

St. Augustine

*Letter to Proba**

*To Proba, a Devoted Handmaid of God, Bishop Augustine, a Servant of Christ and of Christ's Servants,
Sends Greeting in the Name of the Lord of Lords.*

Chapter 1

1. Recollecting your request and my promise, that as soon as time and opportunity should be given by Him to whom we pray, I would write you something on the subject of prayer to God, I feel it my duty now to discharge this debt, and in the love of Christ to minister to the satisfaction of your pious desire. I cannot express in words how greatly I rejoiced because of the request, in which I perceived how great is your solicitude about this supremely important matter. For what could be more suitably the business of your widowhood than to continue in supplications night and day, according to the apostle's admonition, "She that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusts in God, and continues in supplications night and day"? (1 Tim 5:5) It might, indeed, appear wonderful that solicitude about prayer should occupy your heart and claim the first place in it, when you are, so far as this world is concerned, noble and wealthy, and the mother of such an illustrious family, and, although a widow, not desolate, were it not that you wisely understand that in this world and in this life the soul has no sure portion.

2. Wherefore He who inspired you with this thought is assuredly doing what He promised to His disciples when they were grieved, not for themselves, but for the whole human family, and were despairing of the salvation of any one, after they heard from Him that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. He gave them this marvelous and merciful reply: The things which are impossible with men are possible with God (Mt 19:21-26). He, therefore, with whom it is possible to make even the rich enter into the kingdom of heaven, inspired you with that devout anxiety which makes you think it necessary to ask my counsel on the question how you ought to pray. For while He was yet on earth, He brought Zaccheus, though rich, into the kingdom of heaven, and, after being glorified in His resurrection and ascension, He made many who were rich to despise this present world and made them more truly rich by extinguishing their desire

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for riches through His imparting to them His Holy Spirit. For how could you desire so much to pray to God if you did not trust in Him? And how could you trust in Him if you were fixing your trust in uncertain riches, and neglecting the wholesome exhortation of the apostle: Charge them that are rich in this world that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, laying up in store for themselves a good foundation, that they may lay hold on eternal life? (1 Tim 6:17-19)

Chapter 2

3. It becomes you, therefore, out of love to this true life, to account yourself desolate in this world, however great the prosperity of your lot may be. For as that is the true life, in comparison with which the present life, which is much loved, is not worthy to be called life, however happy and prolonged it be, so is it also the true consolation promised by the Lord in the words of Isaiah, I will give him the true consolation, peace upon peace, without which consolation men find themselves, in the midst of every mere earthly solace, rather desolate than comforted. For as for riches and high rank, and all other things in which men who are strangers to true felicity imagine that happiness exists, what comfort do they bring, seeing that it is better to be independent of such things than to enjoy abundance of them, because, when possessed, they occasion, through our fear of losing them, more vexation than was caused by the strength of desire with which their possession was coveted? Men are not made good by possessing these so-called good things, but, if men have become good otherwise, they make these things to be really good by using them well. Therefore, true comfort is to be found not in them, but rather in those things in which true life is found. For a man can be made blessed only by the same power by which he is made good.

4. It is true, indeed, that good men are seen to be the sources of no small comfort to others in this world. For if we be harassed by poverty, or saddened by bereavement, or disquieted by bodily pain, or pining in exile, or vexed by any kind of calamity, let good men visit us, men who can not only rejoice with them that rejoice, but also weep with them that weep (Rom 12:15) and who know how to give profitable counsel, and win us to express our feelings in conversation: the effect is, that rough things become smooth, heavy burdens are lightened, and difficulties vanquished most wonderfully. But this is done in and through them by Him who has made them good by His Spirit. On the other hand, although riches may abound, and no bereavement befall us, and health of body be enjoyed, and we live in our own country in

peace and safety, if, at the same time, we have as our neighbors wicked men, among whom there is not one who can be trusted, not one from whom we do not apprehend and experience treachery, deceit, outbursts of anger, dissensions, and snares, in such a case are not all these other things made bitter and vexatious, so that nothing sweet or pleasant is left in them? Whatever, therefore, be our circumstances in this world, there is nothing truly enjoyable without a friend. But how rarely is one found in this life about whose spirit and behavior as a true friend there may be perfect confidence! For no one is known to another so intimately as he is known to himself, and yet no one is so well known even to himself that he can be sure as to his own conduct on the morrow; wherefore, although many are known by their fruits, and some gladden their neighbors by their good lives, while others grieve their neighbors by their evil lives, yet the minds of men are so unknown and so unstable, that there is the highest wisdom in the exhortation of the apostle: “Judge nothing before the time until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise of God” (1 Cor 4:5).

