

“Combining profound personal knowledge of prayer with a love of sacred scripture, Lohfink takes his readers on a journey through the vast wellspring that is Christian prayer. He focuses in particular on the Hebrew scriptures to demonstrate how sacred scripture is the word of the living God and the oldest faith-tradition of the church. In doing so, Lohfink demonstrates his erudition, facility, and reverence for the biblical texts. Throughout, Lohfink balances the particularity and variety of Christian prayer—from Trinitarian theology to the rosary to the eucharistic prayer—with the universality of worship of God and especially a deep respect for Judaism. Ultimately, for Lohfink, the most personal of prayers happens with and for the church and in communion with the body of Christ. This gorgeous book, rich in wisdom, will change the way readers understand and experience prayer.”

—Mahri Leonard-Fleckman
Assistant Professor, Religious Studies
College of the Holy Cross

“Rarely do you encounter in a spiritual work both brilliance and simplicity, a simultaneous honoring of the mystery and nearness of God, and words that positively contaminate your heart while challenging your mind. In Gerhard Lohfink’s *Prayer Takes Us Home*, this is achieved. In today’s anxious, uncertain world, we are challenged to see prayer more fully in ways that raise new questions as to how we can cooperate with God. This book reminded me of the works written by mystic and premier theologian, Karl Rahner. It is not the kind of book that you simply read. No. No. It also needs to be reflected upon, put down, and while the words are fresh in your mind, taken a walk with so you can come home to God in dynamic ways. If you take this book to heart it can be a portal to new joy and peace at a time when we need it most. The opportunity is there for you. I hope you avail yourself of it.”

—Robert J. Wicks
Author, *Heartstorming: Creating a Place God Can Call Home*
Editor, *Prayer in the Catholic Tradition*

“In *Prayer Takes Us Home*, Lohfink delights us with another refreshing exploration of Christian life and teaching—this time with a look at the central practice of prayer. In response to humble and practical questions about Christian prayer, Lohfink engages his life experiences and a wide range of interlocutors, from modern philosophers and great authors to our Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist brothers and sisters. Yet *Prayer Takes Us Home* is always grounded in the close readings of scripture and attention to Christian tradition that are characteristic of Lohfink’s writing. What results is a series of meditative essays that are deeply Christian and profoundly relevant to the lives of contemporary people of faith. Lohfink surprises readers with provocative observations and astute insights about this ancient practice, and as a result, opens our minds and spurs us to action.”

—Jessica Coblentz

Saint Mary’s College, South Bend, Indiana

Gerhard Lohfink

Prayer Takes Us Home

The Theology and Practice
of Christian Prayer

Translated by

Linda M. Maloney



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from New Revised Standard Version Bible © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Excerpts from the English translation of *The Roman Missal* © 2010, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation. All rights reserved.

Translated from Gerhard Lohfink's *Beten schenkt Heimat. Theologie und Praxis des christlichen Gebets*, 2nd ed. © 2013, 2020 Verlag Herder GmbH, Freiburg im Breisgau.

Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except brief quotations in reviews, without written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, MN 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lohfink, Gerhard, 1934- author. | Maloney, Linda M., translator.
Title: Prayer takes us home : the theology and practice of Christian prayer /
Gerhard Lohfink ; translated by Linda M. Maloney.
Other titles: *Beten schenkt Heimat*. English
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2020. | Translation
of: Gerhard Lohfink's *Beten schenkt Heimat. Theologie und Praxis des
christlichen Gebets*, 2d ed. 2013, Verlag Herder GmbH, Freiburg im
Breisgau. | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "Introduces
the reader to the theology of prayer, referring again and again to the
Bible, especially the Psalms. At the same time, it speaks about personal
experiences"— Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019053999 (print) | LCCN 2019054000 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780814688069 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780814688311 (epub) | ISBN
9780814688311 (mobi) | ISBN 9780814688311 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Prayer—Catholic Church. | Bible—Prayers—History and
criticism.
Classification: LCC BV210.3 .L6413 2020 (print) | LCC BV210.3 (ebook) |
DDC 248.3/2—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019053999>
LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019054000>

Dedicated to Peter F. Schneider
in gratitude

Contents

Preface ix

On the Name of God xi

Chapter 1

To Whom Do We Pray? 1

Chapter 2

God Is Acting Today 27

Chapter 3

The Church Has Many Forms of Prayer 43

Chapter 4

Praise Is for a Reason 55

Chapter 5

Should We Ask for Things in Prayer? 71

Chapter 6

Lament Is a Legitimate Form of Prayer 95

Chapter 7

The Psalms Give Us a Home 121

Chapter 8

Meditation Makes History Present 139

Chapter 9

What Happens in the Eucharistic Prayer? 161

Chapter 10

Each of Us Has a Personal History of Prayer 185

Resources 209

Preface

A lot of people want to learn how to pray again. Others are not sure whether they ought to pray at all. They want to know whether it helps them. More than that: they ask whether prayer makes any difference at all in our world.

This book tries to answer such questions, but not in the form of hasty recipes; instead, it leads us into the theology of prayer. Readers will quickly see that there is constant reference to the Bible, and especially the Psalms. But it is not just a book about the Psalms or about prayer in the Bible. For example, it is also about prayer in worship services and the basic structures of Christian meditation. Hence the subtitle: “The theology and practice of Christian prayer.”

Be it noted: this book is not intended to offer a comprehensive or systematic doctrine of prayer. Rather, it tries to open paths by which people may advance in prayer or perhaps even dare to pray again. Readers will discover right away that it rests on many personal experiences; maybe that in itself will be helpful.

The immediate occasion for the book was a week-long course at the Academy of the People of God in the Villa Cavalletti near Rome from 1 to 7 July 2009. It was called “How Do We Pray as the People of God?” and there were a great many participants.

