The Need
and the Blessing
of Prayer

A new translation of
Father Rahner's book on prayer

Karl Rahner, S.J.

Translated by
Bruce W. Gillette

Introduction by
Harvey D. Egan, S.J.

A Liturgical Press Book

THE LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
Contents

Introduction vii

Note on the Translation xix

Foreword xxiii

1 Opening Our Hearts 1

2 The Helper-Spirit 14

3 The Prayer of Love 25

4 Prayer in the Everyday 37

5 The Prayer of Need 48

6 Prayers of Consecration 60

7 The Prayer of Guilt 75

8 Prayers of Decision 91
Introduction

"Strengthened by the Church's sacrament and accompanied by the prayers of his Jesuit brothers, shortly after completing his eightieth year, Father Karl Rahner has gone home to God. . . . He had loved the Church and his religious Order and spent himself in their service." So read part of the official Jesuit announcement of the death of Father Karl Rahner, S.J., on March 30, 1984. And with his death, the Church lost one of her most loyal sons.

Rahner has been called one of the greatest theologians of this century, the voice of the Second Vatican Council, "the quiet mover of the Roman Catholic Church," and the "father of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century." However, he preferred to refer to himself as someone who was "not particularly industrious," who "went to bed early," and who was a "poor sinner." In fact, "all I want to be," he emphasized, "even in this work [of theology], is a human being, a Christian, and, as well as I can, a priest of the Church."1

I first met Father Rahner in 1969 when he graciously accepted the invitation to celebrate my first Mass with me and to spend the day with my family and friends. During my four years of doctoral studies under his direction, from 1969 to 1973, I found him to be at once utterly brilliant, shockingly creative, traditional in the best sense, original, provocative, balanced, and healing. A passion for hard work, detail, precision, and an

-impatience with mental laziness, "horning after relevance," and bureaucratic incompetence stamped his personality.

And who would not be fascinated by a theologian who loved carnivals, ice cream, large shopping malls, and being driven at very high speeds—one whose olfactory curiosity cost him many dollars in New York when a large department store demanded that he purchase all the perfume bottles he had opened? However, most impressive of all were the simplicity, holiness, and priestliness of his Jesuit and theological life.

At this theologian's crypt I often prayed. I still pray to him. It astonishes me how often he appears in my dream life. I've said and written that he is the father of my theological life and of my heart.

When only twenty years old Rahner published his first article, "Why We Need to Pray." For all practical purposes his first book was a book of prayers, _Encounters with Silence_, his last book, _Prayers for a Lifetime_. In fact, explicit prayer and penetrating reflection on prayer punctuated his entire theological life. Even many essays in his many _Theological Investigations_ often end by shading into prayer. Thus Rahner stands in a long line of great Christian theologians who were likewise great teachers of prayer.

Much of Rahner's theology flows out of and then leads back into encounters with the saving, silent presence of the mystery of God's love for us in the crucified and risen Christ—and does so without dissolving theology's necessarily critical and rational function. To some extent one can view Rahner's theology as prayer seeking understanding, as kneeling with the mind before holy mystery with Christ in the Spirit.

Rahner views the human person as essentially one called to pray. He also highlights prayer as the fundamental act of human existence, the act which embraces the entire person—the great religious act. For Rahner, to pray is to be. He sees Christ's humanity as prayer's perfect paradigm: total, unconditional surrender to holy mystery. Likewise, he considers the God-question and the prayer question as two sides of the same coin.

Prayer, to Rahner, is the last moment of speech before the silence; the act of self-surrender just before the incomprehensible God disposes of one; the reflection immediately preceding the act of letting oneself fall—after the last of one's own efforts—and full of trust—into the infinite fullness and silence that reflection can never grasp.

Rahner was never one to wear his heart on his sleeve. But he did not hesitate to pray publicly. In fact, he often prayed the Rosary while his lectures were being read to American audiences by an interpreter. He enjoyed relating how he and Cardinal Ottaviani—the same cardinal responsible for a Vatican slap on Rahner's wrist—once prayed the Rosary and the Litany of Loreto while traveling together. That the gentle St. Albert the Great could do nothing more at the end of his life than pray the Hail Mary impressed Rahner as a great blessing. He hailed the Jesuit custom of assigning old Jesuits the task of praying for the Society of Jesus, the "work" found after their names in the Jesuit catalogue.