5. In the darkness, then, of this world, in which we are pilgrims absent from the Lord as long as we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:6-7), the Christian soul ought to feel itself desolate, and continue in prayer, and learn to fix the eye of faith on the word of the divine sacred Scriptures, as on a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in our hearts (2 Pet 1:19). For the ineffable source from which this lamp borrows its light is the Light which shines in darkness, but the darkness comprehends it not — the Light, in order to seeing which our hearts must be purified by faith; for blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Mt 5:8); and we know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is (1 Jn 3:2). Then after death shall come the true life, and after desolation the true consolation, that life shall deliver our souls from death that consolation shall deliver our eyes from tears, and, as follows in the psalm, our feet shall be delivered from falling; for there shall be no temptation there. Moreover, if there be no temptation, there will be no prayer; for there we shall not be waiting for promised blessings, but contemplating the blessings actually bestowed; wherefore he adds, I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living, where we shall then be — not in the wilderness of the dead, where we now are: For you are dead, says the apostle, and your life is hid with Christ in God; when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory (Col 3:3-4). For that is the true life on which the rich are exhorted to lay hold by being rich in good works; and in it is the true consolation, for want of which, meanwhile, a widow is desolate indeed, even though she has sons and grandchildren, and conducts her household piously, entreating all dear to her to put

their hope in God: and in the midst of all this, she says in her prayer, My soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; and this dying life is nothing else than such a land, however numerous our mortal comforts, however pleasant our companions in the pilgrimage, and however great the abundance of our possessions. You know how uncertain all these things are; and even if they were not uncertain, what would they be in comparison with the felicity which is promised in the life to come!

6. In saying these things to you, who, being a widow, rich and noble, and the mother of an illustrious family, have asked from me a discourse on prayer, my aim has been to make you feel that, even while your family are spared to you, and live as you would desire, you are desolate so long as you have not attained to that life in which is the true and abiding consolation, in which shall be fulfilled what is spoken in prophecy: We are satisfied in the morning with Your mercy, we rejoice and are glad all our days; we are made glad according to the days wherein You have afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.

Chapter 3

7. Wherefore, until that consolation come, remember, in order to your continuing in prayers and supplications night and day, that, however great the temporal prosperity may be which flows around you, you are desolate. For the apostle does not ascribe this gift to every widow, but to her who, being a widow indeed, and desolate, trusts in God, and continues in supplication night and day. Observe, however, most vigilantly the warning which follows: But she that lives in pleasure is dead while she lives (1 Tim 5:5-6); for a person lives in those things which he loves, which he greatly desires, and in which he believes himself to be blessed.

Wherefore, what Scripture has said of riches: If riches increase, set not your heart upon them, I say to you concerning pleasures: If pleasures increase, set not your heart upon them. Do not, therefore, think highly of yourself because these things are not wanting, but are yours abundantly, flowing, as it were, from a most copious fountain of earthly felicity. By all means look upon your possession of these things with indifference and contempt, and seek nothing from them beyond health of body. For this is a blessing not to be despised, because of its being necessary to the work of life until this mortal shall have put on immortality (1 Cor 15:54) in other words, the true, perfect, and everlasting health, which is neither reduced by earthly infirmities nor repaired by corruptible gratification, but, enduring with celestial rigor, is animated with a life eternally incorruptible. For the apostle himself says, "Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Rom 13:14), because we must take care of the flesh,

but only in so far as is necessary for health, “For no man ever yet hated his own flesh” (Eph 5:39), as he himself likewise says. Hence, also, he admonished Timothy, who was, as it appears, too severe upon his body, that he should use a little wine for his stomach’s sake, and for his often infirmities (1 Tim 5:23).

8. Many holy men and women, using every precaution against those pleasures in which she that lives, cleaving to them, and dwelling in them as her heart’s delight, is dead while she lives, have cast from them that which is as it were the mother of pleasures, by distributing their wealth among the poor, and so have stored it in the safer keeping of the treasury of heaven. If you are hindered from doing this by some consideration of duty to your family, you know yourself what account you can give to God of your use of riches. For no one knows what passes within a man, but the spirit of the man which is in him (1 Cor 2:11). We ought not to judge anything before the time until the Lord come who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts, and then shall every man have praise of God (1 Cor 4:5). It pertains, therefore, to your care as a widow, to see to it that if pleasures increase you do not set your heart upon them, lest that which ought to rise that it may live, die through contact with their corrupting influence. Reckon yourself to be one of those of whom it is written, their hearts shall live forever.