I remember those seven days in the Alban Hills with great pleasure—not only the lectures by Professor Georg Braulik, OSB, of Vienna, and by my brother, Professor Norbert Lohfink, SJ, of Frankfurt, but also the interaction of all the people there. In many discussions during the intermissions, at table, and in our excursion to Subiaco, the talk turned again and again to prayer and the theology of prayer.

My own lectures make up this book; nearly all of them have been reworked on the basis of suggestions and new ideas offered by Georg Braulik, my brother Norbert, and Professor Marius Reiser that I gratefully adopted. My special thanks to my former student, Dr. Linda M. Maloney, who has translated yet another of my books with her theological expertise and expert sense of the nuances of language.

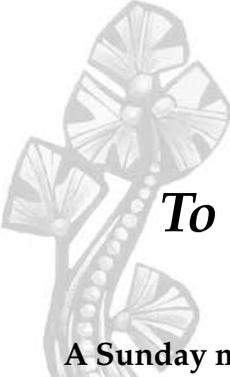
I dedicate the book to Peter F. Schneider, who has gifted Christians with new songs of a high linguistic and musical quality. They breathe the spirit of the Psalms.

Gerhard Lohfink
Bad Tölz
12 September 2009

On the Name of God

God's name in the Old Testament is YHWH. We have to add vowels to those four consonants (the Tetragrammaton) in order to speak the name. If we do so correctly, the original pronunciation of the name of God is not Jehovah but Yahweh. But Jews, out of reverence, do not utter that name. It is sacred to them. They paraphrase it as, for example, "the Name" (*Ha-shem*) or "Adonai" (the LORD). The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that is normative for Christians, accordingly translates YHWH as *Kyrios* (= Lord).

Christians need to respect the usage of their Jewish sisters and brothers, and consequently they should not utter the name of God either. In general I have used the word "Lord" wherever YHWH appears in the Hebrew text, and in small caps, thus: "LORD." There are, however, certain exceptions, namely, where the name of God is particularly emphasized in the Old Testament text or plays a decisive role. There I have left the Hebrew YHWH as it stands.



Chapter 1

To Whom Do We Pray?

A Sunday morning test

Suppose we are standing in front of a church on Sunday morning; the worship service has just ended. We approach as many of those coming out of the church as we can reach and ask them: “To whom were you praying during the service?” Certainly most of those questioned would be slightly irritated at first, and we could expect some evasive answers. But we would not let ourselves be discouraged, and we would stick to our question: “To whom were you praying?”

I am convinced that a large percentage of those questioned would say: “To God, of course. Who else?”—and that answer would be theologically wrong. Why? Because Christians do not pray to God; they pray either to God the Father or to Jesus Christ or to the Holy Spirit. Of course they believe in the *one* God and confess, with Israel, that there is but *one* God, but whenever they are praying to this God they address themselves to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

The basic movement of the liturgy

This is clear especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, in which we can read the substance of Christian faith and prayer. To whom does the church pray at Mass? The three “orations”—that is, the collect of the day, the prayer over the offerings, and the concluding prayer—are almost always addressed to God the Father.

2 *Prayer Takes Us Home*

The climax of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer, has the same basic structure. This great prayer, the primal model of all Christian prayers, is addressed to God the Father—*through Christ in the Holy Spirit*. The solemn conclusion of the prayer is:

Through him [= through Christ], and with him, and in him,
O God, almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
all glory and honor is yours,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

That is the obvious or hidden structural formula of all Christian prayers; it is the basic orientation of the whole liturgy, its fundamental movement: in the Holy Spirit, through Christ, to the Father.

Without calling that basic direction into question, the Mass also includes appeals to Jesus Christ: for example, the Kyrie or the second part of the Gloria, which is addressed to Christ, or the community's acclamation after the so-called "words of institution":

We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection
until you come again.

Similarly, the prayer for peace after the Our Father appeals to Christ:

Lord Jesus Christ,
who said to your Apostles:
Peace I leave you, my peace I give you,
look not on our sins,
but on the faith of your Church,
and graciously grant her peace and unity
in accordance with your will.

Finally, we should mention also the prayer before communion when the congregation prays in words similar to those of the centurion at Capernaum:

Lord, I am not worthy
that you should enter under my roof,
but only say the word
and my soul shall be healed.

Even the orations (collects), the most strictly structured prayers of the Mass, can be addressed to Jesus Christ. Since the Middle Ages there have been a few collects in the Roman liturgy that do not address God the Father but speak directly to Christ. Because this prayer structure is so very rare I will quote an example from the Daily Office for the feast of Corpus Christi:

[Lord Jesus Christ],¹ who in this wonderful Sacrament
have left us a memorial of your Passion,
grant us, we pray,
so to revere the sacred mysteries of your Body and Blood
that we may always experience in ourselves
the fruits of your redemption.

Thus there are prayers in the Roman liturgy for the Mass in which Jesus Christ is directly addressed, and within the Mass formulary of the church's year there is even one prayer addressed to the Holy Spirit. It is the sequence for Pentecost, probably composed by Stephen Langton around the year 1200. This fully-formed work of art in Latin can only be inadequately reproduced in English:

Come, Holy Spirit, come!
And from your celestial home
Shed a ray of light divine!
Come, Father of the poor!
Come, source of all our store,
Come, within our bosoms shine.
You, of comforters the best;
You, the soul's most welcome guest;
Sweet refreshment here below;
In our labor, rest most sweet;
Grateful coolness in the heat;
Solace in the midst of woe.
O most blessed Light divine,
Shine within these hearts of thine,
And our inmost being fill!
Where you are not, we have naught,

1. The English translation (see, e.g., <http://www.liturgies.net/Liturgies/Catholic/loh/loh.htm>) begins paradoxically "O God." Translation LMM.

