



# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Major Trends in Parable Interpretation

JACK DEAN KINGSBURY

The Sense of Church History in Representative  
Missouri Synod Theology

DAVID W. LOTZ

A Consideration of the Meaning of Prayer  
in the Life of Martin Luther

SISTER DEANNA MARIE CARR, B. V. M.

Homiletics

Vol. XLII

October

Number 9

# A Consideration of the Meaning of Prayer in the Life of Martin Luther

SISTER DEANNA MARIE CARR, B. V. M.

*The author is a member of the Roman Catholic Order of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.*

THE AUTHOR CONSIDERS THE MEANING OF PRAYER FOR LUTHER'S RELIGIOUS LIFE and shows how during the 16th-century Reformation Luther "renewed" the wholesome traditions that had surrounded prayer in the prior history of the Christian church.

## Introduction

Of all the scholarly, insightful, popular, biased, and somewhat eccentric studies of Luther available in libraries and bookstores today, the most significant and relevant may well be those which probe into the mystery of Luther's relationship with God. If modern man is driven to despair by the "absence of God," it may be of some comfort for him to know that in ages past men also sought the elusive *Deus absconditus* and sought through prayer an understanding in faith of the self-revealing, self-concealing Divinity. Relocated in the 20th century, Luther would easily identify with the "deep-rooted existential anguish"<sup>1</sup> of man's quest for God.

In this essay we will consider Luther's concept of prayer and his actual exercise of prayer in the hope that by turning briefly to the past we might discover there a living word for the present and for the future.

<sup>1</sup> Egil Grislis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God," *McCormick Quarterly*, 21 (November 1967), 84. See Nathan Söderblom, *The Living God* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 160. Söderblom notes that Luther attempted to restore the "peace of the believer in the face of anguish, doubt and distress."

## THE MEANING OF PRAYER

Luther's writings are replete with testimony to his belief in the value and power of prayer. Whatever its ecclesiastical, political, cultural, social, or economic meaning, the 16th-century Reformation was also (and in some respects primarily) a religious experience,<sup>2</sup> an experience which caught Luther and others in a profound and dramatic struggle with none other than God Himself.

Contemporary man tends to be uneasy with and suspicious of any philosophy that claims to bring him to a certain knowledge of God through the use of unaided reason.<sup>3</sup> God, he will say, cannot be intro-

<sup>2</sup> Conrad Bergendoff, "Luther and Lutheranism Today," *Catholic World*, 206 (November 1967), 63. This entire issue is devoted to material on Luther. See Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1928), p. 13: "In origin and principle the drama of the Reformation was a spiritual drama, a battle of the soul."

<sup>3</sup> Sources on this topic include Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Edith M. Riley (New York: World Publishing Co., 1963), p. 145. See also Michael Novak, *Belief and Unbelief* (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1965), p. 104; and Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 163.

duced as the crowning concept in a sophisticated mental exercise, or as the culmination of a subtle argument. In this respect Luther was like the man of today. He rejected the pretensions of a philosophy that claimed to find God through the powers of the intellect alone. Scholasticism left him incredulous.<sup>4</sup> The only "cognitive" relationship to which he would acquiesce was the faith relationship between God and man.<sup>5</sup> It was his conviction that the only way man can intrude upon the hiddenness of Divinity is through man's receptivity in faith to God's self-revelation in love.<sup>6</sup>

The fullness of revelation and the center of Luther's faith was Christ, the supreme manifestation of the revealing Father.<sup>7</sup> In and through this Son, the Creator and Lord was seen to enter "creatively into home, community, and labor."<sup>8</sup> By His word and His sacraments He entered into man's life speaking redemption, forgiveness, and justification.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, He entered into man's life, convincing man by His living presence of the preeminence of prayer.

It would be possible to conclude this portion of the essay with a few comments on the beauty and generosity of the re-

vealing God, were it not for the fact that, despite all efforts toward self-revelation, for Luther God retained his hiddenness.<sup>10</sup> The tragedy in Luther's life, not unlike the tragedy in many lives today was that the revealing God could also be remote and inaccessible.

Luther was time and again driven to despair by the absence of God, and could comfort himself eventually only in the knowledge that He would one day be present again and revealing and experienced.<sup>11</sup>

As a man of faith, Luther came to know God as both the trusted refuge close at hand and the distant shadow of a half-forgotten encounter. God seemed sometimes to be sleeping, unaware of man's need and hidden from believer and unbeliever alike.

