

**CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE**  
by Fr. John Ramsay**CHAPTER 10 - GRACE AND PRAYER**

The first nine chapters dealt with the Creed - the summary of what God has revealed to us which, with the aid of faith, we are able to believe. Now we start to deal with the CONSEQUENCES of what we believe - the steps we take in response to what God has revealed. You may remember that I said God gave us three great gifts to help us. We have dealt with the first of them - FAITH, with the aid of which we are enabled to believe what God has revealed to us through His Church. Now we deal with the second of these gifts - HOPE.

Hope is a firm trust in God. We believe He has promised us eternal life: we trust Him to keep His promise and we do our share by using all the helps He has given us. We saw when we were talking about faith that it is a gift which we are free to accept or reject and it is the same here with hope. We can reject hope by choosing one of two false extremes. One is to sit back and do nothing and just rely on God's mercy. That is the sin of PRESUMPTION - we presume on God's mercy. The opposite extreme is to give up hope: refusing to believe we have any chance of being saved - the sin of DESPAIR.

If we accept the gift of hope we are able to trust God to keep His promise to give us eternal life and we willingly use the necessary helps He offers us. We can do nothing, however, without the help of God's GRACE, so I shall now talk a bit about that. I have mentioned it on several occasions already. The first time was when I talked of the Fall of man and loss of grace. Then we saw it was a share in God's life, enabling us to live on an altogether new level - a SUPERNATURAL level. It enables us to respond to God's love and to do those things he asks us to do.

Grace enters us at baptism and remains with us unless we throw it away by committing mortal sin, which we saw severs the link - the life-line with Christ. This supernatural life grows just as our natural life grows and we nourish that life by prayer and the reception of the sacraments. Grace really is the "pearl beyond price" of the Gospel since by it we are in love and friendship with God and able to do all He asks of us. We should never stop thanking God for having shared His life with us in this way and make it our constant concern to nourish it. Before going on to consider prayer, one last word on grace. Theologians distinguish between two different kinds of grace. SANCTIFYING grace, which is what we have been talking about all along - that share in God's life which is permanently there (unless we drive it out by mortal sin) and ACTUAL graces which are particular helps given us by God for special needs and moments in life. We are thus talking about actual grace when we say we are praying for the grace to avoid a particular sin, for instance. It is something given for a particular moment: not something there all the time.

Now let us turn our attention to PRAYER The catechism has a wonderful definition for prayer. It says it is the "RAISING UP OF THE MIND AND HEART TO GOD". 'Heart' here is a popular term for the will. What makes prayer so special is that it uses those two faculties which liken us to God - the MIND and the WILL. We are directing the two most important gifts we possess to God who gave them to us. Being made of body and soul, we feel the need to express ourselves when we pray. So, we use words and speak or sing: we adopt certain postures so we kneel or stand: we make certain gestures such as the sign of the cross and so on. These are only the outward expression of the inner reality - the raising up of the mind and heart to God. If we remember that, we are likely to pray a great deal more - remember, He actually said, "PRAY ALWAYS" and that must mean that it is possible, as long as we don't insist on outwardly expressing ourselves, that is.

You may remember we considered a certain form of prayer which did not involve words at all, and could be done anywhere and at any time. We just concentrate the mind on the fact that GOD IS... GOD IS HERE... GOD IS HERE NOW.... This wordless form of prayer is called MENTAL PRAYER or MEDITATION while the form that uses words (even if they are not said out loud) is called VOCAL PRAYER.

Having said that mental prayer can be used anywhere and at any time, it is important to note that we still have to set aside time every day for FORMAL prayer - prayer and prayer alone. Otherwise, it will gradually fade out of our lives. That means we need a daily routine and the best way to work that out is to ask ourselves the questions WHEN? and WHERE?

First, then, WHEN? The traditional times, of course, are morning and night and certainly we must start the day off with some very short prayer such as the MORNING OFFERING. For many people, all they feel like when they first wake is saying: "Oh! God!" and hoping it is a prayer! But if it is VERY SHORT, like the morning offering, you won't neglect it. For many people, then, first thing in the morning is a bad time for serious prayer. Similarly, last thing at night often finds us too tired to pray for any length of time so we should keep that very short too - just a quick run-through of the day with an act of contrition for any sins and thanksgiving for any graces received. When you are deciding the WHEN?, therefore, I always advise you to choose a time when you are WIDE AWAKE, UNLIKELY TO BE DISTURBED, AND REASONABLY COMFORTABLE.

That point about being reasonably comfortable will also help you to determine WHERE? and also what posture, because you can't be "reasonably comfortable" if you are freezing cold or are kneeling on bare boards (although that could be an exercise in mortification). Maybe, just maybe, God means us to use the squashy part He gave us for sitting on! It is interesting to note that the real "professionals" - monks and nuns - usually sit or stand.

