

TERTULLIAN AND SAINT CYPRIAN ON PRAYER

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ABSTRACT. Prayer is one of the renewing aspects of the Christian religion. It summarises the whole Gospel. St. Cyprian presents the evangelical precepts/teachings as the foundation of the path to salvation. Tertullian shows that prayer is considered by Christians offering spiritual sacrifices, which replaced the older offerings to the idols and pagan deities. Prayer is following the exhortation of the Saviour, for true worshipers, to worship God in the Holy Spirit and truth. Prayer teaches patience, suffering for the Lord; it helps to the removal of God's wrath, it helps watching and praying for enemies and persecutors, washing our sins, casting temptations, quenching persecutions, lifting the fall; it offers support for the weak, attack and defence weapons for Christians.

Keywords: prayer, heavenly Father, evangelical teachings, Christianity, salvation

The Fathers and Writers of the Church are faithful who became “luminaries of the world”, whose writings must be guarded and adopted and who were acknowledged as “chosen Fathers”¹. They proved, besides a good knowledge of the culture and thinking of their epoch, also a strong theological formation, solid knowledge of the Tradition of the Church. This offered us the possibility to explain the Holy Scripture, but also to perpetuate the memory of several events from the history of the Church, that have the purpose to build, to form and transform man into a real believer. To this we add their wish to explain God’s word, to theologize, thus emphasizing the truth of faith used in that period most often as a weapon against the heresies. And last but not least, we may speak about the struggles of these writers to determine the members of the community to participate to the services and to praise the Lord.

These are the coordinates on which two treatises may be inscribed, that is the one by Tertullian, *De oratione*, and the one by Saint Cyprian of Carthage, *De Domenica oratione*. The prayer *Our Father* represents one of the renewing aspects of the Christian faith. It summarizes the entire Gospel².

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¹ Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologie*, vol. I, *Introduction, 2nd and 3rd centuries*, trans. Adrian Marinescu (București: Ed. Bizantină, 2006), 20.

² The New Testament presents both God’s Revelation in Jesus Christ and the preaching of this revelation. It is hard to separate the revelation from the community that received and transmitted it. The Gospels are revealed, received, transmitted and lived in the community of the Church, animated by the Holy Spirit, Who shares with it the understanding of the mystery.

Tertullian's treatise³, written between 198 and 203, comprises three parts: the exegesis of the prayer (chapters I-IX), the moral conditions of the prayer (chapters X-XXVII) and the presentation of the prayer as a spiritual sacrifice and in the same time as an universal weapon used to defend the Kingdom of heaven and all the creation.

In his treatise, written at the end of 251 and the beginning of 252, Saint Cyprian⁴ dedicates his attention especially to the prayer Our Father, which he explains, verse by verse, in 35 chapters, considering the treatise to be a catechesis for those who become Christians. In the manner of approach, clarity of the style and concision, the work is superior, as some philologists and theologians remark, to that of Tertullian (M. A. Fahey, E. Gallicet, A. Davids, M. Simonetti, S. Papadopoulos etc.).

Saint Cyprian presents the teachings of the Gospel as fundamental ways to redemption: "The precepts of the Gospel, most beloved brethren, are other than divine teachings, foundations for building hope, supports for strengthening faith nourishments for encouraging the heart, rudders for directing our course, helps for gaining salvation, which, as they instruct the docile minds of believers on earth, conduct them to the heavenly kingdom"⁵. Tertullian, in his turn shows that the prayer must be done with faith, from the bottom of our heart, secretly, humbly, with few words. "Consequently, the prayer formulated by Christ consists of three elements: the spirit whereby it can have such power, the word by which it is expressed, and the reason why it produces reconciliation"⁶.

The Lord's Prayer is very agreeable to God since it was taught by His very Son. "It is a friendly and intimate prayer (*amica et familiaris*) to beseech God with His own words, for the prayer of Christ to ascend to His ears"⁷.

