

The content of our prayers

Priorities to be reexamined.

Introduction

« *We do not know what we ought to pray for* » (Rm 8:26). This remark does not ONLY concern « beginners », who have everything to learn; nor Christians who are « weak in faith ». The « we » is large, and the Apostle Paul includes himself in the picture.

This statement is surprising in a way. For, elsewhere, the NT provides a more spontaneous idea of prayer. « *In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* » (Ph 4:6). « *Are any of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise* » (James 5:13) Yes, it is obvious that we have freedom of speech before God. But within this freedom, the « *what* » for which we pray is not indifferent. Romans 8.26 speaks of that which is « suitable » to ask for¹. This implies that certain requests are more or less appropriate.

We must therefore choose and reflect on what we express when praying. Prayer is not just « letting it all out ». Nor is it repetition of the same ready-made phrases. We must act with discernment. Praying « for what is suitable », is to align our thoughts on those of God, our will on his will, our priorities on his priorities. Freedom exists from the point of view of the person in charge. We cannot pray to our heavenly Father without being in phase with him.

Which is why our subject on the content of our prayers is so important. I suggest we search in the Scripture for indications and references that the Holy Spirit placed there for us, which should help us discern what is suitable for our prayers. We shall follow four principal lines:

1. To pray freely
2. Prayer reflected in the Psalms
3. The Holy Spirit's assistance
4. The use of the Word of God

¹ Literally: « Whatever we ask as we should, we do not know ». The subjunctive « whatever we ask » is a subjunctive of purpose. « as we should » does not apply to the form, but to the content: the emphasis of « whatever » clearly indicates this. Cp Samuel Bénétreau, *La prière par l'Esprit* (Excelsis, Edifac, 2004), 91-92.

1. To pray freely

We must first underline the fact that the Bible provides our approach to God with foundations and a framework to pray freely. Prayer is not a right, but grace... an invitation (Jms 4:6). It is on this basis, however, that the Lord desires a free and open relationship.

THE BASIS OF A FREE RELATIONSHIP

Whosoever places saving faith in Jesus receives the STATUTE OF A CHILD OF GOD. God will never come back on this commitment (Ga 4:5; Eph 1:5). It is a heart commitment (Hos 11:1-4; Jr 31:20; Lk 15). It is on this basis that we can come to God with the liberty of sons (Jn 1:12; 8:35; Ga 4:6-7, 5:1; Rm 8:20). The title of « Father » invites us to pray on this foundation.

RECONCILIATION in Jesus-Christ is another solid foundation for liberty: « *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ* » (Rm 5:1). It is possible to approach « the throne of grace with assurance » (Hb 4:16). The assurance of PARDON for all those who confess their sin prevents us from being weighed down in morbid guilt: God has in store provisions of goodness for us in spite of our faults (Ps 32, 2nd part). The conviction that God KNOWS US PERFECTLY, and yet accepts us in Jesus-Christ, allows us to speak in complete transparency, not behind a mask (1 Jn 1:7; Ps 139). The certainty that GOD IS GOD persuades us that he is neither pressured nor baffled by what we say to him.

A BROAD INVITATION

It is also for this reason that the Bible invites us to say « all sorts of prayers ». EPHESIANS 6:18: « *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.* » This is a broad invitation.

Prayer might be one of request, thankfulness, for oneself, for others, thanksgiving, praise, humiliation, exultation, emptying of the heart, grasp of God's promises, consecration, aspiration, reminder of the past, looking to the future, asking for faith, confession of faith, meditation, contemplation, verbalization of God's word, silence before God... We could multiply these examples. Richard Foster singled out 21 different types of prayer, symbolically arranging them in three groups of seven.² We must not reject any form whatsoever of Biblical prayer, nor must we organize them in any hierarchy, because God has given us liberty in prayer.

