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Pray Anyway

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How Professor Hoyer arrived at the title "Pray Any Way" is an illustration, however poor, of part of today's talk. When we were talking about this on the phone, I gave him the title "Pray Anyway" — and it came through to him "Pray Any Way." As with prayer itself, one wonders: Was the connection poor? When I saw the thing in print, I wondered: Was there anyone on the other end? Did the one who answered hear what I said but then disagree and write, "Pray Any Way" anyway?

In any event, I'm the right speaker for you today, because all of the things I ask for from God I never seem to get; because I never learned how to pray in the first place; because I simply can't pray; and — perhaps most importantly — because I pray anyway. And that's the outline of my address to you: First, *prayer is for God*; second, *prayer is for learning how to pray*; third, *prayer is for people who can't pray*; fourth, *pray anyway!*

Prayer is for God. Prayer is — maybe it could be better defined than this; but this it certainly is — *to the Father through Jesus for the Holy Spirit*. "Through Jesus": of course, that doesn't just mean that we close our prayers with that pious tack-on. Rather, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord *is* our one prayer to God. To participate in the liturgy with heart and soul and mind and strength is to participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is our prayer to the Father for the Holy Spirit. You learn through the years

— not because you're taught, but out of need — to run to the liturgy, to see the worship of God with His people as being *the* resource for your life. You can't wait until Sunday, not because it's the job that you have to do, but because nothing else suffices. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we haven't got a prayer! Thus my ministry and my Christian life have been increasingly focused in participation in the liturgy. There we say:

Here we would present ourselves, though unworthy, body, soul, and spirit, to You, beseeching You to make us true members incorporate in the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ, so that, in communion with Your whole Church, militant on earth, triumphant in heaven, and in union with the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, we may make a pure offering to Your name.

Prayer is to the Father through Jesus for the Holy Spirit, that we might make and be in Jesus a pure offering to God's name.

But the problem with prayer being for God is that we pray for things, and God wants to give us God.

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! (Luke 11:11-13)

That's the trouble I find with praying: that

I ask for a fish and am not given, to be sure, a serpent, but am given God, when I wanted a fish; and for an egg, and do not receive, to be sure, a scorpion, but am given the Holy Spirit, when all I wanted was an egg.

It's not the sort of conflict of interest that someone might suppose at first. Take bread, for example. God has no prejudice against bread; He made it (especially stone-ground whole wheat, I suspect). He gives us bread, and He gives us the Bread of Life. We so often separate the two, whereas God only distinguishes between them. Remember Jesus — when fasting in preparation for His ministry of obedience to the Father even to death, His own hunger was potentially in conflict with the Word of God. So He said to Satan, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). But when the crowds flocked after Him into the wilderness, He saw that they were hungry and had compassion on them and gave them bread instead of saying, "Hungry, are you? Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In the Gospel for Laetare, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, (John 6:1-15), we learn that our Lord, in giving bread to feed hungry stomachs, took bread, broke it, gave it to His disciples, and they distributed it to those who were hungry. The body of Christ and our bread are not that far apart; the problem is that our nature wants bread alone and *not* the Bread of Life. But prayer is for God, whether it is for bread or for the Bread of Life.

A few years ago I buried a man who knew how to pray to God. Within two succeeding years late in his eighties, both his

legs had been amputated at the hip. His problem in the hospital was not his pain but his disturbance of others around him, and his family used to hush him up. He was a Slovak, and he'd keep everyone awake by singing out his Slovak prayers at night. And I asked him, "Peter, what do you pray for?" — "I thanking God for life He give me in His dear Son Jesus Christ." *Prayer is for God.*

But *prayer is for learning how to pray.* We just began our travels to New York City, and two Sundays ago the children came in with us for the first time — the six of us jammed into our little VW bug. We had just come onto that high highway through the midst of the still higher apartments; we hoped all the children would now get a glimpse of what they had been hearing about and would be somewhat excited, as I was. And Paul, my 7-year-old, said, as though we had said it to him — and we hadn't — "It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here." He'd learned that from others who had said it. Children learn to speak and to think by repetition and mimicry. *Prayer is for learning how to pray,* and to you, my fellow children, I recommend repetition and mimicry, the kind of thing your president spoke of last week as "discipline." For we are children and do not know how to pray; and we must learn how to pray, as we do in the liturgy, by mimicking our elder brothers and our Elder Brother.

When a student in the seminary (I must say I was smarter than now), what Luther and many of the old Anglican divines who translated the Bible had done always impressed me as somewhat ludicrous. I'm referring to all the stuff that was in these little descriptive subheadings under chap-

ters. You're rolling through the Old Testament, and all of a sudden these things say, "See here how Christ does this and that." "See here," it says in the Psalms, "how our Lord Jesus Christ suffers for us." I used to chuckle about those things. Luther certainly did find Christ behind every stone and bush! The problem was that I didn't and couldn't and sometimes even laughed when I saw that others, in their old-fashioned way, could and did see Christ where I couldn't. What could I learn from their simplicity? But through the discipline of repetition we learn how our prayers might be formed. God is working in our praying, that we might be enabled to begin to pray and to say "Jesus," to say, as a child, "Father." We learn to say "Jesus," although it may take many years of such repetition before that holy name can be formed on our lips in mimicry of those who have learned to say it before us.