Our attitude of respect, propriety and humbleness when we pray must be similar to that of the tax collector, from the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:10-14), for only this is the manner in which the justification before God that the Evangelist speaks about may be understood as purification (Lat. *iustificatus*) from the sins committed and, consequently,

³ Tertullian, *Despre rugăciune*, in *Apologeți de limbă latină*, trans. David Popescu, Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 3, (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1981), I, p. 229.

⁴ Saint Cyprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, in *Apologeți de limbă latină*, trans. David Popescu, Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 3 (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1981), I, p. 464.

⁵ Saint Ciprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, 464. Tertullian uses the phrase „paves the way for our prayers to reach heaven”, XI, p. 235.

⁶ Tertulian, *Despre rugăciune*, I, p. 229.

⁷ Saint Ciprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, III, p. 465.

to receive the mercy of God, with the meaning of becoming accessible, of acceding to... (Greek *dikaio*).

The prayer starts with the address "Our Father" – an address through which we confess that we are sons of God, according to the word of the Gospel. The Christian, the new man, reborn through Baptism, renewed through the kindness of God, his creator, names Him Father, because he became God's child. The word coming from him, Who continues to dwell in the one who believes in Him, that is the one who gains the privilege to be God's child (cf. St. Cyprian, chapters 8-9). Through faith and grace the bond between father and son is created, with the one Who lives in heaven. Saint Cyprian underlines and insists upon the fact that we pray to our Father, the Father of all those who believe and, not particularly "my Father, Who art in heaven"⁸, thus emphasizing the communitarian character, that of Christian communion of the prayer in general, and of the *Lord's Prayer*, in particular. Tertullian underlines the fact that besides the confession we make through prayer, that of being the sons of the heavenly Father, we confess the faith in God and our Christian filiation⁹. Moreover, he shows that we become in the same time the sons of our mother the Church, that is Christians, as opposed to the people of Israel, which does not acknowledge the divine filiation through Jesus Christ, the one Who was among His fellows and they did not know Him¹⁰ (Isaiah 1:2). This is a condemnation of the Jews because through these words from our prayer we praise our Father. God became our Father and ceased to be the Father of the Jews that abandoned Him. The name of the son cannot belong to a guilty people, but only to those who received forgiveness for their sins and with this Name, they obtained the promise of eternity. Jesus said: "If you hold my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'. They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?' Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father...»'" (John 8:31-38).

The truth that the authors of the treatises want to emphasize is that through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, incarnated, we became sons of God, by

⁸ Saint Cyprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, VII, p. 467

⁹ Tertulian, *Despre rugăciune*, II, p. 230.

¹⁰ Tertulian, *Despre rugăciune*, III, p. 230.

the gift of adoption, (Galatians 4:4-7), because this is the purpose, the apogee of the revelation of the Spirit. “The only prayer that Jesus whispers in the Spirit and the Spirit in Jesus ‘is Abba. Father’. Our Father is truly the apogee of the Eucharistic Mystery, in which our adoption initiated at Baptism takes place and is renewed¹¹.

Moreover, we confess, through prayer: “Who art in heaven”. This is a confession of the Christian spirit, who believes that the prayer does not address to the statues of the idols, neither to Caesar, nor to people, but to heaven, to the heavenly Father, Who is the Father of the Only Begotten Son, it addresses the one Who has the sky, the earth and all the creatures in His power.

We then say, “*Hallowed be Thy Name*”¹². Through this, we request that God gives us the strength to sanctify Him in us, who are in communion with Him through our faith and deeds. We cannot believe not even for a moment that our prayers could add a tiny bit to the holiness of God. Thus, we ask that His name becomes holy in us¹³, for He Himself told us: “Be holy because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16). We ask Him daily to help us progress in this holiness that we received at Baptism. We need Him to sanctify us constantly, to forgive our sins that we commit every day. We pray for the baptismal holiness to remain forever in us. And, as our supreme judge recommends the ill that have been healed, and asked them to sin no more, so that nothing worse may happen to them, to pray to God, day and night to maintain our holiness and the life that we have because of His infinite kindness.

