

## Help For the Asking

The way is long and sometimes arduous; the greatest difficulty is not in our circumstances, hard as they may be, but in ourselves. In his teaching on Prayer, the Lord gives us a “means of grace” – help along the way, help literally for the asking – that we may not wander from the way and be lost but find our way home.

## BELONGING TO CHRIST XIV

# *Special Grace*

*Catechist.* My good Child, know this; that thou art not able to do these things of thyself, nor to walk in the Commandments of God, and to serve him, without his special grace....

### **I STAND AT THE DOOR AND KNOCK**

“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20, the subject of a famous painting by Victorian artist Holman Hunt). But what does it mean? At first glance, it looks very straightforward: Jesus comes to save us, but we have to let him in. But is that really all? Does God, having accomplished everything for us, now wait upon our decision? We who have so much resistance to him? Will he not come to help us open that door? This was the argument of the great Catholic father, Augustine, against the Pelagians. Of this Scripture Richard Hooker comments, that “the Pelagian’s manner of construction was that *to knock* is the free external offer of God’s grace; *to open* is the work of the natural will by itself, accepting grace and so procuring or deserving whatsoever followeth. But the Catholic exposition of that and all such sentences was, that *to stand* and *to knock* is indeed a work of outward grace, but *to open* cometh not from man’s will without the inward illumination of grace; whereupon afterwards ensueth continual augmentation thereof; not because the first concurrence of the will itself with grace, much less without, doth deserve additions after following; but because it is the nature of God’s most bountiful disposition to build forward where his foundation is once laid” (Laws, V. App. 1.3). God does not depend upon us to respond to his grace, or wait upon our response to his grace. At every point he acts freely to illuminate the understanding and move the will of man.

### **THE NEED FOR GRACE AND ITS SUPPLY**

With its treatment of God’s Holy Will and Commandments, the Catechism appears to have completed its explanation of the three promises of Baptism, but this is not the case. Knowledge of what the Commandments require is not enough. As the Catechist explains, “My good Child, know this; that thou art not able to do these things of thyself nor to walk in the Commandments of God, and to serve him, without his special grace....”

To understand why this is, it is helpful to know something about one of the great ancient heresies of the Church, which is called Pelagianism, after its spokesman, the 4<sup>th</sup> c. British monk Pelagius. Pelagius was concerned about the obvious need for greater

moral effort by Christians, and he was probably right. So where did he go wrong? Why is Pelagianism a heresy? Here is how Fr. Crouse answers the question:

Basically, the position is this: we have the Law and the Gospel, we have the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. So we know what is right. All that is required is a determination to do it: a moral effort, a bit of gumption, or, as an old-fashioned Nova-Scotian might put it, a bit of “backbone”. Instead of wallowing in our supposed inadequacies and helplessness, we must simply exert a bit of moral effort and responsibility. Each man is his own Adam, claimed Pelagius, and is thoroughly capable of choosing to sin or not to sin.

Certainly such a position has its attractiveness; and perhaps especially so nowadays, when people are so inclined to blame their sins on circumstances, ... to the extent that moral responsibility seems to have pretty well disappeared. (...) But Pelagianism is a heresy: a distortion of Christianity. Not because it recommends moral effort, which is certainly important, but because it fails to see the deep seriousness of sin. In Christian terms, sin is not just a failure to obey the moral law; it is not just a matter of particular vices of one sort and another; it is something far deeper and more pervasive and crippling than that. Fundamentally sin is alienation from God, and that alienation, that destruction of man’s right relation to God, distorts every relation in the created order: the relation of man to man, of man to nature, and man’s own relationship to himself. All that is marvelously spelled out in symbolic terms in the Genesis story of man’s expulsion from Paradise: the earth brings forth thorns and thistles; man’s body dies; Cain slays his brother Abel, and so there is discord everywhere, in every relation.

That discord – that alienation from God – is a predicament for which man is responsible, but for which man has no remedy. The Law, the old covenant, can show us our faults and inadequacies – our transgressions. It condemns us, but it cannot save us. “We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves”, as one of our Collets puts it. “The blood of bulls and of goats and the ashes of an heifer” are finally of no avail: we have no pure and adequate offering.

It is to this predicament that Christ’s Passion is addressed. In his Passion he is the Mediator: both God and man – the Mediator of a new covenant, a new relation to God. He does what man must do, and only God can do. His willing death is a free and perfect offering: “himself the victim and himself

the priest.” In that offering the alienation – the enmity – is overcome, and a way is opened for us “to receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”

That new covenant is not our moral achievement; it is God’s gift – and that gift is the very ground and starting point of our life as Christians. Our access to God is only by our participation by faith in the perfect offering of Christ. That is why our worship is fundamentally not a proclamation of moral law, but rather a commemoration and participation in the Passion of Christ – the body broken and the blood shed. If we have any final good – any “eternal inheritance” – it is not by our achievement, it is God’s gift<sup>1</sup>.