He once confessed that "I am also someone who has been tempted by atheism." But he said in the same breath: "There is nothing more self-evident to me than God's existence." When challenged by an interviewer because of his great faith despite the horrors of Nazism, Rahner said: "I believe because I pray." 5

---

3. James M. Dermse, trans. (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1966). One commentator (Robert Kress, _A Rahner Handbook_ [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982] 94) describes the "mood" of the prayers in _Encounters_ and this newly translated volume "a bit heavy—even lugubrious—for today's readers. Written shortly after World War II, they inevitably reflect the mood of misery of those years." I do not share that view. I personally know several people from many walks of life whose lives were profoundly changed by reading Rahner's book and of prayer. One example—a friend who worked in a halfway house for troubled teenagers found her copy of _Encounters_ in the hands of a young woman who explained: "Who is this person? He prays just like me!"
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid, 212.
of God offering his very own life, which must be freely accepted or rejected by every single person.

To Rahner, God's self-offer as holy mystery, revelation, and love actually constitutes human identity. To be human in its most radical sense means to be the addressee of God's offer of self. Thus, the human person is an immense longing, a living prayer, exulted only when he or she has surrendered fully to silent mystery's all-embracing spirit of love.

Rahner maintains that our deepest, primordial experience—what haunts the center of our hearts—is of a God who remains holy mystery, the word that illuminates our spirits, and the love that embraces us. This is not a particular, or "categorical," experience to which we can point. Rather, it is an experience beyond all particulars, a "transcendental" experience. It is the atmosphere in which we live, our basic spiritual metabolism, "more intimate to us than we are to ourselves," as the mystics were fond of saying. Just as we take our breathing, our beating hearts, or our own self-awareness for granted, so too may the ever-present experience of God remain overlooked, repressed, or even denied. When it comes to the experience of God in our daily lives, we are like sponges in water. We take the water for granted.

One finds this primordial experience, at least implicitly, in all personal experiences. And, to Rahner, all human experiences tend toward "an intensification which is directed towards something which one could in fact call mystical experience." 11 The immense longing contains within itself the seeds of infused contemplation, that is, mystical prayer in the strict sense, or what I prefer to call "awakened contemplation."

In God's self-communication, we actually experience God-above-us (holy mystery), God-with-us (enfleshed Word), and God-in-us (Holy Spirit). The call of holy mystery explains why we are never satisfied totally with anything in this life. The attraction of the historical crucified and risen Word explains why we are always looking for that one person who will fulfill us perfectly—whom Rahner calls the "absolute savior." The attraction

10. Ibid., p. 38.
of the Holy Spirit explains why our immense longing often draws us into the deepest levels of self. We are essentially ecstatic beings drawn to God's holy mystery, worldly and historical beings attracted to an absolute savior, and ecstatic beings drawn to our deepest interior by the fontal fullness of the Spirit of love. In short, we are called to live and to be trinitarian prayer.

To Rahner, because every person experiences God at least in a hidden way and weaves the fabric of a divine life out of his or her humdrum days, Rahner speaks often of the prayer of everyday life. Paradoxically, this prayer normally appears in the grayness and banality of everyday life, in contrast to the psychologically dramatic way the prayer of the great saints is manifested. The prayer of everyday things also encompasses even the most humble aspects of daily life. For example, in Rahner's meditation on sleep, he calls attention to the human person as free but who loses control and surrenders to the unconscious self. This self-surrender is, of course, at the heart of Rahner's prayer of daily life. The simple act of sleeping for him can be an implicit confidence in the inherent rightness, security, and goodness of the world. When questioned in his advanced years for his advice to old people, Rahner said quite simply: Live as well as you can, make new friends, socialize, take up a hobby. Yet, if one is reduced to total incapacity, that is all right because one will be more likely to place oneself in God's hands rather than in one's own. That is the prayer of daily life.

Perhaps the most easily recognized form of the prayer of everyday life is the universal experience of the immense longing. All persons experience the profound difference between what they want from life and what life actually gives them. Even those who have intelligence, prestige, power, wealth, reputation, health, and a loving family—those who seem to have it all—experience a profound emptiness at times. The hunger of the heart is revealed in the mistaken belief that the thing or person that will fulfill us totally is just around the corner. We are always on the lookout for this thing or person we believe will quench our immense longing. As a child, we want the one toy, as a young person, to belong to the right group, get into the right school, or date the right person; as an adult, to obtain the right position, find the right mate, and the like. Yet when we obtain our heart's alleged desire, we soon discover it is not enough.