Then we add: “*Thy kingdom come*”. Through this call we express the fact that we wait for the coming and the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Spirit, to remind us of everything that was done for us: birth, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and the second coming of Christ. The entire community, the Church, calls Him with all its faith, asking that the Kingdom of God comes quickly to give the world immortality and imperishableness. For God rules forever; in Him Who always has been and always will be, that cannot have a beginning. But when we pray, we ask that the kingdom God promised us, the kingdom that He bought with the sufferance and the blood of His own Son, Jesus Christ, to come to us and make us citizens of His Kingdom as the Righteous Judge will say: “Then the King will say to those on his right,

¹¹ Boris Bobrinskoy, *Taina Preasfintei Treimi*, trans. Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2005), 227.

¹² “One should underline more the fact that Peter’s exhortation to call the Name of God was lived within the Christian communities as the very essence of the new life in Christ and that, even before the name of Christian occurred and became popular with the Church [...] believers were already named those who call the Name of God”, says Father Professor Boris Bobrinskoy in *Taina Preasfintei Treimi*, 137.

¹³ Tertulian, *Despre rugăciune*, III, p. 231; St. Ciprian, XI, p. 470.

‘Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me’ (Matthew 25:34-36)¹⁴. So us, the Christians, in prayer, we call God our Father and we ask for His kingdom to come to us.

“*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” is often the formula through which we ask for the complete fulfillment of the divine will in us, for His will to fulfill in everyone both on earth, in body, and in heaven, in spirit. Tertullian and Saint Cyprian present the third request of the Lord’s prayer as follows: “*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*”, interpreting that we ask for God’s help to be able to fulfill His will, with all our being, body and soul, because they understand here through “heaven” our soul of spiritual nature and through “earth”, our body of material, biological nature.

For man is not strong through his own power, these need to be supported by the grace and mercy of God and they can be achieved if the prayer is done for the power of God to dwell in us and thus, to fulfill God’s will, according to the model of Christ.

The illustration of the human weakness can be found in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who said: “*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me*”, but to show His disciples that they must always fulfill God’s will and not their own will, He added: “*Yet not as I will, but as you will*” (Matthew 26:39). Besides this He also tells us: “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:39). The will of God is the one revealed by Christ: humility in behavior, determination in faith, respect for the words spoken, correctness in actions, mercy in our deeds, sobriety in our behavior.

God wants us not to do something wrong to our neighbors, to be responsible for our deeds, to be at peace with our brothers, to love them with all our hearts, confessing Him, with our activity and our deeds, as Father and fearing God. He wants us to take all effort to fulfill His will because we are inseparable from His mercy, strongly attached to His Cross. He wants us that when the dignity and greatness of the Christian name is mentioned, which strengthens this continuity, which confesses the truth, this determination which supports the fight, this patience which, even in death, deserves praise. In this way the Christian becomes heir, together with Jesus Christ; this is the manner in which we will fulfill His commandments and which fulfill the will of the Father. We pray that the power of the Father

¹⁴ St Cyprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, XII, p. 470.

fulfills in heaven and on earth, because this is the double fulfillment on which our salvation depends. Our body comes from the earth, our soul comes from heaven; we are, thus, both heaven and earth and we pray both for one and for the other that is for body and soul, for the triumph of the divine will. Because of the sin, there is a struggle between the body and soul: these two opponents that offer daily occasions for fights, so that we don't always do what we want. "The spirit seeks the heavenly and the divine, the flesh desires the earthly and worldly. Accordingly we ask that harmony be effected between these two by the help and assistance of God, so that, while the will of God is being done both in the spirit and in the flesh, the soul which is reborn through Him may be preserved"¹⁵.

