

# PRAYER — THE KEY TO SALVATION.

By Hugh J. O'Connell, C.S.S.R.

CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY of Oregon No. Pr161 (1960).

*The man who prays will be saved; the man who does not pray will be lost.*

## PRAYER — THE KEY TO SALVATION.

### INTRODUCTION.

The most urgent and important practical lesson that can be impressed upon the mind of any man is simply this: Pray, and you will surely save your immortal soul; neglect prayer, and you will certainly be lost.

Saint Alphonsus Liguori, a zealous missionary, bishop, Doctor of the Church, and founder of the Redemptorist Order, wrote a little book on prayer, which he entitled: "*The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection.*" Of all the wonderful books that he had written, he considered this the most important. He said that he wished a copy of it could be placed in the hands of every man and woman in the world, not for the sake of his poor book, but in order that they might learn the absolute necessity of prayer for salvation and for obtaining grace from God.

All his doctrine may be summarized in one sentence, which contains all the practical wisdom of life: *The man who prays is saved; the man who does not pray is lost.* The saints are in Heaven because they made use of prayer; the damned are in Hell because they refused to pray.

Sad to say, there are too few souls who realize the importance of prayer. Nor is this sufficiently insisted upon by preachers, confessors, and writers. All other spiritual means, such as hearing the word of God, reading, reflecting on the eternal truths, avoiding the occasions of sin, and receiving the sacraments, are good and useful; but they will avail nothing if we forget to pray.

For, in order to perform any supernaturally good action, to overcome temptation, to practice virtue, and to observe God's law, it is not enough that we be enlightened as to what we ought to do, and make resolutions to do it. We need, moreover, the actual assistance of God; and He gives this assistance only to those who pray, and pray with perseverance.

Thank God for the opportunity He gives to you by means of this little booklet of reflecting more deeply on the importance of prayer. For all who are saved, are ordinarily saved by this single means of grace. Resolve, then, that from this day forward you will never neglect to have continual recourse to God in prayer.

I would ask you, as you love your immortal soul, to read and re-read this booklet again and again in order that you may not forget its important lesson. If, in times past, you offended God by sin, and imperiled your eternal salvation, it was because you neglected to pray and to ask of God the grace to overcome the temptations that assailed you. If, in the future, you persevere in God's grace and save your soul, it will be because you made use of prayer.

After having read this little booklet yourself, induce as many of your friends and neighbors as you can to read it, in order that they, too, may realize that the secret of their salvation lies in prayer.

### NECESSITY OF PRAYER FOR SALVATION.

There is no lesson that the Holy Scriptures bring out more clearly than the necessity of prayer.

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7)

"We ought always to pray, and not to faint." (Luke 18:1)

"Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation." (Matthew 26:41)

"Amen, Amen, I say to you, if you ask the Father anything in my name, He will give it to you." (John 16:23)

The reason for Our Lord's constant insistence on the necessity of prayer is evident. Without the grace of God, we can do nothing in the supernatural order. We cannot save our souls; we cannot overcome temptation; in fact; we cannot even think a good thought or perform a single good action.

"Without me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

"We are not sufficient to think anything of ourselves, as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God." (2 Corinth 3:5)

Hence, the Council of Trent has declared: "If anyone shall assert that without the previous inspiration of the Holy Ghost and His assistance, man can believe, hope, love, or repent as he ought, in order to obtain the grace of justification, let him be anathema." (Session 6, Canon 3)

But the grace that man needs is given, in God's ordinary Providence, only to those who pray for it. God has arranged it so, in order that we may be conscious of our nothingness, and remain in humble dependence upon Him. He knows, indeed, all our wants even before we express them to Him; and He is ready to help us; but He has established prayer as the condition for obtaining His grace and favors. Unless we observe this condition, the divine assistance will not be given to us. Just as a farmer cannot expect his harvest without first sowing the seed; so likewise we cannot expect to obtain from God that which we need unless we pray.

Moreover, since man's mind has been darkened and his will weakened by original sin, he cannot long resist temptation or stay out of grave sin without the assistance of God's grace, which is given in response to prayer. Prayer is, then, the remedy for our human weakness. For, when we pray, God gives us the strength to do that which we cannot do of ourselves.

Saint Augustine wrote, in a wonderful sentence, which was adopted by the Council of Trent: "God does not command impossible things; but by commanding, He suggests to you to do what you can, and to ask for what is beyond your strength; and He helps you that you may be able."

This is, then, the sum total of practical wisdom: *Do what you can, and pray to God for what you cannot do.* We are weak; but God is strong. When we ask Him for aid, He communicates His strength to us, and we are able to do all things, as Saint Paul declared: "I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)

### GOD GIVES TO ALL THE GRACE TO PRAY.

God gives to every man the grace to pray. For He sincerely wills the salvation of every soul, and provides every man with sufficient grace to save his soul. Since prayer, as we have shown, is a necessary means for salvation, it is evident that God must give to every man the grace actually to pray. By using this all-important grace of prayer, man is enabled to persevere in keeping the Commandments, and so to gain eternal life.