Nothing good in deed or thought,
Nothing free from taint of ill.
Heal our wounds, our strength renew;
On our dryness pour your dew;
Wash the stains of guilt away:
Bend the stubborn heart and will;
Melt the frozen, warm the chill;
Guide the steps that go astray.
On the faithful, who adore
And confess you, evermore
In your sevenfold gift descend;
Give them virtue's sure reward;
Give them your salvation, Lord;
Give them joys that never end.²

Still, these borderline exceptions do not change the basic orientation of liturgical prayer: to the Father through Christ. This fundamental movement of prayer was so important to the early church that in the year 393, at the Council of Hippo, it made it a strict rule:

Semper ad Patrem dirigatur oratio.

Prayer is always to be directed to the Father.

This brief look at the prayer structure of the Mass shows that the church never prays simply to God but always to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. It is very precise on this point. Unfortunately, when we pray privately we are not always so accurate. We often fail to make it clear to ourselves whom we are actually addressing in our prayer. We tell children we pray "to our dear God," and that idea endures, for the most part, in adults as well.

I am looking at a thick book, a collection of more than eight hundred prayers, most of them modern. It is called *The Big Book of Prayers*.³ If we work through the book we see that the addressee of most of these prayers is unclear. Many begin with "God," or

2. *Veni, Sancte Spiritus*, from *The Roman Missal*, verses by Bob Hurd, arr. Craig Kingsbury (© 1964, US Conference of Catholic Bishops). Available at <http://cdn.ocp.org/shared/pdf/preview/30126053.pdf>.

3. *Das große Buch der Gebete* (Erfstadt: Hohe, 2007).

“Lord,” which would be quite correct if it were made clear, within the prayer, that it is addressed to God the Father or to Jesus Christ, but mostly it is not, and it remains vague in the majority of the prayers; they lack contour. The error is certainly not the fault of the editors. Rather, they unwillingly document the fact that we have lost a part of our religious consciousness.

Here an essential part of Christian faith has been obscured and has lost the clarity it once had. The church, after all, does not believe in God *somehow or other*; it does not put its faith vaguely in a deity; it does not have a general belief in the divine or a reality that is foundational to the world. It believes in God the Father, the Almighty, the one who created us, and in Jesus Christ, the Son, who redeemed us, and in the Holy Spirit, who sustains the life of the church. Jean-Baptiste Noulleau (1606–1672), an Oratorian, rightly wrote:

What can it profit anyone never to worship God except as “God,” without thought of the trinity of divine Persons? If God had been invoked on a person in that way at baptism, the person would *not* be baptized. So if now that person does not call upon God in any other way, can she or he be a true Christian? Those who pray fully have a different attitude, making present not that God is God but that God is the “Father” . . . the God of Jesus Christ.⁴

Face to face

When such faith expresses itself in prayer it has an almost alarming directness. Then we are really standing before God the Father, and as we call on the Father the whole history of this God with God’s people since Abraham opens before us. It is only through this living confrontation that our worship services acquire their power and become infinitely more than a stage presentation about which we have to ask again and again, “Was everything well prepared, and did it all go according to plan?” Certainly worship services should be well prepared, but at some point there is a limit. As soon as it is reached we can forget about all the externals

4. As quoted in Henri Bremond, *Das wesentliche Gebet* [translation of *La Métaphysique des Saints*] (Regensburg: Pustet, 1959). English LMM.

because then only one thing matters: we are standing before the living God, the Father of Jesus Christ, and we are gathered in the Holy Spirit, the holy assembly of the church of God.

It is also because of this standing before the living God and God's story that our worship services are more than aesthetic arrangements. We do not gather primarily to enjoy music or the external forms of the liturgy or to hear a good sermon. The petitions we express do not function primarily to make us familiar with the needs of the world and so to sharpen our sense of responsibility.

Of course, it is lovely when the congregation sings well, when the organist has some talent, when the church space is pleasant, when the sermon has been carefully prepared and the petitions are appropriate. It is also a good thing when the worship service gives believers support and security in their lives and they go home edified.

But none of that is crucial. When Paul speaks of "building up" he means something different, something much greater and more important. He means that every worship assembly is to happen in such a way that the community is "built up" in the Holy Spirit to form the eschatological temple of God. We may also say that it is gathered into the form of society God wants it to be, and that happens first and foremost when it gives glory to God.

The congregation stands before God the Father in order to praise the Father together with Christ and to give thanks for God's saving deeds—and also, of course, to petition, that is, as a praying congregation to say "We cannot do it ourselves. We cannot live rightly. We cannot create a community. Of ourselves, we are not capable of anything good." Such asking and pleading is ultimately also a praise-filled acknowledgment of God. When praise and thanks offered to the Father constitute the basic movement of Christian worship, everything else happens almost by itself. Then "everything else"—namely, what the community needs for its concrete living—"will be given us besides."

Moses on the mountain

There is a central text in the book of Exodus about this immediate standing before God. It is not altogether simple, but all the same I want to interpret it here. Readers need not be afraid: interpreting

this text will demand something of them, but after that the book will get easier again. Still, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at this text in particular, because in it we find the basic structure of what prayer is in the Bible.

⁴So Moses . . . rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him. . . . ⁵The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD." ⁶The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,

"The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. . . ."

⁸And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. ⁹He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for [your] inheritance." (Exod 34:4-9)

What is so striking about this text, which the NRSV translates as literally as possible, is the lack of clarity in the construction. First of all, in verse 5 God descends in the cloud. So far, so good. But who stands and calls out the name of the Lord? Since Moses is not introduced as a new subject, the hearer or reader simply assumes that it is God who stands beside Moses and proclaims the name of the Lord. In favor of this is also that then, in verse 8, Moses is introduced anew. It appears that God is still the subject in verses 5 and 6.