An aspect which deserves to be emphasized in the interpretation of Tertullian to this verse, is that the author of the treatise demonstrates and arguments that our request that the will of God is fulfilled is natural and it is in agreement with the rules instituted by Christ, but it also expresses the ardent wish of the believers persecuted by the Roman domination, that the Kingdom of God, with its kindness and justice, come quickly.

After the requests for the heavenly gifts (the name of God, His will and His Kingdom), follow the requests for the earthly things "Give us today our daily bread" (*Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie*). Essentially, the request does not refer only to the bread with which we nourish daily, but it also refers to the Eucharistic bread, which provides us with immortality in Christ, the one Who is "the bread of life" (John 6:35), even more, we ask that we remain unseparated from His body forever¹⁶.

This verse may be understood in a spiritual sense¹⁷ and in the natural sense and in both cases, through the grace of God, they serve for salvation. *The bread of life is Christ* (John 6:48) and this bread is not for everyone, but for us, the Christians¹⁸. So we ask for this bread to be given to us daily; because our life is in Christ, and the Eucharist is our daily nourishment. And if, due to great sins, we are forbidden to eat the heavenly bread, we would be separated in the same time from the body of Christ. "But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world... Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood,

¹⁵ Saint Ciprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, XV, p. 473.

¹⁶ That is why some editions of the Holy Scripture preferred the translation "give us our bread for existence", a translation from Latin of the word "supersubstantialem", underlining the spiritual, Eucharistic dimension.

¹⁷ Tertullian, *Despre rugăciune*, VI, p. 233.

¹⁸ Saint Ciprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, XVII, p. 474.

you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever” (John 6:50-51; 53-58). According to this word it is clear that those who will eat the Eucharistic bread will receive communion with Christ the Savior and will live eternally. Hence, we ask for our daily bread, meaning the Body of Christ, thus we commune with the life of Christ so that we remain daily, forever united with His grace and with His Holy Body. The words that we comment on may also be interpreted here in another manner. We give up to temporality, faithful to the call of grace, we abandon the wealth and the vanity of the time because we need the food, which is the Word of God: “In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples” (Luke 14:33). “But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (1Timothy 6:8-9). According to these words “not only are riches to be contemned but are also dangerous, that in them is the root of the enticing evils, that device the blindness of the human mind with the hidden deception. On the contrary, to those who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, He promises that all the other things will be given to them. For, since all are God’s possessions, the one who has God will not lack anything if he does not lack to God¹⁹.

Moreover, as Tertullian says²⁰ “Having considered God’s generosity, we pray next for His indulgence [...] He taught us to say in prayer: ‘Forgive us our trespasses’”.

Cyprian explains the verse more detailed. He indicates that since we are fed by God we live in God. This in not only for this life but also for the eternal life when we cannot do this, so that our sins are forgiven. God gives name to these sins, in the name of the debts, as He says in His Gospel: You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? (Matthew 18:32-33). Remembering that we are sinners is a reality as beneficial as wisdom, because if we are obliged to pray for our sins and ask for God’s forgiveness, we came to know ourselves. No person assumes willingly

¹⁹ Saint Ciprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, XIX-XX, pp. 475-476.

²⁰ Tertulian, *Despre rugăciune*, VII, p. 233.

its own guilt, nobody is innocent: this selfish feeling of innocence makes us guiltier. By praying every day for our sins we can become aware of the fact that we sin every day. This is what we learn from Apostle John: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). God is amiable and asks us to pray for our sins, promising mercy and forgiveness, but adds a condition to this promise that is to forgive in our turn those who trespass against us. Hence, He shows us that we cannot obtain forgiveness for our sins unless we show mercy to our debtors. As He says in the Gospel: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:1-2).