Chapter 4

9. You have now heard what manner of person you should be if you would pray; hear, in the next place, what you ought to pray for. This is the subject on which you have thought it most necessary to ask my opinion, because you were disturbed by the words of the apostle: “We know not what we should pray for as we ought” (Rom 8:26); and you became alarmed lest it should do you more harm to pray otherwise than you ought, than to desist from praying altogether. A short solution of your difficulty may be given thus: Pray for a happy life. This all men wish to have; for even those whose lives are worst and most abandoned would by no means live thus, unless they thought that in this way they either were made or might be made truly happy. Now what else ought we to pray for than that which both bad and good desire, but which only the good obtain?

Chapter 5

10. You ask, perchance, “What is this happy life?” On this question the talents and leisure of many philosophers have been wasted, who, nevertheless, failed in their researches after it just in proportion as they failed to honor Him from whom it proceeds, and were unthankful to Him. In the first place, then, consider whether we should accept the opinion of those philosophers who pronounce that man happy who lives according to his own will. Far be it, surely, from us to believe this; for what if a man’s will inclines him to live in wickedness? Is he not proved to be a miserable man in proportion to the facility with which his depraved will is carried out? Even philosophers who were strangers to the worship of God have rejected this sentiment with deserved abhorrence. One of them, a man of the greatest eloquence, says: Behold, however, others, not philosophers indeed, but men of ready power in disputation, who affirm that all men are happy who live according to their own will. But this is certainly untrue, for to wish that which is unbecoming is itself a most miserable thing; nor is it so miserable a thing to fail in obtaining what you wish as to wish to obtain what you ought not to desire. What is your opinion? Are not these words, by whomsoever they are spoken, derived from the Truth itself? We may therefore here say what the apostle said of a certain Cretan poet whose sentiment had pleased him: This witness is true. (Tit 1:13)

11. He, therefore, is truly happy who has all that he wishes to have and wishes to have nothing which he ought not to wish. This being understood, let us now observe what things men may without impropriety wish to have. One desires marriage; another, having become a widower, chooses thereafter to live a life of continence; a third chooses to practice continence though he is married. And although of these three conditions one may be found better than another, we cannot say that any one of the three persons is wishing what he ought not: the same is true of the desire for children as the fruit of marriage, and for life and health to be enjoyed by the children who have been received — of which desires the latter is one with which widows remaining unmarried are for the most part occupied; for although, refusing a second marriage, they do not now wish to have children, they wish that the children that they have may live in health. From all such care those who preserve their virginity intact are free. Nevertheless, all have some dear to them whose temporal welfare they do without impropriety desire. But when men have obtained this health for themselves, and for those whom they love, are we at liberty to say that they are now happy? They have, it is true, something which it is quite becoming to desire; but if they have not other things which are greater, better, and more full both of utility and beauty, they are still far short of possessing a happy life.

Chapter 6

12. Shall we then say, that in addition to this health of body men may desire for themselves and for those dear to them honor and power? By all means, if they desire these in order that by obtaining them they may promote the interest of those who may be their dependents. If they seek these things not for the sake of the things themselves, but for some good thing which may through this means be accomplished, the wish is a proper one; but if it be merely for the empty gratification of pride, and arrogance, and for a superfluous and pernicious triumph of vanity, the wish is improper. Wherefore, men do nothing wrong in desiring for themselves and for their kindred the competent portion of necessary things, of which the apostle speaks when he says: "Godliness with a competency is great gain; for we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out: and having food and raiment, let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation, and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition; for the love of money is the root of all evil, which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Tim 6:6-10). This competent portion he desires without impropriety who desires it and nothing beyond it, for if his desires go beyond it, he is not desiring it, and therefore his desire is improper. This was desired, and was prayed for by him who said: "Give me neither poverty nor riches: feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny You, and say, Who is the Lord? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain" (Prov 30:8-9). You see assuredly that this competency is desired not for its own sake, but to secure the health of the body, and such provision of house and clothing as is befitting the man's circumstances, that he may appear as he ought to do among those among whom he has to live, so as to retain their respect and discharge the duties of his position.

13. Among all these things, our own welfare and the benefits which friendship bids us ask for others are things to be desired on their own account; but a competency of the necessaries of life is usually sought, if it be sought in the proper way, not on its own account, but for the sake of the two higher benefits. Welfare consists in the possession of life itself, and health and soundness of mind and body. The claims of friendship, moreover, are not to be confined within too narrow range, for it embraces all to whom love and kindly affection are due, although the heart goes out to some of these more freely, to others more cautiously; yea, it even extends to our enemies, for whom also we are commanded to pray. There is accordingly no one in the whole human family to whom kindly affection is not due by reason of the bond of a common humanity, although it may not be due on the ground of reciprocal love;

Chapter 7

For these things, therefore, it becomes us to pray: if we have them, that we may keep them; if we have them not, that we may get them.