Knowing what the Law requires, and being able to fulfill it, are two different things. Our own natural powers of mind and will are not sufficient for the doing of the Law, because they have been so weakened by the alienation of sin. The very first use of the Law, as a mirror of God's righteousness, is to expose our own insufficiency, and so to awaken in us an awareness of our need for God's help, that help which Fr Crouse refers to above as “God’s gift” and which the Catechism calls "special grace".

#### **GRACE DEFINED**

*Grace* is the biblical term for the unmerited gift of God’s love, favour and help. In God the Father it is his "favour and goodness towards us", unmerited and freely bestowed love. In God the Son, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is his redeeming sacrifice, outwardly proclaimed to all the world in the Gospel. In God the Holy Ghost grace is that interior presence and work of God which we discussed in chapter XI, "God within me, prompting me to believe in God manifest in Christ, enabling me to approach God the Father" (O'Donovan). It is in this sense, the (inward) grace of the Holy Ghost, that the term grace is most commonly used - and grace in this sense is nothing else than the operation of the Holy Ghost in the soul, who (as we saw above in chapter XI) makes present and interior to us the work of Christ accomplished for us in the past.

Richard Hooker follows the teaching of Pelagius' opponent, St. Augustine, in his exegesis of Revelation 3:20, "I stand at the door and knock": "the Pelagian's manner of construction", he wrote, "was that to knock is the free external offer of God's grace; to open is the work of the natural will by itself, accepting grace and so procuring or deserving whatsoever followeth. But the Catholic exposition of that and all such sentences was, that to stand and knock is indeed a work of outward grace, but to open cometh not from man's will without the inward illumination of grace"<sup>2</sup>.

#### **COMMON AND SPECIAL GRACE**

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<sup>1</sup> From an unpublished Sermon for Passion Sunday, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1979

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hooker, *Laws V. App.* 13 in Keble, vol. 2, p. 548.

But what makes grace "special"? *Common grace* is the grace given to a creature or all mankind: God's creating and preserving all things; his providential restraint of sin, through the structures of human society (as a result of which we are not as bad as we possibly could be); the preservation of conscience (the innate sense of moral obligation); and also advances in the arts, sciences, crafts, and technology. Common grace, however, is not saving grace: it is *special grace* that sanctifies the elect. It regenerates and renews man's nature, it empowers him morally, making him capable responding to God in faith, hope, and charity, capable of fulfilling God's holy will. Special grace is what the Prayer Book has in mind when it rehearses the Ten Commandments at the outset of the Lord's Supper: for in response the People "ask God mercy for their transgressions for the time past, and grace to keep the law for the time to come": "Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law". And since this forgiveness and renewal is only found in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our prayer in response to the Ten Commandments leads us straight to the sacramental memorial of the cross, where that grace is to be found.

### **PREVENIENT AND COOPERATING GRACE**

Special grace is of course what we ask for when we pray; but it is also the work of special grace to "give us an hearty desire to pray"<sup>3</sup> in the first place. Any and every movement of the soul towards God is always a response to the initiative of his special grace. We call this initiating grace *prevenient* grace, because it "prevents" or "goes before" us, not to stop or hinder (as in the modern sense of the word 'prevent') but to start and stir up! Of course what it stirs awake, it then supports and helps - and this is *cooperating* grace. Both are mentioned in the Collect for Easter Day, in which we ask God - who "through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life" - that "as by thy special grace preventing us, thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help, we may bring the same to good effect". Prevenient grace is the grace that raises us from spiritual death! "God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened [i.e. made alive] us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God...." (Ephesians 2:4-8).

### **APOSTLE OF GRACE**

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this grace was evident in the conversion of Saul (St. Paul) on the road to Damascus, when the fierce persecutor of the Church became the fervent preacher of the Gospel. How did this happen? St. Paul says, "I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of

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<sup>3</sup> Collect for Trinity 3.

God. But by the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Corinthians 15:9, 10). Paul's conversion to Christ owes nothing to Paul - it is all the work of Christ. And as a result, his own ministry was marked by an attitude both humble and bold, trusting not in himself but in God: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament..." (2 Corinthians 3:5,6). "By the grace of God I am what I am"; "our sufficiency is of God" - these are words not just for Saint Paul, but for every Christian.

