

# WITHOUT CEASING: PRAYER AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE



## *The Texts*

### **AT HOURS WITHOUT CEASING: THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE**

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

-Acts 2:42

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

-Deuteronomy 6:4-9

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.

-Daniel 6:10

Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.

-Psalm 55:17

Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules.

-Psalm 119:164

### **STILL PRAYING**

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.

-Acts 3:1

The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.

-Acts 10:9

And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing."

-Acts 10:30

"Then, when the whole assembly of the people was praying outside at the hour of the incense offering, the angel of the Lord appeared to him..."

-Luke 1:10-11

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

-Matthew 6:7-13

### **PRAYING IN CHRIST**

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

-Romans 8:14-17

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

-Romans 8:26-27

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-Romans 8:38-39

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

-1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

### **THE BREATH OF GOD**

Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do your fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. And do not pray as the hypocrites, but as the Lord commanded in his Gospel, pray thus: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, as in Heaven so also upon earth; give us to-day our daily bread, and forgive us our debt

as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into trial, but deliver us from the Evil One, for thine is the power and the glory for ever." Pray thus three times a day.

**-Didache (1st/2nd c.), 8**

Touching the time, however, the extrinsic observance of certain hours will not be unprofitable—those common hours, I mean, which mark the intervals of the day—the third, the sixth, the ninth—which we may find in the Scriptures to have been more solemn than the rest. The first infusion of the Holy Spirit into the congregated disciples took place at "the third hour." Peter, on the day on which he experienced the vision of Universal Community, (exhibited) in that small vessel, had ascended into the more lofty parts of the house, for prayer's sake "at the sixth hour." The same (apostle) was going into the temple, with John, at the ninth hour," when he restored the paralytic to his health. Albeit these practices stand simply without any precept for their observance, still it may be granted a good thing to establish some definite presumption, which may both add stringency to the admonition to pray, and may, as it were by a law, tear us out from our businesses unto such a duty; so that—what we read to have been observed by Daniel also, in accordance (of course) with Israel's discipline—we pray at least not less than thrice in the day, debtors as we are to Three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: of course, in addition to our regular prayers which are due, without any admonition, on the entrance of light and of night.

**-Tertullian (160-220), *On Prayer* 25**

Now breathing together is properly said of the Church. For the sacrifice of the Church is the word breathing as incense from holy souls, the sacrifice and the whole mind being at the same time unveiled to God. Now the very ancient altar in Delos they celebrated as holy; which alone, being undefiled by slaughter and death, they say Pythagoras approached. And will they not believe us when we say that the righteous soul is the truly sacred altar, and that incense arising from it is holy prayer?...

Now we are commanded to reverence and to honour the same one, being persuaded that He is Word, Saviour, and Leader, and by Him, the Father, not on special days, as some others, but doing this continually in our whole life, and in every way. Certainly the elect race justified by the precept says, "Seven times a day have I praised Thee." Whence not in a specified place, or selected temple, or at certain festivals and on appointed days, but during his whole life, the Gnostic [i.e., Christian] in every place, even if he be alone by himself...Now, if some assign definite hours for prayer—as, for example, the third, and sixth, and ninth—yet the Gnostic prays throughout his whole life, endeavouring by prayer to have fellowship with God. And, briefly, having reached to this, he leaves behind him all that is of no service, as having now received the perfection of the man that acts by love. But the distribution of the hours into a threefold division, honoured with as many prayers, those are acquainted with, who know the blessed triad of the holy abodes...But also it becomes him to make all his prayers gently with the good. For it is a dangerous thing to take part in others' sins. Accordingly the Gnostic will pray along with those who have more recently believed, for those things in respect of which it is their duty to act together. And his whole life is a holy festival. His sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during night. By these he unites himself to the divine choir, from continual recollection, engaged in contemplation which has everlasting remembrance.

**-Saint Clement of Alexandria (150-215), *Stromateis* 7.6-7**

For the only way we can accept the command to “pray constantly” as referring to a real possibility is by saying that the entire life of the saint taken as a whole is a single great prayer. What is customarily called prayer is, then, a part of this prayer. Now prayer in the ordinary sense ought to be made no less than three times each day.

-Origen (185-254), *On Prayer* 12.2

### **PRESERVE IN PROFESSION**

What makes us Christians? “Our faith,” everyone would answer. How are we saved? Obviously through the regenerating grace of baptism. How else could we be? We are confirmed in our understanding that salvation comes through Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Shall we cast away that standard of teaching we received? This would surely be grounds for great sorrow; if we reject now what we accepted at baptism, we will be found to be further away from our salvation than when we first believed...We made this profession when we first entered the Church...I exhort them to keep the faith inviolate until the day of Christ’s coming: they must not divide the Spirit from the Father and the Son, but must preserve in the profession of faith and in the doxology the teaching received at their baptism.

-Saint Basil the Great (330-379), *On the Holy Spirit* 10.26

### **ONE OF THE SECRETS OF THE KINGDOM**

In the New Covenant, prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Kingdom is "the union of the entire holy and royal Trinity . . . with the whole human spirit." Thus, the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him. This communion of life is always possible because, through Baptism, we have already been united with Christ. Prayer is *Christian* insofar as it is communion with Christ and extends throughout the Church, which is his Body. Its dimensions are those of Christ's love.