14. Is this all? Are these the benefits in which exclusively the happy life is found? Or does truth teach us that something else is to be preferred to them all? We know that both the competency of things necessary and the well-being of ourselves and of our friends, so long as these concern this present world alone, are to be cast aside as dross in comparison with the obtaining of eternal life; for although the body may be in health, the mind cannot be regarded as sound which does not prefer eternal to temporal things. Truly, the life which we live in time is wasted, if it be not spent in obtaining that by which we may be worthy of eternal life.

Therefore, all things which are the objects of useful and becoming desire are unquestionably to be viewed with reference to that one life which is lived with God, and is derived from Him. In so doing, we love ourselves if we love God; and we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, according to the second great commandment, if, so far as is in our power, we persuade them to a similar love of God. We love God, therefore, for what He is in Himself, and ourselves and our neighbors for His sake. Even when living thus, let us not think that we are securely established in that happy life, as if there was nothing more for which we should still pray. For how could we be said to live a happy life now, while that which alone is the object of a well-directed life is still wanting to us?

Chapter 8

15. Why, then, are our desires scattered over many things, and why, through fear of not praying as we ought, do we ask what we should pray for, and not rather say with the Psalmist: "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple"? For in the house of the Lord all the days of life are not days distinguished by their successively coming and passing away: the beginning of one day is not the end of another; but they are all alike unending in that place where the life which is made up of them has itself no end. In order to our obtaining this true blessed life, He who is Himself the True Blessed Life has taught us to pray, not with much speaking, as if our being heard depended upon the fluency with which we express ourselves, seeing that we are praying to One who, as the Lord tells us, knows what things we have need of before we ask Him (Mt 6:7-8). Whence it may seem surprising that, although He has forbidden much speaking, He who knows before we

ask Him what things we need has nevertheless given us exhortation to prayer in such words as these: Men ought always to pray and not to faint; setting before us the case of a widow, who, desiring to have justice done to her against her adversary, did by her persevering entreaties persuade an unjust judge to listen to her, not moved by a regard either to justice or to mercy, but overcome by her wearisome importunity; in order that we might be admonished how much more certainly the Lord God, who is merciful and just, gives ear to us praying continually to Him, when this widow, by her unremitting supplication, prevailed over the indifference of an unjust and wicked judge, and how willingly and benignantly He fulfils the good desires of those whom He knows to have forgiven others their trespasses, when this suppliant, though seeking vengeance upon her adversary, obtained her desire (Lk 18:1-8). A similar lesson the Lord gives in the parable of the man to whom a friend in his journey had come, and who, having nothing to set before him, desired to borrow from another friend three loaves (in which, perhaps, there is a figure of the Trinity of persons of one substance), and finding him already along with his household asleep, succeeded by very urgent and importunate entreaties in rousing him up, so that he gave him as many as he needed, being moved rather by a wish to avoid further annoyance than by benevolent thoughts: from which the Lord would have us understand that, if even one who was asleep is constrained to give, even in spite of himself, after being disturbed in his sleep by the person who asks of him, how much more kindly will He give who never sleeps, and who rouses us from sleep that we may ask from Him (Lk 11:5-8).

16. With the same design He added: Ask, and you shall receive; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asks receives; and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give good things to them that ask Him? We have here what corresponds to those three things which the apostle commends: faith is signified by the fish, either on account of the element of water used in baptism, or because it remains unharmed amid the tempestuous waves of this world — contrasted with which is the serpent, that with poisonous deceit persuaded man to disbelieve God; hope is signified by the egg, because the life of the young bird is not yet in it, but is to be — is not seen, but hoped for, because hope which is seen is not hope (Rom 8:24) — contrasted with which is the scorpion, for the man who hopes for eternal life forgets the things which are behind, and reaches forth to the things which are before, for to him it is

dangerous to look back; but the scorpion is to be guarded against on account of what it has in its tail, namely, a sharp and venomous sting; charity, is signified by bread, for the greatest of these is charity, and bread surpasses all other kinds of food in usefulness — contrasted with which is a stone, because hard hearts refuse to exercise charity. Whether this be the meaning of these symbols, or some other more suitable be found, it is at least certain that He who knows how to give good gifts to His children urges us to ask and seek and knock.