This truth, that God gives to every man the actual grace of prayer, as the key to salvation, is so important that we must establish clearly its foundations. For, if we did not always have it in our power to pray, we would have no assurance of receiving God's assistance, and might well despair.

That God sincerely wills the salvation of all men is evident both from the Holy Scriptures and from the constant teaching of the Church.

Saint Paul says: "I desire, therefore, first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men . . . for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, Who will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

Again, the Scripture says in the prophecy of Ezekiel: "As I live, says the Lord, I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked man turn from his way and live." (Ezekiel 33:11)

The Book of Wisdom declares: "You love all things that are, and hate none of the things that You have made." (11:25) If God loves all men, He must certainly will that all should obtain eternal salvation, which is the greatest good of man, and the one end for which he was created: "You have your fruit unto sanctification; but your end eternal life." (Romans 6:22)

Moreover, the Holy Scriptures bring out clearly the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died to save all men: "The Son of Man is come to save that which was lost." (Matthew 18:11. See Luke 19:10.) "He gave Himself a redemption for all." (1 Timothy 2:6) "Christ died for all." (2 Corinth 5:15) "He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." (1 John 2:2)

This doctrine that God wishes all men to be saved, and that Jesus Christ died for the salvation of all, though denied by some heretics, such as Calvin, has been taught by the Church throughout the ages.

The Council of Arles, for example, pronounced, A.D. 475: "Anathema to him that said that Christ did not die for all men, and that He does not will all to be saved." The Council of Quercy (or Quierzy), A.D. 853, declared: "God wills all men without exception to be saved."

This same truth was also clearly expressed by the Council of Trent, which stated that Jesus Christ died "that all men might receive the adoption of sons."

God, indeed, sincerely wills the salvation of every soul. However, this will is conditional on the individual's avoidance of sin and use of the means of grace. If any man is lost, then, it is through his own fault, and not because of any defect on the part of God.

God likewise gives to each man the graces that are necessary for his salvation. For, if He refused these graces, He could not be said to have a true will to save all. Hence, the Council of Trent has defined: "God does not command impossibilities; but by commanding He admonishes you both to do what you can, and to ask for that which is beyond your power, and by His help enables you to do it."

Since God sincerely wills the salvation of all, and gives to all sufficient grace to be saved, it follows necessarily that He gives to every man the grace actually to pray. For prayer, as we have shown, is the necessary means for salvation. Only through prayer can man obtain the grace which is required in order to keep God's commandments, to overcome temptation, and to avoid sin.

Every man has, then, been given by God the power to pray as the key to his salvation. If he makes use of prayer, all other graces come to him. If, on the other hand, he neglects to pray, he closes the door of eternal life upon himself.

Theologians dispute about Predestination, and about the reconciliation of God's dominion and fore-knowledge with the free will of man. God has not found it necessary to reveal to us the answer to all the speculative aspects of these deep problems. For some, we shall find the answer only in Heaven. However, He has given us the practical answer, to which all theological systems must eventually return: Pray, and you will certainly be saved; neglect to pray, and you will certainly be lost. With this answer, we can abide in peace.

#### PRAYER IS THE BASIS OF HOPE.

Upon prayer, then, ultimately rests the certitude of our Christian hope. Hope is that virtue by which we confidently expect from God eternal beatitude and the means necessary for its attainment. It is imposed upon every Christian, not only as a counsel, but as a command: "Trust in Him, all ye peoples." (Psalm 61:9 in the Vulgate or Psalm 62:8 in the Hebrew.) "Ye that fear the Lord, hope in Him." (Ecclesiasticus 2:9) "Hope in your God always." (Hosea or Osee 12:6) "Hope perfectly for that grace which is offered to you." (1 Peter 1:13)

This hope of eternal life ought to be sure and firm, as the Council of Trent expressly declared: "All men ought to place and repose a most firm hope in the help of God. For God, unless they fail to correspond to His grace, as He has begun the good work, so will He finish it, working in them both to will and to perform." (Session 6, Canon 13)

This Christian virtue of hope is certain on the part of God. For God can and will save us, and has promised us all the necessary graces to enable us to obey His law, if we ask for them. It is true that hope is accompanied by fear. But this fear does not arise from God's part, but from our own, since we may at any time fail by not corresponding as we ought, and by putting an impediment in the way of grace by our sins. Hence, we should, on the one hand, always fear for ourselves, lest we should fall into presumption by trusting in our own strength; but, on the other hand, we should always be certain of God's good will, and of His assistance to save us, provided that we pray for it.

The motives, then, upon which the certainty of our hope is founded, are the power and goodness of God, and His fidelity to His promises. Of these the strongest and most certain motive is God's infallible faithfulness to the promise which He has made to us, through the merits of Jesus Christ, to save us, and to give us the graces necessary for our salvation, if we pray for them.

He has promised: "Ask and you shall receive. If you ask the Father anything in my name, He will give it to you. He will give good things to those that ask. I say to you, all things whatsoever you ask when you pray, believe that you shall receive them, and they shall come unto you."

