

THE PRAYER OF CHRIST

LET me begin by setting down a passage from the now well-known *One God and Father of All*, by Eric Milner-White and Wilfred L. Knox (pp. 46, 47) :

A common argument of Roman writers on the same lines may be noticed here, since it sometimes causes great perplexity. It is said that our Lord in the great prayer in S. John xvii prays that the Church may be one. This prayer is sometimes described as a 'creative prayer,' whatever the words may mean. If they mean anything, they would seem to be plain heresy, since they would mean that our Lord was simply God, not God made man and therefore subject to the limitations of humanity which made it necessary for Him to pray. More often the argument is used that our Lord at this supreme moment prayed that His Church might be one; we cannot believe that a prayer uttered at such a moment would not be answered. Therefore the Church must be one. But the Roman Church alone claims to be the one Church; therefore the one Church for which our Lord prayed is the Roman Church.

But it would be equally legitimate to argue that at an even greater moment in the crisis of the Passion our Lord prayed, 'Let this cup pass from me.' Consequently this prayer could be used to show that, as some early heretics held, He did not really die upon the Cross, but substituted for Himself a phantom or Simon of Cyrene. Obviously our Lord's prayer in S. John xvii proves nothing more than that the Church ought to be one—which everyone admits. The argument is ludicrous.

With some things in this passage I could not, of course, agree, but with one thing at least I do agree, and that is with the dislike expressed in it for calling Christ's prayer a 'creative prayer.' I have not found the phrase used in any theologian I have consulted, and when I asked one of the authors if he could refer me to any passage where it occurred, he replied that he knew it, from experience, to be a popular phrase with certain Roman Catholic controversialists, and it

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was of them, not of standard theologians, that he was writing. It is certain that the phrase is used, though whether it is popular or not I cannot say. I have found it in print in but two other places. It was used in a criticism by Fr. Hugh Pope of this same book, *One God and Father of All*. Quite evidently approving of the phrase he wrote :¹

Is this good theology? In endeavouring to evade the force of the argument from Jn. xvii, 20-21: 'Father, I pray that they may be one' which is a creative prayer whereby He, God-made-man, made His Church one, and did not merely petition that it might be so if God thought fit, the writers say that this notion 'would mean that our Lord was simply God, not God-made-man and therefore subject to the limitations of humanity which made it necessary for Him to pray.' He, then, who prayed was not the eternal, infinite, 'unlimited' God, but—what? The writers have fallen into Nestorianism which, to put it mildly, is bad theology.

Some time later I found the same writer had already used the phrase several years earlier in his *Layman's New Testament*, commenting thus on the text in question (Jn. xvii, 21):

This prayer is the prayer of God and therefore creative; Christ thereby *made* His Church one and that Unity can never be broken.

I confess that both passages seem to me to be misleading and to be based on a confusion of ideas. I propose to consider them in the light of St. Thomas's teaching on prayer in general and on Christ's prayer.

Prayer of petition—and it is with that we are concerned—is the statement, the expressing in words, of one's desire before God, with the request that He should fulfil it. Of this prayer of petition a threefold effect may be distinguished:² (a) merit, (b) impetration, (c) spiritual refreshment of the mind.

¹ BLACKFRIARS, 1930, pp. 135, 136.

² *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, lxxxiii, 13 and 15.

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The first effect is an effect that is common to all acts informed by charity; every act done under the influence of charity merits grace and eternal life, and consequently an act of prayer so performed also has that effect.

The second, impetration or the obtaining by one's petition of what one desires, is, as the very terms show, the proper and peculiar effect of the prayer of petition.

The third is an effect which prayer actually produces *hic et nunc*, directly, without any intermediary. If a man sincerely raises his mind to his Heavenly Father in a prayer of petition, that act will naturally have a certain effect on his own mind, and that psychological effect it produces directly or without any intermediary. This kind of effect differs from the other two, and the difference is of importance for our purpose. The point will be clearer from the following words of St. Thomas :³

An operation that brings one to the thing aimed at, is either (a) actually itself productive of that thing (*factiva finis*), as is the case when the thing is not outside the power of the agent that is working for it (thus doctoring actually produces health); or (b) it merits the thing aimed at (*est meritoria finis*), as is the case when the thing is outside the power of the agent, and consequently must be looked for from the gift of another (*expectatur finis ex dono alterius*).

What is true of merit is true also of impetration. The one who prays does not, by his prayer, actually produce the thing desired; *expectatur finis ex dono alterius*, the thing is looked for from the gift of another. If a beggar asks me for a shilling and gets it, his petition *non est factiva finis*, it does not actually itself produce the thing desired, the possession of the money; true, it brings him to the end desired,

³ 1a, lxii, 4.

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but by petitioning me and thus leading me to give it to him. Prayer, then, attains its proper and peculiar effect, its impetratory effect, *only by being answered, granted, or, as we say, heard.*

We now come to the prayer of Christ. I shall make mention only of those points the consideration of which is necessary for answering the question we are dealing with.