There is, of course, no substitute for the presence of the Blessed Sacrament but most cannot get to a church every day so do whatever is best for you - for example, your bedroom when you first get in from work, or whatever. By the way, I always use a TIMER - that stops me looking at my watch all the time and holds me down to a set time. So far, then, we have seen WHAT prayer is - the raising up of the mind and heart to God. We've seen the two main types - MENTAL and VOCAL. We've thought about WHEN and WHERE, bearing in mind that we need to be wide awake, undisturbed and reasonably comfortable. Now let's consider the PURPOSES of prayer - WHY do we pray?

The first two motives for prayer can be deduced from considering God and His goodness towards us. So, we think of the God who is LOVE and PRAISE Him for what He is. Then we think of how good He is to us so we THANK Him for His goodness. Then we think of how we respond to Him - our lack of effort or downright sin so we ask FORGIVENESS. And, finally, NOT first, we ask for what we need! Notice, too, I said "NEED" not WANT! So often we complain 'My prayers are never answered!' and the reason for that is probably because I ask for the wrong things - things that God knows would be bad for me or perhaps God is encouraging me to pray more so He doesn't answer straight away or gives me something different and better. He Himself told us to ask for what we need so if we are uncertain whether it is the right thing we are asking for, we should add the proviso "if it is Your will".

An easy way to remember the order of priority in prayer is: (1) I LOVE YOU (2) THANK YOU (3) I'M SORRY and (4) PLEASE!

One last word on prayer. I have been pretty emphatic about putting the prayers of PETITION at the end of the list. I make no apology. Our relationship with God is a personal one - between two persons, one of whom has a limitless love for the other and offers unlimited happiness for ever to the other. Under those circumstances isn't it the most frightful cheek to be always holding out our hand and saying: GIVE ME!

### **OUR LADY**

We have thought about grace and prayer so I think it is highly appropriate to end this chapter by talking about the one who is described as "FULL OF GRACE" and must be considered the ultimate expert on prayer since she taught the infant Jesus to pray - namely, Our Blessed Lady, Mary, the Mother of God. In the first of the chapters on the Incarnation, I mentioned the unique part Mary played in it. A part which earned her the title "MOTHER OF GOD". I mentioned then that if you accepted the Incarnation in all its fullness and all its implications then devotion to Mary is entirely understandable. Indeed, the lack of it would be inexcusable.

What we shall do now is to examine some of the implications. We have seen that, as a consequence of the Fall from grace of man, everyone is born deprived of grace, NOT in a state of friendship with God, without God's life flowing in them. So, unless there was a special intervention by God, when Jesus Christ, God the Son, became a man, He would have had to have been born of a woman who was out of love and friendship with God! Such a thought is unacceptable and so, of course, we say that there WAS a special intervention by God and we call it the IMMACULATE CONCEPTION. From the first moment of her earthly existence in her mother's womb, Mary was FREE from the consequences of Original Sin – she was in the state of grace: in the state of love and friendship with God.

The Immaculate Conception is the classic example of the Church, reflecting upon her teaching and discovering fresh depths in it. Gradually the Church came to realise that it must be so. It could not possibly be otherwise. We say that Mary enjoyed this special privilege due to the FORESEEN MERITS of Her Son's death. The first and greatest fruit of her Son's death was that Mary was spared even the consequences of Original Sin - she was altogether sinless. Now, Mary, conceived free from sin, and sinless throughout her life could not therefore suffer the CONSEQUENCE of sin - namely death. Hence we say that at the end of her earthly existence Mary was taken up body and soul into heaven "ASSUMED INTO HEAVEN" as we say. Though this doctrine of the Assumption was only solemnly defined as being part of Revelation as recently as 1950, the Church had in fact come to believe it from the earliest times. They called it the "DORMITION".

From all that I have said, it is hardly surprising that Catholics pray to and are URGED to pray to, Mary. Since we believe her to be closer and dearer to God than anyone else, so her INTERCESSION is that much more powerful. The most common prayer to Mary is, of course, the "HAIL MARY" - an admirable prayer, since the first half is from Scripture and so the Word of God, and the second half is a plea to help us at two most important moments - NOW - and AT THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH. The only time we can do anything about - NOW - and the moment when our fate is sealed for ever - THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH. There are other lovely prayers too - the "HAIL HOLY QUEEN"... the "ANGELUS" and, of course, THE ROSARY... I shall deal with these at the end when I talk about Catholic Devotions.

There is no such thing as a guarantee for getting to heaven, but the nearest we will ever get to one is to have a strong devotion to Mary who always leads us to her Son.