A number of years back — amazing how easily one forgets these times! — my wife was near death, or so we both thought. She suffered from asthma and had been hospitalized in our suburban town near Detroit while I was out of town. They had given her the wrong medication, and she wasn't able to speak to let her situation be known to those who were helping, except to call for me. I was flown in, and although I could ask for the right medication, that time seemed to be past. We stood in desperate embrace in the hospital room, and then we began to pray. We prayed the Psalms, prayers I had for years considered completely irrelevant. We had learned these prayers from others and repeated them without even knowing what they meant, thinking them ridiculous. But in that moment of need, what we had re-

peated so many times without understanding became the prayer God had formed on our lips. *Prayer is for learning how to pray.*

But *prayer is for people who can't pray.* In the saying of the Psalms, my wife spoke. It will not take you long in your ministry to discover that praying of familiar prayers — the Creed, the Our Father — almost literally wakes people from the dead. They come out of comas to pray with you.

But our inability to pray seldom results from physical comas. *Prayer is for people who can't pray* — and nowadays that's just about everyone, isn't it? For people in the church and outside of it are wondering more and more: Is there a God on the other end of our praying? Is there one to whom to speak? And, even if there is, does He answer? The question is rhetorical. I don't know if we are helped more than hindered by people admitting their doubt, but these days they are admitting it. "We hear no answer."

But then, people still resort to prayer. You've heard that said, "Well, there's nothing else we can do in this situation, we might as well resort to prayer." I remember when the riots in New Haven began in 1967 on our block; lazy and fearful as I am, I thought that somehow it would be faithless not to be out there, but there was nothing I could do. I have been in a great number of situations where, we are told, the church and its ministry ought to be these days. If you are shaping the style of your future for such a ministry in urban life, at least remember this: Even though you are a well-endowed Christian, it would be difficult for me to name a situation in urban life today about which you can do

something! The mayors can't. The wise men are fresh out of solutions.

I remember, during the riots in New Haven, one of these midmorning meetings of people who were supposed to be able to do something about it. Everyone saw that there was really nothing they could do except get angry at the officials. Then one priest — the one Roman Catholic priest there — said, "Gentlemen, let's get down on our knees and pray." And everyone laughed. It simply seemed so inappropriate when there was so much to do. But nobody knew what to do. I must confess everyone laughed, including me, for that sounded like "resort to prayer," and I thought there was something suspicious about that. I thought there should be some theological grounds for resenting that word "resort." But I thought again about my laughter. How soon one's own brilliant mind and deep resources are depleted, how soon! Really, that's when prayer can begin. You see, there was powerful truth in what the priest said. When there's nothing *you* can do about a situation, resort to prayer.

Prayer is for people who can't pray: when you realize that you've done everything and can do nothing, and then resort to prayer and discover you can't pray, that's when you've begun to learn. When we know we can't do anything about a situation and then know as well that we can't pray, then Christ prays in us by the Spirit, and that's praying. That's why the liturgy is for those who can't pray. There we join Christ's people and His prayer to the Father; there those who can't pray can yet begin.

C. S. Lewis describes the situation of those who cannot pray. I'm going to read

his poem to you because it speaks to those who know that modern man cannot pray:

Master, they say that when I seem to be
in speech with You,
Since You make no replies, it's all a dream,
One talker aping two.
They are half-right, but not as they imagine.
Rather, I seek in myself the things I meant
to say
And lo, the wells are dry.
Then, seeing me empty, You forsake the
listener's role,
And through my dead lips breathe,
And into utterance wake the thoughts I
never knew,
And thus You neither need reply nor can.
Thus, while we seem two talking, Thou
art one forever,
And I no dreamer, but Thy dream.

Pray anyway. When you realize that prayer asks God and you don't want God, when you realize that you've never learned to pray, when it becomes plain that you can't pray, then *pray anyway*, and God will answer.

"Well, has He ever answered your prayers?" you ask skeptically. C. S. Lewis also describes a pilgrim who thinks that by now he should have arrived at the supreme stage of the walk, where there is refuge and beauty at last. Then he concludes, "I can see nothing like all this. Was the map wrong?" Maps can be wrong, but the experienced walker knows that the other explanation is more often true. We are discouraged because we seem not to get results even when we are following the map, even the desired result of more of the life of God and more of the mind of Christ.

Remember Jesus on the cross. He wanted God, but God seemed absent. He

thought He had learned how to pray— understand me when I say these things— He thought He had learned how to pray but didn't know what to say. He was sure He couldn't pray, so He prayed anyway and said, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" And God didn't answer. Jesus had to wait . . . until the third day. A thousand years may be as a day to God, but to a man, to the Man our Lord Jesus Christ, when you're dead, even three days must seem like a thousand years to wait for an answer.

And on the third day He rose again from the dead.

Has God ever answered my prayers? Oh, yes. He answered all my prayers when His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, was born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried; He

descended into hell; when He rose again from the dead on the third day and ascended into heaven and sat on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

My brothers, when you *pray anyway*, it's happening. Tell me, were Martin Luther's prayers for the power of the Gospel and the renewal and unity of the church answered? You say, "No." Were Martin Luther King's prayers for justice for his people and the whole society answered? You say, "No." But, my brothers, these men were more than conquerors, because even in the moment of despair and loss, when near to death, when all seemed failure, they could say, because they were praying men, "I have been to the mountaintop. Mine eyes have seen the glory."

Lord, teach us to *pray anyway*.

New York, N. Y.