

## 68. *To pray is to cooperate with God*

As I read your letter, I thought: "Why not answer the question of a Protestant by a Protestant?" I picked up a book in my library that I have reread many times, and which has always given me renewed inspiration to pray. I refer to *Le Problème de la prière* (The Problem of Prayer) by Fernand Ménégoz. Certainly, I do not agree with all of this author's theses. But what fervent conviction, what faith in the primordial importance of prayer! Here is the very importance that, you write, seems to escape you.

The core of his message stems from the purest Biblical tradition. It is condensed in one of the many definitions of prayer that can be gleaned from his book:

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*Christian prayer is the cry of a heart conquered by the grace of the sovereign God, whose supreme joy is to "cooperate" with God and to see the divine work of salvation triumph in human society.*

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There is a danger that we will accept this definition without measuring its full significance. The author, for his part, did not hesitate to deploy considerable erudition to justify it throughout the five hundred pages of his book. He first attacks an error that he considers to be the most formidable of all. This consists in speaking of Christian prayer solely from man's point of view. It is as if prayer were only one human activity among others, which man could perform left to his own resources. It is as if God were just another person, to whom we address our requests, and remain on good terms with, but who remains external to us.

Fernand Ménégoz forces us to reverse our perspective. In many different ways, he repeats that in order to understand prayer we have to start out not from man, but from God. We have to start out from God at work in the world and in each of us, accomplishing the work of salvation. St. Paul presents this to us in a vigorous synthesis in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians: the gathering together in his risen Son of all those who open themselves to his grace through faith.

This God, who never ceases his work of forgiving, regenerating, and saving, invites the believer to work with him. And that's what prayer is: cooperating with God, so that in each one of us the work of God may be realized, his name be blessed, his kingdom come, and his will be done.

Such a prayer is fundamentally devoid of self-interest.

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*In place of the principle that tends to make the Godhead the servant of man, it substitutes the opposite principle that makes man the totally dependent*

*servant of God. It yearns for the revelation of the glory of "the Lord of heaven and earth" and requests on man's behalf only what will make this glory shine forth.*

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But the Christian does not cooperate only in God's work within him during prayer. He also cooperates in the work of the sovereign and holy God in the whole world. This prayer is a combat more than a labor. However, the Christian is not alone in persevering in this labor and this combat. The Spirit of Christ quickens him, leads him, sustains him, and encourages him.

When Fernand Ménégoz considers the future of Christianity and the world, the scholar in him is filled with the vehemence of the prophets, and he gives us dire warnings. If theology persists in disregarding the importance of prayer, if Christians cling to an ego-centric prayer commanded solely by their own interests, if, under the influence of hostile philosophies, they renounce prayer, then, he predicts, our century will end in spiritual darkness and scientific barbarism. *"Either Christianity will conquer the world through prayer, or it will perish." "This is a matter of life or death for Christianity."*

Conversely, once authentic Christian prayer, inspired only by the interests and the glory of God, is rediscovered, then Christianity will experience a new purity and a new expansion. Thanks to Christianity, mankind will rise to a higher civilization.

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*Christianity conquers...only in communities where the eruptive and "primitive" spirit of evangelical prayer continues to unfurl its action.*

*Prayer is the missionary phenomenon par excellence.*

*The only truly "civilizing" power is the praying Church.*

*The "Ecclesia orans" (praying church) is the one and only wellspring of a real, profound and enduring progress, of a regenerating progress both for the individual and for society.*

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And why does prayer have such great power? Because to repeat once more, it is not man's activity but God's action within man, in which man participates. Christ said, *"My Father is at work until now, and I am at work as well"* (Jn 5:17). The man and woman who pray contact God's all-powerful action within themselves, surrender to it, cooperate with it, and offer it the means of penetrating a world that would otherwise remain closed to its riches.