

The Hope of the World to Come: The Sacrifice of Prayer and our Response to the
Abundant Grace of God in Creation

THEOLOGY

The famous verse of St. John's Gospel, 3:16, reads "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should ... have eternal life." The essence of this message is one of love. It is a transformative and crucifying love that places one blessed individual at the center of the sacrificial interplay between transcendent mystery and the earthly Creation. It is in that interplay that prayer in community brings the believer into love with fellow believers from across traditions.

The love of one another is the response to God's love for us in Christ and in Creation. It is the love of Christ poured out on the cross that provides our model for prayer and engagement in the world. That love is modeled for us not only in Christ, but in the work of the martyrs as well. For by their offering of themselves, they demonstrate the indiscriminate and blind love of the cross for all. They represent the church at her best in the world. Our prayers together as seeking churches transforms our hearts for the work of reconciliation and forgiveness that further builds the kingdom of God.

On March 23rd, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero declared, during a homily that "Those who surrender to the service of the poor through love of Christ will live like the grain of wheat that dies...The harvest comes because of the grain that dies...We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us." This homily took place during a funeral Mass Archbishop Romero was celebrating. Once he had begun the Mass, he was slain by a single shot to the heart. His blood ran across the altar and mixed with the blood of Christ in the chalice. Archbishop Romero led a life of service to the

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Abundant Grace of God in Creation

people and a life of pious devotion to Christ and the church. It is this kind of pious devotion and love for the other that must animate prayer.

The lives of the saints illustrate that the precious yet abundant commodity that we share is the body of Christ which we take in at the altar rail and pray for together. This is the divine economy of martyrdom. We prayerfully exchange the short-term and the visible for the eternal and mysterious. We embrace beauty in its purest form. This is what we share in our corporate prayer, the beauty of the holy.

Beauty is not always the soft light of a Monet painting. Beauty often has a harsh realism to it, a stark reminder that we are not God and must pray together for the wisdom to move forward. Think of the frozen expanse of the tundra. The sheer edge of a soaring cliff. The surging waters of a coursing river. All are things of beautiful creation; all the site of harsh struggle. So we are too; things of a mysterious beauty, sites of perpetual Creation and struggle. Our willingness to struggle for the other is a form of prayer.

We are creatures crafted by God, the fruit of the vine of creation that are ultimately interconnected with one another and the created order. We did not have to be, but we are. And we are held in every instant by God. We thank God for if He were to turn from creation for even an instant, we would cease to be. The ongoing creation is an act of infinite mercy which we bless God for together. It is the fulfillment of that plan that we anticipate in prayerful reflection. The invisible kingdom come is made visible in those instants when we pray together and attain a measure of renewal in Christ with one another.

We, as Christians, do not evolve naturally or by ourselves. We need Christ and the other to experience and appreciate the miracle of the ongoing creation. Our praying

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Abundant Grace of God in Creation

with Christ stands to make us a new thing in every moment we are with Him. Our answer to the sinful divisions of the world is found in our prayer together. The healing unity that seems so elusive in this life and this world is integral to our prayers for the next.

God begins with creation, declaring “Let it be” and “It is Good.” Our daily lives, which seem such a struggle, are a miraculous thing. Our finitude is a constant reminder that our lives are too short to be wasted or to be forgotten in spite or bitterness. In that short time, we are agents of the kingdom, helping to bring all things to the fulfillment foretold in the metaphors of Revelation. We honor the sacrifice of Christ that allows us to live not as just a mass of perdition, but as a saved and free people who choose to serve freely, pray unceasingly, and share the news of Christ’s sacrifice willingly and with joy.

Transcending physical space and stretching across time, we participate in a union with Christ that binds us to the prayerful across the ages and the creation. I recently read a magnificent piece in which the iron in our blood is traced to the cosmic eruption of the Big Bang. The same molecules and particles of iron that have existed across the eons have transversed the interstellar night and our very veins. Every atom of the universe is crafted in the death of another.