But if we read the text in that sense it is somewhat irritating. Why should God call out—or call on—God's own name? Besides: when the Old Testament uses the phrase "call on the name of the LORD" it is always a human being who is the subject. Still more: shortly before this, in Exodus 33:21, God has instructed Moses: "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock." Moses obeys that instruction in Exodus 34:5. Moreover, this text is echoed in Psalm 41: "you have . . . set me in your presence forever" (Ps 41:12).

It seems, then, that it is not God who is standing in the indicated place, but Moses. But then why is there no *clearly discernible* change

of subject? Is this just lazy use of language? Or is there something more behind it?

The construction is unclear again in verse 6. The Lord passes by Moses and [a voice] calls out, “The LORD, the LORD.” Who calls out? God or Moses? Again no new subject is introduced, but this time the matter is somewhat clearer because shortly before—in Exodus 33:18—Moses had asked to be allowed to see the divine glory. God had refused him because “no one shall see me and live.” Instead, God will let the divine “goodness” pass before Moses:

I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The LORD”; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Exod 33:19)

That makes it clear: at the moment when this promise is fulfilled in our text it is not Moses who cries out, “The LORD, the LORD”; it is God who calls out the divine name before Moses and reveals the divine mercy and graciousness.

Even so, some uncertainty remains because every person praying in and according to the Old Testament is accustomed to calling on God as “LORD.” Hence there is a new irritant in verse 6: isn’t it Moses, after all, who here calls on the name of the Lord and praises God, confessing God’s compassion?

In both verses 5 and 6, then, the text creates uncertainties for the reader. Is it God who stands forth, or Moses? Is it God who speaks, or Moses? Are these the words *of God* or words addressed *to God*? Certainly a translator can easily smooth out the text simply by inserting a definite subject. But would that do justice to the biblical text? Is it ultimately ambiguous for a reason? Is it, in fact, deliberately irritating?

If the text really does intend such a thing it would not simply be an accident that it uses a formula for God’s speaking that is otherwise only used to introduce human prayer, namely, “calling on the name of the LORD,” or that it has God speak just as an Old Testament petitioner might speak, confessing “LORD, LORD.” If God speaks here as a human being does when praying, it could mean that it was the narrator’s intention to show God teaching Moses how to pray. We

might say that for a moment God slips into the human role. In that case we can read the text of Exodus 34:4-9—among others—as teaching us how prayer should sound and what happens in true worship. Should we try it out? Let's read our text again, simply in those terms:

Verses 4-5a: Moses rises early in the morning and ascends Mount Sinai. So human beings must put themselves in motion, must go to meet God, must accept some cost. But this movement of the human toward God corresponds to a movement from God's side: God descends onto the mountain to meet Moses. Moses goes up and God comes down. Perhaps we should even say that God comes down to Moses because Moses goes up, or also the reverse: because God comes down to Moses, Moses can go up to God. Here is an indissoluble mutuality.

Verse 5b: God stands beside Moses, or Moses assumes a place close to God, a place God has shown him—after all, we saw that the text leaves the subject open. God is with Moses, and Moses is with God: encounter happens. Every prayer—especially every prayer of the assembled community—is a real encounter with God. But what does encounter mean in that context? It means that two persons, two freedoms, entrust themselves to one another without reservation, without fear and without hesitation.

Verses 5c, 6: God speaks the divine Name over Moses, the holy, inexpressible name YHWH—or else Moses calls out the name of YHWH. This means in the first place that God has a name, is a person, is a living partner, a THOU to whom one can speak. This is not Godhead in some vague sense, not a diffuse divinity.

It is important, of course, that the Name of God, God's true nature, the "Thou" we can address must be revealed directly by God. Therefore God calls out the divine name to Moses (v. 5), and therefore God reveals the divine nature by explaining the Name: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." And by leaving the subject open the text shows that this self-revelation of God culminates in Moses' appeal to God. Thus in every prayer God reveals the holy Name; that is: God reveals God's own self, and in every prayer, if it is genuine prayer, the one praying responds to this divine self-revelation by calling on the holy Name of God, praising and confessing it.

Verses 5, 6: Certainly God's self-revelation does not simply lead to a cozy companionship between God and the human being. As in every personal encounter the mystery remains, the hiddenness of the Other, the impassable gulf. Our text has two symbols for this:

First, the "cloud." It illustrates both hiddenness and incomprehensible nearness. We can enter into a cloud; it can surround us, but at the same time it occludes our sight altogether. Anyone who has climbed a peak and suddenly been fogged in can testify to that. And so can everyone who has ever struggled with God in prayer: God was near and yet always remained hidden.

The second symbol: God "passes by" Moses. God's face cannot be seen; God cannot be clung to. God cannot be harnessed to human purposes but must always withdraw again. Otherwise God would not be the holy God who is infinitely greater than everything we can imagine.

Verses 8-9: There can be only *one* reaction to this encounter with the holy God: adoration. Moses throws himself on the ground before God, but at the same time his adoration moves into petition. We could also say he throws himself on the ground in order to petition God, but his petition is simultaneously an adoring recognition of God.

For what does Moses pray? That the Lord who has passed by him and thereby revealed himself may accompany Israel and make it God's own possession, even though it is "a stiff-necked people." Isn't that also the basic structure of our worship? It is encounter with the holy God of Israel who is revealed in the divine Name and whom we dare call by name—that is, the God who is wholly and entirely personal. In prayer we dare stand before the face of God; we dare fall down before it; we dare call on God.

But do we also ask the most important thing Moses asks? He is no longer asking to be allowed to see God's glory (as in Exod 33:18-20) but requesting that the Lord will accompany Israel on its path through the wilderness and make it God's own people. Evidently the first and most important theme of all our prayers must be on behalf of the People of God: that God may gather it, lead it, protect it, and care for it, even though it is a stiff-necked and sinful people.