PRAYER OF REQUEST

The prayer of request, widely practiced by many Christians, has incited much reserve and numerous objections. The Greek philosophers criticized this way of praying as too

² Richard Foster, *La prière* (Ed Vida, 1995), 350 pp.

self-interested, preferring for their part disinterested praise. Much of this criticism concerns the character of certain frivolous or egocentric requests. Some only conceded to tolerating these prayer requests if they express at least a minimum of elevation and are worthy of God. Opposition comes today from many sides. It is considered to be pretentious to wish to disrupt God's plans, with uninspired and often contradictory requests. They denounce the attitude of believing we can change God's will. One might refuse to associate the Lord with our miserable little needs, judging useless and out of place to express our requests. But is God not more concerned by our well-being than we are ourselves?³ A prayer that replaces human action and responsibility is also rejected. We then wonder: is not asking something from God imprisoning us in a position of weakness, or fabricating a God that fulfills all of our shortages and needs? In this line of thought, the theologian John Ansaldi solely approves a prayer of request if it is a place of work – on ourselves – to help us progress; he considers to be childish, however, any expectation of a miracle: the God of the incarnation invites us to assume our finitude (Cf. 2 Co 12:8-9).⁴

What justifies the prayer of request? The freedom that God has given us; he invites us to present our requests to him. A spirituality that strives to place itself above this takes the risk of falling into several traps: self-sufficiency, false humility, autonomy, the refusal to trust. That God desires to integrate our needs in the relationship he establishes with us in grace, a sign that he takes into consideration our human reality. Of course, there is always room for discernment of our needs, to purify and elevate our requests. But this is precisely the work of prayer, if it is true dialogue. We shall also be reminded that prayer and human action are not in opposition. Jesus gave us the example at Gethsemane: he prayed to be strengthened to confront reality (Mt 26:46). Finally, we honor the Lord when we wait upon him to act, or to help us. We honor him by trusting that he will act, and by remaining confident through faith. He chose himself to be: « *with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.* » (Es 57:15) It is not a childish human projection; it is the choice of God, a line that he follows in all his actions. The God who is manifest in Jesus-Christ is sensitive to all of our needs.

PRAISE, REQUEST, THANKSGIVING

In the same spirit, there is no room for hierarchy in forms of prayer, making one type superior to another. Currently, increased prestige is accredited to praise. Praise is both legitimate and excellent, if it is balanced with the other prayer modes: supplication, confession of sins, stating our needs. « *.../...in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God!* » (Ph 4:6)⁵ Without that balance, piety might plunge into artificial triumphalism, in which one wishes neither to see nor assume

³ Augustin a eu cette belle remarque, dans l'un de ses sermons : « Le Sauveur veut plus ardemment nous donner que nous ne voulons recevoir. » Cité in Bénétreau, 22-23.

⁴ Pour la présentation et la discussion de ces objections, cp Bénétreau, 15-33.

⁵ L'équilibre se relève aussi dans le livre des Psaumes : sur l'ensemble 1/3 environ des psaumes sont des psaumes de supplication ou d'appel au secours ; 1/3 sont des psaumes de reconnaissance ou de louange. Le troisième tiers est composé de psaumes d'instruction, d'humiliation, de psaumes royaux, ou pour des circonstances particulières.

ones limits. Offering praise only to God is also leveling everything down: thus missing out on the contrast between times of need, of supplication, and those of fulfillment and deliverance. As for the moral superiority of praise, which is said to be more disinterested than prayers of request, we must be reminded of many requests that are authentically not egocentric: the most perfect example are that of the first three requests of the Lord's prayer. I might add that self-interest is sometimes found to be in the very heart of expressions of praise: if it is true, as some might suggest, that praise is *the* most efficient way of getting what we want, does it remain to be an unselfish gesture?

It is equally unwise to prioritize praise of worship and thanksgiving. Worship admires God for what he is (cp Ps 139). Thanksgiving thanks him for what he does (cp Ps 103). Some give priority to the first, adoring « God for what he is », much more than for « what he does », whereas Scripture privileges dialogue between the two: the works of God lead to admiration of the author; but this author is expressed totally in his works. The supreme illustration of this is given through Jesus: « *God IS LOVE... This is how God SHOWED his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him* » (1 Jn 4:8-9). Who would dare prioritize these two propositions? Worship and thanksgiving are both inter-penetrable and mutually strengthening.