The heart is a lonely hunter because it is restless until it rests in God. The immense longing we feel in daily life underscores that nothing finite ultimately satisfies us, that we will settle for nothing less than perfect life and total fulfillment. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that the first temptation was to be like God, indicating that we want it all.

Because God has communicated himself to the very roots of our being, we experience God at least in a silent, hidden, and even repressed way. This ever-present experience of God, the anonymous presence of our heart's desire, is the ambience or horizon against which we experience all else. This God-experience is the cause of our dissatisfaction with life, for nothing measures up to the God who offers himself at our deepest center. The immense longing speaks to us, even if at times only in a whisper: this or that finite thing is not ultimately where we have already set our hearts. Is this not prayer, an encounter with silence?

To Rahner, the prayer of everyday life exists not only as the immense longing, or even only as the undertow, vector, or implicit call to holiness found in every person's deepest interior. It becomes more explicit in the many good and lovely experiences that punctuate even the most banal lives. Hence Rahner calls attention to joyful experiences, to the good and beautiful things of life, because they "promise and point to eternal light and everlasting life." Since God can be found in all things, there is certainly an Easter faith that loves the earth, a radical prayer of joy in the world.

In the Gospels one finds Jesus at wedding feasts, at banquets, changing water into wine, making food available to the hungry—

in short, eating and drinking in a way that shocked the Pharisees. Jesus marveled at the birds of the air, the flowers of the field, and rejoiced in the many joys found in ordinary life. Is this not the prayer of daily life?

As Rahner says, "The good things in life are not only for the rascals." To someone for whom the experience of suffering negated God's existence, Rahner countered, "Have you even once tried to make your experience of happiness, of meaning, of joy, of shelteredness, Likewise an argument from which the presentiment of the eternal God of light and blessedness can unfold in you." Despite Rahner's appreciation of the prayer of joy in the world, he prefers to emphasize the negative way because here the human spirit experiences its proper transcendence. As he says, "The experience of the meaning of inner worldly values, in love, in fidelity, in beauty, in truth, and so on is finite. As such these values are a promise in their positive aspect, while in their finiteness they are an indication that we must always proceed beyond these partial experiences, in the hope of this infinite fulfillment." For Rahner, however, a "burned-out," "tired and disillusioned heart" is not necessarily closer to God than a young and happy one. All too often do both routine, humdrum, daily joys and sorrows obscure God's presence. Nonetheless, because the human mystery is infinite emptiness and the divine mystery infinite fullness, "wherever space is really left by parting, by death, by renunciation, by apparent emptiness, provided the emptiness that cannot remain such is not filled by the world, or activity, or chatter, or the deadly grief of the world—there God is."

Thus God is experienced more clearly and more intensely in our ordinary and banal everyday existence, "where the graspable contours of our everyday realities break and dissolve." To Rahner, God's presence becomes transparent when "the lights which illuminate the tiny islands of our everyday life go out." The best moment, says Rahner, is when everything that propels our life fails. Then we are forced to ask if the inescapable darkness and silence engulfing us is absolute meaninglessness or a blessed night. Pure Rahnerian prayer is surrendering to the blessed night.

The prayer of everyday life can be experienced negatively in the variety of ways in which "we bear the everyday." We must carry "our cross of the everyday—on which alone our self-seeking can completely die because it has to be crucified inconspicuously... If everything in the everyday becomes such dying, everything in the everyday becomes the rising of love." Then one truly prays the everyday.

For example, one may become dissatisfied with one's life, see clearly that things simply do not add up and yet nurture a real Christian hope in an ultimate reconciliation, that Julian of Norwich is correct when she averred that "all will be well." One may try to love God, to pray, but no answer comes. The heart is left empty, devoid of all emotion and meaning. Perhaps for the first time one has not confused the life-force or the self with God but still surrenders to the mysterious darkness. Hence one's heart: of hearts does pray and experiences the "wilderness" of the ever greater God.

They who obey through the inmost fidelity to conscience and not because of external necessity; who deny self and do their duty despite looking foolish in the eyes of others; who stand by their convictions regardless of the cost—they too pray the prayer of daily life.

