

# The Tradition of Catholic Prayer

*The Monks of Saint Meinrad Archabbey*

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Editors



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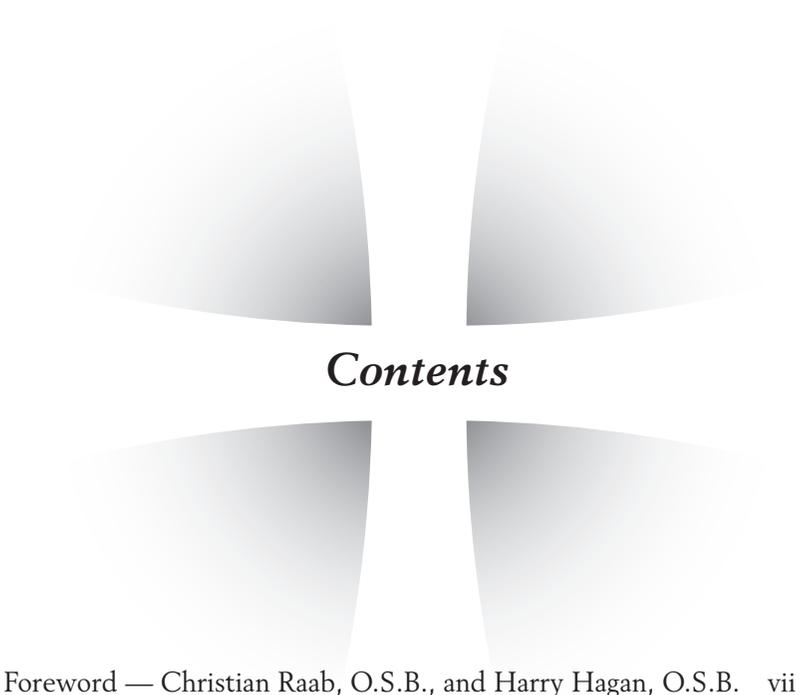
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TO THE MONKS  
OF  
SAINT MEINRAD ARCHABBEY  
WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US  
AND MADE THIS PLACE  
A HOUSE OF PRAYER





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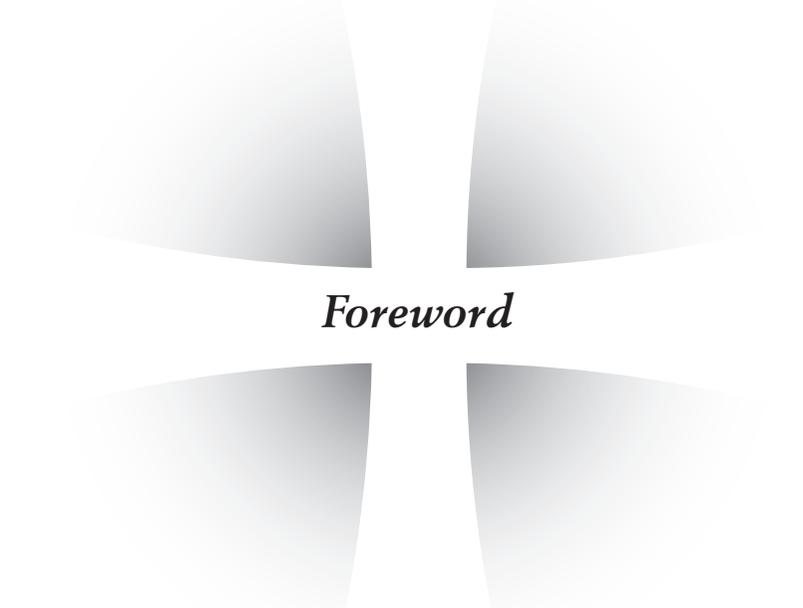
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## *Foreword*

This book grew out of the regular conversations between the novice master, Father Harry, and Brother Christian, at that time a novice. For several years Father Harry had been thinking of asking various monks to write chapters for a book on prayer. As their conversations continued to return to the tradition of prayer, Father Harry presented the idea of the book to Brother Christian, who himself had a broad knowledge of the history of Catholic prayer. Together they put together a plan for the project, and after Brother Christian's profession, they approached some monks of Saint Meinrad who had the scholarly expertise about a period or topic in Catholic spirituality. A generous response by their confreres made the work go quickly, and two years later the book has become a reality.

For Benedictines, tradition is a way of life that depends on those who have gone before us. Their way of life both guides and challenges us to make the tradition our own so that it may live in us today. Our prayer, then, depends on their prayer, and so we have devoted much of this book to exploring how others have lived a life of prayer. The first section surveys the history of Catholic prayer, the second section focuses on liturgical prayer, and the third section deals with special topics that, for the most part, span the whole of Church history. Since there is too much to say on each topic, we consciously limited the scope of each

chapter and asked the authors to write an accessible introduction to their topic, focusing on three or four main people or ideas. This has not been easy, since the tradition is such a rich patchwork quilt. We have also limited the book to the Catholic tradition. The Protestant and Jewish traditions would each require hundreds of pages and not a chapter. Only part of Eastern Christianity finds a place here. We have left those and other topics for other people. Some will also find this person or that movement missing from this overview. Clearly our decisions have been colored by the fact that we are a group of Benedictine monks living in the Midwest. Still, that is who we are.