2. Prayer reflected in the Psalms

What content should we put in prayer? When you open your Bible in the middle, you inevitably fall upon the Psalms. They are a gift of God to his people, a source, inspiration and school for prayer. The book of Psalms is the largest in the Bible: which is proof of the importance God gives to prayer, and of his concrete wish to help us. It is open space! « In the kingdom of prayer, there are 150 portals; whatever one you choose, you shall be led to discover God under a different light; each time you will see yourself under a different angle. » ⁶

A great exercise is to read at one sitting the whole book of Psalms, to receive in full face the liberty of the relationship that prayer allows. I took the time to do so during two mornings. The image that emerges with impressionable force is that prayer opens a magnificently free relationship with God, and integrates all aspects of life.

Let me develop this.

1. PRAYER IS A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IN ALL LIFE SITUATIONS: (1) situations of personal difficulty⁷; (2) times of deliverance⁸; (3) moments when nothing happens⁹; (4) time set apart for God (worship, pilgrimage)¹⁰ ; (5) situations where evil strikes (sin,

⁶ Daniel Bourguet, *Prions les Psaumes*, 24.

⁷ Fuite (Ps 3 - Ps 7) - calomnie (Ps 5) - trahison (Ps 55) - complots (Ps 59) - errance (Ps 54-55) - insécurité et besoin d'être guidé (Ps 25) - isolement (Ps 42) - abattement (Ps 137) - affaiblissement et vieillesse (Ps 71).

⁸ Ps 18 ; 34 ; 48 ; 126

⁹ Temps d'arrêt saisi pour la reconnaissance : Ps 8 ; 23 ; 103 ; temps où il semble que Dieu ne fait rien, oublie, tarde : Ps 10 - Ps 13 - Ps 42-43

¹⁰ Ps 47 ; 68 ; 100 ; 121-134

injustice, the evil ones refuse God)¹¹; (6) situations of much questioning¹²; (7) important steps in life (vow of blessing, time to leave).¹³ The totality is experienced authentically before God. None of these events, not any of our life situations are unknown to the Lord.

2. PRAYER INTEGRATES A WHOLE RANGE OF SENTIMENTS: This volume that presents itself as a "book of praise" devotes a large place to distress, cries, supplication, complaints, questions put forth to God¹⁴. It is not necessary to adopt a « stereotyped attitude » before God.

It is often when going through tense situations that we discover God's most significant riches. This shows us how important and essential it is for us to place God, and all that we know of him, in relation with what we live.

It is also important to underline the great liberty of speech before God that is found in the Psalms:

- POSITIVE FEELINGS are expressed very liberally: « I love you, Lord! » (Ps 18); « I am calm and tranquil as a child with his mother » (Ps 131); « I thirst for you » (Ps 63); « How can I return to the Lord all of his goodness to me? » (Ps 116). One sings the joy of forgiveness (Ps 32), the joy of belonging to God (Ps 23), to live in his home (Ps 84), to have his Word (Ps 119). One lists his blessings (Ps 103), his care for his creation (Ps 65, 104), the amazing attention he gives to each one (Ps 8). Cries of marvel burst out in an experience of deliverance (Ps 34), which makes us meditate God (Ps 30), and leads us to greater commitment and consecration (Ps 116).

- DIFFICULTIES are expressed with the same liberty. A huge variety of words exist: respectful contesting (Ps 44), energetic debate (Ps 10), cries (Ps 74), detailed description of a situation (Ps 22), voicing of conflict between divine promises and what we are living (Ps 77, 80, 89). We « speak the truth » before the Lord, if the phrasing be « religiously acceptable » or not. The limit of our freedom is the respect of the Lord: if we question God on his silence, we wait for his intervening (Ps 10); if we scream abandon, we keep our eyes fixed on the horizon and on God's future action (Ps 22); if we voice our suffering because of the change between God's past and present doings: (« *Has his unfailing love vanished forever? .../... I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago*», Ps 77:8; 11), we hold fast through hope, and we wait on him.

- Prayer is a place where we can « TELL GOD », and confide in him. It is with insecurity that we express to him successively, heart-felt cries, fear, desire to escape,

¹¹ P  ch   : Ps 32 ; 51 - Injustice : Ps 12 ; 52 - Refus de Dieu : Ps 14

¹² Ps 44 ; 73

¹³ Ps 20 ; 121.