The explosion of a star yields new star stuff that is the building block of life. We are here because other things died. Trees, stars, animals, and all else have become the soil in which we have grown. Our fragility, our vulnerability, as humans is the very fragility and vulnerability of the universe. Yet the majesty and glory of the universe, in all its finitude and its magnificence is ours as well. “It is Good.” This is the miracle we are bound together in. Our shared vulnerability, fragility, majesty all lead us to pray. In

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fervent prayer together, we are provided a fleeting glimpse of the Christian defiance of the particular viciousness of the status quo. It is an act of insurrection against the despair of the world.

Our participation in and prayerful reflection on the paschal mystery brings us to an awareness of the Christian next to us, the Christian behind us, and the Christian we share our home with. The deepest reality of God's grace and abundance is taken in through prayer and bursts the bland superficiality of mundane days with the hope of eternity. When that drop of the divine falls onto the surface of our superficiality, the ripples of the moment spread out into the rest of our lives. Each time we pray, we are building upon the times we have done it before, we are making progress toward understanding that final kingdom. Each time we pray together, we move forward together in hope and trembling.

Prayer ties us to Christians past and reminds us of our obligations to Christians to come. It is a precious cord which ties us together and binds our hearts, minds, and souls to one another. Perhaps no craft of the evil one is more defeating than that which convinces us that this tie is too loose to truly hold us or that it is too tight to allow others to be brought in. This blessing of prayer; and the sacrament of the Eucharist are our participation in the ongoing creation. It is the building up of the community and natural order through prayerful action and Christian fidelity.

PRAXIS

Those churches that demonstrate real growth and depth are those communities that struggle together to find spiritual meaning in a shared life of honest and open deliberation, prayer, and inquiry. In a parish setting, I would work to make prayer the

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Abundant Grace of God in Creation

center of our lives together. This means that the prayers of the people should be written by the people. The concerns of the wider community should be articulated in our prayers together. Moreover, adult education should be used not simply to grow in knowledge, but to grow in love for one another.

A key component of that is learning how to pray by ourselves and together. Thus, the liturgy of the church, its prayer life, and its education must all be vehicles for making meaning of the world around us and seeing God's work of completion unfolding in our community and the wider world. This is why the emphasis of the sacraments should be on movement toward fulfillment in God and our prayer life should reflect the same. I would also ask my congregation to go out into the neighborhood, door-to-door, not evangelizing per se, but asking them what prayer concerns they have that we could pray for in the coming weeks. Thus we would reestablish our link to the community and remind us of our obligations to and shared life in the community.

PRAYER

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by your will, carry out in peace the plan of salvation and fulfillment; may all your Creation know that those things which were laid low are being raised again and that those things once exalted are being perfected in your will. May we, who are God's servants work together in your name, building upon the foundation laid by your master builder, our savior Jesus Christ. Guide us now O God and so direct our wills that we, joined in Christian unity and the fellowship of all your Saints, Apostles, and Prophets, may be an holy temple showing forth your healing grace till all things are made anew through your Son our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

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REFLECTION ON PRAYER

This prayer reflects Anglican tradition in a number of ways. First, it is expressed in a traditional Anglican collect form, which has been the standard form of public prayer used by the Church since at least the 16th century prayer books. Secondly, it expresses the Anglican ideals of Christian unity that is found in Scripture, Tradition, and Experience.

In part, it is based on *Corinthians I, 3:9-11* which I found to be an apt description of the Church and her foundation upon Christ. It is rendered in relatively traditional language and appeals to our historic understandings of the work of the saints and our communion with them. It also uses components of a much-loved collect that expresses the hope for things to be made perfect in Christ. It also echoes notions of experience in its understanding that the world we see around us is not the world in its final form. Our experience of the world tells us that there is beauty in Creation, but much that remains flawed. It expresses the hope that there is a perfecting Spirit at work bringing all things to fulfillment.

In crafting this prayer, I sought to incorporate elements of my understanding of Christian fulfillment and perfection in Christ. It is my belief that our work in Creation is an aspect of salvation and eschatology insofar as our ability to work together as the Church calls to the world to work together more fully in love and charity. However, I also called attention to the fact that this is God's work of fulfillment through Christ and not simply the expression of hopeful people.