"To complete the prayer which was so well arranged, Christ added that we should pray not only that our sins be forgiven, but that they be shunned completely: 'Lead us not into temptation', that is, do not allow us to be led by the Tempter"²¹. We see through these words that the enemy cannot do anything against us if God does not allow this. So, when we ask God not to lead us into temptation, we are reminded of our helplessness and our weakness. This thing protects us from the attacks of pride, against presumptions and against vain glory. We must not take pride in anything, not even in confessing the name of Jesus Christ, nor in sufferance, because Jesus recommended humility by saying: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). So when man acknowledges in humility his weakness and offers everything to God, God's heart opens for mercy, and He hears the prayers inspired by the respect and will to call Him and to pray to Him. The last request expresses, in two words, all our demands and all our prayers.

The verse "but deliver us from evil" comes as "a little clause concluding all our petitions"²². With these words we refer to all the evil acts that the Tempter may exercise upon us, in this world, and that God only, through His grace, can grant and offer them to us. When we have said: *Deliver us from evil*, there is nothing more to ask for. We beg the divine protection against the spirit of evil and, after obtaining it, we are safe against the attacks coming from the devil and from the world. God's plan is a merciful plan²³, for God is long enduring and merciful as it is shown from the Old Testament. But why

²¹ Tertulian, *Despre rugăciune*, VIII, p. 234.

²² Saint Ciprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, XXVI, p. 480.

²³ "But salvation through Jesus Christ is death and resurrection, reconciliation and new life: 'For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!' (Romans 5:10)". Bobrinskoy, *Taina Preasfintei Treimi*, 133.

should we fear the evilness of the world, when God protects us, covers us with His power and authority: “what fear indeed is there with regard to the world for him who has God as his protector in the world?”²⁴.

The treatise *De Domenica oration*, by Saint Cyprian, continues from chapter 27 to chapter 35, urging the Christians to pray ceaselessly, day and night “recreated spiritually and reborn imitate what we are destined to be”²⁵, not only through words but also through deeds according to the model of our Lord Jesus Christ²⁶.

Tertullian develops in the following chapters, from 10 to 29, a guide book for Christians, with a spiritual-theoretical part and a practical one. In the first part, prayer is considered and presented as a spiritual offering which replaced the old sacrifices destined to the pagan idols and deities; it follows for the true prayers, the recommendation of Jesus Christ to worship the Father in in the Spirit and in truth (John 4:23). The author tells us that the prayer teaches: patience, sufferance in the name of the Lord; it helps banishing God’s anger, it is strength for vigil and prayer for the enemies and persecutors, it brings the forgiveness for our sins, it drives away temptations, it allays persecutions, it is rise from fall and offers support to the weak, it is a weapon of attack and defense for Christians. (We also find these ideas in the book *Apologeticum*). In the practical part of this, let’s say “guide book of moral behavior”, Tertullian returns to an older concern: the aspect of women and their jewelry; he recommends the manner proper to kneel while praying; he enumerates other practices he does not agree with; he brings into discussion aspects concerning martyrdom and martyrs; he explains the word *Alleluia* and the use of psalms and eulogizes the entire universe in his prayer to the Creator.

Although some works of the Church Writers, in general, and those mentioned above, in particular, may be subsumed in the genre of those called interpretations or arrangement of truths that are already known and debated for “on the Person of Christ and on the economy of God [...] no one can say something more than it has already been said before authentically”²⁷ however it was a necessary phenomenon within the Christian literature, being a manner of promotion, a nucleus of the Christian education and of adaptation and expression in the Apostolic Tradition.

²⁴ Saint Ciprian, *Despre rugăciunea domnească*, XXVI, p. 480.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, XXXV, p. 486.

²⁶ “The entire ethics of Cyprian is based on the eschatological tension between *now* and *then* (nunc et tunc)”, said Michel Réveillaud in his book *Saint Cyprien, L’oraison dominicale* (Paris, 1964), p. 207.

²⁷ S. Papadopoulos, *Patrologie*, I: 27.

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