Luther lived out his life in the tension between the hidden and the experienced God, longing for the gracious presence but always threatened by the impending absence. It is the considered opinion of reputable scholars that the remote and terrible God was often more real to the reformer than was the beloved, benign, and merciful Lord.<sup>12</sup> By his own admission, he suffered *Anfechtungen*, that is, temptations, doubts, and anxiety of heart. For this reason prayer was not easy for Luther. Instead he regarded it as

the hardest work of all . . . a labor above all labors, since he who prays must wage a mighty warfare against the doubt and

<sup>4</sup> Grislis, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> William Van Horn Davies Jr., "Luther's Idea of Revelation" (S. T. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1934), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> John Cogley, *Religion in a Secular Age* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Grislis, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 194.

<sup>9</sup> Grislis notes, p. 82, that God reveals Himself in three ways according to Luther's thought: (a) in faith, (b) through the Word in Scripture, and (c) through Christ in Word and sacrament.

<sup>10</sup> John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), p. xvii. Dillenberger mentions the *Deus absconditus* theme in John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine as well.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

murmuring excited by the faintheartedness and unworthiness we feel within us.<sup>13</sup>

It is not our purpose here to attempt a definitive study of the problems that may have complicated Luther's spiritual development, or the motives that may have prompted his admirable perseverance. In *Man's Quest for God*, the Jewish scholar Abraham J. Heschel notes that if he is to be a "mentor of prayer," man must develop a sense of "spiritual delicacy,"<sup>14</sup> a quality Martin Luther never seemed quite able to manifest. If Luther's lack of refinement in language and manner was symptomatic of an inner coarseness, this factor could have contributed significantly to the painful inner struggle of which Luther so often spoke. In any event, one cannot pray "unless he has faith in his own ability to accost the infinite, merciful and eternal God."<sup>15</sup> Luther manifested such faith and, against whatever odds, he continued to pray.

To speak to God means to pray; this is indeed a great glory that the high majesty of heaven should stoop to us poor worms and permit us to open our mouths to him . . . but it is still more glorious and more precious that he should speak to us and that we should hear him.<sup>16</sup>

Luther's prayer was never characterized by a contemplative absorption into God

(as the transcendent One), but rather by an emotional expression "of the deep necessities of heart and conscience,"<sup>17</sup> ending in joyful resolution and trusting surrender. In the memorable metaphor of Søren Kierkegaard, this life of faith was for Luther a "great, anguished yet joyous, tormented yet trusting leap across the abyss of sin and guilt, death and despair into meaningfulness."<sup>18</sup> For Luther, faith could have no outcome except prayer, and the "leap" of faith — so cautiously considered in contemporary philosophy — was for him a foregone conclusion.

Nor was Luther disappointed in his trust. There is ample evidence that God did not withhold the comfort of His presence, even from a "vulgar" reformer. Throughout his life and work Luther described prayer in a variety of ways, but whatever it meant to him at any given time it was never a soliloquy. It was the outgrowth of his belief that God could indeed speak to man and that man could, in turn, both listen and respond. Even Maritain admits that Luther's doctrine of prayer was born chiefly of his own inward experience.<sup>19</sup>

For Martin Luther, a prayer was an appeal to the hidden God, that He might grant unworthy man the gift of prayer and through it the wonder of His presence.

#### PRAYER AND ANTI-PRAYER

Authentic Christian reform cannot be explained in terms of either strategy or structure, though it necessarily involves both. It is, rather, a "response to the motion of the Spirit,"<sup>20</sup> a sensitivity to the

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer* (New York: Oxford-Galaxy Press, 1958), p. 263. On Luther's *Anfechtungen* see Lennart Pinomaa, *Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther's Theology*, trans. Walter J. Kukkonen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), chap. 9, pp. 89—100.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), p. 77. "It is of vital importance to beware of intellectual vulgarity." Heschel speaks of a distinction between the sacred and the everyday (*havdalah*).

<sup>15</sup> Heiler, p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Cogley, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Maritain, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *The New Reforma-*

movement of the Spirit through the dry bones of the human person, his church and his world. (See Ezek. 37:3-5.)

Aware as he was of the divine transcendence<sup>21</sup> Luther was also conscious of the immanence of God constantly informing and impelling human life. This consciousness of the Spirit pulsating at the very heart of the Christian faith prompted him to develop a more personal, vital concept of prayer than many of his colleagues in reform.

