

# WHAT PRAYER IS AND IS NOT

by the Rt. Rev. George de Charms

(Excerpts from a series of four addresses on “The Doctrine of Prayer”)

Prayer is an essential element in any religion. Wherever people sincerely acknowledge the existence of God and their dependence upon Him, they turn to Him spontaneously in praise and thanksgiving and in supplication for protection, guidance and blessing. This has been true from time immemorial, in all lands and among all nations. Yet if we wish to pray rightly, we must understand what prayer really is and what it is intended to accomplish.

## What Prayer Is Not

Prayer is not for the purpose of asking personal favors of the Deity. It is not intended as a way to persuade God to change His mind, or to alter the course of His providence at our request. Nor is prayer intended to be merely a contemplation of infinity with the mind emptied of all human thought and desire. To pray in this way is to evade our responsibility for free choice and rational judgment, and thereby to give up those very faculties that make us human.

Prayer is not a means of making contact with some powerhouse of Divine energy so that we can use that energy to accomplish our own natural desires and fulfill our human ambitions. This would be to take providence into our own hands, to claim for ourselves the power and wisdom that belong to God alone. Finally, prayer is not merely the passive acceptance of an inevitable fate, as is often mistakenly implied in the idea “Thy will, O Lord, not mine, be done.” This, also, is to evade our own responsibility. It assumes that all things are predetermined and ignores the truth that the law of God is also the law of human freedom. What God can do for us is not predetermined, but depends upon the use we make of the life He has given us.

## What Prayer Is

In its essence, prayer is not a form of thought or of speech, but a love, a wish of the heart. We wish for many things, but for some more than others, and we willingly relinquish lesser desires for the sake of attaining those we love more deeply. And deep in the heart of every person there is a supreme goal, an inmost love that transcends all others, and for the sake of which he will sacrifice all others. This inmost love may be changed as life advances, as knowledge broadens and experience deepens. But *whatever a person loves most, at any time, is his real prayer*. This is true regardless of any formula of words he may use in worship. A person may, indeed, ask for other things, but interiorly these are only means to the achievement of his ultimate goal.

And here is the crucial point. The dominant wish of any human heart can produce only one of two possible things: either an insistence that his life is his own, to be used for his own ends; or the willing acknowledgment that it is a gift of God, in trust, to be used in the service of the Lord and the neighbor. This is the only choice a person has, and, according to that choice, he determines the all-dominant love—the real prayer—of his life.

If love to the Lord is to become our inmost love, we must receive constant help, instruction, guidance, and inspiration from the Lord. Yet this decision must be made freely, deliberately. We must, therefore, ask for the Lord's aid in making and sustaining this decision. We must pray for the power to resist the love of self. The essence of such a prayer is that the Lord's will should be done, and not our own. But this prayer is not a passive acquiescence in a preordained fate. It is the Lord's will that we should love Him with all our heart and all our mind and all our strength, *freely* and by our own choice. To make that choice, and to labor unceasingly for its permanent establishment with us, is our primary and unavoidable responsibility, even while we acknowledge that the power to do so is not our own, but is a perpetual gift from the Lord. Such a prayer is always answered. The Lord is ever present with infinite power to help, protect, and bless, without ever trespassing upon a person's free choice. Our asking opens the way for the Lord to operate—by a thousand secret means to lessen and gradually remove the evil delights of the love of self.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Above all others, the Lord's Prayer embraces all the heavenly and eternal blessings which the Lord wills to impart to us. In an eminent sense, therefore, this prayer is *from* the Lord, as well as *to* the Lord. It opens our minds to what it is the Lord would have us ask in prayer. When we repeat the Lord's Prayer, the words themselves, in their order and series, invite and powerfully attract angelic influx. The angels perceive the spiritual meaning of the words and enter into the Prayer with great delight. This heavenly delight enters into the mind of the person who prays and is stored there. We are clearly taught that we are constantly being influenced by many impulses from the spiritual world. This is especially true of affections that come to us during states of worship. When the angels flow in, as into the words of the Lord's Prayer, evil spirits withdraw, and for the moment the pressure of their delights is removed. The effect is a strengthening of our power to resist those evil delights.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church teaches what the Lord's Prayer really means, and we should try to understand it ever more deeply. This knowledge brings us into association with the angels, and helps us to do the things which the prayer involves. It helps us to ask, not only in prayer, but also in the actions of our life, day by day, for those eternal things which the Lord wishes to give us. If we have stored up such knowledge in our memory from a sincere affection, then the meaning of the prayer will be present with us, in the back of our mind, while we repeat the words.

### **The Personal Nature of Prayer**

There is an intensely personal relationship between the Lord and every individual human being. Because the law of God is also the law of human freedom, it is minutely sensitive to every wish of a person's heart and responsive to every impulse of a person's will. By means of this law, and according to its unchanging operation, the Lord is immediately present with each individual. And through His providence He governs all things, even the most minute, in each person's life, moment by moment, without ceasing.

There is no such thing as a “special providence,” a Divine intervention in response to prayer for the special benefit of one person. The Lord is equally present with all people, and gives His love and life in full measure to everyone. Yet every individual is, as it were, the center of all the forces of Divine providence. Each person receives the Lord’s care and protection just as if he were the only one in the world (see *Spiritual Experiences* 4090 and *Arcana Coelestia* 2057). It could not be otherwise if the free choice of each person is to be protected. And, because of individuality, each person must be protected and led differently, according to his personal needs and desires. This is the supreme end and purpose of the Divine law.

When we pray the Lord is immediately present with us, and He gives consideration to our every petition. There is, indeed, no crucial moment in our life when we are not, as it were, alone with the Lord.