¹⁴ Cp   mile Nicole, *La spiritualit   et les chr  tiens   vang  liques*, pp.61-67

rebellion and disgust for wrongdoing; we ask God to give us confidence (Ps 55). Those who are unhappy take the time to describe their suffering, before voicing their plea or expressing their confidence (Ps 38). When facing calumny, God is a witness of the believer's sincerity (Ps 26, 28). Anxiety is not suppressed. (Ps 25:16-19). The shock of injustice is expressed before God, with all of its repercussions (Ps 35). An excess of wrong-doing gives way to an excess of words, indispensable when confronting the intolerable (Ps 109; 137:8-9)¹⁵.

3. THERE IS ROOM, IN PRAYER, TO TRULY PROGRESS: The believer comes before God from his life situation; the Psalms show us that there are various paths to take.

The first path, which is fundamental, leads from what we live to what we know of God. How can my relationship with God connect with my life-experience? What light should I receive? What perspectives should I grasp when talking to God about what I am going through, integrating his word, waiting upon him? Advancing on this path often brings strength and rest.

But the refuge is not reached immediately. The Psalms indicate that it often takes time to attain serenity. First we make several attempts before regaining peace¹⁶ ; then we go back and forth from despair to hope¹⁷. When we confess our sin, we must sometimes talk about what hurts, because of the weight of the fault.¹⁸ From time to time, the believer's « internal situation » will evolve: prayer has made things progress¹⁹. But this movement is not guaranteed, for there can be collisions, or brutal reminders of particularly difficult circumstances.²⁰ It is also sometimes the case where raw emotions are expressed before God, and submitted to his attention²¹.

All of this is included in the relationship. Prayer is a “walk” with God. It requires time. It allows for words that are not perfect first off. We can express sentiments that are approximate.

4. PRAYER ALLOWS DIFFERENT APPROACHES. This is another remarkable aspect: there is no stereotyped approach to life situations. Let us examine « a difficult situation » :

- some Psalms are cries in distress: "Help!" (Ps 70:2)
- others approach God in a more physical manner: « *Why, O LORD, do you stand far*

¹⁵ These words describe a "moment" of advancement in an extreme situation. To speak to God, even excessively, is to get back to a normal situation all while being in the middle of hurting. It is a first step on the path of healing, without making abstraction of reality, even when it is cruel.

¹⁶ Cp the back-and-forth of Ps 31

¹⁷ Cp Ps 42-43

¹⁸ Ps 51

¹⁹ Ps 73:16-17 ; the passage on nostalgia in the sense of walk : Ps 84

²⁰ Cp Ps 139:19-22.

²¹ Cp Ps 139:19-22, suivis de 139:23-24.

off? » (Ps 10)

- others begin distressed and finish in confidence (cp Ps 6)
- others begin in confidence, to only return to human fragility (cp 9:1-12 : proclamation of faith ; 9:14-21 : return to human fragility)
- others express serenity in God's refuge (Ps 11)
- others are triumphant songs of faith (Ps 62)
- others hang on to hope as well as they can (Ps 42-43)
- yet others remember past deliverance, then ask for help and assistance for the present: Ps 40

There is room for different approaches. One is not more « spiritual » than the other.²²

What have we learned from this rapid reflection on the Psalms? Prayer is a true relationship. Prayer is, as God wishes it to be, a real relationship. It extends throughout a lifetime. It must increase in depth, but also experiences clashes, bumps, questions, need of time, which is what makes the beauty and fragility of prayer. It is an open space. It is magnificent on the part of God, who listens to our prayer. It is fragile, on our part we who risk remaining centered on ourselves. But we are invited to advance on a true path of dialogue with the Lord.

3. The Holy Spirit's assistance

How can we make the best use of this liberty in the relationship that is offered to us? We must first acquire it as true liberty. But we need to be assisted, to be led, in view of rich, vivifying prayer that God desires. Thankfully, help and resources are promised to us!

The first assistance is given to us by God himself: The HOLY SPIRIT. The NT invites us to « *pray in the Holy spirit* » (Ep 6:18; Jd 20)²³. Paul reminds us that the Spirit himself comes to us in aid, for we know not how to pray (Rm 8:26-27)²⁴.