Let us conclude this examination of Exodus 34:4-9 by returning to the ambivalence of the construction in verses 5 and 6. Evidently

it is deliberate: it intends to leave open whether *God* calls out the divine Name or *Moses* appeals to it. Thus God enters into the role of the one praying—or, to put it another way: God teaches us *in person* how we should pray. And precisely that is an extraordinarily important point in any theology of prayer. We could state it this way:

We ourselves cannot pray. We do not know what prayer is and most certainly not what we should pray for if our prayer is to be genuine. God, in person, has to teach us about prayer. Still more: God must pray in us, and we can enter into God's prayer. But how can it be that God prays in us? How can one and the same person turn with ultimate surrender to the self and the result not be an unbearable *self-centeredness*?

The Spirit's sighing

If we consider that question more deeply, our discontent with Exodus 34:4-9 almost inevitably leads us to the question of the three Persons in God, because if God prays in us, and if that *prayer of God in us* is to be worthy of the holy God, then we have to think of God as a conversation. Can we really think that? Or are we here falling into the quicksand of meaningless speculation? No, such a thing is thinkable. Paul himself thought in just that direction; after all, in Romans 8:26-27 he wrote:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God [= God the Father], who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

First we have to consider the context within which Paul wrote those sentences. He had already spoken at Romans 8:22 about "sighing": all creation lies in birth pangs. It sighs and groans because it is not what, in God's mind, it ought to be. Because of the human history of sin it is subjected to nothingness and mortality. What human beings do always leaves its mark on their

environment. When they destroy themselves they destroy creation along with them.

So creation groans and sighs—and so do humans. They suffer together with the creation they have destroyed, and they too, like creation, need to be freed and redeemed. Even the baptized live under the pressure of suffering that lies upon creation. They too groan and sigh and await their liberation. It is true that—unlike those who do not believe—they are filled with hope, for in baptism they have already received the Holy Spirit as the beginning of eschatological salvation. The Spirit “dwells” in the baptized (Rom 8:9, 11), but for that reason the discrepancy between the preliminary gift of the Spirit and the redemption that still awaits is all the greater.

After all, Christians speak of redemption, liberation, and future glory, but they cannot grasp what those words really express. They are part of the still invisible gifts of salvation (Rom 8:25) that are greater than anything a human being can imagine. Hence Christians (and this, of course, is still more true of pagans) are ultimately incapable of prayer: they cannot bridge the profound discrepancy between the Holy Spirit, already received, and the salvation yet to come. Their prayer cannot sustain the tension between the reality in which they live and the salvation already given them. Christians utter many words in prayer, but those words cannot touch God’s reality. The New Testament scholar Heinrich Schlier (1900–1978) wrote correctly of our text: “Our sighing (and longing), no matter how internalized, never comprehend what is being called for.”

In this crisis the Holy Spirit comes to the aid of the baptized, representing those praying before God the Father. Paul had already written (in Rom 8:15) that it is *through the Holy Spirit* who has made them sons and daughters of God that the baptized cry, “Abba, Father.” Thus it is already clear that there is no genuine prayer that does not take place through the Holy Spirit. Our text renders this idea still more profound: The Holy Spirit, in person, speaks to the Father in the baptized, in whom the Spirit dwells, “with sighs too deep for words.”

So Paul again takes up the phrase about the groaning and sighing of creation. The Holy Spirit, by sighing, adopts and owns the sighing of suffering people. But at the same time the Spirit speaks

in sighs *too deep for words*, sighs that are *inexpressible*. This means that the Spirit transforms our sighing—for example, when we complain to God—into the language that is “worthy of” and appropriate for God, the language we cannot command. This is a conversation within God’s self.

A visit to Aristotle

But what kind of conversation is that? At this point it is worth our while to pay a visit to the great philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE). For him, God is perfect spirit existing from eternity from and through itself. God is pure spirit, pure thought. “But then what does God think?” Aristotle asks in the twelfth book of his *Metaphysics* (1074b), and he answers: God thinks *God’s self*—presuming that God is really the highest being. What else could God think, according to Aristotle’s logic? God is perfect being-in-itself. If God were to think something other than God, such as human beings or the world or any individual things, God would no longer be thinking of the highest thing and thus would voluntarily move out of God’s self and lose divine perfection.

Christian theology gratefully made use of Greek philosophy, thinking of God in Aristotle’s categories, and yet it went far beyond Aristotle. From the beginning it was aware that God thinks not only God’s self but the world. Moreover: God speaks not only within God’s self; God speaks the eternal divine Word into the world. Still more than that: God creates the world from the beginning through that eternal Word that is Christ. And finally: God sends the divine Spirit to renew the world so that it can enter into dialogue with God. It is precisely because God sends the eternal Word and the Holy Spirit into the world to dwell there that God can think the world.

Thus conversation in God does not revolve around itself, any more than God thinks only God; rather, that conversation grasps the world and comprehends it. The baptized are empowered to say, “Abba, Father,” with Jesus and, in the Holy Spirit, to speak to the Father in sighs too deep for words.

God is not only self-possession, as Aristotle thought, but self-gift. The Father’s self-surrender is continued in the self-surrender of the

Son and the self-exhalation of the Holy Spirit. It is precisely in this that God possesses the divine Self and thinks God through self-surrender. Out of love, in the Father's surrender to the Son and the Holy Spirit, God thinks the world, calls it into being, and enters into conversation with it. Indeed, through that conversation God creates it and constantly creates it anew. Every prayer must be thought of on this basis, in terms of this trinitarian primal movement.

Ultimately, then, prayer means entering into the conversation among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—not out of our own power and ability, but empowered by being made sons and daughters in baptism. Every adequate theology of prayer must lead to this insight and has already done so. As an example of many possible citations I have chosen a passage from the book *Instructions for Those Who Find It Difficult to Pray*,⁵ by the Franciscan Oratorian Claude Séguenot (1634):

How can we achieve anything through the natural strength of our spirit? What community is there between it and God? The Holy Spirit teaches us to pray. But that is not saying enough. [The Spirit itself] prays in us, lifts up our spirit, encourages our will, breathes sighs into our hearts and makes us serve God rightly—and more: [The Spirit itself] serves God for us. It is not you who pray. Prayer is not the work of the human spirit. The smaller our own share in it, the better we pray.