17. Why this should be done by Him who before we ask Him knows what things we have need of, might perplex our minds, if we did not understand that the Lord our God requires us to ask not that thereby our wish may be intimated to Him, for to Him it cannot be unknown, but in order that by prayer there may be exercised in us by supplications that desire by which we may receive what He prepares to bestow. His gifts are very great, but we are small and straitened in our capacity of receiving. Wherefore it is said to us: Be enlarged, not bearing the yoke along with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:13-14). For, in proportion to the simplicity of our faith, the firmness of our hope, and the ardor of our desire, will we more largely receive of that which is immensely great; which eye has not seen, for it is not color; which the ear has not heard, for it is not sound; and which has not ascended into the heart of man, for the heart of man must ascend to it (1 Cor 2:9).

Chapter 9

18. When we cherish uninterrupted desire along with the exercise of faith and hope and charity, we pray always. But at certain stated hours and seasons we also use words in prayer to God, that by these signs of things we may admonish ourselves and may acquaint ourselves with the measure of progress which we have made in this desire and may more warmly excite ourselves to obtain an increase of its strength. For the effect following upon prayer will be excellent in proportion to the fervor of the desire which precedes its utterance. And therefore, what else is intended by the words of the apostle: “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17) than, Desire without intermission, from Him who alone can give it, a happy life, which no life can be but that which is eternal? This, therefore, let us desire continually from the Lord our God; and thus let us pray continually. But at certain hours we recall our minds from other cares and business, in which desire itself somehow is cooled down, to the business of prayer, admonishing ourselves by the words of our prayer to fix attention upon that which we desire, lest what had begun to lose heat become altogether cold, and be finally extinguished, if the flame be not more frequently fanned. Whence, also, when the same apostle says, “Let your

requests be made known unto God” (Phil 4:6), this is not to be understood as if thereby they become known to God, who certainly knew them before they were uttered, but in this sense, that they are to be made known to ourselves in the presence of God by patient waiting upon Him, not in the presence of men by ostentatious worship. Or perhaps that they may be made known also to the angels that are in the presence of God, that these beings may in some way present them to God, and consult Him concerning them, and may bring to us, either manifestly or secretly, that which, hearkening to His commandment, they may have learned to be His will, and which must be fulfilled by them according to that which they have there learned to be their duty; for the angel said to Tobias: “Now, therefore, when you prayed, and Sara your daughter-in-law, I brought the remembrance of your prayers before the Holy One” (Tob 12:12).

Chapter 10

19. Wherefore it is neither wrong nor unprofitable to spend much time in praying, if there be leisure for this without hindering other good and necessary works to which duty calls us, although even in the doing of these, as I have said, we ought by cherishing holy desire to pray without ceasing. For to spend a long time in prayer is not, as some think, the same thing as to pray with much speaking. Multiplied words are one thing, long-continued warmth of desire is another. For even of the Lord Himself it is written, that He continued all night in prayer (Lk 6:12) and that His prayer was more prolonged when He was in an agony; and in this is not an example given to us by Him who is in time an Intercessor such as we need, and who is with the Father eternally the Hearer of prayer?

20. The brethren in Egypt are reported to have very frequent prayers, but these very brief, and, as it were, sudden and brief, lest the wakeful and aroused attention which is indispensable in prayer should by protracted exercises vanish or lose its keenness. And in this they themselves show plainly enough, that just as this attention is not to be allowed to become exhausted if it cannot continue long, so it is not to be suddenly suspended if it is sustained. Far be it from us either to use much speaking in prayer, or to refrain from prolonged prayer, if fervent attention of the soul continue. To use much speaking in prayer is to employ a superfluity of words in asking a necessary thing, but to prolong prayer is to have the heart throbbing with continued pious emotion towards Him to whom we pray. For in most cases prayer consists more in groaning than in speaking, in tears rather than in words. But He sets our tears in His sight, and

our groaning is not hidden from Him who made all things by the word and does not need human words.