The Spirit can help us in several ways. He can help motivate us to pray (« create the will and the way », Ph 2:13). We can ask him for direction when we commence our moment of prayer. He can put on our hearts a particular burden (Rm 8:26). He can renew our faith and our hope in the heart of our limitations (Rm 8:23). He might remind us of a promise or a word that will then orient the prayer (Ac 4:23-26). He leads and inspires

²² Just a word on Ps 18:3: « I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies. » This verse is considered by some as a guaranteed key to victory through praise. We note that within the specific circumstances, prayer was a call for help (18:7). It may be necessary to translate: « May be he praised! I call to the Lord, and I am delivered » (cp 18:7 for the identical expression « to cry out to the Lord »). It is not wise therefore to systematize, especially that we have here a language of circumstance (18:1, cp 2 S 22).

²³ The text 1 Co 14:15 is, in its context, a more specific designation of praying in tongues; Paul distinguishes it as prayer « with intelligence »... giving it value. The action of the Spirit is not denied, however, in the intelligent word, except that Paul does not recommend it. Cf. the remarks in Bénétreau, 53-54.

²⁴ Other texts could be used in this same perspective. O. Cullmann mentions, in particular, 1 Co 12:3 (he believes that « confessing Jesus as Lord » is a form of praise) and Rm 8:15 (the cry of « Abba Father » is, as far as he is concerned, a cry of prayer). He also mentions Paul's exhortation to combat with him through prayer « through our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of his Spirit » (Rm 15:30): there is an indirect action, where the Spirit revives in the Christian heart the love that will lead them to intercede. Col 3:16 and Ep 5:19 speak also of « spiritual songs ».

the path of our prayer to render us sensitive to God's will (Rm 8:26). God's Spirit intercedes « with us » when we approach God, which gives both assurance and encouragement.

The theological debate around Rm 8:26-27 is abundant. S. Bénétreau gives a complete summary in his publication.²⁵ The decisive choices to determine what intercession of the spirit is, are to my understanding, the following: (1) IS THERE A REFERENCE TO SPEAKING IN TONGUES? Several theologians prefer this understanding (Käsemann, Cullmann, G.Fee), and even see there the testimony to the possibility of intercession in tongues (J.C.Boutinon). Others underline the differences (J.Stott²⁶, Bénétreau): the context is not the same (cp the list of gifts, Rm 12); the nature of prayer is different (intercession / praise), the intervention of the spirit is of another nature (groaning / speech). (2) WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN THE SPIRIT'S INTERCESSION AND OURS? Does it replace our prayer (J.Schneider²⁷)? Does it super-impose our prayer, to compensate for its weaknesses (Cranfield, Légasse, Bénétreau²⁸)? Or does it take effect within, to incite or orient our prayer (Calvin²⁹, J.Stott³⁰)? In other words, does the Spirit intercede « for us », or « with us »? Personally, I find it difficult to imagine this intercession as a short-circuit or a substitute to our prayer: this would be in opposition to the usual action of the Spirit whose role is to apply the work of God to our life: he produced *in us* a new life (Rm 8:4), he makes *us* exclaim « Abba Father » (Rm 8:15), he witnesses to *our* spirit that we are children of God (Rm 8:16). He is the God who « examines our heart » who discerns what the Spirit wishes to pray: this suggests that we are marked by this desire (Rm 8:27). This vision of the Spirit assisting us in prayer is clearly attested elsewhere by the expression « pray in the Spirit ». However, this must not lead us to a triumphant conception of prayer, in which the Spirit leads us irrevocably to request that which is conform to the will of God in such a way that our prayers have to be granted: we remain « in weakness », it is not yet the time of perfect accomplishment. The Spirit should, therefore, “accompany” our feeble prayers, interceding for us in our indigent knowledge of prayer. I choose, therefore, the vision of the Spirit praying « with us », to both sustain and direct our prayer, and to surround it and carry it as his own.

4. The use of the Word of God

The second possible help for our prayer comes from the Word of God. Inspired by the Spirit, it is also the best inspiration for a prayer in the Spirit.