We want to thank Peter Dwyer, Mary Stommes, and Susan Sink of Liturgical Press for their dedication to this project. Thanks also to Dr. Joseph Raab and Father Raymond Studzinski, O.S.B., for their guidance as readers of this text, and to Prior Tobias Colgan, O.S.B., Brother Fidelis Mary von Hazmburg, O.S.B., Novice Craig Wagner, O.S.B., and Mary Jeanne Schumacher for looking over individual chapters. We appreciate the careful attention of Brother Matthew Mattingly, O.S.B., to details in the final stages. We also want to thank Saint Meinrad School of Theology for monies from the Adrian Fuerst Fund to obtain the rights to publish the color images used in this book, and we are grateful for the work of John Farless, who tended to the permissions and technical matters so that could happen. Finally, we thank our confreres who daily re-create this tradition of prayer as together we seek to prefer nothing to the work of God and to the love of Christ (RB 4:21; 43:3; 72:11).<sup>1</sup>

Brother Christian Raab, O.S.B.  
Father Harry Hagan, O.S.B.  
Coeditors  
Feast of All Saints, 2006  
Saint Meinrad Archabbey

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this collection, the Rule of Benedict is abbreviated as RB and quotations are taken from Timothy Fry, O.S.B., *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).



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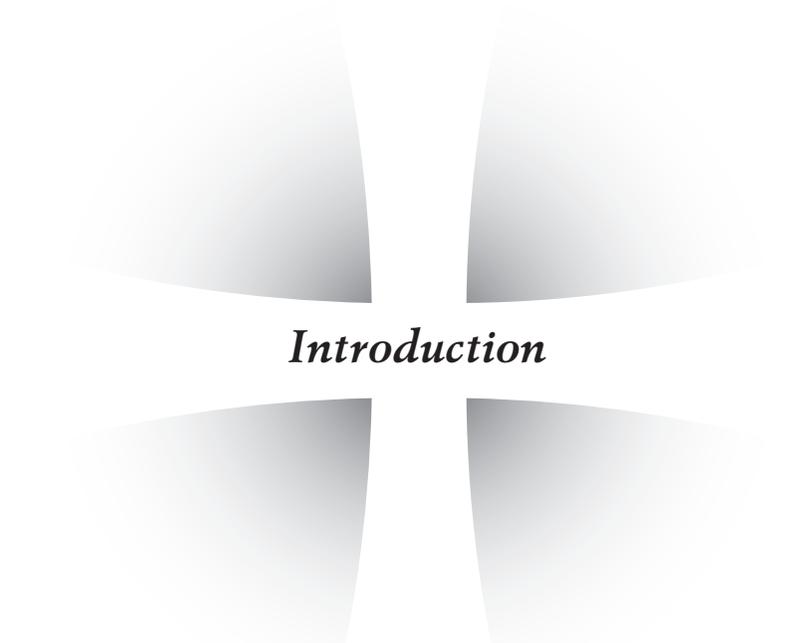
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## *Introduction*

**WARNING:** This book may be hazardous to your spiritual health.

A book on prayer is a dangerous thing, every bit as dangerous as a book on love. Prayer, like love, withers under the microscope of the objective observer, and the reader of this present volume might be tempted to think it examines in a distanced way the tradition of Catholic prayer. The danger for the reader lies in believing that the book will offer some as yet unrealized insights into how to pray.

*The Tradition of Catholic Prayer* does offer insights, not as a how-to book, but as a from-where book. It looks at the great tradition in Catholicism that has been shaped by the prayer of real people over the centuries. They opened their hearts and minds to God in prayer and came away changed by the living God whom they encountered. They did this with others in the liturgical assembly, they did it alone behind closed doors in the privacy of their rooms as Jesus commanded his followers (Matt 6:6), they did it on fields of battle, they did it in monasteries and religious houses, they did it on trains and planes as they traveled, and they did it with their children at their knees. The present generation of Catholic Christians continues to pray, encountering the God whose loving kindness extends from generation to generation. Their life of prayer contributes to the living tradition of Catholicism, which is a legacy to generations yet to come.

Early on in the tradition a man known as Prosper of Aquitaine, who wrote in the first quarter of the fourth century, coined a phrase that succinctly states the right relationship between how we pray and what we believe. He wrote, “The law of praying founds the law of believing.” Prayer, or encounter with the living God, establishes a foundation for what we come to believe about God, Christ, the Church, and how they relate to the created world in which we live. Prosper’s pithy summary offers us a guide for negotiating the danger that a book on prayer poses to the reader by keeping before our mind’s eye the primacy of prayer as the indispensable component of the Christian life. It gives rise to the living tradition that sustains each succeeding generation of Catholic Christians.

All the authors of the chapters in this volume are Catholics. They are also Benedictine monks. The reader might well wonder if the title of the book should not be *The Tradition of Benedictine Prayer*! While that might be an interesting book, it would be a far more focused book. Benedictine monasticism provides the authors with a particular vantage point from which they examine the larger tradition within which they are situated. As Benedictines they practice prayer day in and day out, with their brothers in choir, alone in their cells, using formal rites and wordless sighs of the heart. They pray for the Church, for the world, and for themselves. The bulletin board of our monastery is never without requests from many other people—Catholics and non-Catholics alike—requesting the prayers of the monks for particular intentions and daily needs ranging from the health of a loved one to the success of a job search. These people recognize the place prayer has in the life of the community and they entrust their cares to the prayers of the monks. It is an awesome responsibility for us.

