

Alter Christus

*“As an **alter Christus** (another Christ) the priest is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ... Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation” (Pope Benedict XVI)*

Monthly bulletin dedicated to all the Priests of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

Prayer Is a Means Necessary to Salvation

By Saint Alphonus Liguori

[From the book *The Great Means of Salvation and Perfection*]

1 - Prayer Is a Means Necessary to Salvation

One of the errors of Pelagianism was the assertion that prayer is not necessary for salvation. Pelagius, the impious author of that heresy, said that man will only be damned for neglecting to know the truths

necessary to be learned. How astonishing! St. Augustine said: “Pelagius discussed everything except how to pray,” though, as the saint held and taught, prayer is the only means of acquiring the science of the saints; according to the text of St. James: *If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all abundantly, and upbraides not* (James 1:5). The Scriptures are clear enough in pointing out how necessary it is to

pray, if we would be saved. *We ought always to pray, and not to faint* (Lk 18:1). *Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation* (Mt 26:41). *Ask, and it shall be given you* (Mt 7:7). The words “we ought,” “pray,” “ask,” according to the general consent of theologians, impose the precept, and denote the necessity of prayer.

The reason of this is evident. Without the assistance of God’s grace we can do no good thing: *Without me, you can do nothing* (Jn 15:5). St. Augustine remarks on this passage, that our Lord did not say, “Without me, you can complete nothing,” but

without me, you can do nothing; giving us to understand that without grace we cannot even begin to do a good thing. Nay more, St. Paul writes, that *of ourselves we cannot even have the wish to do good. Not that we are sufficient to think anything ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God* (2 Cor 3:5). If we cannot even think a good thing, much less can we wish it. The same thing is taught in many other passages of Scripture: *God works all in all* (1 Cor 12:6). *I will cause you to walk in my commandments, and to keep my judgments, and do them* (Ezek 36:27). So that, as St. Leo I says,

Author: Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori

Bishop, Doctor of the Church, and the founder of the Redemptorist Congregation. He was born on September 27, 1696, near Naples, Italy. Educated at the University of Naples, Alphonsus received his doctorate at the age of sixteen. By age nineteen he was practicing law, but he saw the transitory nature of the secular world, and after a brief time, retreated from the law courts and his fame. Visiting the local Hospital for Incurables on August 28, 1723, he had a vision and was told to consecrate his life solely to God. In response, Alphonsus dedicated himself to the religious life, even while suffering persecution from his family. He finally agreed to become a priest but to live at home as a member of a group of secular missionaries. He was ordained on December 21, 1726. Alphonsus founded the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer on November 9, 1732. Alphonsus was preaching missions in the rural areas and writing. He refused to become the bishop of Palermo but in 1762 had to accept the papal command to accept the see of St. Agatha of the Goths near Naples. For thirteen years Alphonsus fed the poor, instructed families, reorganized the seminary and religious houses, taught theology, and wrote. His austerities were rigorous. He died peacefully on August 1, 1787. He was beatified in 1816 and canonized in 1839. In 1871, Alphonsus was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius IX. His writings on moral, theological, and ascetic matters had great impact and have survived through the years, especially his Moral Theology and his Glories of Mary.

“Man does no good thing, except that which God, by his grace, enables him to do,” and hence the Council of Trent says: “If anyone shall assert that without the previous inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and his assistance, man can believe, hope, love or repent, as he ought, in order to obtain the grace of justification, let him be anathema.”

Hence it is that the generality of theologians, following St. Basil, St. Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, St. Augustine, and other Fathers, teach that prayer is necessary to adults, not only because of the obligation of the precept (as they say), but because it is necessary as a means of salvation. That is to say, in the ordinary course of Providence, it is impossible that a Christian should be saved without recommending himself to God, and asking for the graces necessary to salvation. St. Thomas teaches the same: “After baptism, continual prayer is necessary to man, in order that he may enter heaven; for though by baptism our sins are remitted,

The Scriptures are clear enough in pointing out how necessary it is to pray, if we would be saved. The reason of this is evident. Without the assistance of God’s grace we can do no good thing. Therefore without prayer there is no salvation.

there still remain concupiscence to assail us from within, and the world and the devil to assail us from without.” The reason then which makes us certain of the necessity of prayer is shortly this, in order to be saved we must contend and conquer: *He that strives for the mystery is not crowned except he strive lawfully* (2 Tim 2:5). But without the divine assistance we cannot resist the might of so many and so powerful’ enemies: now this assistance is only granted to prayer; therefore without prayer there is no salvation.

