

John Cassian (360-435), *Conferences with Abba Isaac on Prayer*

THE aim of every monk and the perfection of his heart tends to continual and unbroken perseverance in prayer, and, as far as it is allowed to human frailty, strives to acquire an immovable tranquility of mind and a perpetual purity, for the sake of which we seek unweariedly and constantly to practice all bodily labors as well as contrition of spirit. And there is between these two a sort of reciprocal and inseparable union. For just as the crown of the building of all virtues is the perfection of prayer, so unless everything has been united and compacted by this as its crown, it cannot possibly continue strong and stable.

And therefore, in order that prayer may be offered up with that earnestness and purity with which it ought to be, we must by all means observe these rules. First all anxiety about carnal things must be entirely got rid of; next we must leave no room for not merely the care but even the recollection of any business affairs, and in like manner also must lay aside all back-biting, vain and incessant chattering, and buffoonery; anger above all and disturbing moroseness must be entirely destroyed, and the deadly taint of carnal lust and covetousness be torn up by the roots.

For whatever our mind has been thinking of before the hour of prayer, is sure to occur to us while we are praying through the activity of the memory. Wherefore what we want to find ourselves like while we are praying, that we ought to prepare ourselves to be before the time for prayer.

And therefore, if we want our prayers to reach not only the sky, but what is beyond the sky, let us be careful to reduce our soul, purged from all earthly faults and purified from every stain, to its natural lightness, that so our prayer may rise to God unchecked by the weight of any sin.

And when the soul has been established in such a peaceful condition, and has been freed from the meshes of all carnal desires, and the purpose of the heart has been steadily fixed on that which is the only highest good, he will then fulfil this Apostolic precept: "Pray without ceasing;" and: "in every place lifting up holy hands without wrath and disputing:" for when by this purity (if we can say so) the thoughts of the soul are engrossed, and are re-fashioned out of their earthly condition to bear a spiritual and angelic likeness, whatever it receives, whatever it takes in hand, whatever it does, the prayer will be perfectly pure and sincere.

Sometimes however the mind which is advancing to that perfect state of purity and which is already beginning to be established in it, will take in all these [supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings] at one and the same time, and like some incomprehensible and all-devouring flame, dart through them all and offer up to God inexpressible prayers of the purest force, which the Spirit Itself, intervening with groanings that cannot be uttered, while we ourselves understand not, pours forth to God, grasping at that hour and ineffably pouring forth in its supplications things so great that they cannot be uttered with the mouth nor even at any other time be recollected by the mind. And thence it comes that in whatever degree any one stands, he is found sometimes to offer up pure and devout prayers.

AND so there follows after these different kinds of supplication a still more sublime and exalted condition which is brought about by the contemplation of God alone and by fervent love, by

which the mind, transporting and flinging itself into love for Him, addresses God most familiarly as its own Father with a piety of its own. And that we ought earnestly to seek after this condition the formula of the Lord's prayer teaches us, saying "Our Father."

THIS prayer then though it seems to contain all the fullness of perfection, as being what was originated and appointed by the Lord's own authority, yet lifts those to whom it belongs to that still higher condition of which we spoke above, and carries them on by a loftier stage to that ardent prayer which is known and tried by but very few, and which to speak more truly is ineffable; which transcends all human thoughts, and is distinguished, I will not say by any sound of the voice, but by no movement of the tongue, or utterance of words, but which the mind enlightened by the infusion of that heavenly light describes in no human and confined language, but pours forth richly as from copious fountain in an accumulation of thoughts, and ineffably utters to God, expressing in the shortest possible space of time such great things that the mind when it returns to its usual condition cannot easily utter or relate. And this condition our Lord also similarly prefigured by the form of those supplications which, when he retired alone in the mountain He is said to have poured forth in silence, and when being in an agony of prayer He shed forth even drops of blood, as an example of a purpose which it is hard to imitate.

AND that you may see the character of true prayer I will give you not my own opinion but that of the blessed Antony: 'That is not, said he, a perfect prayer, wherein a monk understands himself and the words which he prays.'

BEFORE all things however we ought most carefully to observe the Evangelic precept, which tells us to enter into our chamber and shut the door and pray to our Father, which may be fulfilled by us as follows: We pray within our chamber, when removing our hearts inwardly from the din of all thoughts and anxieties, we disclose our prayers in secret and in closest intercourse to the Lord. We pray with closed doors when with closed lips and complete silence we pray to the searcher not of words but of hearts.

And so, for keeping up continual recollection of God this pious formula is to be ever set before you. "O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me," for this verse has not unreasonably been picked out from the whole of Scripture for this purpose. For it embraces all the feelings which can be implanted in human nature, and can be fitly and satisfactorily adapted to every condition, and all assaults. Let the thought of this verse, I tell you, be turned over in your breast without ceasing. Whatever work you are doing, or office you are holding, or journey you are going, do not cease to chant this. This is the formula which the mind should unceasingly cling to until, strengthened by the constant use of it and by continual meditation, it casts off and rejects the rich and full material of all manner of thoughts and restricts itself to the poverty of this one verse.

And so our mind will reach that incorruptible prayer to which in our former treatise, as the Lord vouchsafed to grant, the scheme of our Conference mounted, and this is not merely not engaged in gazing on any image, but is actually distinguished by the use of no words or utterances; but with the purpose of the mind all on fire, is produced through ecstasy of heart by some unaccountable keenness of spirit, and the mind being thus affected without the aid of the senses or any visible material pours it forth to God with groanings and sighs that cannot be uttered.