The authors approach the tradition of Catholic prayer as practitioners of prayer themselves. They know that this tradition, while it has a fairly wide breadth, also has definite boundaries. From their vantage point, they look out at the wider tradition with one eye on the road of history and another on some particular landscapes along the way.

The first seven chapters trace the historical development of the tradition, beginning with the Old Testament and moving up to the present era. Father Cyprian Davis’s chapter on “Prayer as Battle” takes an explicit monastic point of view, but shows how it makes a contribution to the greater tradition. The road is wide and includes room for

the monastic lane as well as others. The historical section closes with the chapter on “Prayer in the Modern Period.” The several contributors to this chapter lay out quite a selection of contemporary methods that have become familiar in the lives of Catholics and so take their place in the tradition of Catholic prayer.

The second part of the book examines more specifically the practices of liturgical prayer. Father Godfrey Mullen’s and Father Harry Hagan’s chapters on the liturgical year and the Liturgy of the Hours explore this backbone of Catholic spirituality. Father Kurt Stasiak’s chapter on the Eucharist walks through the elements of the Mass and its prayers to demonstrate how corporate prayer joins us together and to Christ.

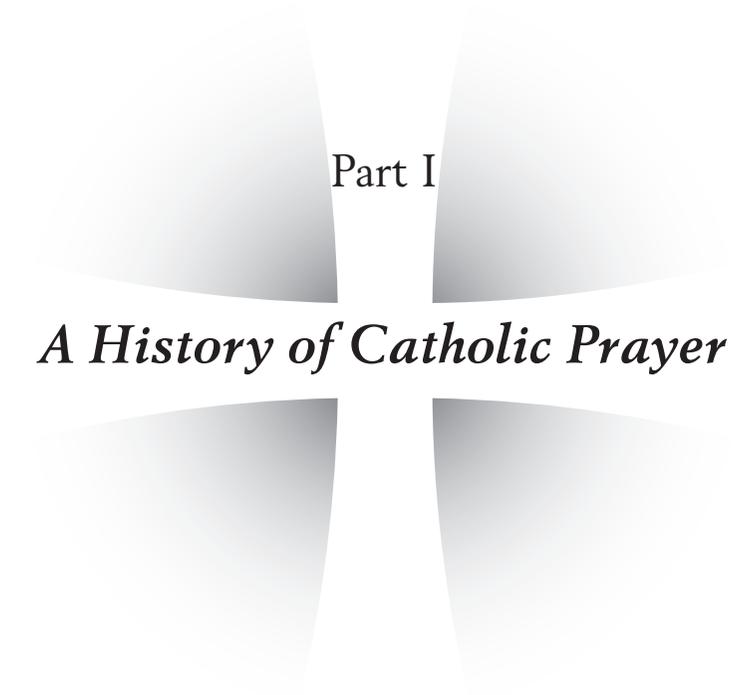
The third section of this book takes a look at some of the scenic landscapes that lie along the road that the tradition has followed. These special topics in the history of Catholic prayer give the reader the opportunity to enjoy some of the sights that have delighted—and continue to delight—the people who practice prayer. With the chapter on *lectio divina*, Father Raymond Studzinski puts the monastic lens back in place, although the method of prayer has its origins prior to its promotion in monastic circles. The cultural shift to a preference for the visual lies at the heart of Father Gueric DeBona’s chapter on images of Jesus. Building on the approach of *lectio*, he moves on to a contemporary “video” way of praying. With his treatment of Mary and the saints in the great tradition of prayer, Brother Silas Henderson deals with perhaps the prayers most popularly identified as “Catholic.” Rather than a peculiar deviation, Brother Silas shows how this form of prayer is solidly planted within the mainstream of the tradition. Prayer touches every aspect of our Christian life, so Father Mark O’Keefe looks at the life of virtue as it relates to prayer in the effort of conversion.

As noted above, the authors of all the chapters are Benedictine monks for whom prayer is daily fare, and not merely the subject of research. I know this because each day, four times a day, I pray with them. They are my brothers in Christ and in monastic profession. We together join the whole monastic community of prayers whose ages stretch from 106 to 23, covering several generations who have seen lots of change in the world and in the Church. This diversity enriches our prayer and our life together and allows the authors of this book to write from experience, so that they can give witness to Prosper of Aquitaine’s maxim, “The law of praying founds the law of believing.”

As Catholic Christians who pray, the authors gladly offer this book to the reader out of love for God and the Church, and in solidarity with their fellow travelers who brave the dangers along the way of the great tradition of Catholic prayer.

As Benedictine monks whose lives are spent seeking this same God, they humbly offer this book *ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus*, “so that in all things God may be glorified” (RB 57:9; 1 Pet 4:11).

Archabbot Justin DuVall, O.S.B.  
21 March 2007  
Feast of Saint Benedict  
Saint Meinrad Archabbey



Part I

*A History of Catholic Prayer*



## Chapter 1

# *Prayer in the Old Testament*

*Harry Hagan, O.S.B.*

Prayer is the way that we carry on our relationship with God. We do many things to carry on our relationships with other people, and the same is true for God. Broadly speaking we can divide the ways of relating into three categories: words, actions, and presence.

Typically we think of words as being central to establishing and carrying on a relationship with others. Words carry both a rational meaning and an emotional meaning. Sometimes the emotional dimension is discounted, but it is very powerful. Words give us the power to tell stories and to express our ideas and feelings. Part of this essay will explore the words of the Old Testament directed to God, particularly in the book of Psalms.