God has, then, bound Himself by His unfulfilling promises to answer every prayer that is made in the proper way. Upon this unshakable rock of God's fidelity, the certainty of our hope is founded. He gives to each of us, as we have seen, the grace to pray.

If we pray, we shall surely receive from Him all the graces that we need to overcome temptation, to avoid sin, and to attain eternal life. Our only fear need be that we will neglect to use the grace of prayer that God has given to us.

#### HOW AND WHEN TO PRAY.

In order to obtain its infallible effect, prayer should be:

- 1) humble;
- 2) confident;
- 3) persevering; and
- 4) directed to matters conducive to salvation.

Prayer must, *first of all, be humble*. For it is precisely to keep us mindful of our nothingness, sinfulness, and complete dependence upon Him that God has commanded us to pray. Hence, the Holy Scriptures tell us: "God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble." (James, 4:6) "The prayer of him that humbles himself shall pierce the clouds; and he will not depart till the Most High behold." (Ecclesiasticus 35:21)

Our prayer should, *likewise, be confident*. For by this we glorify the power, goodness, and fidelity of God. The Scriptures, therefore, say: "He is the protector of all that hope in Him." (Psalm 17:31 in the Vulgate or Psalm 18:30 in the Hebrew.) "Blessed is the man that trusts in You." (Psalm 83:13 in the Vulgate or Psalm 84:12 in the Hebrew.) Our Lord instructs us: "Whatsoever you ask when you pray, believe that you shall receive, and they shall come unto you." (Mark, 11:24) And Saint Paul admonishes: "Let us go, therefore, with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace in seasonable aid." (Hebrews 4:16) On the other hand, Saint James warns us that the man who prays without confidence should not expect to receive anything of God: "For he who wavers is like a wave of the sea, which is moved and carried about by the wind. Therefore let not that man think to receive anything of the Lord." (James 1:6)

*Perseverance is also required* in prayer. For we never cease to be dependent upon God's help. Therefore, we should continually ask for it. Some favors, too, God grants, not the first time we pray for them, but only after repeated requests. Our Lord, therefore, has told us: "We ought always to pray, and not to faint." (Luke 18:1) "Watch ye, therefore, praying at all times." (Luke 21:36) Saint Paul says: "Be instant in prayer, watching in it with thanksgiving." (Colossians 4:2) This is the lesson which Christ wished to teach us in the parable of the man who would not give the loaves of bread to his friend until he continued to importune him. "Yet if he shall continue knocking, I say to you, although he will not rise and give him because he is his friend, yet, because of his importunity, he will rise and give him as many as he needs." (Luke 11:8)

*Finally*, in order to be infallibly efficacious, prayer must be *directed to things conducive to salvation*. For God looks at all things from the viewpoint of eternity, and He will not give us anything that would prejudice our eternal welfare. Too often, in our shortsightedness, we ask only for temporal favors, some of which would not be good for us. When, therefore, we pray for such temporal things, we should be careful to add: "If it be Your Holy Will." Spiritual favors we can ask for without reserve.

Prayer should, then, be the breath of our soul. Conscious of our human weakness, and trusting in God's power, goodness, and fidelity, we should constantly turn to Him in

prayer. Pray in the morning when you arise, offering the day to Him, and asking His blessing. Turn to Him often during the course of the day with short but fervent ejaculatory prayers, such as: "Incline unto my aid, O God; O Lord, make haste to help me!" "My Jesus, mercy!" Say your prayers before and after meals. Recite the Rosary daily to obtain the assistance of God's Holy Mother. And, when evening has come, kneel down and ask God's pardon for the faults of the day, and grace to serve Him better on the morrow.

Pray especially in the time of temptation. For it is only by the grace of God, given in response to prayer, that you can long resist the assaults of the enemies of your soul. If, however, you continue to pray, you can be certain that you will not fall into sin.

Every day of our life, we should pray, too, for the gift of final perseverance, that the decisive moment of death find us with the love and the grace of God in our heart. This crowning grace we should ask particularly from Mary, the Holy Mother of God. Add to your night prayers the "Hail, Holy Queen," or one "Hail Mary" that you may obtain this grace through her intercession.

Pray, likewise, for constancy in prayer, since this is the key to all other graces. Say often: "O Lord, grant me the spirit of prayer!" "Help me to pray always!" "O Lord, grant me the grace to pray in the time of temptation!"

Teach this great lesson of the importance of prayer to others, especially to those confided to your care.

For, if they learn to pray, all other good things will come to them.

#### CONCLUSION.

With these considerations, God's whole beautiful plan of salvation opens before our eyes. He has given us His commandments, and will grant us eternal life if we obey them. Of ourselves, due to our human weakness, we are unable to observe God's law. However, with the help of His grace, we can save our souls: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me." This grace we obtain through prayer. It is in prayer, then, that we find the key to our salvation.

All the practical wisdom of life, therefore, may be summed up in that sentence of Saint Alphonsus: "*The man who prays will be saved; the man who does not pray will be lost.*" The saints are in Heaven because they made use of prayer; the damned are in hell because they refused to pray."

(Thanks to Redemptorist Fathers, Saint Louis.)

\*\*\*\*\*