Could Christ pray? I am speaking, of course, of the prayer of petition, firstly because it is with that we are concerned, and secondly because if by prayer we mean simply the raising up of the mind and heart to God, the question would not present the same difficulties, as it is evident that His human mind and heart were continually thinking of and loving God. But could He use the prayer of petition? Seeing that He was able to bring about all things by His own power, why make use of an operation which depends for what it aims at on the gift of another? St. Thomas answers the difficulty thus :⁴

Prayer is, as it were, the unfolding of one's will before God, in order that He may fulfil it. If, therefore, there were but one will in Christ and that the divine, it would in no wise belong to Him to pray, since the Divine will is effective by itself of what it wants. But since, in Christ, distinct from the divine will there is also the human will, and this human will is not able to bring about what it wants by itself, but only through the divine power, hence it is that, in so far as He is man and has a human will, it belongs to Christ to pray.

What, in the light of the above article and of the other articles of this 21st question of the *Tertia Pars*, are we to say of the assertions already quoted, namely, that Jn. xvii, 20-21 is 'a creative prayer whereby He, God made man, made His Church one, and did not merely petition that it might be so if God thought fit,'

⁴ IIIa, xxi, 1.

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and that 'this prayer is the prayer of God and therefore creative; Christ thereby *made* His Church one'?

It is true that we can call it 'the prayer of God,' true that we can say 'there God was praying'—but only if, as St. Thomas reminds us,⁵ we express, or at least understand, the qualification *in quantum homo*, 'in so far as He was man.' 'To pray belongs to Christ in so far as He is man and has a human will.' In praying He was acting as man.

Christ was under no necessity to pray; as God He could bring about by the divine power whatever He wanted, and He was under no necessity to make use of this particular, limited, human operation of prayer in order to attain the thing desired. But in His adorable condescension He chose to make use of it. God and man, He chose to pray as man, and to make that prayer of petition the means for bringing about, say, the Unity of the Church. In other words, His human will willed that thing; it could not by its own power bring it about; therefore, praying as man, He put into words this desire before the Father, and petitioned that it should be fulfilled by the divine power. The prayer was a petition, and operated as a petition operates. And if it attained the thing desired, it was because it was *answered*, or *heard*. And if it was heard, it was because the desire it expressed was for a thing that God willed. This, as St. Thomas remarks, is true of Christ's prayers as it is of other men's prayers: 'For the prayers of other men too are fulfilled, in so far as what they desire is in accord with God's will' (IIIa, xxi, 4).

It will be seen what my objection is to the phrases I am considering. It is not the merely captious one that in theological language 'creation' signifies '*pro-*

⁵ *Loc. cit.* See also IIIa, xvi, 4 and 8. In the latter article St. Thomas explains when the qualification should be explicitly added.

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ductio ex nihilo.' I should not take exception, for instance, to the statement that prayer is 'creative' of its third effect, the *quaedam spiritualis reffectio mentis* of which St. Thomas speaks, and perhaps we get an example of this at the end of Christ's prayer in the Garden. But my objection is to the whole phrase and to the meaning which the word 'creative' takes on in the context. The meaning suggested is that Christ's prayer (or, if you wish, Christ as praying) was itself (or Himself) directly productive of the thing desired, or, as St. Thomas would say, *factiva finis*. But if that were true, we should no longer have a prayer of petition, for a prayer of petition is not itself productive of the thing aimed at, but asks for it to be accorded. 'I ask that all may be one.' If Christ petitioned, He petitioned, and His being God as well as man, does not make His petition not a petition. Christ as praying did not Himself actually produce the Unity but asked for it to be accorded. Let us not say, then, 'Jn. xvii, 20 is a creative prayer whereby He, God made man, made His Church one, and did not merely petition that it might be so if God thought fit'—but rather 'it is a prayer in which Christ (God and man, but in praying acting as man) petitions His Father that all who shall believe in Him may be one.'⁶ And

⁶ I omit the 'merely' of the previous phrase simply because I am not sure of its meaning. Christ, as praying, petitioned, nothing more or less. In that sense He *merely* petitioned, which does not mean that His petition did not impetrate or obtain what it asked for. I omit also the words, 'if God thought fit,' because I hold with St. Thomas that Christ even as man, *i.e.*, even with knowledge in His human mind, knew exactly what God willed should be. This foreknowledge on Christ's part might seem at first sight to make it impossible for Him to pray; in reality it does nothing of the kind. The reader will find some excellent observations on the point in Father Vincent McNabb's invaluable *Oxford Conferences on Prayer*, which, published some thirty years ago, are still by far the finest presentation of St. Thomas's teaching on prayer in

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if the prayer attains the object desired, it is because it is *heard*, i.e., the object is brought about by God. And it is accorded because God thinks fit, because it is His will. A prayer that is heard is sometimes called an 'efficacious' prayer. But it is efficacious *as a prayer*. It is a prayer that impetrates, i.e., obtains by asking.