So we can return to our initial thesis. It should be clear by now that our prayer cannot and must not be vaguely directed toward God. It is addressed either to God the Father or to Jesus Christ or to the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, however, it is always directed *in* the Holy Spirit, *through* Christ, *to* the Father. The liturgy, and especially the Eucharistic Prayer, shows us this basic process of Christian prayer.

But if that is the case, if we can never pray except to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, isn't there a great danger that we will

5. *Conduite d'oraison, pour les âmes qui n'y ont pas facilité* (Paris: S. Huré, 1663). English LMM, from the German translation, *Anweisungen für das Gebet solcher, die Mühe damit haben*, as quoted in Henri Bremond, *Das wesentliche Gebet: La Métaphysique des Saints*, trans. Hedwig Michel (Regensburg: Pustet, 1936), 93.

worship them as three gods? How can we explain to a believing Jew or a pious Muslim that such is not the case? On this account we must take another step, one that I dare not simply avoid. We have to ask: what exactly does theological language about three persons in God mean?

The reproach of Islam

In our present situation it is more important than ever to reflect on God in three persons, because in recent decades Islam has been spreading more powerfully than anyone would have imagined in the first half of the twentieth century. Islam regards Africa as “its own” part of the earth. There are more active Muslims in France than active Christians. In Berlin, every year, more children are born into Muslim families than are baptized as Christians. A steady stream of Muslim missionaries passes through Vienna’s airport to support the Islamic mission in Austria. The main theme of their preaching is that Christians have falsified Scripture, falling into polytheism and thus idolatry. They worship three gods.

This accusation was central to Islam from the beginning. Mohammed fought first against the older Arabian polytheism, but he very quickly turned also against Christian belief in the triune God. The famous *Sura* 112 in the Qur’an reads:

Say: “He is Allah, the One and Only;
Allah, the Eternal, Absolute;
He begets not, nor is He begotten.
And there is none like unto Him.”⁶

This may well have been spoken directly against the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Saying that God does not beget is an attack on the Christological confession “begotten, not made.” *Sura* 4.48 avers that polytheism of that sort is an unforgivable sin:

6. Quotations from the Qur’an are taken from *The Qur’an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 20th ed. (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, Inc., 2007).

Allah does not forgive that partners should be set up with Him; but He forgives anything else, to whom He pleases; to set up partners to Allah is to devise a sin most heinous indeed.

That too is directed primarily against Christians. There is but one sin that Allah will never forgive, so it says. All other sins he can, in his mercy, set aside, but the sin of setting other gods alongside the *one* God he can never forgive. If that is what Christians do, then Muslims who take their own tradition seriously must maintain that Christians are idolaters for whom there is no pardon for all eternity.

The experience of history

But Christians do not worship three gods! They explicitly confess faith in the *one* God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Worship of the triune God does *not* mean that there are three gods; rather, it says that all honor, all worship, all praise belongs to God the Father. But at the same time worship of the triune God affirms that ultimately the Father can only be known and glorified through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. How did this way of worshipping God come about, with its basis in Israel, in its foundational, utterly radical monotheism?

First of all, there is the experience of the Old Testament People of God with the one God who brought this people out of Egypt, traveled with them through the wilderness, led them, rescued them, forgave their sin, and is near and alongside them. This is no absent, rejecting, distant god. This is a close, saving God, a God who comes to the aid of God's people. Israel itself gives this God the loveliest name God can have, calling God its "Father."

This basic experience of nearness that Israel has always had with its God acquired a new dimension in Jesus. In him God has now definitively been made present in the midst of God's people. Jesus' disciples could not say it any other way. They had to say that Jesus is God's ultimate, definitive Word in whom God has communicated God's self entirely, communicated everything forever and definitively acted. In short: whoever sees Jesus sees the Father. And because Jesus is wholly the image, wholly the reflection of

the Father, they had to say Jesus is the "Son." That does *not* mean he is a "second" god but that he is the definitive presence of the Father in the world. Hence from then on the prayer of the People of God can no longer ignore him. All prayer to the God of Israel now takes place "with him" and "in his name."

Then, at Pentecost, all that is made more profound through a third fundamental experience: Jesus is—superficially—no longer present. His disciples can no longer see him. No one can hear him any longer. And yet he is not separated from his disciples; he is in their midst. He is among them when they gather. In fact, he is closer to them than he ever had been. He is with them through his Spirit. This is the fundamental experience of Easter and Pentecost and of the church as a whole: Jesus is present in the Holy Spirit, and with Jesus the Father also.

If the church no longer talks in undifferentiated fashion about God, but instead speaks of "Father," "Son," and "Spirit," that is not an afterthought, nor is it an ideology directed against Israel's monotheistic faith. That would, historically speaking, be altogether unlikely because the experiences we have described happened in Israel's midst, that is, within the sphere of the strictest imaginable monotheism.

Those who formulated the belief in the triune God were not Gentile Christians but Jews, deeply rooted in Israel's faith. And the theologians who, in subsequent centuries, plunged more deeply into the mystery of the triune God in order to secure it against misunderstandings were not thinking in the spirit of Greek philosophy. In that case they would have had to speak in Neo-platonic fashion of the "primeval One," the negation of all multiplicity. No, they did not think in terms of Hellenistic speculation about gods but in light of the New Testament.

