

# **Dominican Prayer**

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**Practiced and preached in our western world today** are many different methods of prayer and meditation from a variety of religious and non-religious traditions. One has only to think of such oriental imports as Zen, Yoga, Aikido, Hindu and Buddhist chant; or turn to the secularized adaptations of these like transcendental meditation, mind control, Arica, body reading, physical and mental message; or recall the more familiar (and so less known) forms of Christian prayer: liturgical worship, the rosary, Ignatian spiritual exercises, Benedictine, Carmelite, Carthusian, Trappist, Franciscan modes of contemplation - all still alive and well enough among us; or consider the free, easy, spontaneous approach to prayer promoted and popularized in and through the Christian charismatic renewal. For those who have eyes that see and ears that hear, there is invitation and method aplenty to move beyond our prevailing stifling materialism into the lighter, fresher world of the spirit.

## **St. Dominic and His Eucharistic Orientation**

Dominicans, too, have their way of prayer which they have inherited from their founder. St. Dominic was born into an ancient tradition of prayer, that of the Eucharist. Early in life he became a Canon Regular, whose chief duty and joy it was to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice and pray the liturgy that led up to and flowed from it. True, this was the Church's public worship, but it became Dominic's private prayer as well in that he became personally absorbed in it and allowed it to shape his solitary contemplative prayer.

For him the Eucharist was Christ's last and perfect prayer to his Father for the healing of mankind. Dominic's concern was to say "yes" to it, become one with it, and pattern all his individual prayer upon it. Dominic looked to Christ in his sacrificial act of total giving and with Christ looked also to the Father, knowing that it is through such perfect orientation that mankind begins to be saved. It is not so much method, then, that characterizes Dominic's, and so Dominican prayer, as a constant moving outward into God that He might save the world.

## **The Divine Office**

As part of, and as an outgrowth of, his personal and private communication with God, Dominic was always devoted to the public recitation of prayer in the Divine Office. As a Canon of Osma Cathedral, he had been intimately involved in the official prayer of the Church, and he passed this on to the Order he brought into being. During his lifetime, Dominic was faithful to common prayer in the choir, which he saw as a mainspring to the development and continuity of a true community life. Today, his sons and daughters strive for this same balance between the individual and God and the group and God. The very discipline of combining the two into a harmonious unity is a means of growth in itself. Thus Dominican prayer - personal or communal - is objective, with a dynamism that continually moves beyond subjective self, beyond the world, beyond even the healing humanity of Christ, into God and further and further into the depths of God, confident in the belief that this right order to God makes for a right order in the world. But

the order of the world is secondary and not the prime reason for prayer. A man can and should pray for the world, for himself, for the success of his good work, for those dear and not so dear to him, but unless he's learned to reach beyond all this into God himself, for God himself, he makes an idol of the world and so eventually destroys the world.

## **Meditative Study**

This note of objectivity carries over into another distinctive feature of Dominican prayer: study, principally of sacred revealed truth, but also of all truth wherever it may be found. It was difficult in Dominic's time for many to see any connection at all between prayer and study, especially careful, detailed, scientific study. It's equally difficult in our time. More often than not, study - the diligent use of the mind - is seen as an obstacle to prayer, which is regarded as the pious exercise of the heart. But Dominic saw it as a deeper, more loving penetration into the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers which surrounded and permeated that great Eucharistic prayer of Christ and as a way of uncovering and entering into the objectivity of God. Dominic was aware of the dangers, especially that of the mind crushing the heart, and so he sought to keep study reverent by setting it within the context of semi-monastic liturgical life and he was aware of the need for study, to direct the heart and keep it moving outward, in love and desire, to God.

For the Dominican, then, study is, or is meant to be, meditation. Not the kind of meditation popular in our time - an emptying of the mind, a peaceful abiding in darkness. Dominicans are for this, too, but as a first step in an advanced degree of prayer, which is contemplation. Prior to this, however, one's mind and heart must be informed by Christ, viz., who He is, what He means, where He points and leads. Then when the darkness at last comes and the emptying is accomplished, it will be Christ and not some thwarted spirit of self who will arise from the depths, bringing light and fullness and the joy of God.

## **Contemplative Action**

A fourth characteristic of Dominican prayer is fruitfulness. *Contemplata allis tradere* (to give to others the benefits of one's own contemplation): not only an absorption in God but a return from Him, and with Him, into the lives of others. With Him - this is important. Again, it is Christ who saves. And not only is the Dominican's prayer meant to be contemplative, i.e. centered upon God, but his action in the world is also to be contemplative. Not a nervous feverish action that is anxious for results, especially the kind that we ourselves anticipate, but a quiet action that leaves room for God and is patient for God's results in God's time. Here again the movement is outward, with little if any break in one's prime concern. One contemplates God, reaching further and further into Him; one acts for the world, reaching deeper and deeper into it for the best of it, which is the very God who is above and beyond it.

## **Praying Whole**

Still another feature of Dominican prayer is its use of the body. It involves the physical, but nothing exaggerated or extreme. Merely a few simple gestures toward the harmonization of body and spirit. This also Dominic bequeathed to his Order, having himself learned it in part from the Eucharistic liturgy with its rich and delicate blend of word, chant, and gesture - the whole of the

person engaged in worship. So from an early document we learn of the nine ways of Dominic's private prayer: He would incline profoundly, prostrate his body upon the ground, genuflect, scourge himself, raise his arms to the heavens - in short, he would pray while standing, sitting, kneeling, prostrating, walking.

Dominic's "nine ways" were probably nine times ninety. His body was as flexible as his spirit and just as engaged when he was aware of his God, which was always. So also with the modern Dominican. He prays, or should pray, whole. And his prayer should be his varied and personal response to God's varied and personal touch upon him. He may borrow methods from other traditions to help dispose him for prayer, to quiet his body and still his nerves and imagination and thought - all so necessary especially in tense and nervous times like our own. But these the Dominican sees only as a beginning. He must move through and beyond them to his own personal meeting with God and to where Christ and His prayer are.