PRAYING THE PSALMS

The Psalms illustrate our approach to prayer. They are also, however, prayers inspired by the Spirit to help us pray. They are available to us to support our prayer, orient it, renew it, put what we wish to say into words.

I find no better words than Daniel Bourguet to express what this gift of God represents

²⁵ S.Bénétreau, *La prière par l'Esprit*, 57-100

²⁶ J.Stott, *The message of Romans*, IVP 1994, 245.

²⁷ For Schneider we have here only a heavenly reality, and not « in us ».

²⁸ In this case, « inexpressible sighs » are the aspirations of the Spirit, that compensate for our often deficient words, and that the Father understands without the need of words for their expression.

²⁹ In his commentary, Calvin envisages that the faithful are taught how to pray « by the Spirit », while their mind is « confused and mixed up ». Quoted in Bénétreau, 66

³⁰ Stott underlines: « The inspiration by the Spirit is as necessary to our prayers as the mediation of the Son » (J.Stott, *The message of Romans*, IVP 1994, 244).

for our prayer:

« You were looking for the words to pray? Here they are! It is so true... You will find in the Psalms the right words for every prayer: those of confidence, thanksgiving, repentance, praise, suffering, compassion, intercession... The many facets of solitary prayer, as well as of community prayer.

« The words of the Psalms enlighten me, appease me, help me progress, and reveal to me other aspects of prayer. They often go beyond what I would know how to say, and surpass what I would have been able to say.

« [...] All things considered, the Psalms contain the plenitude of prayer, where all is said: from the purest of love to the most violent invective; from immense tenderness to the most vehement anger; from total confidence to the worst of doubts; from luminous hope to the darkest despair... Plenitude and depth, the book of Psalms reveals to me paths of prayer that are totally above anything I could imagine, surpassing my greatest expectations. [...]

« If prayer is the beauty of man, and if man has lost this primitive beauty, then this loss is irreparable and definitive. The Psalmist invites man to regain the path of prayer, the way to God, with confidence, in spite of the treason and rejection, ignoring his deformity and ugliness of traits. [...] The Book of Psalms is the loveliness of man in 150 colors; it is a human symphony of 150 harmonies; music has never been so rich; light has never made so many colors dance. »³¹

We would be wrong to deprive ourselves from such a generous source. How can we pray in the spirit, without using prayers inspired by the Spirit? I rarely begin a time of prayer without the help of a Psalm. It always brings richness and illumination. It is also a valuable guide: « 100% proof »!

How can we make these prayers ours?

The adequate approach is to let them resound within us. It is not necessary to indulge in an analytical and technical study. Just read the Psalm, listen to what it evokes in us. Sometimes it will help first to ponder on it, then to adopt it as our own prayer. Sometimes we will take over from where it has met us, and it will become the sounding board for our own words, before going back to other thoughts expressed in the Psalm. Other times, we will follow the text verse by verse, praying intermittently, relating it to what we live and feel. Praise might spark up, like a jewel that we discover. It is sometimes a word, or a promise that we will hold in our heart to repeat it to God. At times we might feel out of touch, but a simple difference in circumstances doesn't mean we have to dig deeper. A fundamental difference, however, should become itself the basis of a prayer, when we are unable to make ours a declaration in a Psalm: « Lead me to the rock I am unable to reach. »

The appropriation of a Psalm must be honest. We must avoid to approach the text with an expectancy of magic, but keep a certain distance. If I read a Psalm that speaks of enemies, I must not take this as the horoscope that is telling me I shall meet some foes during the day. I can, however, thank God freely that I am at peace with those around me. I can ask him to help me work towards precious relations of peace. I can pray for others who are confronting adversity. If I am in difficulty, I can allow the given words to lift me up.

There is room for us to speak simply with our own words. When a biblical text speaks

³¹ Daniel Bourguet, *Prions les Psaumes*, 25-27.

to us, we are encouraged to respond, in extension of what we have received. It is truly wonderful to receive a word that illuminates everything else. Prayer enriches, enlarges, and reveals new heights and better foundations.