The Spirit of prayer was to be primarily a Spirit of confident conviction inspired by the reminder, "Whatever you ask in My name, I will do it" (John 14:13). Luther insisted that his followers approach prayer with the tenacity and resoluteness which characterized Christ's own prayer. In Luther's words,

Whoever is inclined to doubt that God will answer his prayer might as well drop the idea entirely and not bother with God and prayer. For God cannot and will not tolerate our doubting.<sup>22</sup>

Left to his own resources, man has no power to pray,<sup>23</sup> but the Holy Spirit groans within him, inspiring him to emulate Christ in strength, vigor, and unfailing confidence that no prayer ever goes unheard or unanswered.

True enough, we are not Joshua, who through prayer could command the sun to stand still (Joshua 10:12-13). Nor are we a Moses, who through his fervent

plea separated the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15-22). Neither are we an Elijah, who by his prayer called down fire from heaven (II Kings 1:9-12). But we are at least the equal of those to whom God gave his word and whom the Holy Spirit has inspired to preach. . . . And God must answer (if I may be so bold to put it that way) just as much as he answered their prayer, for we are members of his church which is the bride of his beloved Son. He cannot ignore the Church when it earnestly beseeches him.<sup>24</sup>

Luther's writings on prayer were motivated by both personal and pastoral concerns. In the steady and ineluctable advance of the reform he recognized his own and his people's need for a rationale to undergird their prayer life during the transition between Roman Catholicism and Reformation Christianity. According to this rationale, the hallmark of Lutheran prayer would be its simplicity.<sup>25</sup> Rejecting elaborate medieval technique and methodology, Luther referred his followers to Scripture, especially our Lord's counsel: "In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do" (Matt. 6:7). So great was his stress on simplicity that even a sigh or a moan was regarded as a potential form or expression of Christian prayer.<sup>26</sup>

In 1535 Luther edited and published a pamphlet entitled *A Simple Way to Pray*. Dedicated to his barber, Peter Beskendorf, it was largely based on the explanation of the Our Father in the Small Catechism and was regarded by Luther as one of his chief accomplishments as a writer.<sup>27</sup> The

tion (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 248.

<sup>22</sup> Gustav K. Wiencke, *Devotional Writings II*, Vol. 43 of *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 230.

<sup>23</sup> Wingren, p. 185.

<sup>24</sup> Wiencke, p. 226.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Heiler, p. 239; see Heschel, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Wiencke, p. 190. See also Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. and trans. Theo-

modest publication was written, at least partially, by way of response to Besken-dorf's questions about the role of prayer in the life of the common man. Luther recommended the Lord's Prayer as the "best of all" and the Psalter as "second best."<sup>28</sup>

The method of prayer described in the *Simple Way* follows a time-honored form and is characteristic of the best in all Christian traditions. The place for prayer and the posture taken in prayer is left to the discretion of the individual. Luther allows for prayer in one's room (Matt. 6:6) as well as in church.<sup>29</sup> It can be undertaken from either a kneeling or a standing position. Luther himself is said to have regularly prayed aloud in the evening while standing at a window in his home.<sup>30</sup> In short, the methodology set forth in the *Simple Way* calls for no specific body posture, but does presuppose a definite disposition or favorable orientation.

Luther recommends both reading and reflection as (inferior but necessary) remote preparations for prayer.<sup>31</sup> At the actual time of prayer, the believer is free to use the Lord's Prayer, the Psalter, the commandments or the catechism, all of which are recommended points of departure. If the Lord's Prayer is chosen, the

catechism can be used as a "key" to meditation. Each phrase or detail is slowly considered in its turn and from every possible point of view. Luther notes that it is often helpful to correlate meditative readings with one's day-to-day experience and so constantly to relate the day's meditation to situations of the times.<sup>32</sup> Luther reportedly devoted as much as three hours a day to meditation of this kind.<sup>33</sup>

The most important aspect of this prayer-exercise<sup>34</sup> was the movement of the Holy Spirit as He informed the human spirit. "The Holy Spirit himself preaches in prayer, and one word of his sermon is far better than 1,000 of our prayers."<sup>35</sup> Fearful that the faithful might become slaves to the turning of many pages or the rattling of many beads,<sup>36</sup> Luther cautions his followers to be vigilant in prayer, awaiting the voice of the Spirit. "When the Spirit begins to speak to the heart, all method and scheme should be abandoned."<sup>37</sup>

Unlike Zwingli<sup>38</sup> Luther advocates variety in prayer, and that variety includes sacred music as worship. While Zwingli rejects as humanly impossible the use of music as prayer (maintaining that no man can pray properly and sing properly at the same time), Luther not only encourages the prayer of song but also bases his

dore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), pp. 124—30, passim. In many ways the most illuminating exposition of Luther's teaching about prayer is his explanation of the Our Father in the Large Catechism (Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959], pp. 420 to 436).