Thus faith in the Father, Son, and Spirit rests on historical experience in which God has revealed God's own self. The *one* God has become a presence in the world in a way that has led all previous divine becoming-present to its goal and perfection. Therefore the Son and Spirit are not two new gods but the revelation and caring concern of the one God for the world, in which God is altogether with it—in the face of the Son and the power of the Spirit. None of that has anything to do with polytheism, not in the slightest;

what it is about is the incomprehensible and superabundant love of God for the world.

Prayer can no longer avoid facing this ultimate speaking and acting of God in history. A prayer completely decoupled from that, not directed through Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit, but only to God in a vague sense, would deny the historical basis of Christian belief. To put it as bluntly as possible: it would no longer be Christian.

Church as reflection of the triune God

We must ask ourselves, of course: why has this truth about the three-person God and God's historical self-revelation become so foreign to people today—not only the neo-pagans, but many Christians as well?

It is probably connected with the fact that the Holy Spirit has become or remained a stranger to them—and with the Holy Spirit what community, or church, is. It is true that the Holy Spirit is hard to picture, but there does exist a reflection of the Spirit. Certainly I have never been able to do much with the dove—above all because my study of behaviors has shown me that doves can be quite unpleasant. No, the true image of the Holy Spirit is the church, the Christian community with its assemblies. An assembled congregation seeking the will of God, with one mind, attentive to every individual and making something of the love of God visible: that is the most beautiful reflection of the Holy Spirit. Such an assembly can be seen at a glance to be different from a gathering of Christians who are stiff and unfree, or disunited and in conflict.

So Luke is right to show in his Pentecost narrative that the Holy Spirit is *perceptible*. We can see very quickly whether an assembly is driven by the Spirit of God or by some other spirit. God wills the world and wants to be very, very close to this world; God wants to dwell within it. The place of God's presence is the community of believers. There Jesus is present, and there his Holy Spirit can fill and fulfill all. That is why it is precisely there, in the unified single-hearted community, that one can experience the triune God.

People are by nature very different. We each have our own origins, our own history, our own insights and points of view. When,

in spite of all this often profound difference, people become a unified, single-minded congregation we can get a little taste of what the triune God is: difference of persons and yet unity in nature; an unceasing conversation that takes place in love.

Shared life

Therefore faith in the one God, who is yet triune, has not only a historical but also a social basis. The insight that God, in three persons, is one God is not just one among many possibilities. It is given where the People of God itself lives as a *communio*—where believers trust one another, accept one another in mutual *agapē*, and share their lives with one another. The insight that God is a triune being-together presumes the being-together of the community itself. This insight presupposes church, community, assemblies in which there are many different persons and yet the unanimity of all.

Our image of God is, in fact, always socially conditioned. A society full of violence will believe in a violent god. For a society whose principle of unity is absolutist power, God must also be an absolutist ruler.

By contrast, a society that lives in a community of trust and unanimity will receive the revelation of the true triune God. There the Holy Spirit can be recognized as the personal bond in love. Where Christians share their lives with one another they can at least surmise that there is also a shared life in God, a mutually self-giving life. When these experiences are no longer present there is a danger that confession of the Trinity will become purely formulaic.

Consequently, the history of continually deeper experience of the true God is simultaneously a long stretch of human social history. It was only in the moment when, in the course of evolution of social forms, a form of *communio* was achieved in the primitive community in Jerusalem, where a social group was held together not through power or force but through unanimity and trust in a shared life—only then could the Spirit of God be recognized as a divine Person and God be known as a three-person God.

Therefore the feast of Pentecost—the birthday of the eschatological People of God—is the hour in which the Holy Spirit was

definitively recognized, and with it the triune God. For in the wake of the feast of Pentecost it could be said:

All who believed were together and had all things in common. . . . Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. (Acts 2:44, 46)

Just as the entire search for the true God found its definitive home in Jesus Christ, so all searching for the Spirit of God has its definitive place in the Pentecost community. Consequently the Pentecost church is at the same time the social basis for recognizing the triune God.

In turn, of course, it is also true that where people live in and on the basis of adoration of the triune God what we call society changes as well: a conversation can become speechless. Egoists can surrender themselves to a cause that is far greater than themselves and makes them suddenly focus on the happiness of *others*. But above all: people who are fundamentally different by their very nature can come together, find agreement, become a unity without any damage to their freedom—and all that not from their own strength, not through human effort, but through grace. It is given them as a reflection of the life of the triune God.

Three persons in God

The primary and most profound reason for difficulty with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is thus the absence of any genuine experience of church. The second reason is what we will speak of next: that many people have a wrong idea of what is meant by the three “persons” in God; that is, they do not know what the language of the church’s faith means by “person.”

What is a person? In our naïve, prescientific understanding we see every adult person as a complete, autonomous reality that exists for itself. This compact, sharply distinguished reality then also makes contact with other realities of the same kind, that is, other persons. If we imagine the triune God in that form we of course

have three gods, certainly in relationship with each other but each of them in the first place a self-contained reality.

Even in the case of human beings as persons, however, the idea of a sharply distinguishable reality is only partly correct, because as regards a human being the question is: insofar as this is a person, is she or he really such an autonomous, independent reality existing within itself?

To put it very simply: how, then, does the child that develops from embryo to adult become a person? I am not posing a theological question about the “nature” of a child. The issue is clear for Christian faith: every human being is a person from the first second of its existence because it is seen and loved by God. No, I am asking the phenomenological question: How does the initial clump of cells become *the* person whom we encounter, many years later, as an adult?

A development takes place—indeed, an extraordinarily long and subtle development. A seemingly infinite series of things must happen. We cannot begin to list everything that goes into the making of a person. The child must be nourished and cared for. Its parents have to smile at it. Above all: they must speak with it. And the child is constantly expanding the number of faces it recognizes. It becomes increasingly intertwined in a thick web of relationships: first with its parents, then with other children, then with a steadily growing number of adults.