There are also many actions that express our relationship to others. They can range from a formal handshake to an intimate kiss. They can be public gestures or very private. Typically these actions are repeated in various ways and so are familiar. As a result, people can interpret these actions based on what they remember from the past. In a religious context, these actions become our ritual, the actions that express our relationship to God. We are perhaps most familiar with the ritual actions that are communal and public, but individuals often add their own private actions to give expression to their personal relationship to God.

Sometimes nothing need be said or done. Being with the other person in silence expresses the communion and unity that we as human beings seek with others. For religious people, this being with another in union is most profoundly realized by being fully and completely present to God. Several stories in the Old Testament have become models for this kind of religious experience down through the ages.

### *Prayer and Speaking*

In Hebrew words have weight and power. In Genesis 1, God creates the world by speaking: “Let there be light.” To speak is to create and so to be like God in whose image we have been made. In the Old Testament those who bring “the word of the Lord” are revered by some or feared by others because they “speak for God,” and so in Greek they are called “prophets.”

Psalm 115 contrasts God who made heaven and earth with idols of silver and gold:

- <sup>5</sup> They have **mouths**, but do not speak;  
    **eyes**, but do not see.
- <sup>6</sup> They have **ears**, but do not hear;  
    **noses**, but do not smell.
- <sup>7</sup> They have **hands**, but do not feel;  
    **feet**, but do not walk;  
    they make no sound in their **throats**.

This list of seven elements shows the idols lifeless and dead. Notice that the list begins and ends with speaking. Idols cannot speak. The next line of the psalm says:

- <sup>8</sup> Those who make them are like them;  
    so are all who trust in them.

Idol worshipers become lifeless like the idols they worship, and the psalmist tells us:

- <sup>17</sup> The dead do not praise the LORD,  
    nor do any that go down into silence.

Those who do not praise the Lord have become as good as dead. They have gone down into the silence. To be alive means praising God, so the psalmist ends with the affirmation:

<sup>18</sup> But we will bless the LORD  
from this time on and forevermore. Praise the LORD!

When we speak, we not only live, but we also act as God acts—this God in whose image we have been made.

### **Psalms of Praise and Thanksgiving**

Prayer can be divided into two large categories: praise and petition.

Praise is basically the making of statements about God. We can make statements about God's qualities:

God is good, just, kind, merciful, etc.

Or we can make statements about what God has done:

God has created the world.

God has brought Israel out of Egypt.

God has sent his only Son to save us.

By making statements about God, we describe the most important realities in our lives. We reaffirm the order of reality, particularly the reality that God is God and we are his creatures and not gods. In this sense, praise is an act of humility because humility is truth. However this is a truth that should be celebrated and proclaimed to all the world. So praise is always an act of celebration. It tells the story once again of the history of our salvation.

When we make statements about what God has done particularly for us, then we move toward thanksgiving which is essentially an acknowledgment of what another has done for us. So thanks and praise are intimately related and cannot be neatly separated. In a sense, every reason that we have for praise is also a reason to give thanks.

The psalms of praise typically have two basic elements:

1. a call to praise
2. statement/reason: a statement of praise which also serves as the reason for praise

The first element calls the community to praise. The other element has two functions. On the one hand it is the reason that people should

praise. At the same time, it is also what people should say, the statement that they should make about God. We see this in Psalm 117.

*call:*

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD, all you nations!  
Extol him, all you peoples!

*statement/reason:*

<sup>2</sup> For great is his steadfast love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

The first two lines call all nations and people to praise the Lord. The next two lines give the reason, introduced by “for,” that they should praise God. This is also exactly what people should say in order to praise God. These words are the very hymn itself.

<sup>2</sup> For great is his steadfast love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

This same pattern appears in many psalms and elsewhere as well.

Psalm 148 divides into two large sections:

148:1-5a      calls the heavens to praise God;

148:7-12      calls the earth and all people to praise God.

This psalm celebrates the greatness of God the creator who is above everything created, but it ends by stating that this exalted God is also near to “the people of Israel who are close to him” (148:14). Likewise praise brings us near to God. Human beings need to praise God in order to acknowledge God as creator and savior and to declare that we are creatures and servants of God.

Two important hymns of praise found in the Liturgy of the Hours are the Canticle of Zachary (Luke 1:68-79) used at morning prayer and the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) used at evening prayer. These two hymns restate both what God has done for the people of Israel and also for these two individuals. As such they are models of praise for us all.

### **Psalms of Petition**

Often when we think of prayer, we think of asking God for something, and many of the psalms focus on petition. Just as the praise psalms

have a pattern, so also do the psalms of petition, and the pattern is rooted in our human experience of asking someone for something.

invocation	Typically we call the person by name.
description	Then we explain the problem. We talk about our need for something or for help, and we explain why the person would be able to meet this need.
petition	Then we ask the person.
so that	Sometimes we explain what we hope for as an outcome or result; this may be introduced also by “in order to.”

