

SOME REMARKS CONCERNING A THEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF PRAYER



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Literature concerning prayer is enormous. In fact, many of the most ancient written monuments are sacred or religious writings containing many different prayers, as well as views on the nature, importance, necessity, goal, usefulness and kinds of prayer.¹ Also, one normal human life would be by far too short to collect complete and scholarly bibliographical data concerning prayer in the Christian tradition alone. In recent times comparative-religious, ethnographical, ethnological, historical, philosophical, literary, psychological investigations, etc. of prayer are truly flourishing and bear many scholarly and scientific fruits.² However, in the area of Christian theological de-

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1 Cf. T. Ohm, *Die Gebetsgebärden der Völker und das Christentum* (Leiden, 1948); P.W. Scheele, (ed.), *Opfer des Wortes. Gebete der Heiden aus fünf Jahrtausenden* (Paderborn, 1960).

2 In the rich literature on prayer without doubt the most prominent place is occupied by F. Heiler, *Das Gebet. Eine religionsgeschichtliche und religionspsychologische Untersuchung* (Munich/Basle, 1969). Extensive bibliography is found on pp. 498-503 and 619-26. Translations of this work: *Prayer* (New York, 1932, 1958); *La Prière* (Paris, 1931); *Bönen* (Stockholm, 1922). It is necessary here to mention another monumental work by the same author—a prominent scholar of the Christian East, *Die Ostkirchen* (Munich/Basle, 1971). There, on pp. 276-93, he deals with Eastern mysticism, hesychasm and prayer. On pp. 523-33 one finds an extensive bibliography. Among more recent works on prayer the most distinguished are: Th. Soiron, *Das Geheimnis des Gebetes* (Freiburg, 1937); J. C. Fenton, *The Theology of Prayer* (Milwaukee, 1939); V. Lossky, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Eglise d'Orient* (Paris, 1944); Idem, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957); H. Kuhauf, *Abba Vater. Christliche Lehre vom Gebet* (Freiburg, 1948); E. Behr-Siegel, *Prière et sainteté dans l'Eglise russe* (Paris, 1950); J. Arinterro, *Grados de oracion* (Salamanca, 1950); J. de Monteleon, *Traité sur l'oraison* (Paris, 1950); H. Urs von Balthasar, *Das betrachtende Gebet* (Einsiedeln, 1955); R. Guardini, *Vorschule des Betens* (Einsiedeln, 1956); K. Rahner, *Von der Not und dem Segen des Gebetes* (Innsbruck, 1959); A. Hamman, *La Prière. Vol. I. Le Nouveau Testament* (Tournai, 1959); H. Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, tr. A. V. Littleale (New York, 1961); F. Wulf, *Gebet: Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, H. Fries, ed., (Munich, 1962) I, 424-436; Φιλοκαλία τῶν ἱερῶν νηπτικῶν, 5 vols. Athens, 1963), Russian translation: *Dobrotoliubiie* (Moscow, 1905); an abbreviated English edition: *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer, trans. (London, 1951); D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London, 1965); H. Dumoulin, *Östliche Meditation und christliche Mystik* (Freiburg/Munich, 1966);

scription of prayer one can notice a certain stagnation, for very few theologians and spiritual writers ventured beyond the definition of prayer given to us towards the end of the fourth century by Evagrius Pontikos in the 35th chapter of his famous *Chapters on Prayer*, which reads: "Prayer is an ascent of the spirit to God."³

It is not easy to explain why the Fathers of the Church and innumerable theologians have repeated either literally or with some more or less important additions precisely this definition of prayer, and why after one and a half millennia it still enjoys tremendous popularity. The above definition of prayer, which suggests a monologue originating in the human being, overshadowed other definitions and descriptions of prayer given by Evagrius Pontikos in his *Chapters on Prayer*, e.g. in chapter three we read: "Prayer is a continual intercourse of the spirit with God."⁴ This definition quite clearly classifies prayer as a dialogue, and thus is much richer and more precise than the definition given in chapter thirty-five of the same work, which can be interpreted in a Pelagian sense, i.e. a human being can pray by his own power, on his own initiative and thus elicit supernatural acts of faith, hope, and love without divine assistance.

Thus it is clear that the definition of prayer contained in chapter 35 does not clearly indicate the efficient causality of prayer and can be interpreted as a purely human phenomenon which originates in the human being and which by the power of the same ascends to God. It is our intention to show that prayer is a supernatural act which is gratuitously given from above, or a charism of the Holy Spirit, i.e. it is a product of supernatural grace and originates within the realm of the primary or divine Causality. The divine and human synergism, which

J. von Gardner et al., *Kult und Kontemplation in Ost und West* (Regensburg, 1967); K. J. Healy, "Prayer, Theology of," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1967) 11.670-78; Ch. Humphreys, *Concentration and Meditation. A Manual of Mind Development* (London, 1968); Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York, 1969); Idem, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Spencer, 1969); K. Cragg, *Alive to God: Muslim and Christian Prayer* (London, 1970); O. H. Pesch, *Sprechender Glaube. Entwurf einer Theologie des Gebetes* (Mainz, 1970); Kirpal Singh, *Prayer: Its Nature and Technique* (Franklin, 1972).

³ For the Greek text cf. PG 79:1173. For an English translation and a commentary cf. Evagrius Pontikos, *The Praktikos. Chapters on Prayer* (Spencer, Mass., 1970).

⁴ Ibid., p. 56.