The language a child slowly learns conveys a world to it. The care bestowed on it by its parents and many others is what creates primal trust, the basic precondition for real human personhood. The child enters into a more and more intensive relationship to the world. It takes in more and more of the world and shapes a world of its own. It builds a world around it and internalizes it.

So what is a person? It is not merely a reality resting in and focused on itself but always also the sum of its relationships to other people and to the world. This is most fully visible in love, the turning of the self to another Thou, entrusting oneself, surrendering oneself. Every human person is thus self-existing but is also to an extraordinary degree “relational”—and much more intensively so than we normally acknowledge. We usually think that we exist entirely within ourselves, but that is not true.

Now let us make the counter-experiment: we will eliminate from the history of our lives all the people we have ever met or had anything to do with: mother, father, spouse, siblings, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, all our teachers. We also eliminate all the books we have ever read, all the media that have instructed us, all the things that have fascinated us, all the conflicts we have entered into, everything in the world we have ever encountered.

What remains of us? Only a torso, an empty shell, a clump of cells, a skeleton. In other words, being a person means essentially *being-in-relationship*. Without the web of relationships in which we have lived in the past and in which we live today we would be nothing.

And now the theology of the triune God tells us: the Father, Son, and Spirit are pure, self-existent relationships. They are *not* self-enclosed realities but, insofar as they are persons, nothing but relational, that is, relationships. The Father is pure self-communication and self-giving to the Son. The Son is pure listening to the Father. The Spirit is pure receptiveness to Father and Son. As a whole the one God is an absolute "we" unimaginable to us. So the mystery of the triune God makes it clear to us that the ultimate is not being-in-itself, being-for-itself, but being-for-another and being-from-another.

To make this decisive difference in the trinitarian concept of person still clearer we may consider ourselves once again. I am I, my "ego," my self: I do something. I stand, I sit, I walk around the room, I eat, I go to bed in the evening. "I" do all that. But I am not simply identical with what I do. I am not simply my standing or eating, nor am I simply my going-to-bed. There always remains an acting center that does or does not do certain things.

But the theology of the three divine Persons says that in them such a difference does not exist. God the Father is not first of all God the Father, who then does something else: loving. No, Sacred Scripture tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8). This means that loving is not something extra added to the Father; instead, the Father is nothing other than the event of purely loving. In exactly the same way the Son is nothing other than pure listening, pure receiving, pure handing on of what is heard from the Father (John

15:15). Correspondingly, the Holy Spirit is nothing other than pure receiving and being the bond of love between Father and Son.

I think it is clear that when we speak of three *Persons* in God the concept of “person” we are using is completely different from the idea of personhood we apply to ourselves. We cannot conceive a positive idea of the personhood of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, that is true of everything we say of God: we can speak of God only in images and comparisons in which the dissimilarity is infinitely greater than the similarity. Even when we speak of *three* Persons we have to be clear that the number “three” is only an analogous concept: it is something completely different from saying “three trees” or “three houses” or “three people.”

And despite all this we may pray to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We may and must stand before their face and address them in prayer, because they are much more intensely and more gloriously Person than we can begin to conceive what a “person” is.

Clearly, we dare not approach such a mystery altogether in terms of concepts. The only adequate form of approach to this God is praise—praising the truth that the triune God desires from all eternity to receive us into that community and give us a share in the eternal divine life that is nothing but love.

A difficulty

I do not want to conclude this first chapter, which is so basic for Christian prayer, without discussing a difficulty that is “in the air,” as we might say. I can imagine someone posing the following objection:

That is all too complicated for me. Until now I have always simply prayed to *God*, and I want to go on doing that. It would be unbearable to me to have to think, every time, that I am praying in the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ to the Father. It would destroy the immediacy and simplicity of my prayer. The thoughts presented here may be important to theologians but they have nothing to do with real life. Besides, preachers and even theologians mostly talk simply about “God” without

constantly making distinctions. So I'm going to go on praying to *God* and no one else.

The objection is understandable, but it is off the mark. Karl Rahner, in one of his important essays, investigated the concept of "God" in the New Testament. He was able to show that in the vast number of passages in which the word "God" appears in the New Testament it almost always refers to God the Father. "God" never refers to the trinitarian God in three persons. That New Testament usage endured for a long time in the practice of the ancient church. It appears, for example, in the ancient Roman baptismal confession (the source of the so-called Apostles' Creed), which says:

I believe in God, the Father almighty . . .
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son . . .
and in the Holy Spirit . . .

This rule of speech did not mean, of course, that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are not true God just as the Father is. But the language attaches "God" to the Father. It was only the usage of medieval Scholastic theology that changed that—in the West. From then on the word "God," when used without further qualification, often meant the trinity of Persons as a whole. But as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the liturgy held to the old usage. For example, in the collect for the Twentieth Sunday of the year it prays:

O God, who have prepared for those who love you
good things which no eye can see,
fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love,
so that, loving you in all things and above all things,
we may attain your promises,
which surpass every human desire.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son . . .

In the Latin of this and many other collects the address is simply *Deus*, that is, "God." But in the course of the prayer and above all through the doxology at the end it becomes clear that "God" here refers to none other than God the Father. It is time for this

understanding of the language to be restored. It is good biblical language, and it has the church's tradition behind it.

With regard to the objection voiced above, this means that when we pray we may simply say "God." We only need to recall from time to time that it almost always means God the Father and that the direction of the prayer should also be expressed in some way by the content of the prayer itself.

We don't have to remember constantly that we are praying *through* Jesus Christ *in* the Holy Spirit. It is enough to have reflected thoroughly on this profound mystery at least once in the course of our lives. Likewise the liturgy, with its doxologies, constantly reminds us of this basic structure of all prayer.

In the end we need to know that because ultimately we are always praying to God, our Father, we are thereby united not only with Jesus, who taught us to pray, "Abba, dear Father," but also most profoundly with Israel and Judaism. Israel is the olive tree into which we Gentile Christians have been grafted.