Let us distinguish carefully what ought to be distinguished. There is the question whether Christ obtained by His petition what He asked for, and we may have every reason for answering, Yes. There is the question whether what He asked for was a unity only gradually to be attained in the course of ages, or a unity to be accorded there and then; and again we may have every reason to reply, The latter. It follows that Christ's prayer obtained that that unity should be at once fulfilled. But it obtained it, as a petition obtains its effect, by petitioning. What is meant by calling it 'a creative prayer whereby He, God made man, made His Church one, and did not merely petition . . .'? It is perfectly true that He was God, but if you are considering Him as praying, you are not considering Him as acting *in quantum Deus*, but *in quantum homo*, for only as man could He pray.

I must add a word on another point. I have so far supposed, for simplicity's sake, that this particular prayer of Christ *was* heard. But was it? Was every prayer of Christ heard?

Taking the second question first, we must bear in mind the distinction drawn by St. Thomas. As

English. 'We have already argued,' he says (p. 152) 'against the difficulty that because God foreknew all coming events it was superfluous to pray for them. Now we have to add the apparently more complicating factor of foreknowledge in the one who offers up the prayer. But in truth the difficulty is left unchanged.'

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prayer is the voicing of the desire of the human will, a man's prayer is answered when his desire is fulfilled. But a desire can be of two kinds. We may desire a thing absolutely, definitively, without any qualification. Or we may desire a thing, not absolutely, but with certain qualifications, as, for instance, provided the obtaining of it does not conflict with something else that we desire unconditionally. Thus Christ had a natural desire not to die, He even expressed that desire in a prayer with the words: 'Let this chalice pass from me.' But He cannot be said to have desired it without qualification. That was not His definitive desire. This He expressed in the prayer: 'But not my will, but thine be done.' Definitively, then, He here desires that His Father's will be fulfilled, not His own natural desire. And that was the object of every definitive desire of His: definitively, or as St. Thomas says with His absolute human will, He desired that to be which He knew God willed to be. Consequently every absolute desire of His human will was fulfilled, and every prayer of His which was an expression of that will was heard. But not so the prayer which was not an expression of that will. I have just given one example. He prayed: 'Let this chalice pass from me'; and it did not pass from Him. We have another example in the fact that He prayed that all men might be saved. Was that prayer answered?

Let us not, then, say: 'This prayer in Jn. xvii, 20, 21, is the prayer of God and therefore creative.' We ought not even to say: 'This prayer was the prayer of Christ and therefore was heard,' unless we can show it to have been an expression of His absolute human will. Was it?

On the adequate discussion of this question I cannot, of course, enter here. It will be sufficient for

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my purpose⁷ to note certain remarks of St. Thomas not without bearing on the point. In the *Summa Theologica*, IIIa xxi,4 ad 2um, he says that here 'our Lord did not pray for all of those who were to believe in Him, but for those only who were predestined to obtain eternal life through Him.' The commentators hasten to add, and surely rightly, that he does not mean that Christ did not pray for the others at all, but only that His prayer, in their regard, did not express an absolute will. What does that mean if not that the prayer cannot be pronounced absolute without distinction? Further, from the same passage and from his *Expositio in Joannem* it is clear that St. Thomas took the object of the prayer to be, not merely the unity which is a note of the Church (though that is included), but union in divine charity. Considering the prayer from this point of view, are we to say that it was absolute as regards all for whom He prayed? Not unless we are prepared to use some such distinction as that between *sufficiencia mediolorum* and the *consecutio finis*.

Thank God, we can read St. John profitably without thinking of these distinctions. But a theologian in controversy must think of them and not simply argue thus: 'Christ here prays that the Church may be one. Now, whatever He prayed for He obtained. Therefore the Church is one.' Even a Catholic may well feel difficulties and say: 'First of all I should like to know what precisely is the unity Christ prays for here, and secondly in any case I could not admit without reservation, that He always obtained what He prayed for.' Our theologian will then have to begin to draw distinctions. But what if he were arguing with a non-Catholic? Should we think the latter very un-

⁷ Which, needless to say, is not to show that it was not an absolute prayer, but only to suggest the need of careful statement.

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reasonable if he judged that such distinctions did but darken counsel? They are, after all, a very specialised part of our theology, and even Catholic students do not always feel at ease with them. And yet, how far is the argument valid unless they are, if not expressed, at least understood?

The argument from Jn. xvii, 20, 21 can be satisfactorily stated. But how often is it so stated? After all, there are many other arguments, easier to state, which prove that Christ did make His Church one,⁸ and unless we are prepared to use the argument from Christ's prayer with due care, it would be better not to use it at all. More than once St. Thomas warns us against employing arguments which do but promote the '*irrisio infidelium*.'

Let me conclude by saying—though it is hardly necessary to say it—that I have been concerned only with one particular passage of this book, *One God and Father of All*. With the book as a whole, of course, I have no sympathy, and I think there are many passages in it which a man might well be ashamed to have written. But that should not prevent us from acknowledging the reasonableness of its authors' objection to the form in which a particular argument has been presented to them.

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⁸ Hence it follows that whatever be the meaning of Jn xvii, 20, 21, it certainly does *not* mean that that unity which is a note of the one true Church of Christ is as yet non-existent.