One could also call the prayer of daily life the prayer of the "unknown saints." Unknown saints so forget themselves "that they suffer the fate of remaining unrecognized by others." These are "people who leave us with the impression that they have spent their whole lives, with all their disappointments and
 absurdities, for the love of neighbor." As Rahner says, "Where selfless love occurs in daily life; where people die devoutly, patiently, and hopef ul of an absolute meaning despite all the absurdities of existence; where people do the simplest tasks of their daily life without an egotistical turning in on themselves...this is what sainthood means." That is what Rahnerian prayer means.

Even the atheist or agnostic who lives moderately, selflessly, honestly, courageously, and in silent service to others prays the prayer of daily life as an unknown saint. The courageous, total acceptance of life and of oneself, even when everything tangible seems to be collapsing, is perhaps the primary way of praying the prayer of daily life in so-called secular life. Anyone who does so accepts implicitly the holy, silent mystery that fills the emptiness both of oneself and of life. And because Christ's grace supports this hope against hope, the experience is at least anonymously Christian, that is, Christian in fact, if not in name.

Rahner asks, "Why is any kind of radical moral cynicism impossible for a person who has ever discovered his real self?... Why does ultimate fidelity not capitulate in the face of death? Why is real moral goodness not afraid of the apparently hopeless futility of all striving?" Because the prayer of daily life implicitly and secretly experiences the God revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Rahner gives specific examples of the unknown saints in his brief piece, "Why Become or Remain a Jesuit?" He says: "I still see around me living in many of my companions a readiness for disinterested service carried out in silence, a readiness for prayer, for abandonment to the incomprehensibility of God, for the calm acceptance of death in whatever form it may come, for total dedication to the following of Christ crucified." He mentions specifically his friend Alfred Delp, who signed his final vows with chained hands and then went to his death in

26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
29. Mademois [Jesuit Publication in Melbourne, Australia] (April 1987)
30. Ibid.

Berlin for anti-Nazi activity. Rahner finds consolation in the humble work of a Jesuit in India unknown to Indian intellectuals because of his physical work with the poor. Another example of Rahner's unknown saints is a Jesuit student chaplain, beaten by police along with his students but without the satisfaction of considering himself a "revolutionary."

What of a hospital chaplain who works daily with the sick and dying until even death becomes a "dull routine," or the prison chaplain who is appreciated more for the cigarettes he brings than for the gospel he preaches? For Rahner the prayer of everyday life, the prayer of the unknown saint, is made by "one who with difficulty and without any clear evidence of success plods away at the task of awakening in just a few men and women a spark of faith, of hope and of charity."

The prayer of everyday life is nothing more than the "more excellent way" of love described in 1 Corinthians 13. As St. Paul says, "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4-7).

This love must be the norm against which everything is to be measured. For example, many contemporary Christians cry that there is only one way to be a Christian. Speaking in tongues, charismatic healings, academic theology, the pope, faith and justice, political and liberation theology, the preferential option for the poor, Christian pacifism, mysticism, appearances of Our Lady at Medjugorje, and the like are often touted as the more excellent way.

But as St. Paul says, without love—the prayer of everyday life—these are nothing. They may be the "triggers" that intensify genuine Christian life, but they may also be turned into idols, ideologies, and idols. No Christian need feel obliged to be present at all the rallies, even when they are genuine.

Rahner's theology of the prayer of everyday life challenges everyone to look more closely at what is actually going on in the depths of their daily lives. What is implicit, hidden, anonymous,
repressed, or bursting forth from the center of all we do! To Rahner, wherever there is radical self-forgetting for the sake of the other, an absolute letting go, an absolute yielding of everything, surrender to the silent mystery that embraces all life—there is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ and the prayer of everyday life.

For these reasons, therefore, I welcome Bruce Gillette’s per- lucid and accurate translation of Rahner’s Von der Not und dem Segen des Gebetes. The original English translation seriously distorted both Rahner’s language and thought, a misrepresentation which Gillette has rectified by his competence and diligence.

Harvey D. Egan, S.J.
Boston College
30 March 1997

Note on the Translation

In linguistic terms, German is a very “productive” language, that is, it retains the Germanic feature of allowing the virtually limitless formation of lexical items from existing morphemes of the standard German lexicon. This can occur through the arrangement of discrete morphemes into a word, for example, Welt-an-schau-ung, or it enables the speaker or writer to express a concept by using a word that usually exists in the standard lexicon in another form, for example, as a verb, noun, or adjective. Thus the verb *verschütten*, usually translated as “to cover over,” “to bury,” is frequently used in this text in the past passive participle form as a substantive, *die Verschütteten*, “those who have been covered over,” “those who have been buried,” or, as normally used in this translation, “the rubbed-over.” This productivity of the German language gives the speaker the opportunity for tremendous expressivity. This is an important feature of Rahner’s written works.