Moreover, that prayer is the only ordinary means of receiving the divine gifts is more distinctly proved by St. Thomas in another place, where he says that whatever graces God has from all eternity determined to give us, he will give only if we pray for them. St. Gregory says the same thing: “Man by prayer merits to receive that which God had from all eternity determined to give him.” Not, says St. Thomas, that prayer is necessary in order that God may

know our necessities, but in order that we may know the necessity of having recourse to God to obtain the help necessary for our salvation, and may thus acknowledge him to be the author of all our good. As, therefore, it is God's law that we should provide ourselves with bread by sowing corn, and with wine by planting vines; so has he ordained that we should receive the graces necessary to salvation by means of prayer: *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find* (Mt 7:7).

We, in a word, are merely beggars, who have nothing but what God bestows on us as alms: But I am a beggar and poor (Ps 39:18). The Lord, says St. Augustine, desires and wills to pour forth his graces upon us, but will not give them except to him who prays: "God wishes to give, but only gives to him who asks." This is declared in the words, *Seek, and it shall be given to you*. Whence it follows, says St. Teresa, that he who seeks not, does not receive. As moisture is necessary for the life of plants, to prevent them from drying up, so, says St. Chrysostom, is prayer

necessary for our salvation. Or, as he says in another place, prayer vivifies the soul, as the soul vivifies the body:

"As the body without the soul cannot live, so the soul without prayer is dead and emits an offensive odor." He uses these words, because the man who omits to recommend himself to God, at once begins to be defiled with sins.

Without the divine assistance we cannot resist the might of so many and so powerful enemies and temptations: now this assistance is only granted to prayer.

2 - Without Prayer It Is Impossible to Resist Temptations and to Keep the Commandments

Moreover, prayer is the most necessary weapon of defense against our enemies; he who does not avail himself of it, says St. Thomas, is lost. He does not doubt that Adam fell because he did not recommend himself to God when he was tempted: "He sinned because he had not recourse to the divine assistance." St. Gelasius says the same of the rebel angels: "Receiving the grace of God in vain, they could not persevere, because they did not pray." St. Charles Borromeo, in a pastoral letter, observes, that

among all the means of salvation recommended by Jesus Christ in the Gospel, the first place is given to prayer; and he has determined that this should distinguish his Church from all false religions, when he calls her “the house of prayer.” *My house is a house of prayer* (Mt 21:13). St. Charles concludes that prayer is “the beginning and progress and the completion of all virtues.” So that in darkness, distress, and danger, we have no other hope than to raise our eyes to God, and with fervent prayers to beseech his mercy to save us: As we know not, said king Josaphat, what to do, we can only turn our eyes to you (2 Par 20:12). This also was David’s practice, who could find no other means of safety from his enemies, than continual prayer to God to deliver him from their snares: *My eyes are ever towards the Lord; for he shall pluck my feet out of the snare* (Ps 24:15) . So he did nothing but pray: *Look upon me, and have mercy on me; for I am alone and poor* (Ibid 16). *I cried to you, O Lord; save me that I may keep your commandments*

Prayer is the beginning and progress and the completion of all virtues. So that in darkness, distress, and danger, we have no other hope than to raise our eyes to God, and with fervent prayers to beseech his mercy to save us.

(Ps. 118,146). Lord, turn your eyes to me, have pity on me, and save me; for I can do nothing, and beside you there is none that can help me.

It is true, says St. Augustine, that man, in consequence of his weakness, is unable to fulfil some of God’s commands with his present strength and the ordinary grace given to all men; but he can easily, by prayer, obtain such further aid as he requires for his salvation: “God commands not impossibilities, but by commanding he suggests to you to do what you can, to ask for what is beyond your strength; and he helps you, that you may be able.”