Chapter 11

21. To us, therefore, words are necessary, that by them we may be assisted in considering and observing what we ask, not as means by which we expect that God is to be either informed or moved to compliance. When, therefore, we say, “Hallowed be thy name,” we admonish ourselves to desire that His name, which is always holy, may be also among men esteemed holy, that is to say, not despised; which is an advantage not to God, but to men. When we say, “thy kingdom come,” which shall certainly come whether we wish it or not, we do by these words stir up our own desires for that kingdom, that it may come to us, and that we may be found worthy to reign in it. When we say, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we pray for ourselves that He would give us the grace of obedience, that His will may be done by us in the same way as it is done in heavenly places by His angels. When we say, “give us this day our daily bread,” the word this day signifies for the present time, in which we ask either for that competency of temporal blessings which I have spoken of before (bread being used to designate the whole of those blessings, because of its constituting so important a part of them), or the sacrament of believers, which is in this present time necessary, but necessary in order to obtain the felicity not of the present time, but of eternity. When we say, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” we remind ourselves both what we should ask, and what we should do in order that we may be worthy to receive what we ask. When we say, “lead us not into temptation,” we admonish ourselves to seek that we may not, through being deprived of God’s help, be either ensnared to consent or compelled to yield to temptation. When we say, “deliver us from evil,” we admonish ourselves to consider that we are not yet enjoying that good estate in which we shall experience no evil. And this petition, which stands last in the Lord’s Prayer, is so comprehensive that a Christian, in whatsoever affliction he be placed, may in using it give utterance to his groans and find vent for his tears — may begin with this petition, go on with it, and with it conclude his prayer. For it was necessary that by the use of these words the things which they signify should be kept before our memory.

Chapter 12

22. For whatever other words we may say — whether the desire of the person praying go before the words, and employ them in order to give definite form to its requests, or come after them, and concentrate attention upon them, that it may increase in fervor — if we pray rightly, and as becomes our wants, we say nothing but what is already contained in the Lord's Prayer. And whoever says in prayer anything which cannot find its place in that gospel prayer, is praying in a way which, if it be not unlawful, is at least not spiritual; and I know not how carnal prayers can be lawful, since it becomes those who are born again by the Spirit to pray in no other way than spiritually. For example, when one prays, "Be glorified among all nations as You are glorified among us, and Let Your prophets be found faithful" (Sir 36:4, 18), what else does he ask than, "Hallowed be thy name"? When one says, "Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts, cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved," what else is he saying than, "thy kingdom come"? When one says, "Order my steps in Your word, and let not any iniquity have dominion over me," what else is he saying than, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? When one says, "Give me neither poverty nor riches" (Prov 30:8), what else is this than, "give us this day our daily bread"? When one says, "Lord, remember David, and all his compassion, or, O Lord, if I have done this, if there be iniquity in my hands, if I have rewarded evil to them that did evil to me," what else is this than, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"? When one says, "Take away from me the lusts of the appetite, and let not sensual desire take hold on me" (Sir 23:6), what else is this than, "lead us not into temptation"? When one says, "Deliver me from mine enemies, O my God; defend me from them that rise up against me," what else is this than, "deliver us from evil"? And if you go over all the words of holy prayers, you will, I believe, find nothing which cannot be comprised and summed up in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Wherefore, in praying, we are free to use different words to any extent, but we must ask the same things: in this we have no choice.

23. These things it is our duty to ask without hesitation for ourselves and for our friends, and for strangers — yes, even for enemies; although in the heart of the person praying, desire for one and for another may arise, differing in nature or in strength according to the more immediate or more remote relationship. But he who says in prayer such words as, O Lord, multiply my riches; or, Give me as much wealth as You have given to this or that man; or, Increase my honors, make me eminent for power and fame in this world, or something else of this sort, and who asks merely from a desire for these things, and not in order through them to benefit men agreeably to God's will, I do not think that he will find any part of the Lord's Prayer in connection with which he could fit in these requests. Wherefore let us be ashamed at

least to ask these things, if we be not ashamed to desire them. If, however, we are ashamed of even desiring them, but feel ourselves overcome by the desire, how much better would it be to ask to be freed from this plague of desire by Him to whom we say, “deliver us from evil”!

Chapter 13

24. You have now, if I am not mistaken, an answer to two questions — what kind of person you ought to be if you would pray, and what things you should ask in prayer; and the answer has been given not by my teaching, but by His who has condescended to teach us all. A happy life is to be sought after, and this is to be asked from the Lord God. Many different answers have been given by many in discussing wherein true happiness consists; but why should we go to many teachers, or consider many answers to this question? It has been briefly and truly stated in the divine Scriptures, Blessed is the people whose God is the Lord. That we may be numbered among this people, and that we may attain to beholding Him and dwelling forever with Him, the end of the commandment is, charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned (1 Tim 1:5). In the same three, hope has been placed instead of a good conscience. Faith, hope, and charity, therefore, lead unto God the man who prays, that is, who believes, hopes, and desires, and is guided as to what he should ask from the Lord by studying the Lord’s Prayer. Fasting, and abstinence from gratifying carnal desire in other pleasures without injury to health, and especially frequent almsgiving, are a great assistance in prayer; so that we may be able to say, In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord, with my hands in the night before Him, and I was not deceived. For how can God, who is a Spirit, and who cannot be touched, be sought with hands in any other sense than by good works?