In his writings Rahner pushed the morphology and syntax of standard German to its limits. Herbert Vrogrinler attributes this unique style to Rahner’s vast experience with Latin.1 In German, Rahner creates words that cannot be found in the standard German lexicon, words that are frequently only found in the writings of Rahner. Rahner’s stylistic features are important for the proper understanding of his work, particularly as they affect a translation.

Rahner was born in southern Germany and spent most of his life in the same linguistic area in which High German dialects

were spoken: Baden, Bavaria, and Tirol. One feature of these spoken languages that is apparent in this text is the use of redundancy, that is, repetition to add emphasis to the thought being expressed. There are other features that the reader should bear in mind. These fall under two categories: Rahner’s text itself and the mode of the translation.

The eight chapters of the book were originally sermons, that is, the spoken word, which Rahner gave during the Lent of 1946 in St. Michael’s Church in the heart of Munich. The situation, the date, and the location are important.

Lent is the time in the liturgical year for inner renewal and change of heart. Lent in the center of Munich in March and April of 1946 occurred in the midst of rubble. Munich had been bombed to the ground during the war, and only a few gutted-out buildings, mostly churches, remained standing. There are photographs of postwar Munich that show nothing but broken stone and brick, heaps of rubble over the horizon, just as the devastating bombardment had left them.

This was the first Lent in Munich since the end of the war, the collapse of the Third Reich, and occupation by the United States Army. In early 1946 the CARE packages had not yet started to arrive; the Marshall Plan did not exist; there was little food, portable water, or public utilities (in “The Helper-Spirit” Rahner mentions “the slavery of hunger and need which . . . now prevails”). Rahner’s sermons are aimed directly at these people, “the people of today.” His reference to the existential philosophy of the time, the “nights in the cellars,” and particularly of collapse, rubble, and so forth, must have evoked very real, concrete, even frightening memories in the minds of those present in St. Michael’s.

Since it is based on sermons, this text is not as rigorous as some of Rahner’s theoretical writings. However, it does contain some typical Rahnerian peculiarities: sentences and paragraphs tend to be very long, and he uses parenthetical comments frequently and sometimes within another parenthetical comment. I have, whenever possible, retained these features in the translation because they are Rahner’s style and present his mode of thought. To translate these into “proper” English style might make for easier reading but would change Rahner’s own thinking and alter his flow of thought.

Frequently Rahner uses expressions that may sound somewhat stilted to today’s reader, but these were well-known to his audience as the current German translations of the Bible, Roman Missal, and other liturgical texts of the period.

Whenever possible I have translated Mensch as “man,” its primary meaning. Sometimes I have used “human being” or “people” according to the context, but the original is always Mensch. I have only used “person” when Rahner used Person (for example, “the autonomous person”), because of its use as a technical term. I have also included some biblical references for the convenience of the reader who may not have a concordance at hand. Rahner also makes reference to various philosophers, from ancient to modern. Exact references to those sources are left to the interest of the reader.

One final comment on the text: Rahner considered these sermons as an important work, and one of his editors regards them as Rahner’s theoretical work on prayer. They had a profound and lasting effect upon me when I first read them in 1964 while a student at the University of Munich. This fundamental Christian message to the people assembled in St. Michael’s in 1946 is just as compelling to the people of today. I hope that the labor of translation has done justice to the spirit of the original text.

My special thanks go to Rev. Harvey Egan, S.J., who kindly reviewed the final draft of the translation and offered many valuable comments and suggestions, particularly on technical terms in theology and Jesuit spirituality. Special thanks also go to Miss Cho Jun Sang and Rev. John Burghard, O.F.M. Conv., without whose support this translation would never have been published.

Bruce W. Gillette
Holy Week of 1997

2. See Vorgrimler, Understanding Karl Rahner, 185 n. 2.
Foreword

These eight short chapters on Christian prayer are not intended to address the theme of prayer in every respect. For the most part, they were originally sermons that were held during Lent of 1946 at St. Michael's Church in Munich, and they bear the traces of this source without the intention of hiding this origin.

If we are not supposed to cease praying, then perhaps one shouldn't cease speaking about prayer, speaking about it as well and as poorly as it is given to one.