This pattern shapes the prayers of the Roman Missal used at Mass with the addition of a final element called the doxology, which celebrates the Trinity. The prayers of the Roman Missal typically ask God to grant something through Christ in union with the Father and Holy Spirit, or makes prayers through Christ. Here is the opening prayer for the Vigil of Pentecost Sunday:<sup>1</sup>

invocation	Almighty and ever-living God,
description	you fulfilled the Easter promise by sending us your Holy Spirit.
petition	May that Spirit unite the races and nations on earth,
so that	[in order] to proclaim your glory.
doxology	Grant this through our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

In these prayers, the description typically focuses on what God has done, so it is a statement of praise and thanks. The elements may be expanded and repeated and rearranged in various ways as is seen in the Prayer before Meals:

petition and invocation	Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts
-------------------------	---------------------------------------

<sup>1</sup> *The Sacramentary of the Roman Missal*, English translation by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1974), 270.

description of us	which we are about to receive
description of God	from thy bountiful hands
doxology	through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The opening of Psalm 61 shows the basic elements:

petition for God to hear	<sup>1</sup> Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.
description of the psalmist	<sup>2</sup> From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint.
petition	<sup>2c</sup> Lead me to the rock that is higher than I;
description of God	<sup>3</sup> for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.
second petition	<sup>4</sup> Let me abide in your tent forever, find refuge under the shelter of your wings.

The psalms are different from the prayers of the Roman Missal, which are great universal prayers for the whole Church and tend to be rather formal and restrained. In contrast, the prayers of petition found in the book of Psalms are mainly by an individual in an immediate and great need. As a result these psalms can be very personal, rather emotional, and extremely frank. Often people beginning to read the psalms think that these prayers should express “my own” personal prayer, and instead they find the psalms filled with emotions and ideas that are very different, even shocking. It is important to remember that these were originally the prayers of other people. Therefore we must begin by trying to see what this other person was saying to God and why.

Central to these psalms is the description of the psalmist’s need. Some psalmists are sick; some have been falsely accused; others are suffering from the weight of their own sin or feel abandoned by friends and even by God. From what the psalmist says, we must piece together the story of what has happened. Unlike a traditional narrative in which the actions unfold sequentially, the psalmist’s story must be reconstructed from various parts of the text.

The psalms add to the basic elements found in Roman prayer form. The first is a statement of trust. In Psalm 31:14 the psalmist says:

<sup>14</sup> But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God."

And in Psalm 56:4 we hear:

<sup>4</sup> In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust;  
I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?

In these psalms trust becomes the basis for prayer.

The other new element is the rhetorical question directed at God. Typically it is full of frustration, and even despair. Surely the most famous example opens Psalm 22:

<sup>1</sup> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me,  
from the words of my groaning?

This psalm moves back and forth between this sense of abandonment and a search for hope. The psalmist recounts the trust of Israel's ancestors as a basis for hope and later recounts his or perhaps her own experience of birth as a ground for hope. This search is punctuated by images of what is near and far away until it reaches a climax in the final petition of 22:21a: "Save me from the mouth of the lion!" After this, the psalm shifts radically.

The next line states that the psalmist has been rescued: "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me" (22:21b). There follows an affirmation of praise (22:22) and then a call for all Israel to praise (22:23), and then a statement of praise (22:24).

Psalm 22 divides into a psalm of petition in the midst of conflict and a thanksgiving psalm celebrating God's rescue of the psalmist. A number of psalms contain these two different moments: e.g., Psalm 6:1-7, 8-10; Psalm 13:1-5, 6; Psalm 28:1-5, 6-9. Some scholars explain the two moments of the psalm by creating a liturgical context for it. They see someone who has survived an illness or false accusation coming to the temple and reliving the experience by reciting the first part of the psalm. Then a priest would have pronounced an oracle of salvation telling of God's deliverance. The person would then have recited the second part of the psalm, a thanksgiving hymn stating what God has done for the psalmist.

In the book of Psalms we find a number of thanksgiving hymns added as a second element to the prayer psalms. There are also examples where the whole psalm offers thanks: Psalms 30, 32, 118, and 138.

This double movement of petition and thanks can be seen very clearly in some of the narratives. Exodus 14 tells of the escape from Pharaoh at the Red Sea, and Exodus 15 gives Moses' triumphal hymn of thanks. Deborah sings a hymn of triumph (Judg 5) after Jael defeats Sisera (Judg 4). These hymns are two of the oldest texts in the Old Testament. In 1 Samuel 1-2, Hannah pours out her heart to God because she is barren. The priest Eli mistakes her ecstatic prayer and weeping for drunkenness, but she explains that it is because of her grief that she prays with such emotion. Eli sends her away in peace with either the assurance or the prayer that God grant her desire. The Hebrew is ambiguous. Hannah gives birth to Samuel and then in 1 Samuel 2 celebrates the gift of the child with a long hymn of praise which forms a foundation for Mary's hymn of praise, the Magnificat, in Luke 1:46-55. Likewise Judith makes her prayer of petition to God before going to meet the Assyrian general Holofernes (Judg 9). After her triumph, Judith sings a great hymn of thanksgiving (Judg 16). For Christians, this double movement reflects the cross and resurrection.

Not all the psalms end with everything resolved. In Psalm 58 the psalmist cries out against unjust judges whose mouths cause violence like poisonous snakes. The psalmist asks that these unjust judges vanish like water, wither like grass, dissolve like a snail, or be like a miscarriage (Ps 58:7-8). The psalmist has violent images for these purveyors of violence. Some people are scandalized by the sentiments, but as was stated earlier, the psalms were originally other people's prayers. They are not necessarily what I would say. The psalmists do not hold back. They pour out their hearts; they tell God exactly what they feel. In Psalm 137 we see the anger of an exile in Babylon who had seen the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Psalm 137 reaches its climax in the call for the children of Babylon to be dashed on the rocks. The psalm asks us to confront these feelings of violence. It may be that we will discover such feelings within ourselves, or the psalm may only remind us that there were people then and there are people today who feel such hurt and anger. Only by confronting such strong emotion can it be dealt with, and the psalm invites us to such a confrontation.

