"Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved."-Rom. 10:13

"Whoever prays is certainly saved. He who does not is certainly damned. All the blessed (except infants) have been saved by prayer. All the damned have been lost through not praying. If they had prayed they would not have been lost."-St. Alphonsus Ligouri (1696-1787)

1. Definition of Prayer

Prayer is the cornerstone of the Christian life, the secret of every triumph of every saint and the one practice that can be universally advised at all times and in every occasion. "Pray without ceasing," St. Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Even the God-Man Himself, though He was already infinitely powerful, drew strength through prayer before He began His ministry and also before His Passion.

Nevertheless, prayer is a paradox. It is extremely easy to define, and extraordinarily difficult to practice. The Catechism adopts the saying of St. John Damascene (8th century) in its own definition of prayer:

Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God (CCC 2559).

Prayer is the acting out of the virtue of religion which consists in asking proper gifts or graces from God. In a more general sense it is the application of the mind to Divine things, not merely to acquire knowledge of them but to make use of such knowledge as a means of union with God. This may be done by acts of praise and thanksgiving, but petition is the principal act of prayer. It is the expression of our desires to God, whether they are for others or ourselves.
St. Therese of Lisieux said, "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." Man desires not only to know God, but to communion with Him Thus, prayer touches on the deepest aspect of man's being: his vocation to love. Prayer is a means of uniting man with the object of his love.

2. Gift, Covenant, Communion

There are several different aspects to prayer.

First, prayer is a gift from God. Aristotle imagined God as a distant Being, utterly unconcerned with the affairs of men and unreachable from earth. The God of Christ, however, reveals Himself to be a loving Father, one Who is concerned with the well being of men and Who allows Himself to be called upon by them.

Recognizing that this ability to call upon God is a gift, the proper attitude for prayer is **humility**. As it is written, "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (Jas. 4:6). Not every saint in heaven was a martyr; not every saint a virgin, not every saint a religious – but every saint in

ever practiced the virtue of humility. Humility demands that we learn prayer from our Lord as a gift. Only when we humbly acknowledge that "we do not know how to pray as we ought" are we ready to receive the gift of prayer (Rom. 8:26).

The gift is free, but it needs to be asked for, as the disciples asked Christ, "Lord, teach us how to pray" (Luke 11:1). Christ promises that those who ask for this gift will be granted it, as is demonstrated by the story of the Samarian woman at the well:

"If you knew the gift of God!" The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him. "You would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Paradoxically our prayer of petition is a response to the plea of the living God: "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water!" Prayer is the response of faith to the free promise of salvation and also a response of love to the thirst of the only Son of God (CCC 2560-61).

While the mind influences prayer, and it can be said that prayer is a spiritual communion, Scripture speaks of the *heart* as being the source of prayer. By *heart*, Scripture denotes both the seat of man (the source of his being), and the whole man, body and soul. Prayer comes forth from the depths of man, and it is in these depths that mankind encounters God.

Thus, prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ. It is both a divine action and a human action, reflecting man's spiritual nature and his earthly nature, coming both from ourselves and the Holy Spirit, and directed to the Father. By being able to pray, to lift up our hearts and call upon God, man shows that He is a being created in covenant with God, unlike the beasts of the earth.

Prayer is not only a covenant, but is also life-giving communion in that covenant. "In the New Covenant, prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Kingdom is "the union of the entire holy and royal Trinity . . . with the whole human spirit."[12] Thus, the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him. This communion of life is always possible because, through Baptism, we have already been united with Christ.[13] Prayer is *Christian* insofar as it is communion with Christ and extends throughout the Church, which is his Body. Its dimensions are those of Christ's love" (CCC 2565).

3. Universal Call to Prayer

In the act of Creation, God calls man from nothingness into existence. Man was created in a state of friendship with God, a state that was soon lost through sin. Nevertheless, man continued to search for God in hopes of restoring the lost communion. All religions bear witness to men's essential search for God (CCC 2566).

Though in prayer man calls out to God, it is in fact God Who calls man first, from the very first moment in Eden when God came walking and calling for Adam. Prayer is responsive, for God's loving initiative always comes first. The desire to pray comes from God, the grace of humility necessary for prayer comes from God, the will to carry out our desire and the graces that come to us through prayer all have their source in God. The drama of God's call to man (and man's response) unfolds throughout all salvation history.