Chapter 14

25. Perhaps you may still ask why the apostle said, “We know not what to pray for as we ought” (Rom 8:26), for it is wholly incredible that either he or those to whom he wrote were ignorant of the Lord’s Prayer. He could not say this either rashly or falsely; what, then, do we suppose to be his reason for the statement? Is it not that vexations and troubles in this world are for the most part profitable either to heal the swelling of pride, or to prove and exercise patience, for which, after such probation and discipline, a greater reward is reserved, or to punish and eradicate some sins; but we, not knowing what beneficial purpose these may serve,

desire to be freed from all tribulation? To this ignorance the apostle showed that even he himself was not a stranger (unless, perhaps, he did it notwithstanding his knowing what to pray for as he ought), when, lest he should be exalted above measure by the greatness of the revelations, there was given unto him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him; for which thing, not knowing surely what he ought to pray for, he besought the Lord thrice that it might depart from him. At length he received the answer of God, declaring why that which so great a man prayed for was denied, and why it was expedient that it should not be done: “My grace is sufficient for you; my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:7-9).

26. Accordingly, we know not what to pray for as we ought in regard to tribulations, which may do us good or harm; and yet, because they are hard and painful, and against the natural feelings of our weak nature, we pray, with a desire which is common to mankind, that they may be removed from us. But we ought to exercise such submission to the will of the Lord our God, that if He does not remove those vexations, we do not suppose ourselves to be neglected by Him, but rather, in patient endurance of evil, hope to be made partakers of greater good, for so His strength is perfected in our weakness. God has sometimes in anger granted the request of impatient petitioners, as in mercy He denied it to the apostle. For we read what the Israelites asked, and in what manner they asked and obtained their request; but while their desire was granted, their impatience was severely corrected. Again, He gave them, in answer to their request, a king according to their heart, as it is written, not according to His own heart. He granted also what the devil asked, namely, that His servant, who was to be proved, might be tempted. He granted also the request of unclean spirits, when they besought Him that their legion might be sent into the great herd of swine (Lk 8:32). These things are written to prevent anyone from thinking too highly of himself if he has received an answer when he was urgently asking anything which it would be more advantageous for him not to receive, or to prevent him from being cast down and despairing of the divine compassion towards himself if he be not heard, when, perchance, he is asking something by the obtaining of which he might be more grievously afflicted, or might be by the corrupting influences of prosperity wholly destroyed. In regard to such things, therefore, we know not what to pray for as we ought. Accordingly, if anything is ordered in a way contrary to our prayer, we ought, patiently bearing the disappointment, and in everything giving thanks to God, to entertain no doubt whatever that it was right that the will of God and not our will should be done. For of this the Mediator has given us an example, inasmuch as, after He had said, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me,” transforming the human will which was in Him through His incarnation, He immediately added, “Nevertheless, O Father, not as I will but as You will”

(Mt 26:39). Wherefore, not without reason are many made righteous by the obedience of One (Rom 5:19).

27. But whoever desires from the Lord that one thing, and seeks after it, asks in certainty and in confidence, and has no fear lest when obtained it be injurious to him, seeing that, without it, anything else which he may have obtained by asking in a right way is of no advantage to him. The thing referred to is the one true and only happy life, in which, immortal and incorruptible in body and spirit, we may contemplate the joy of the Lord forever. All other things are desired, and are without impropriety prayed for, with a view to this one thing. For whosoever has it shall have all that he wishes and cannot possibly wish to have anything along with it which would be unbecoming. For in it is the fountain of life, which we must now thirst for in prayer so long as we live in hope, not yet seeing that which we hope for, trusting under the shadow of His wings before whom are all our desires, that we may be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of His house, and made to drink of the river of His pleasures; because with Him is the fountain of life, and in His light we shall see light, when our desire shall be satisfied with good things, and when there shall be nothing beyond to be sought after with groaning, but all things shall be possessed by us with rejoicing. At the same time, because this blessing is nothing else than the “peace which passes all understanding” (Phil 4:7), even when we are asking it in our prayers, we know not what to pray for as we ought. For inasmuch as we cannot present it to our minds as it really is, we do not know it, but whatever image of it may be presented to our minds we reject, disown, and condemn; we know it is not what we are seeking, although we do not yet know enough to be able to define what we seek.