Even God comes in for harsh criticism in some of the psalms. We have already seen how Psalm 22 begins by asking God: “Why have you forsaken me?” Psalms 38, 39, and 88 are some of the darkest, reflecting the desperation of the sick. In Psalm 38 the psalmist sees sickness as the result of his own sin—a common theological understanding during this period. The psalmist confesses his sin and begs: “Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation” (Ps 38:22). Psalm 39 presents a darker picture still. Seeing God as the cause of this suffering, the psalmist asks God to turn away from him. Finally Psalm 88 presents us with a psalmist who seems completely in despair except for the fact that he has spoken this psalm; it even seems to end in despair: “You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness” (Ps 88:18).

Again these psalms teach us that anything can be said in prayer. Too often people think that prayer must only be “pious” and good, but this is not what we find in the psalms. They have the raw emotion of country music, pop, and blues. They lay it on the line and show that anything can be said. They give us permission to say anything we want or feel to God. At the same time these psalms invite us to hear the hope and trust.

In conclusion, the prayer of petition has a basic pattern which these psalms develop to meet the needs of the psalmist. At the heart of petition is simply telling God what is wrong and asking for what we need. These psalms show us that we can say anything to God. God wants us to be real.

### **The Psalms and Christ**

In the early monastic tradition, each psalm was followed by a short period of silence. This gave people a moment to react to the psalm and then to make their own prayer. The psalms are both mirrors and windows. They are mirrors in the sense that they sometimes, but not always, reflect our situation. Sometimes a line, if not a whole psalm, puts our experience into words. More often, the psalms are windows into the human experience. They let us see both the hurt and joy of life in this world, and they look for the God of salvation to play a part.

Many of the psalms tell of an enemy and oppression, of violence and the fight for goodness. Other psalms identify the king as the hero of this battle. The early Church identifies these motifs with the struggle of Christ crucified and risen. Whatever the historical and external reality of the psalms, the early Church understands them as a description of a

spiritual and eternal reality bound up with Christ. This Christocentric interpretation is found already on the road to Emmaus with the risen Lord explaining to the disciples how to interpret the Old Testament in terms of the events taking place in their midst. The early Church follows this approach and understands the Old Testament in terms of Christ.

Saint Augustine, for instance, sees two levels of meaning in the Scriptures. First is the literal meaning which is particular and historical. The spiritual meaning transcends the particular and historical in order to speak to the universal reality of Christ. Augustine, therefore, is able to find links to the mysteries of Christ throughout the psalms. He also sees the psalms as the prayers of “the whole Christ”—*totus Christus*, a term which appears throughout his commentary on the psalms.<sup>2</sup> The “whole Christ” is made up of two dimensions: Christ the Head, who died and rose for us, and Christ the Body, that is, the Church. Augustine interprets the psalms either as the words of Christ the Head or as the words of the Church with its many emotions, struggles, and hopes. Because some psalms seem strange in the mouth of Christ, later commentators have tended to interpret the psalms as the prayers of the whole Body of Christ.

The history of interpretation, to some extent, is a movement back and forth between an emphasis on literal and spiritual meaning. The School of Antioch and the Scholastic tradition have emphasized a respect for the literal meaning, lest readers become too much enamored of and misled by their own imaginations. The modern historical approach has also emphasized the literal and historical meaning. Its concerns were shaped by the Enlightenment’s rejection of the Scriptures as a credible historical witness, and modern historical scholarship has helped to clarify and answer those objections. However, historical scholarship can focus too narrowly on the literal, which tends to isolate the many pieces making up the Scriptures and create a sense of fragmentation. Some scholars have compounded the problem with a rejection of patristic interpretation as “allegorical,” meaning naïve and fanciful, but that judgment is itself naïve.<sup>3</sup> The new emphasis on Scripture as literature has helped readers see the connections that unify and

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Agostino Trapè, “St. Augustine,” in *Patrology*, ed. Angelo di Berardino, trans. Placid Solari, O.S.B. (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1986), 342–462, esp. 397.

<sup>3</sup> For a defense of patristic scholarship, see John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). See also Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

create a sense of universality. Literary studies provide a way to understand the interpretation of Augustine, Origen, and others, as well as the use of the Scriptures in the liturgy. However, the Scriptures are more than literature. They are documents of faith read in faith as the Word of God.

The primary reading of these texts in faith takes place during the liturgy. Here a spiritual understanding is primary, because faith allows us to see the necessary interconnection between Christ and all the Scriptures. Whether at the Eucharist or in the Liturgy of the Hours, the psalms become the many prayers of the Church past and present. Here the Body of Christ recites the psalms in the belief that these prayers give expression to the many situations and feelings of the Body of Christ before the face of God. By praying the psalms we join ourselves to the many and diverse prayers of the Church, and we pray the psalms for the whole Church and not just for our individual selves. Here the prayer of the Church becomes the prayer of Christ himself.

### ***The Actions of Prayer***

In part we carry on our relationships with other people by what we do for and with them. These actions communicate our thoughts and intentions and make them present in a very concrete way.