4. The Prayers of Jesus

Jesus Christ, as the eternal Word of God made man, gives us an invaluable insight into the proper way to pray. First we contemplate the mystery of Him in prayer, and then listen as He teaches us to pray in order to know how He hears our prayer.

As a man, Jesus learned to pray according to His human heart.

"The Gospel according to St. Luke emphasizes the action of the Holy Spirit and the meaning of prayer in Christ's ministry. Jesus prays *before* the decisive moments of his mission: before his Father's witness to him during his baptism and Transfiguration, and before his own fulfillment of the Father's plan of love by his Passion. He also prays before the decisive moments involving the mission of his apostles: at his election and call of the Twelve, before Peter's confession of him as "the Christ of God," and again that the faith of the chief of the Apostles may not fail when tempted. Jesus' prayer before the events of salvation that the Father has asked him to fulfill is a humble and trusting commitment of his human will to the loving will of the Father. By *contemplating* and hearing the Son, the master of prayer, the children learn to pray to the Father.

Jesus often draws apart to pray *in solitude*, on a mountain, preferably at night. He *includes all men* in his prayer, for he has taken on humanity in his incarnation, and he offers them to the Father when he offers himself. Jesus, the Word who has become flesh, shares by his human prayer in all that "his brethren" experience; he sympathizes with their weaknesses in order to free them. It was for this that the Father sent him. His words and works are the visible manifestation of his prayer in secret" (CCC 2599-2606). The priestly prayer (John 17) of Jesus holds a unique place in the economy of salvation.

5. Jesus teaches us how to pray

When Jesus prays he is already teaching us how to pray. His prayer to his Father is the theological path (the path of faith, hope, and charity) of our prayer to God. But the Gospel also gives us Jesus' explicit teaching on prayer. Like a wise teacher, he takes hold of us where we are and leads us progressively toward the Father.

From the *Sermon on the Mount* onwards, Jesus insists on *conversion of heart*: reconciliation with one's brother before presenting an offering on the altar, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors, prayer to the Father in secret, not heaping up empty phrases, prayerful forgiveness from the depths of the heart, purity of heart, and seeking the Kingdom before all else.[64] This filial conversion is entirely directed to the Father.

Once committed to conversion, the heart learns to pray in *faith*. Faith is a filial adherence to God beyond what we feel and understand. It is possible because the beloved Son gives us access to the Father. He can ask us to "seek" and to "knock," since he himself is the door and the way.

Just as Jesus prays to the Father and gives thanks before receiving his gifts, so he teaches us *filial boldness*: "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will." Such is the power of prayer and of faith that does not doubt: "all things are possible to him who believes." Jesus is as saddened by the "lack of faith" of his own neighbors and the "little faith" of his own disciples as he is struck with admiration at the great faith of the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman. The prayer of faith consists not only in saying "Lord, Lord," but in disposing the heart to do the will of the Father. Jesus calls his disciples to bring into their prayer this concern for cooperating with the divine plan.

In Jesus "the Kingdom of God is at hand." He calls his hearers to conversion and faith, but also to *watchfulness*. In prayer the disciple keeps watch, attentive to Him Who Is and Him Who Comes, in memory of his first coming in the lowliness of the flesh, and in the hope of his second coming in glory. In communion with their Master, the disciples' prayer is a battle; only by keeping watch in prayer can one avoid falling into temptation.

When Jesus openly entrusts to his disciples the mystery of prayer to the Father, he reveals to them what their prayer and ours must be, once he has returned to the Father in his glorified humanity. What is new is to "ask *in his name*." Faith in the Son introduces the disciples into the knowledge of the Father, because Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life." Faith bears its fruit in love: it means keeping the word and the commandments of Jesus, it means abiding with him in the Father who, in him, so loves us that he abides with us. In this new covenant the certitude that our petitions will be heard is founded on the prayer of Jesus.

Even more, what the Father gives us when our prayer is united with that of Jesus is "another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth." This new dimension of prayer and of its circumstances is displayed throughout the farewell discourse. In the Holy Spirit, Christian prayer is a communion of love with the Father, not only through Christ but also *in him*: "Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."

