

ST. DOMINIC'S *NINE WAYS OF PRAYER*

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Lord, teach us to pray. Ever since the first disciples asked Jesus to instruct them in prayer, the followers of Christ have engaged in various fruitful ways of prayer. Indeed, there are as many ways to pray as there are ways to have a conversation. For prayer is a type of conversation with God. Some of methods of praying which are probably familiar to us are liturgical worship, the rosary, the Ignatian spiritual exercises, or monastic contemplation. As we consider how we can benefit from the wisdom of St. Dominic during this month, we might ask, “Is there a particularly Dominican way to pray?”

THE ORIGINS OF *THE NINE WAYS*

Although St. Dominic was a man of intense prayer, unlike other religious founders, he did not leave a written text to his followers which outlined a specific norm or method of prayer. Yet his intimate life of prayer was the source which sparked his passion for the preaching the gospel. It was said of him that he seldom spoke unless it was *with God* (in his prayer) or *about God* (when he preached). Eager to preserve the spirit of his prayer life, the early Dominicans undertook to preserve the memory of the various ways in which St. Dominic prayed. These various forms of prayers are compiled and explained (complete with miniature sketches) in *The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic*. This document was written by an anonymous author, probably at Bologna, sometime between 1260 and 1288. The source of his information was Sister Cecilia of the Monastery of St. Agnes at Bologna (who had received the habit from St. Dominic) and others who had been in contact with St. Dominic. The *Nine Ways* testifies to the eminent holiness of the Saint, showing something of his intimate life and intense love of God.

THE NINE WAYS AS ACTIONS

A universal characteristic of Dominic's *Nine Ways* is that they engage the entire person in the act of prayer. By combining physical movement, vocal utterance, and contemplative reflection together in this act, Dominic modeled a method which teaches us how to pray with our whole being: body, mind, and spirit. Dominic's *Nine Ways* are particularly human. They recognize that prayer is most fully human – most fully alive – when body and spirit are intimately connected. Prayer is not just an act of the spirit. For the spirit, in



moving the body, is moved by it. Thus Dominic's method serves to enkindle devotion to God by the reciprocal action of spirit upon body and body upon spirit.

Not only do these *Nine Ways* unite us to God in a specifically human way, they also encompass the basic kinds of conversations that we can have with God. Accordingly, we might group Dominic's *Nine Ways* together according to the attitude which forms each prayer. So rather than simply recounting the list of *The Nine Ways*, it can be fruitful to consider how these *Nine Ways* are grouped as prayers of Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving, Intimacy, Offering, Need and Service (*ACTIONS*). In this way, the spirit of prayer that shaped Dominic's zeal for preaching the gospel can continue to inspire us in our own conversations with God.

ADORATION

St. Dominic's first way of prayer is an act of adoration. At the beginning of his prayer, Dominic would first reverently bow before the altar as if it were Christ himself. With bowed head, he would adore the majesty of God, especially the presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word. For Dominic, our initial stance before God should be adoration. God is goodness itself and thus is worthy to be adored simply as God. Also Dominic taught his followers to profoundly bow whenever they passed before the crucifix, in order to honor the great dignity of Christ who so generously humbled himself for us. Further, he exhorted the friars to bow before the entire Trinity whenever they chanted solemnly: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit." In this way, Dominic reveals the fruitfulness of the prayer which springs forth from an attitude of humble adoration.



CONTRITION



St. Dominic's second and third ways of prayer are acts of contrition. Contrition reflects the sorrow that is caused when we are separated from God. When Dominic experienced this separation (either in himself or for others), he would throw himself outstretched upon the ground. Lying on his face, he would recall the prayer of the tax collector in the gospel and would call out from the heart saying: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). He would also perform acts of penance, such as fasting.

Further, St. Dominic would also exhort the brothers to be mindful of others who are in need of God's compassion and love. Dominic fostered the attitude that our prayers can be the means whereby others experience the tenderness of God's healing mercy. Just as

Jesus himself wept over those who rejected him, so too, we are called to show compassion for those who hurt us. Thus by this prayer of contrition, Dominic leads us to acknowledge our failings, to beg God humbly for mercy, and to ask that God would extend his compassion to those in need of his love.

THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving and gratitude form another basic way that Dominic prayed. In giving thanks for all the blessings he received, St. Dominic was led into a more intimate relationship with God because gratitude opens the heart to receive the fullness of God's grace. This is seen in Dominic's ninth way of prayer. As he was traveling from one country to another, especially when he passed through some deserted region, Dominic delighted in giving himself completely to meditating on Scripture. This meditation fostered contemplation, and in the presence of God, Dominic would sometimes burst into a song of thanksgiving. In his meditation of thanks and praise, he was inflamed with the fire of charity. Also, it was while praying in this way that the saint obtained his extensive penetration of Sacred Scripture. Dominic's power to preach so fervently and courageously was fueled by that intimate acquaintance with the Holy Spirit by which he came to know the hidden things of God. Thus Dominic shows us how contemplative gratitude leads to wisdom.



INTIMACY



Dominic's fifth way of prayer can be seen as a prayer of intimacy. Prayers of intimacy are spontaneous and ecstatic; they express the hidden language of the heart enflamed with love. Dominic expressed such burning passion in a number of physical actions. When he profoundly engaged in this prayer, Dominic would alternately stand at the altar and extend his joined hands in prayer. Deep in prayer, he appeared to be meditating upon the words of God, and he would repeat them to himself in a sweet voice. Also his followers would report that, as he prayed, Dominic would

suddenly become completely silent and still, his whole being straining as if to hear the voice of God. St. Dominic's prayer of intimacy teaches us that when we are completely in love with God, we are led to develop our own unique language of prayer and conversation with God. The language of love speaks in many tongues.

OFFERING

Dominic's sixth way of prayer is the complete offering of oneself to God. Sometimes called a prayer of oblation, the bodily posture of this prayer mirrors Jesus'



humble posture on the cross. Accordingly, when Dominic prayed in this way, he would stand upright with his hands and arms outstretched in the form of a cross. This was an especially powerful form of prayer and he did not pray in this way unless he was inspired by God to intercede for someone in a special way. Through Dominic's supplications, he raised to life a young boy from the dead and performed other miracles. Just as Jesus' obediential act of self-offering brought us the grace of redemption, so too, by imitating Christ's act, St. Dominic became an instrument of God's redemptive healing power. In this prayer of offering, Dominic invites us to join our daily lives with the prayers of Jesus as the suffering servant.



NECESSITY

Prayers of necessity (or intercession) are modeled in Dominic's fourth and seventh ways of prayer. These prayers took several forms. First, he would genuflect, rise, and then genuflect once again. He would continue to do this for a period of time, and while he genuflected, he would pray for all his needs, the needs of his brothers, and the needs of the world. He would especially pray for God's mercy towards himself, all sinners, and for the perseverance of the younger brethren whom he sent forth to preach the gospel. At times the friars would hear Dominic plead to God for those who had turned away from his divine love. Second, Dominic would reach towards heaven - like an arrow shot from a bow straight upwards into the sky. He would stand with joined hands outstretched above his head as if to pierce heaven with his prayers. In this way, Dominic interceded for all those who had need of prayer and support.

STUDY

Although we might not think of study as way of prayer, St. Dominic read Scripture and other theological works as a form of prayer. Dominic would often pray in this way after hearing the Word of God which had been sung in the choir or refectory. He would withdraw to some solitary place, and recollect himself in the presence of God. Then he would sit quietly, and after the sign of the cross, begin to read from either the Scriptures or some other text. He would begin by reading and analyzing the text. Then he began to ponder the profundity of the reading. One moment he would question the text as if disputing with a companion, and in the next moment he would become a quiet listener. In this way, his study was like an ever ascending spiral which



passed upwards from reading to vocal prayer, from vocal prayer to thoughtful meditation, from meditation to contemplation, and from contemplation back into reading.

In each of these ACTIONS of prayer, St. Dominic teaches us that our prayers are most fully human when the physical action of our body focuses and directs our spirit into a place of quiet reflection and contemplation. Dominic's *Ways* invite us to practice the art of praying with our whole being and to experience the wide range of possible conversations that we can share with God. Prayer need not be complex or elaborate. We simply turn to God and act as if we are in the presence of a friend.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. What forms of prayer are helpful for you?
2. Which of St. Dominic's *Ways* of prayer seems natural to you?
3. Which of the *Ways* seems uncomfortable?
4. How could you use one of these *Ways* to deepen your prayer life?

Michael Hurley, O.P., August 2005