### **Postures of Prayer**

The postures of prayer orient us toward God. In Psalm 95:6 the psalmist calls:

<sup>6</sup> O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

Prostration, bowing, and kneeling bring the body low and show an attitude of lowliness and obeisance which was typically shown to rulers in the ancient Near East. The word “to prostrate” is used extensively in the Old Testament and takes on the more general meaning “to worship.” Prostration is a radical gesture and is maintained today only in the liturgy for Good Friday, ordination, and monastic profession. Early in the monastic tradition, prostration was used between psalms with the warning that it should not go on too long lest people fall asleep. The bow displays reverence; it is used particularly in the Byzantine liturgy as the main gesture of reverence, accompanied by the sign of the cross. Kneeling acknowledges

sovereignty, and in Isaiah 45:23, the Lord commands: “To me every knee shall bow; every tongue shall swear.” Therefore Philippians 2:10 states “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” In the Western Church, kneeling becomes a basic posture at liturgy, particularly before the Real Presence.

In the Old Testament the basic posture of prayer seems to be standing with hands outstretched. When Solomon made his great prayer at the dedication of the temple, he stood before the altar and “spread out his hands to heaven” (1 Kgs 8:22; also Pss 28:2; 63:4; 134:2). The raising of hands suggests lifting of oneself to God and so raising one’s prayer to God as found in the famous verse from Psalm 141:2:

<sup>2</sup> Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,  
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

With hands extended, a person becomes vulnerable because the hands are so far from the body. Therefore this stance suggests surrender and openness—appropriate for prayer. Christians, of course, saw in this gesture an image of the cross, and it became a basic stance of prayer for the early Church as seen in the famous fresco of a widow from the Catacombs of Santa Priscilla (see fig. 1, pg. 251).<sup>4</sup>

### **Fasting**

Fasting creates a kind of sacred time for a person and so both physically intensifies and expresses a person’s prayer. During the period of the Second Temple, the Mosaic law commanded fasting only for the Day of Atonement, but there are numerous references indicating that fasting was a common practice to express grief in the face of death and sorrow for sin. Though Moses and Elijah fast forty days and David, seven, the usual length seems to have been only a fast of one day from all food except water. Fasting involves the body integrally in prayer.

### **Offering Sacrifice**

Ancient peoples of the Near East understood their deities in human terms, as if they were very powerful beings capable of doing good or evil

<sup>4</sup> Such pictures are called an *orant* or *orans*. Although the gesture has become identified with the priest, it was not so originally.

for human beings. The temple was the house where deities lived, and sacrifices were a way of feeding them and making them happy.

Israel's understanding of God transforms these rituals. Though very foreign to our world, the offering of animals, grain, drink, and incense played an integral role for Israel in acting out their relationship to God.

The English word "sacrifice" comes from the Latin and means "to make holy" (*sacer* + *facere*). The Hebrew word for "holy," *qadosh*, means "set apart" and refers to that which has been "set apart" as belonging to God. To sacrifice something is to acknowledge explicitly that it belongs to God. Three types of sacrifice help us to understand the implications.

First was the holocaust, an offering in which everything was burned in the fire to show that it belonged wholly and entirely to God. A second type was called the *sh'lamîm*: a word related to *shalom*, meaning peace, prosperity, wholeness. This sacrifice sought to express the peace and prosperity received by the one making the sacrifice, so it often had a dimension of thanksgiving. Here only part of the animal was burned and given back to God. Another part was eaten as a meal by the one making the sacrifice with his family and friends, so it is sometimes called a communion sacrifice because those involved share a kind of meal with God and are joined in communion with the divine. A third type was a sin offering in which those making the sacrifice acknowledged their sin and sought forgiveness. In different ways all sacrifices sought to maintain or reestablish a person's relationship to God.

The importance of the sacrifice cannot be overstated. Still, there is another tradition that emphasizes interior disposition. In Isaiah 1:10-17, the Lord rejects the ritual of sacrifices and feasts and demands instead goodness and justice as prerequisites for any ritual. Psalm 51:17 likewise demands as sacrifice "a broken and contrite heart." All ritual must express a person's interior state; otherwise it becomes a kind of magic that seeks to manipulate the divine. Therefore, the external ritual must express the interior heart. At the same time we, as human beings, need actions and not just words to express our inmost heart.

Even with the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C. and certainly with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., the understanding of sacrifice becomes more and more interior and spiritual.

### **Celebrating Feasts and Making the Pilgrimage**

Likewise feast days were important rituals for celebrating the basic stories and beliefs of Israel. During the time of the First Temple before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., the autumn Festival of Booths played a central role because it celebrated the Lord's kingship. After the fall of Jerusalem, Passover and its springtime celebration of the Exodus became the central feast of cultic life.

For these feasts, the people were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This journey was more than travel; it involved the whole body in remembering the many journeys of Israel's history: the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, Abraham's journey to the promised land, Joseph's journey to Egypt, then the Exodus that brought them back, and finally the journey into the Babylonian exile and the return. Journey takes people into a new world, asks them to mature, and brings them home. Life is like a journey, so the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a multilayered experience, and psalms of pilgrimage (Pss 120–134) explore some of these themes. Pilgrimage became a core experience for Christians particularly during the Middle Ages.