### *Further Reading*

- Romans 5:6-21 - *As sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life.*
- Ephesians 1:15-2:22 - *What we were by nature, what we are made by grace.*
- Articles IX-XVIII, Prayer Book pp 604-606 - *On Sin and Grace*
- Collect for Trinity XIII, Prayer Book, p. 207 - *"of whose only gift it cometh that thy people do unto thee true and laudable service"*
- Collect for Trinity XV, Prayer Book, p. 210 - *the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall*
- Collect for Trinity XVII, Prayer Book, p. 213 - *Prayer for prevenient and cooperating grace*

### *Questions for Review*

- What is Pelagianism, and what does it teach?
- What is sin and why does it make Pelagianism inadequate?
- What is grace?
- What is common grace?
- What is special grace?
- What is prevenient grace?
- What is cooperating grace?

### *Questions for Discussion*

- Compare and contrast the different motivations that Pelagianism produces and the knowledge of grace produces.
- The Collects are short prayers of a specific form. There is a Collect appointed for each Sunday and Holy Day (printed together with Epistles and Gospels, pp. 90ff), as well as Morning and Evening Prayer (pp.17, 31) and elsewhere (pp. 49-50).

They have been called a "treatise on grace" because of their rich doctrinal content. Read a few collects and discuss what their teaching is about grace.

## *Diligent Prayer*

*Catechist.* My good Child, know this; that thou art not able to do these things of thyself, nor to walk in the Commandments of God, and to serve him, without his special grace; which thou must learn at all times to call for by diligent prayer. Let me hear, therefore, if thou canst say the Lord's Prayer.

*Answer.* Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. Amen.

*Catechist.* What desirest thou of God in this Prayer?

*Answer.* I desire my Lord God, our heavenly Father, who is the giver of all goodness, to send his grace unto me, and to all people; that we may worship him, serve him, and obey him, as we ought to do. And I pray unto God, that he will send us all things that are needful both for our souls and bodies; and that he will be merciful unto us, and forgive us our sins; and that it will please him to save and defend us in all dangers both of soul and body; and that he will keep us from all sin and wickedness, and from our spiritual enemy, and from everlasting death. And this I trust he will do of his mercy and goodness, through our Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore I say, Amen, So be it.

### **REASONS TO PRAY**

Because "the help of special grace" is a gift of God, it is a benefit "which thou must learn at all times to call for by diligent prayer". That is to say, the practicality of the Christian life is the practicality of prayer: otherwise it is mere abstraction. Those who in their pride do not admit they need God's help, do not pray; those who despair of God's help do not pray; and those who presume on his help do not pray; but those who know their need of his grace, and trust in him to give it, they will pray, as the Scripture often urges them, "instantly" (insistently, earnestly, Romans 12:12) and "without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). And to encourage us to pray, and faint not, we have the promises of Christ: "ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

### **WHAT PRAYER IS**



We also have his teaching on prayer, itself a prayer, the Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father". But "prayer without ceasing" is not merely the saying of prayers (although it is that), but the inner disposition of the heart, referring all things to the Father, looking at them in God's Word, and loving them in his Spirit. It is as we see our circumstances in the light of heaven, that we know their right use in bringing us to God; only as we see them in this light, can we desire or fear them rightly. Hence (on the basis of Psalm 25:1) St. John of Damascus formulated one of the classic definitions of the prayer, as the lifting up of the heart and mind to God.

### **DUTY AND DESIRE**

In its treatment of the Lord's Prayer, the Catechist begins by asking, "What desirest thou of God in this Prayer?" and the answer begins with the same verb, "I desire" .... To this point the Catechism has spoken chiefly of *duty*, of things that ought to be done: now it begins to speak of *desire*, of things to be longed for. Desire takes countless forms - the quest for knowledge, for happiness, for freedom, for beauty - but all these longings and aspiration, expressed in countless different ways, are ultimately (whether we know it or not) a quest for God, who as infinite wisdom, infinite goodness, infinite power and beauty alone quenches our desire. Desire for God is innate in every human being: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee". But human desire is wayward, foolishly misguided and disastrously perverse, "looking for love in all the wrong places". But it is only in the word of God, only in prayer, does this desire know itself as desire for God: "Like as the hart desireth the water brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God: when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?" (Psalm 42). Christian prayer therefore is the *redemption* of desire from folly and futility, it is the purification of the will, the conversion of our loves, "that our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found". In prayer our duty to God is transmuted into desire for God and, finally, delight in God: the natural human desire and longing for true and lasting happiness is directed by the Word and Spirit to its true end, to God, who alone bestows *beatitude*, blessedness.

### **CALLING ON GOD**

We begin by addressing God as "Our Father, who art in heaven". In the age of digital messages that begin with "Hi!", we may overlook the importance in effective speech of acknowledging the one to whom we speak, and our relation to him. In so doing, we open their ears to our speech. But in prayer, it is the other way around: we acknowledge God aright, not to persuade him, but (as it were) to persuade ourselves: in addressing God as Jesus has taught us to do, we stir up in ourselves that reverent and confident faith in God's favour towards us, and almighty power to give what we ask, which is the ground of prayer. "Unto thee, O Lord, will I lift up my soul" (Ps. 25), and if our faith does not attain to God, then our prayer falls short.