In certain situations, we need another's words to help us stand fast. When Jesus was going through the terrible hour of abandonment by his Father, when the heavens were closed to him because he was carrying our sin, he prayed Psalm 22. He made hold of someone else's words, in a Psalm that expressed the despair of being abandoned by God, but that concludes by the acclamation of the Lord's intervention. Jesus was able in this way to declare his fidelity, even though all was closed around and within him. We should also employ this method. Let us prefer this to a silence that shuts off God. Let us accept to be backed up, supported, and lifted up by prayers that the Holy Spirit has given to us.

PRAYING THE « LORD'S PRAYER »

Jesus used the Psalms in prayer. He did however leave an inheritance in a prayer that he polished himself expressly for us: the « Lord's prayer ».

There is an evangelical tradition that has put this prayer aside, believing any personal babbling to be more spiritual, as long as it is spontaneous. This is in reaction to a mechanical recitation of the « Lord's prayer ». This reaction, however, is an impoverishment and a lack of consideration. In the « Lord's prayer », Jesus has assembled and organized for us the « essentials » of spiritual life. We must honor this gift for its true worth.

I am not going to comment on this prayer... it would need a whole presentation in itself! We have in our hands a prayer that will always be in synergy with God. This prayer places us, always, in a right attitude, in the correct balance. Sometimes we are so preoccupied by the rut of worry that our prayer is bogged down. The « Lord's prayer » is the *prayer of harmony* that the Lord Jesus has given to us to help us out of our rut. We do not always know which words to use when we come before God: the « Lord's prayer » is the *prayer of resources* provided by the Lord Jesus. When we wish to take our bearings with God, the « Lord's prayer » is the *landmark prayer* that the Lord Jesus has given us. If we only have a short time to spend with God, the « Lord's prayer » is the *core prayer* given by the Lord Jesus. We have had a magnificent time of prayer, the « Lord's prayer » is the *crowning* given by our Lord Jesus.

The « Lord's prayer » is not determined by a particular context: I can always make each of these words mine, finding my place among them. The Lord's prayer is complete. It contains everything, in few words. God's love and his welcome. Our identity, our statute before him. The communion of the saints. The concern for God. The decentering from self. God's qualities. Their impact on our life. God's project. The expectancy of its achievement. God's will. Our actions. The Earth. The Heavens. Our needs. The legitimacy of our asking. Everyday life. The Lord's provisions. The need of forgiveness. Resources of grace. The pardon we receive. The pardon we grant. Our vulnerability in the face of evil. Indispensable vigilance. God's protection. His deliverance. Waiting for

his victory. The cry of this waiting. Eternal horizons. The Lord above all things. Plenitude in him. The immense peace in knowing this. From eternity to eternity.

It is huge when you think about it. A prayer that is inexhaustible. Never the same journey. In every instant, a new grace to receive. A prayer that is really too beautiful for us to deprive ourselves of it.

One last thing, nevertheless. Jesus gave us a model, not an iron collar. Jesus prays other prayers. They were not all along the strict model of the « Lord's prayer ». There is liberty in the Lord's prayer, AND liberty in other prayers. It would be folly, however, to miss such a resourceful gift that Jesus offers us.

PRAYING THE PRAYERS OF PAUL

A third Biblical course to orient and nurture the content of our prayers is found in the prayers of the Apostle Paul. Donald Carson shines the light on the importance of these prayers, and confronts us with the priorities they convey.³²

It is worthwhile to consider them all. I note three principal directions they give to our prayers.

1. THESE PRAYERS INVITE US TO LOVING MEDITATION OF GOD AND OF HIS ACTIONS.

The hymns of the apostle (Ep 1, Col 1, 2 Co 1) are praise that find their source in reflection on and meditation of God's works. The apostle prays his theology, and studies theology while praying. His praise is thought, reflected upon before God. It is an invitation to prayer with true content, in which we love the Lord « with all our soul and all our heart », meditating on his actions and his person.

2. THESE PRAYERS INVITE US TO QUESTION GOD'S OBJECTIVES FOR OUR CHRISTIAN LIFE.

The Psalms underline the liberty that is ours to progress towards God from the point of our life-experience. The apostle's prayers invite us to begin our prayer with the expectations of God to make them our priorities. Of course, Paul knows to pray for his immediate, concrete needs in his situations (cp Rm 15:14-33), but his principal orientation concerns sanctification, progression in the Christian life. If we want to pray biblically, we must integrate this dimension, and give it true space.