### **Keeping the Sabbath: Torah and the Synagogue**

Keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. During the time of the Second Temple, the importance of keeping the Sabbath grew and became a hallmark of Israel's identity. The priestly tradition saw the Sabbath as established by God as part of creation, for God rested on the seventh day (Gen 2:2-3). In Exodus 31:16-17 the Sabbath became the sign of the Sinai covenant as was the rainbow for Noah's covenant and circumcision for Abraham's. To keep the Sabbath then was to participate week by week in God's covenant.

The laws for keeping the covenant restricted activity in order to promote rest, yet there was also a call to gather in a "holy convocation" (Lev 23:3). This gathering became the synagogue. With sacrifice strictly limited to Jerusalem by Deuteronomy and with the dispersal of Israel and Judah to Babylon, Egypt, and farther, the need grew for a new gathering of prayer. Although it is not clear exactly how it developed, the synagogue emerged as a place where Rabbinic Judaism gathered both to pray and to study. The great gift of the Second Temple was the gift of the Bible itself, for it was during this time that the Torah along with the prophets and other writings were written down and gathered

into a recognizable body of literature. The people now had a book that brought them the word of God. For Rabbinic Judaism the study of the Scriptures went hand in hand with prayer. The Scriptures became a source of prayer. The importance of this is inestimable.

### ***Prayer and the Presence of God***

Sometimes in a relationship nothing needs to be said or done. It is enough to be with the other person and experience that person's presence. This too is a type of prayer and in some ways the most profound form of prayer. While Moses and Elijah on Mount Sinai are archetypal images of this experience, there are many stories about meeting God in various ways.

### **The Temple and Being with God**

In the ancient Near East, a temple was the house where a deity lived, and the statue of the deity was the main focal point. Solomon builds the first temple in Jerusalem with a cherubim throne in the holy of holies where the Lord as king could sit and dwell, but there is no image of God. In fact, the first two Commandments forbid this: The first commandment prohibits the worship of any god but the Lord alone, and the second prohibits any image of God. Every image of God is necessarily inadequate and so forbidden. In this way, the Israelite tradition preserves the transcendence of God, and later traditions would put more emphasis on the transcendent by making the temple the place not for God to dwell but for YHWH's name or glory to dwell. Even so, the temple becomes the special place where one is connected to God, and we find in the psalms a desire to be in the temple in order to be with God as seen in Psalm 27:4.

<sup>4</sup> One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

While it is possible to pray anywhere at any time, we all need sacred spaces, whether they be spaces consecrated by generations who have come to some specific place to pray, a public building dedicated to the worship of God, or a private space made holy by one's own experience of God.

## **Sexuality and Relationship**

In the ancient Near East, infertility was a serious problem, and much energy was devoted to assuring the good order and fertility of the earth. The peoples around Israel had fertility cults in which men and women played the roles of the god and goddess; by their sexual union they expected to cause their deities to be fertile and so to promote the fertility of the earth. This was a type of sympathetic magic in which a person does something that forces something else to happen. It was a way of trying to control the fickle deities.

Hosea in his prophecy makes clear that in Yahwism sexuality is fundamentally an issue of relationship defined by God's covenant of love and fidelity. From this relationship flows fertility as a gift from God. This theological context becomes crucial for an understanding of the Song of Songs which celebrates the sexual love of a man and woman. The rabbis questioned whether this poem of human, sexual love should be included in the Scriptures, but in the end they embraced it because sexuality cannot be separated from the divine, and many Christian writers have followed their lead. If the Song of Songs is literally about the love of a man and woman, the tradition affirms that it is also a metaphor about the love between God and Israel, the love between Christ and the Church, and between the love of God and the soul. If prayer is about relationship, then sexuality is necessarily a dimension that must not be forgotten or ignored. Moreover, the intense experience of the love of God becomes a privileged way of being with God as affirmed most dramatically in the mystical tradition.

## **The Face of God**

The face of God appears throughout the Old Testament as one of the great images of God's presence, and so the psalmist says in Psalm 27:8:

"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"  
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

However, the presence of God was dangerous, and seeing the face of God could bring death.

In Exodus 33:18-23, Moses asks to see God's glory, but the Lord tells Moses that he cannot see the face of God and live. Still, the Lord is willing to put Moses in the cleft of a rock and protect him with the

divine hand so that Moses may see God's back, but Moses is not allowed to see the face of God. In another tradition, however, both Moses and Jacob are celebrated for having seen God face-to-face (Deut 34:10; Gen 32:31), and the surly Gideon and foolish Manoah are amazed that they have seen God face-to-face and are not dead (Judg 6:22; 13:22). To see God face-to-face is an extraordinary and dangerous event, and much desired. Elijah, however, does not see God at all but meets him on Mount Sinai, not in the wind or in the earthquake or in the fire, but in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:12). Such is the mystery of this God who is powerful but nonetheless comes near to us.

### **Conclusion**

The Old Testament holds many prayers and many ways to pray. So many express a longing to be near God. In Psalm 73, the psalmist, after telling of his struggle to make sense of the injustice of the world, says:

Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.  
But for me it is good to be near God;  
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,  
to tell of all your works. (Ps 73:25, 28)

Seldom does the Old Testament find such equanimity and peace. More often its prayers are full of expectation for something yet to come. In either case, this tradition of prayer is vibrant and insistent, and it can teach us much about how to carry on our relationship with God until we with the psalmist can say: "And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you" (73:25b).

### **Further Reading**

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