

Introduction

From the earliest ages of Christianity, the followers of Jesus have sought to respond to his teachings and his mandates, in fidelity to a gospel that proclaims a universal call to holiness (cf. Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, chapter V). In terms of prayer, this response has had to include the courage to grapple with a doctrine that admonishes believers to “keep on praying and never lose heart” (Lk 18:1)¹ and the creativity to probe the meaning of an injunction to confide one’s entire life and all one’s concerns to the God who is Father (cf. Lk 11:1-2).

The revival of interest in patristic studies, especially since Vatican II, provides the context within which we can go to the men and women of the age known as Christian Antiquity to hear what they have to say about Christian prayer, both personal and liturgical. We are not the first generation of disciples to seek the counsel of the Fathers on the question of prayer. The teaching that comes to us from the first centuries of the Christian era has inspired and funded the heritage of Christian spirituality throughout the centuries. Our particular interest, at this time, is born of the conviction that only by standing on the shoulders of the giants of the past² can we hope to see more clearly the panoramic horizons of the Kingdom of God that lie before our eyes.

¹All scriptural quotations are from the New English Bible.

²This phrase is frequently used to refer to the recourse later ages have had to the Fathers.

1. *The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic*

Some months ago, I came upon an illustrated version of Saint Dominic's "nine ways of praying": inclinations, genuflections, prostrations, penance, contemplation, earnest intercession, supplication, thoughtful reading, and praying on a journey.

[This] way of praying [is one] in which the soul uses the members of the body in order to rise more devotedly to God, so that the soul, as it causes the body to move, is in turn moved by the body, until sometimes it comes to be in ecstasy like Paul, sometimes in agony like our Saviour, and sometimes in rapture like the prophet David.³

In studying and reflecting on the small figure who demonstrates the saint's teaching, I have come to realize that Dominic stands firmly in the tradition of the great teachers and masters of prayer in the early Church. In fact, the document describing the nine ways begins with a recognition of the contribution of "Augustine, Leo, Ambrose, Gregory, Hilary, Isidore, John Chrysostom and John Damascene as teachers" of prayer. They held a concept that we could call, today, "wholistic prayer." Their prayer, like their love, was a response to the gospel imperative: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27).

2. *General Plan*

In this volume, we intend to hear and examine a "message" from several Fathers (and from at least one "Mother") on prayer, personal and liturgical. In order to do this, we shall review early definitions and forms of prayer and shall

³"The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic" (trans., Simon Tugwell, O.P.). *Canadian Catholic Review*, March, 1983. P. 22/93.

attempt to formulate a theology of prayer in the light of available evidences from the first eight hundred years of the Christian era. Selections from specific documents will be presented in an attempt to demonstrate as complete a picture as possible of the way in which early Christians learned to pray and contributed to a developing understanding of prayer. In conclusion, a brief bibliography for further reading will be suggested. Perhaps the overall aim of this entire volume can be expressed in the words of one of the great early masters of prayer:

He prays without ceasing who joins prayer to works that are of obligation and good works to his prayer. For virtuous works, or the carrying out of what is enjoined, form part of prayer. It is only in this way that we can understand the injunction, *pray without ceasing*, as something that we can carry out; that is to say, if we regard the whole life of the saint as one great continuous prayer.⁴

⁴*On Prayer*, Origen (trans., John J. O'Meara). ACW 19. Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1954. pp. 46-47.