<sup>28</sup> Wiencke, p. 200.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>30</sup> Heiler, p. 239.

<sup>31</sup> Wiencke, p. 198.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>33</sup> Heiler, p. 107. See Maritain, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Heiler, p. 235.

<sup>35</sup> Wiencke, p. 198.

<sup>36</sup> Heiler, p. 282. See Wiencke, pp. 198 to 199.

<sup>37</sup> Wiencke, p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Garside, "Some Attitudes of Major Reformers Toward the Role of Music in Liturgy," *McCormick Quarterly*, 21 (November 1967), 155.

argument in its favor on prophetic texts. He reminds people that

the prophets cultivated no art so much as music in that they attached their theology not to geometry, nor to arithmetic, nor to astronomy, but to music, speaking the truth through psalms and hymns.<sup>39</sup>

Luther openly contended with Zwingli on the meaning of Col. 3:16:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom and as you sing psalms and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts.

Zwingli held that the "songs" mentioned were to be sung only in the heart and not aloud, while Luther insisted that the reference called for true song, an audible and joyful expression of the depth and movement of the human heart. "Doppelt betet, wer singet." ("He prays doubly who sings.")<sup>40</sup>

Just as Luther emphasized the relationship between prayer and song, so too did he stress the affinity between prayer and work. "He who does his work thoroughly can pray with power, for then he has a good conscience."<sup>41</sup> Prayer and work

go together in Luther's thought, and the man who approaches his work with enthusiasm and vigor brings those same dispositions to his prayer life. Ironically, the Luther who so eloquently opposed justification based on good works called on God during his own sickness to remember his diligence in preaching.<sup>42</sup> One might interpret Luther as saying that when rightly done, man's work entitles him to "confront God and pray,"<sup>43</sup> whereas the man who does not make proper use of his own talents and energies can never manifest that strength of faith that enables the common man to implore the beneficent God to fulfill his simple needs.

A final aspect of Luther's treatment of prayer is, perhaps, as puzzling as it is significant. Despite the beauty and depth of Luther's commentaries, sermons, and letters, the reader can hardly escape the conclusion that Luther's prayer was not wholly expressive of faith, love, patience, and gentleness. Even his reflections on the Lord's Prayer were, as he admitted, interrupted by what Erikson calls "personalized profanity,"<sup>44</sup> or "anti-prayer." If Luther's prayer is a free expression of simple love inspired by God's command that man pray, it is also an expression of a complex hatred inspired, at least in part, by his conflict with Roman Catholicism.

For I am unable to pray without at the same time cursing. If I am prompted to say, "Hallowed be Thy Name," I must add, "Cursed, damned, outraged be the name of the papists."<sup>45</sup>

Heiler also mentions Luther's "prayer" in-

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 153. Instructive is Luther's reconstruction and expansion of the petitions in the *Litania Latina correcta* of 1529, which was of course sung. See Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Let Us Pray for the Church!" *Response in Worship — Music — the Arts*, 6 (Michaelmas 1964), 69—72, and "Let Us Pray for the State!" *ibid.*, 6 (Epiphany 1965), 121—125. Luther also appended a section on morning, evening, and table prayers to the Small Catechism. On these formularies see Piepkorn, "As You Get Out of Bed — As You Go to Bed," *ibid.*, 5 (Pentecost 1963), 35—40; "This Little Prayer in Addition," *ibid.*, 5 (Michaelmas 1963), 70—73; "Benedicite and Gratas," *ibid.*, 5 (Epiphany 1964), 139—143.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>41</sup> Wingren, pp. 137, 185.

<sup>42</sup> Heiler, p. 256.

<sup>43</sup> Wingren, p. 185.