St. Bernard’s teaching is the same: “What are we, or what is our strength, that we should be able to resist so many temptations? This certainly it was that God intended; that we, seeing our deficiencies, and that we have no other help, should with all humility have recourse to his mercy.” God knows how useful it is to us to be obliged to pray, in order to keep us humble, and to exercise our confidence; and he therefore

permits us to be assaulted by enemies too mighty to be overcome by our own strength, that by prayer we may obtain from his mercy aid to resist them; and it is especially to be remarked that no one can resist the impure temptations of the flesh without recommending himself to God when he is tempted. This foe is so terrible that, when he fights with us, he? as it were, takes away all light; he makes us forget all our meditations, all our good resolutions; he makes us also disregard the truths of faith, and even almost lose the fear of the divine punishments. For he conspires with our natural inclinations, which drive us with the greatest violence to the indulgence of sensual pleasures. He who in such a moment does not have recourse to God is lost. The only defense against this temptation is prayer, as St. Gregory of Nyssa says: "Prayer is the bulwark of chastity"; and before him Solomon: *And as I knew that I could not otherwise be continent except God gave it, I went to the Lord and besought him* (Wis 8:21). Chastity is a virtue which we have no strength to practice, unless God gives us; and God does not give this strength except to him who asks for it. But whoever prays for it will certainly obtain it.

Wrongly, therefore, do those

sinner excuse themselves who say that they have no strength to resist temptation. But if you have not this strength, why do you not ask for it? is the reproof which St. James gives them: *You have it not, because you ask it not*. There is no doubt that we are too weak to resist the attacks of our enemies. But, on the other hand, it is certain that God is faithful, as the Apostle says, and will not permit us to be tempted beyond our strength: *God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able; but will make also with the temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it* (1 Cor 10:13).

3- The Intercession of the Blessed Virgin

And if this is true of the saints, much more is it true of the intercession of the Mother of God, whose prayers are certainly of more value in his sight than those of all the rest of the inhabitants of heaven together. For St. Thomas says that the saints, in proportion to the merits by which they have obtained grace for themselves, are able also to save others; but that Jesus Christ, and so also his Mother, have merited so much grace that they can save all men. "It is a great thing in any saint

that he should have grace enough for the salvation of many beside himself; but if he had enough for the salvation of all men, this would be the greatest of all; and this is the case with Christ, and with the Blessed Virgin." And St. Bernard speaks thus to Mary:

"Through you we have access to your Son, O discoverer of grace and Mother of salvation, that through you he may receive us, who through you was given to us." These words signify that as we only have access to the Father by means

of the Son, who is the Mediator of justice, so we only have access to the Son by means of the Mother, who is mediator of grace, and who obtains for us, by her intercession, the gifts which Jesus Christ has merited for us. And therefore St. Bernard says, in another place, that Mary has received a twofold fullness of grace: the first was the Incarnation of the Word, who was made Man in her most holy womb; the second is that fullness of grace which we receive from God by means of her prayers.

Hence St. Bernard exhorts us to have continual recourse to the

Mother of God, because her prayers are certain to be heard by her Son: "Go to Mary, I say, without hesitation; the Son will hear the Mother." And then he says: "My children, she is the ladder of sinners, she is my chief confidence, she is the

whole ground of my hope." He calls her "ladder," because, as you cannot mount the third step except you first put your foot on the second, nor can you arrive at the second except by the first, so you cannot come to God except by means

of Jesus Christ, nor can you come to Christ except by means of his Mother. Then he calls her his greatest security, and the whole ground of his hope; because, as he affirms, God wills that all the graces which he gives us should pass through the hands of Mary. And he concludes by saying, that we ought to ask all the graces which we desire through Mary; because she obtains whatever she seeks, and her prayers cannot be resisted. "Let us seek grace, and let us seek it through Mary; because what she seeks she finds and she cannot be disappointed."

***Go to Mary, I say,
without hesitation;
the Son will hear the
Mother. Let us seek
grace, and let us seek it
through Mary; because
what she seeks she
finds and she cannot be
disappointed.***