6. Jesus hears our prayer

Prayer to Jesus is answered by him already during his ministry, through signs that anticipate the power of his death and Resurrection: Jesus hears the prayer of faith, expressed in words (the leper, Jairus, the Canaanite woman, the good thief) or in silence (the bearers of the paralytic, the woman with a hemorrhage who touches his clothes, the tears and ointment of the sinful woman). The urgent request of the blind men, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" or "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" has-been renewed in the traditional prayer to Jesus known as the *Jesus Prayer*: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" Healing infirmities or forgiving sins, Jesus always responds to a prayer offered in faith: "Your faith has made you well; go in peace."

"*St. Augustine wonderfully summarizes the three dimensions of Jesus' prayer: "He prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head, and is prayed to by us as our God. Therefore let us acknowledge our voice in him and his in us*" (CCC 2616).

7. The prayer of the Virgin Mary

Mary's prayer is revealed to us at the dawning of the fullness of time. Before the incarnation of the Son of God, and before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, her prayer cooperates in a unique way with the Father's plan of loving kindness: at the Annunciation, for Christ's conception; at Pentecost, for the formation of the Church, his Body. In the faith of his humble handmaid, the Gift of God found the acceptance he had awaited from the beginning of time. She whom the Almighty made "full of grace" responds by offering her whole being: "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word." "*Fiat*": this is Christian prayer: to be wholly God's, because he is wholly ours.

The Gospel reveals to us how Mary prays and intercedes in faith. At Cana, the mother of Jesus asks her son for the needs of a wedding feast; this is the sign of another feast - that of the wedding of the Lamb where he gives his body and blood at the request of the Church, his Bride. It is at the hour of the New Covenant, at the foot of the cross, that Mary is heard as the Woman, the new Eve, the true "Mother of all the living."

That is why the Canticle of Mary, the *Magnificat* (Latin) or *Megalynei* (Byzantine) is the song both of the Mother of God and of the Church; the song of the Daughter of Zion and of the new People of God; the song of thanksgiving for the fullness of graces poured out in the economy of salvation and the song of the "poor" whose hope is met by the fulfillment of the promises made to our ancestors, "to Abraham and to his posterity forever."

Thus Church Tradition assigns Mary an important role in the life of the Church by assigning her the title *Mediatrix of All-Graces*. This means that every grace given to us by God comes to us via the intercession of Mary; or, to put it another way, there is no grace we receive from God that Mary has not assented to and prayed for.

8. Types of Prayer

1) BLESSING AND ADORATION

   Blessing expresses the basic movement of Christian prayer: it is an encounter between God and man. In blessing, God's gift and man's acceptance of it are united in dialogue with each other. The prayer of blessing is man's response to God's gifts: because God blesses, the human heart can in return bless the One who is the source of every blessing.

   Two fundamental forms express this movement: our prayer *ascends* in the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father - we bless him for having blessed us; it implores the grace of the Holy Spirit that *descends* through Christ from the Father - he blesses us.

Adoration is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator. It exalts the greatness of the Lord who made us and the almighty power of the Savior who sets us free from evil. Adoration is homage of the spirit to the "King of Glory," respectful silence in the presence of the "ever greater" God. Adoration of the thrice-holy and sovereign God of love blends with humility and gives assurance to our supplications.

2) PRAYER OF PETITION

The vocabulary of supplication in the New Testament is rich in shades of meaning: ask, beseech, plead, invoke, entreat, cry out, even "struggle in prayer." Its most usual form, because the most spontaneous, is petition: by prayer of petition we express awareness of our relationship with God. We are creatures who are not our own beginning, not the masters of adversity, not our own last end. We are sinners who as Christians know that we have turned away from our Father. Our petition is already a turning back to him.

The first movement of the prayer of petition is *asking forgiveness*, like the tax collector in the parable: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" It is a prerequisite for righteous and pure prayer. A trusting humility brings us back into the light of communion between the Father and his Son Jesus Christ and with one another, so that "we receive from him whatever we ask." Asking forgiveness is the prerequisite for both the Eucharistic liturgy and personal prayer.

Christian petition is centered on the desire and *search for the Kingdom to come*, in keeping with the teaching of Christ. There is a hierarchy in these petitions: we pray first for the Kingdom, then for what is necessary to welcome it and cooperate with its coming. This collaboration with the mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit, which is now that of the Church, is the object of the prayer of the apostolic community. It is the prayer of Paul, the apostle par excellence, which reveals to us how the divine solicitude for all the churches ought to inspire Christian prayer. By prayer every baptized person works for the coming of the Kingdom.