<sup>44</sup> Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1958), p. 247.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

spired by anger and built on his contempt for the ungrateful and ungodly adversary.<sup>46</sup>

It would be difficult to exaggerate the role that adversity played in shaping Luther's theory of prayer. "No one," he said, "prays for anything deeply who has not been deeply alarmed."<sup>47</sup> The question and its influence on Luther's spiritual development is a topic rich enough to provide material for a lengthy study. In this context, however, we will note only that crises, temptations, and needs were instrumental in molding Luther's prayer and anti-prayer alike. Personal and pastoral issues prompted him to remember the sick and the dying, the anxious and the despondent, the perplexed and the doubting, the bereaved, the persecuted and the imprisoned. His general topics for prayer reveal the breadth of his concern, and he included the hungry of the world, those suffering from problems in marriage, beleaguered government officials, and harassed clergymen. Among Luther's works one can discover prayers for the emperor, the imperial Diet, the German army in the field, monks in temptation, and widows and children in affliction.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Heiler, p. 235.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231. See also Tournier, p. 60, who discusses adversity as "a sign that there are deeper discoveries to be made, a new order to perceive which will transform the whole nature of the problem." Maritain, p. 5, treats an interesting aspect of the problem: "If we may accept his own story Luther entered religion as the result of a feeling of terror."

<sup>48</sup> Luther was extremely reluctant to pray specifically that one side or the other win the war with the Turks because he was convinced that both armies and both peoples were, in a very real sense, "guilty." He was not about to ask God to take the side of a guilty party, yet felt the need to pray through the war situation.

#### PRAYER OF COMMUNITY AND OF PERSON

Martin Luther regarded prayer as an essentially social exercise. "Let no one among us," he petitioned, "seek his own things and forget before Thee those of others."<sup>49</sup> Unlike Zwingli, who preached the preeminence of private, silent worship ("Commune with your hearts . . . and be still." Ps. 4:5),<sup>50</sup> Luther regarded prayer as an efficacious force with a multiplicity of social significances. "It binds people together within one another so that each prays for the other and with the other."<sup>51</sup> In his commentary on the seventh petition of the Lord's Prayer, Luther spells out in some detail some of the benefits that might accrue to society through man's earnest prayer.

This petition bids for deliverance from every evil of pain and punishment, as the holy church does in the litanies. Deliver us, O Father, from your eternal wrath and from the pangs of hell. Deliver us, O Father, in death and on Judgment Day, from your severe condemnation. Deliver us from sudden death. Protect us from fire and flood, from lightning and hail. Protect us from hunger and famine. Protect us from war and bloodshed. Protect us when you send plagues, pestilence, venereal disease, and other grave sickness. Protect us from every bodily evil and woe, to the end, however, that all this may redound to the honor of your name, the increase of your kingdom, and the accomplishment of your holy will. Amen.<sup>52</sup>

These social consequences are first evident among the young who listen to the

<sup>49</sup> Heiler, p. 246.

<sup>50</sup> Garside, p. 155.

<sup>51</sup> Heiler, p. 246.

<sup>52</sup> Wiencke, p. 38.



"voices of prayer" and from them learn the significance of this unique dialog.<sup>53</sup> Through communal prayer young and old alike deepen and perpetuate the love in which all are carried together toward God.

True prayer, then, is immune from the cold, solitary, inattentive, and unrecollected dispositions Luther associated with the papists' recitation of the "canonical hours."<sup>54</sup> His concept of prayer allows for nothing of the papists' spiritual absenteeism in which

the words are there, but the souls who are to feel their meaning, to absorb their significance, are absent. They utter shells of syllables, but put nothing of themselves into the shells.<sup>55</sup>

Such was Luther's harsh judgment on monastic prayer, and such was the spiritual desert out of which he sought to lead his people. He would introduce them to a prayer life that would bring repentance, good conscience, intensification of faith, and ultimately a new depth of spirit which would produce a "new inspiration come to set us free from our dilemmas, to transform our relationships with ourselves, with others, with God."<sup>56</sup>

Prayer was seen by Luther as the central mystery in the life of the Christian community. A gratuitous gift from God, it inspired and intensified the faith and solidarity of the church as it moved forward in the process of becoming holy.

Never think you are kneeling or standing

<sup>53</sup> John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday-Anchor Books, 1961), p. 217. Communal prayer is a unifying factor in man's life "right from the cradle," according to Luther.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217. See also Wiencke, p. 199.