A few significant examples³³ :

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 ¹²May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones!

Colossians 1:9-11 ⁹For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord

³² Donald A. Carson, *La prière renouvelée* (Excelsis, 2005), 267pp

³³ Autres textes : 2 Th 1 :11-12 ; Ph 1 :9-11 ; Ep 1 :17-23.

and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully.

Ephesians 6:19-20 ¹⁹Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

We need to integrate these requests, using the first person singular, when facing the days we have to live. To make them regularly our own, is to fit sanctification into our daily life project. To pray these words, is to give to them material expression: they become a milestone, an objective, a reminder. It is also a gesture towards order, it organizes the priorities: our miserable little problems take up so much space that we no longer consider the principal desire of God for us: to form Christ within us. Prayed in community, these prayers prove to be of wonderful pedagogical and deepening virtue, when compared to the superficiality that always threatens our « subjects for prayer ».

3. Paul's prayers invite us to take an active part in the INTERCESSION FOR OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, AND FOR THE WORK OF GOD. Paul did not economize his time when praying for others. He did so regularly, and willingly³⁴. He disciplined himself into seeking first to discern his brothers and sisters' contribution to God's work, before considering their problems or needs. His intercession is, as a result, joyous and beneficial, rather than exhausting. Paul always maintained, in his intercession, the concern for these brothers' spiritual progress. The apostle was, through his intercession, partner with his brothers and sisters along their walk with God. He also submitted to God, in his prayers, the needs of his own work, and asked the Lord to grant him the necessary resources for his complete engagement. They contribute to the fight against the evil forces and hostile situations towards the Gospel. What better way to remind us that prayer makes us participants in all of God's work?

By way of an opening...

There are other possibilities for nurturing our prayers.

- CHURCH PRAYER OVER THE CENTURIES: our prayer can be inspired by those composed by others, in diverse situations. Cp. a morning prayer that we can adopt regularly.³⁵
- A PRAYER PLAN: this implies structuring our prayer time around a specific theme, all while planning the approach to God that will include praise, humiliation, intercession, confidence, consecration... A sort of « personalized liturgy » that will enrich and nourish the time spent with God, like a well-

³⁴ Carson underlines very rightly that Paul's praying « night and day » do not necessarily mean that the apostle was constantly in prayer for his brothers, but that every time he prayed, night and day, he prayed regularly for them. D.Carson, *La prière renouvelée*, 103.

³⁵ Cp W.Barclay, « *Pour mieux prier* », Ed Croire et Servir (30 prayers for the morning and evening). Barclay also wrote about specific prayers for young people: « *Prières du soir et du matin* » (Ed Croire Pocket, 2009,124pp). W. Barclay's prayers are of an ethical orientation that is in phase with the spirit of Paul's prayers.

balanced meal.³⁶

- BY WRITING: certain Christians will want to write a prayer, to formulate chosen and polished words, a prayer that really represents them, to honor the Lord (cp. Ps 45).

Every year in our Church, we select a motto. In 2010, we chose the following: « *Cast your cares on the LORD, put your trust in him, and he will sustain you.* » We asked a young graphic artist of the church to illustrate this verse. I was expecting an illustration of a road, with beautiful perspectives to pursue, to give us the desire to walk forward. This artist made a completely different choice, much more essential: she did not place a road in the center, but a person praying. Kneeling on the road, at the junction of the distance covered so far and the remainder of her voyage, this person is turned towards a light that invites to continue, all while enlightening with its brilliance the road yet to cover. In other words, it is the attitude that makes the difference and not the road we must take. I have this message before my eyes constantly. « *Prayer is the beauty of man* »³⁷.

Thierry Huser

³⁶ Cp Pierre-Yves Paquier, *En piste, Prier c'est passionnant !*, LLB, 1993, 160pp – 7 different prayer plans.

³⁷ D.Bourguet, *Prions les Psaumes* (Réveil Publications), 5-11.