And so the Catechism explains the opening of the Lord's Prayer as an acknowledgment of God as "our heavenly Father, who is the giver of all goodness ... unto me, and to all people". In addressing God as "Father" we claim our rights as his children by adoption and grace; but since this adoption is by accomplished in Christ, faith in God the Father is also faith in God the incarnate Son; and so the Catechism's explanation of the Lord's Prayer ends: "And this I trust he will do of his mercy and goodness, through our Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore I say, Amen, So be it". (The Catechism provides no explanation of the doxology often added in worship at the end of the Lord's Prayer, "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory": though ancient, this only became customary in Protestant churches in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. One may briefly comment that its meaning is an expansion both of the faith expressed in the address and the Amen.) And though there is no explicit mention of the Holy Ghost, faith in him is implied by the explanation that we are asking for God to *send* his grace to us, an allusion to the mission ('sending') in time of the Holy Ghost, to administer to the Church the grace of God given by Jesus Christ.

In asking God to send his grace "unto me, *and to all people*", the Catechism picks up on a special feature of the Lord's Prayer that begins by addressing God as *our* Father and in later petitions, asking him to give *us*, forgive *us*, lead *us*, and deliver *us*. If Christian prayer is made in faith, it is also an expression of charity, which "seeketh not her own" (1 Corinthians 13:5) but the good of all. I cannot ask for anything without asking it for all people; and so all Christian prayer is intrinsically *common* prayer, prayer "in common", in the communion and fellowship that Christians have with one another in Christ, prayer made with, for, and on behalf of other members of his Body.

### **FIRST GOD ...**

In its treatment of the seven petitions, the Catechism makes a clear distinction between the first three and the last four. First we seek the hallowing of the Father's Name, the coming of his kingdom, and the fulfillment of his will; only then do we look for our needs for provision, pardon, and protection. The priority of the first three petitions is significant. Prayer is not a magic charm bending God's power to my will and my agenda, it is rather the aligning of my will with his will, that my will may become the instrument of his. And so in the Lord's Prayer "I desire my Lord God, our heavenly Father, who is the giver of all goodness, to send his grace unto me, and to all people; that we may worship him, serve him, and obey him, as we ought to do". The explanation of the first three petitions is brief - worship, serve, and obey – but the content has already been covered in the explanations of the Creed and the Commandments.

### **... THEN MAN**

Yet if prayer is the alignment of my will with God's will, it is not the abolition of my will. There is a place in his will for the fulfillment of my needs, both material and spiritual, as they align with his will. His glory, after all, is the glory of his goodness, the splendor of his grace, the revelation of his tender mercy and loving kindness to men. And so the last four petitions turn to consider them, and does so in a little more detail than the first three. "Give us this day our daily bread" – this "all things that are needful both for our souls and bodies": the bread of life, which is the redeeming grace of Christ himself, and the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit. "Forgive us our trespasses", is prayer "that he will be merciful unto us, and forgive us our sins". The longest explanation is reserved for the final two petitions, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil": "that it will please him to save and defend us in all dangers both of soul and body; and that he will keep us from all sin and wickedness, and from our spiritual enemy, and from everlasting death". Beneath these words lurks a vivid sense of our spiritual, moral, and physical fragility, a fear against which only faith in God's fatherly goodness can be a sure refuge. And so the Lord's Prayer is a great ladder rising up to the heights of heaven, by which man may find his way home from even the darkest corner of hell.

#### *For Further Reading*

- Psalms 31 (prayer), 51 (penitence), 103 (praise)
- Daniel 9 *Daniel's intercession for his people*
- Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-14 - *Teaching and parables of Prayer*
- John 16:23-28 - *Teaching of Prayer*
- Ephesians 3:16-end - *Example of Apostolic Prayer*
- Collects for Epiphany I, p. 109; Trinity III, p. 192; Trinity X, p. 203 - *Collects about prayer*

#### *Questions for Review*

- Why do people pray or not pray?
- What else is prayer besides the saying of prayers?
- What is the significance of addressing God as "Father" and as "our" Father?
- What is the division into two parts of the Lord's Prayer? What is distinctive about each of these parts?
- Briefly explain what each of the seven petitions asks for

#### *Questions for Discussion*

- Why do you think the order of the petitions is important to the Lord's Prayer?

If God is almighty, all-knowing, and all-good, and has a plan and a design for our salvation already in place, and knows exactly how it will all turn out in the end, why does he also tell us to pray? What use is prayer if God's eternal purpose cannot be frustrat