When we share in God's saving love, we understand that *every need* can become the object of petition. Christ, who assumed all things in order to redeem all things, is glorified by what we ask the Father in his name. It is with this confidence that St. James and St. Paul exhort us to pray *at all times*.

3) PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

Intercession is a prayer of petition, which leads us to pray as Jesus did. He is the one intercessor with the Father on behalf of all men, especially sinners. He is "able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." The Holy Spirit "himself intercedes for us . . . and intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Since

Abraham, intercession - asking on behalf of another has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy. In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints. In intercessory prayer, he who prays looks "not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others," even to the point of praying for those who do him harm.

The first Christian communities lived this form of fellowship intensely. Thus the Apostle Paul gives them a share in his ministry of preaching the Gospel but also intercedes for them. The intercession of Christians recognizes no boundaries: "for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions," for persecutors, for the salvation of those who reject the Gospel.

4) PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving characterizes the prayer of the Church which, in celebrating the Eucharist, reveals and becomes more fully what she is. Indeed, in the work of salvation, Christ sets creation free from sin and death to consecrate it anew and make it return to the Father, for his glory. The thanksgiving of the members of the Body participates in that of their Head.
As in the prayer of petition, every event and need can become an offering of thanksgiving. The letters of St. Paul often begin and end with thanksgiving, and the Lord Jesus is always present in it: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you"; "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

5) PRAYER OF PRAISE

Praise is the form of prayer which recognizes most immediately that God is God. It lauds God for his own sake and gives him glory, quite beyond what he does, but simply because HE IS. It shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory. By praise, the Spirit is joined to our spirits to bear witness that we are children of God, testifying to the only Son in whom we are adopted and by whom we glorify the Father. Praise embraces the other forms of prayer and carries them toward him who is its source and goal: the "one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist."

The Eucharist contains and expresses all forms of prayer: it is "the pure offering" of the whole Body of Christ to the glory of God's name and, according to the traditions of East and West, it is *the* "sacrifice of praise.

The Mass is the most perfect prayer because it is the offering of Christ to the Father.

The Universal Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith. I trust in you: strengthen my trust.
I love you: let me love you more and more. I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.
I worship you as my first beginning, I long for you as my last end,
I praise you as my constant helper,
And call on you as my loving protector.

Guide me by your wisdom, Correct me with your justice, Comfort me with your mercy, Protect me with your power.
I offer you, Lord, my thoughts: to be fixed on you;
My words: to have you for their theme; My actions: to reflect my love for you;
My sufferings: to be endured for your greater glory.

I want to do what you ask of me: In the way you ask,
For as long as you ask, Because you ask it.
Lord, enlighten my understanding, Strengthen my will,
Purify my heart, and make me holy.
Help me to repent of my past sins And to resist temptation in the future.
Help me to rise above my human weaknesses And to grow stronger as a Christian.

Let me love you, my Lord and my God, And see myself as I really am:
A pilgrim in this world,
A Christian called to respect and love All whose lives I touch,
Those under my authority, My friends and my enemies.

Help me to conquer anger with gentleness, Greed by generosity,
Apathy by fervor.

Help me to forget myself And reach out toward others.
Make me prudent in planning, Courageous in taking risks.
Make me patient in suffering, unassuming in prosperity.

Keep me, Lord, attentive at prayer, Temperate in food and drink, Diligent in my work,
Firm in my good intentions.
Let my conscience be clear, My conduct without fault, My speech blameless,
My life well-ordered.

Put me on guard against my human weaknesses. Let me cherish your love for me,
Keep your law,
And come at last to your salvation.

Teach me to realize that this world is passing, That my true future is the happiness of heaven,
That life on earth is short,
And the life to come eternal.

Help me to prepare for death With a proper fear of judgment,

But a greater trust in your goodness. Lead me safely through death
To the endless joy of heaven.

Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

For Further Reading:

1 Thess. 5:17
John 17
Catechism of the Catholic Church § 2558-2865
St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*
St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*
Humility of Heart by Fr. Cajetan Mary de Bergamo, translated by Hebert Cardinal Vaughn