<sup>55</sup> Heschel, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> Tournier, p. 61.

alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain.<sup>57</sup>

But side by side with the comforting, reassuring "we-Thou" relationship described above, Luther admitted feeling the "disdain" of God and correspondingly the more forbidding, dismaying aspect of prayer. It would be tempting to speculate about the relationship between this admission and Luther's difficulty in fully accepting the good God and in rejecting the image of the supreme "bogeyman." Luther insists that man approach prayer with firmness but sometimes gives the impression of having been somewhat intimidated by the experience:

When anyone, be he emperor or craftsman, turns to God in faith, or, more concretely, in prayer, he is without the outer support which "station" gives in relation to others. . . . Each is alone before God . . . as alone as if there were only God and he in heaven and earth.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the cost of exposing oneself utterly to God in prayer, Luther was convinced that the pain was both necessary and valuable. Indeed, he was absolutely certain that *without* such prayer man could never effect anything, whereas *with* prayer man's entire situation changed and the world quite literally turned "upside down."<sup>59</sup>

Prayer is a positive action through which

<sup>57</sup> Wiencke, p. 198.

<sup>58</sup> Wingren, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113, 135, 193. This provides a thorough treatment of Luther's considerations regarding radical changes in the human order accomplished through prayer.

new and revolutionary ways are opened, for it brings into the earthly situation the God who is free from all external orders.<sup>60</sup>

### Conclusion

Everything begins in the Spirit, and all the great events of modern history have been formed in the innermost soul of a few men, in the life of that nous which, as Aristotle says, is nothing at all as to volume and mass.<sup>61</sup>

It would be absurd to deny the complexity of the 16th-century situation. Analyses of the period reveal principally that one's evaluation is necessarily colored by one's background, religious affiliation, or point of view.

As for Luther himself, he will undoubtedly live on in history under many guises. For Henri Daniel-Rops he will be the "quietistic Fatalist."<sup>62</sup> For Léon Cristiani he will be the violent, impulsive, yet child-like rebel.<sup>63</sup> For John Dillenberger he will be the occasionally bewildered victim of circumstances.<sup>64</sup> But for all this, there will be others who, like Tillich, will insist on looking past the person and the history to Luther as author of a "new relationship" between God and man.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>61</sup> Maritain, p. 14.

<sup>62</sup> Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Catholic Reformation*, trans. John Warrington (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1962), pp. 34—35.

<sup>63</sup> Léon Cristiani, *The Revolt Against the Church*, trans. R. F. Trevett (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1962), pp. 61—69.

<sup>64</sup> Dillenberger, p. xii. "Not infrequently Luther himself was bewildered by the new world he encountered."

<sup>65</sup> Tillich, p. 232: "It is not a new doctrine, but a new relationship to God which the Reformer brought about."

One could question the accuracy of Tillich's observation and question the "newness" of the relationship toward which Luther struggled both in himself and for the church. If Luther was troubled by the *Deus absconditus*, there are those who would point out a similar puzzle involving God (hidden and revealed) in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. It was, after all, He to whom Christ cried, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" (Ps. 21:1; see Matt. 27:46). Some might also wish to challenge the "newness" of Luther's problem with prayer and anti-prayer. It was, after all, the people of the Old Testament who sang out both the beautiful blessing, "O Lord, our Lord, how wonderful is Thy name in all the earth" (Ps. 8:1), and the terrible curse, "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks." (Ps. 137:9)

Perhaps it would be well to suggest a modification in Tillich's statement—a substitution of "renewed" for "new." Such a substitution is not intended to weaken the original statement or to minimize the importance of any real contribution Luther may have made to the prayer life of the Christian church. It is, rather, intended to enhance the value of Luther's contribution by pointing up its relationship to similar patterns in Scripture and early tradition.

Luther's legacy may not be so much an "innovation" as it is to bring to light that which was lost and is now found. It is to his credit that in his writings on prayer he was sometimes able to reflect fidelity to much that is proper to pre-Christian and early Christian tradition and to anticipate something of 20th-century Christianity as well.

Friedrich Heiler has said that it was as a man of prayer that Luther became a great reformer and the "inaugurator of a new era in the history of Christianity."<sup>66</sup> Even those who entertain some misgivings regarding the desirability of that "new era" must, at least, concede that as a man of prayer Luther helped to restore the balance between regularity and spontaneity in prayer, between the potential beauty of vocal prayer (recited or sung) and the

primacy of inwardness, between prayer for the sake of something else and prayer for the sake of prayer.

It is to be regretted that Luther's theology did not permit him to place less stress on prayer as a duty and more emphasis on prayer as a precious prerogative. But there is reason to be grateful that in his time Luther strove with such passion to bring about a renewed dialog between the inexpressible within man and the ineffable beyond him.

Chicago, Ill.

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<sup>66</sup> Heiler, p. 115.