-*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2565

Prayer in the events of each day and each moment is one of the secrets of the kingdom revealed to "little children," to the servants of Christ, to the poor of the Beatitudes. It is right and good to pray so that the coming of the kingdom of justice and peace may influence the march of history, but it is just as important to bring the help of prayer into humble, everyday situations; all forms of prayer can be the leaven to which the Lord compares the kingdom.

-*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2660

The Tradition of the Church proposes to the faithful certain rhythms of praying intended to nourish continual prayer. Some are daily, such as morning and evening prayer, grace before and after meals, the Liturgy of the Hours. Sundays, centered on the Eucharist, are kept holy primarily by prayer. The cycle of the liturgical year and its great feasts are also basic rhythms of the Christian's life of prayer.

-*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2660

The mystery of Christ, his Incarnation and Passover, which we celebrate in the Eucharist especially at the Sunday assembly, permeates and transfigures the time of each day, through the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, "the divine office." This celebration, faithful to the apostolic exhortations

to "pray constantly," is "so devised that the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praise of God." In this "public prayer of the Church," the faithful (clergy, religious, and lay people) exercise the royal priesthood of the baptized. Celebrated in "the form approved" by the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours "is truly the voice of the Bride herself addressed to her Bridegroom. It is the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father.

**-Catechism of the Catholic Church §1174**

The Liturgy of the Hours is intended to become the prayer of the whole People of God.

**-Catechism of the Catholic Church §1175**

The whole life of the faithful, hour by hour during day and night, is a kind of *leitourgia* or public service, in which the faithful give themselves over to the ministry of love toward God and neighbor, identifying themselves with the action of Christ, who by His life and self-offering sanctified the life of all mankind. The Liturgy of the Hours clearly expresses and effectively strengthens this sublime truth, embodied in the Christian life. For this reason the Liturgy of the Hours is recommended to all the faithful, including those who are not bound by law to their recitation.

**-Pope Paul VI, *Laudis Canticum* 8 (1971)**

Pastors of souls should see to it that the chief hours, especially Vespers, are celebrated in common in church on Sundays and the more solemn feasts. And the laity, too, are encouraged to recite the divine office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually.

**-Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 100**

## **NEW RATIONALITY**

For prayer to develop this power of purification, it must on the one hand be something very personal, an encounter between my intimate self and God, the living God. On the other hand it must be constantly guided and enlightened by the great prayers of the Church and of the saints, by liturgical prayer, in which the Lord teaches us again and again how to pray properly...Praying must always involve this intermingling of public and personal prayer. This is how we can speak to God and how God speaks to us. In this way we undergo those purifications by which we become open to God and are prepared for the service of our fellow human beings. We become capable of great hope, and thus we become ministers of hope for others. Hope in a Christian sense is always hope for others as well.

**-Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Savli* 34 (2007)**

While these various entities may institutionalize dozens of ways of forming judgments about the world and about how to act in it, I will ask you to imagine...that we moderns are socialized to privilege one form as if it set the agenda for all the rest..."the propositional way of judging the world." I understand this to be a form of judging—that is perceiving, conceiving, and interpreting—all phenomena in the world so that when I (someone socialized this way) awaken in the morning my first act is to see whatever is around me as an object of my vision and as a context for my action...These are all ways I could go out and judge the world this morning. One purpose and effect of Morning Prayer is to prepare me to offer judgments in a different way, which means to perceive the world differently and act in it differently....

The propositional way of judging the world is not bad in itself: it represents as essential part of every day's judgments and is the best way to address certain phenomena and certain calls for action. It is simply not the only way to judge; in many cases it is not the best way; in some cases it is among the worst ways; and it becomes "bad" when it replaces all other ways. Our warrant for paying special attention to this way is that, through the modern epoch (the epoch of Enlightenment and colonialism), Western civilization has tended to promote propositional logic as simply the best means of knowing the world—and, sometimes as the only way of knowing it in a sane or rational way. The very serious danger here is not the logic itself but its being overgeneralized and absolutized: so the culprit is the logic of propositions plus the logic and psychology/sociology of overgeneralization...

[O]ne consequence of Morning Prayer is to remind us that our immediate experiences of the world may be very vast and amazing before we whittle them down to the specific contexts of our momentary and passing concerns...It simply reminds us that, in each moment, we have available to us something much vaster and richer than what we are in the habit of discriminating within it.

**-Peter Ochs, "Morning Prayer as Redemptive Thinking" (2006)**

I have said already that the greatest and most lasting gift which I took away from my brief time at Ely was the possession of a definite framework of disciplined spirituality, of mass, offices and mental prayer. However reluctantly I have observed it at times, and with whatever distraction and tepidity, I am convinced that, under the hands of God, it has done more than anything else to preserve and stabilize my vocation as a priest. For it has been alarmingly evident to me how many personal tragedies and collapses of vocation in the lives of priests, to say nothing of the more spectacular failures of highly publicized and massively equipped ecclesiastical projects, have been traceable to the neglect or erosion of the basic disciplines of the Christian life.

**-E.L. Mascall, *Saraband*, 114 (1905-1993)**