Chapter 15

28. There is therefore in us a certain learned ignorance, so to speak — an ignorance which we learn from that Spirit of God who helps our infirmities. For after the apostle said, “If we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it,” he added in the same passage, “Likewise the Spirit also helps our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us, with groanings which cannot be uttered. And He that searches the hearts knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:25-27). This is not to be understood as if it meant that the Holy Spirit of God, who is in the Trinity, God unchangeable, and is one God with the Father and the Son, intercedes for the saints like one who is not a divine person; for it is said, “He makes intercession for the saints,” because He

enables the saints to make intercession, as in another place it is said, “The Lord your God proves you, that He may know whether ye love Him” (Deut 12:3), that is, that He may make you know. He therefore makes the saints intercede with groanings which cannot be uttered, when He inspires them with longings for that great blessing, as yet unknown, for which we patiently wait. For how is that which is desired set forth in language if it be unknown, for if it were utterly unknown it would not be desired; and on the other hand, if it were seen, it would not be desired nor sought for with groanings?

Chapter 16

29. Considering all these things, and whatever else the Lord shall have made known to you in this matter, which either does not occur to me or would take too much time to state here, strive in prayer to overcome this world: pray in hope, pray in faith, pray in love, pray earnestly and patiently, pray as a widow belonging to Christ. For although prayer is, as He has taught, the duty of all His members, that is, of all who believe in Him and are united to His body, a more assiduous attention to prayer is found to be specially enjoined in Scripture upon those who are widows. Two women of the name of Anna are honorably named there — the one, Elkanah’s wife, who was the mother of holy Samuel; the other, the widow who recognized the Most Holy One when He was yet a babe. The former, though married, prayed with sorrow of mind and brokenness of heart because she had no sons; and she obtained Samuel, and dedicated him to the Lord, because she vowed to do so when she prayed for him. It is not easy, however, to find to what petition of the Lord’s Prayer her petition could be referred, unless it be to the last, “deliver us from evil,” because it was esteemed to be an evil to be married and not to have offspring as the fruit of marriage. Observe, however, what is written concerning the other Anna, the widow: “she departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day” (Lk 2:36-37). In like manner, the apostle said in words already quoted, “She that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day” (1 Tim 5:5), and the Lord, when exhorting men to pray always and not to faint, made mention of a widow, who, by persevering importunity, persuaded a judge to attend to her cause, though he was an unjust and wicked man, and one who neither feared God nor regarded man. How incumbent it is on widows to go beyond others in devoting time to prayer may be plainly enough seen from the fact that from among them are taken the examples set forth as an exhortation to all to earnestness in prayer.

30. Now what makes this work especially suitable to widows but their bereaved and desolate condition? Whosoever, then, understands that he is in this world bereaved and desolate as long as he is a pilgrim absent from his Lord, is careful to commit his widowhood, so to speak, to his God as his shield in continual and most fervent prayer. Pray, therefore, as a widow of Christ, not yet seeing Him whose help you implore. And though you are very wealthy, pray as a poor person, for you have not yet the true riches of the world to come, in which you have no loss to fear. Though you have sons and grandchildren, and a large household, still pray, as I said already, as one who is desolate, for we have no certainty in regard to all temporal blessings that they shall abide for our consolation even to the end of this present life. If you seek and relish the things that are above, you desire things everlasting and sure; and as long as you do not yet possess them, you ought to regard yourself as desolate, even though all your family are spared to you, and live as you desire. And if you thus act, assuredly your example will be followed by your most devout daughter-in-law, and the other holy widows and virgins that are settled in peace under your care; for the more pious the manner in which you order your house, the more are you bound to persevere fervently in prayer, not engaging yourselves with the affairs of this world further than is demanded in the interests of religion.

31. By all means remember to pray earnestly for me. I would not have you yield such deference to the office fraught with perils which I bear, as to refrain from giving the assistance which I know myself to need. Prayer was made by the household of Christ for Peter and for Paul. I rejoice that you are in His household; and I need, incomparably more than Peter and Paul did, the help of the prayers of the brethren. Emulate each other in prayer with a holy rivalry, with one heart, for you wrestle not against each other, but against the devil, who is the common enemy of all the saints. By fasting, by vigils, and all mortification of the body, prayer is greatly helped (Tob 12:8). Let each one do what she can; what one cannot herself do, she does by another who can do it, if she loves in another that which personal inability alone hinders her from doing; wherefore let her who can do less not keep back the one who can do more, and let her who can do more not urge unduly her who can do less. For your conscience is responsible to God; to each other owe nothing but mutual love. May the Lord, who is able to do above what we ask or think, give ear to your prayers (Eph 3:20).