Foreword to the Ninth Printing

These little meditations were originally—more than thirty years ago—sermons in Munich at St. Michael's Church. The little book went through many printings, particularly in the Herderbücherei. At the request of the publisher and many readers of the Herderbücherei it is presented again after being out of print for several years. These meditations naturally do not claim to present a systematic theology of prayer. If this were the intention, much would have to be said, particularly today, that is simply presupposed here.

And, after so many years, even the author himself would not seldom say differently what is said here even though he still stands behind what he attempted to stammer about prayer then and now.

The book's history of more than thirty years, always with more readers, lets the author hope that it will also find new readers even today. For, as he had written in the first edition, "If we are not supposed to cease praying, then perhaps one shouldn't cease speaking about prayer; speaking about it as well and as poorly as it is given to one."

Karl Rahner, S.J.
Munich, February 1977
Opening Our Hearts

Man does very many quite diverse things. He does not have the gift of always doing one thing, although he bears a secret, perhaps unacknowledged and semiconscious longing always to do just one single thing; something that is everything and worth the effort, the heart’s final exertion and love. Man must do many things. But not everything he does is of the same order and the same dignity. It can be something “important” because it is unavoidable. And the really important and necessary can be very easily avoided and forgotten. What everyone does, and no one can omit, is not unconditionally the highest priority. When man is with God in awe and love, then he is praying. Then he doesn’t perform everything at once, because it will never be possible for him, the finite, to do that in this life. But he is at least with him who is everything, and therefore he does something most important and necessary. Something not everyone does. For just because prayer belongs to the most necessary it is also the freest, the most avoidable, which only exists when we do it freely, always with new love, otherwise it would not exist. However, that’s the reason that it seldom happens. It is difficult for man. Therefore he always has to meditate about what prayer is, and he must not wait until it happens by itself. Meditating on the nature and dignity of prayer can cause saying at least one thing to God: Lord, teach us to pray!1

But don’t we all know what prayer is, can’t we all pray, can this actually be a matter of something different from the exhortation and admonition to do what we really know and are capable

of doing? That is not so simple and self-evident. Often we really don’t know what prayer is, and therefore we often are unable to pray. Because there are human things, acts of the heart, which everyone thinks he knows because everyone talks about them. He knows them because they are obviously very simple. However, the most self-evident and the simplest acts of the heart are the most difficult, and man only learns them slowly. And if he is capable of them at the end of his life, then his life was good, delightful, and blessed. And to these acts of the heart, the simplest and most difficult at the same time, belong goodness, selflessness, love, silence, understanding, true joy—and prayer. No, it’s really not easy to know and understand what prayer is. Perhaps at one time someone did know or was capable of it, at a time when his poor heart wasn’t yet so worn out by the bitterness and joy of life, just as perhaps he was once capable of pure love. But then gradually something quite unusual came about without his knowing it—just as love can become a habit and perhaps become a mutual egotism—and this human being still thought that he was praying. And then he either gave it up, disappointed and bored, because he slowly noticed that what he was doing to do really wasn’t worth it anymore. Or he “prayed” on (if one can still call what he continued to do “prayer”). It’s like going to a government office. One either has something to pay or something to pick up, and thus one simply goes there in the name of God. One needs something from one’s dear God, and therefore one asks for it. One doesn’t want to be on bad terms with him, and one does one’s duty. One pays the visit (not too long, what has to be said can truly be said quickly, and surely God too must realize that one doesn’t have much time and has more important things to do). And this application at the supreme office of the world’s government (one has the impression that it takes a lot of requesting and very slowly functions) and this official visit with the world’s supreme ruler, whom one doesn’t want to displeasure (because that could be dangerous in the hereafter, one is never sure), is called prayer. Oh, God, this isn’t prayer, but rather the corpse and the lie of a prayer.

But what is prayer actually? That’s difficult to say. And in the end we shall have talked a lot about it without having said much. First, let’s say something quite simple about prayer, something very self-evident which is at the very beginning of prayer and which we usually overlook: in prayer we open our hearts to God. In order to understand that, to understand it with the heart and not just with the head, two things have to be discussed: the rubbed-over heart and the opening of the heart.

The events that occur concretely in our exterior life, clearly and manifestly, are, when one examines them, often only a sign and a symbol, an external shadow of things that take place in the heart, perhaps have been taking place for a long time, and now, without anyone’s noticing it, they suddenly form the exterior reality of man according to their hidden nature. And then, in this exterior process and occurrence, man can suddenly look at the secret condition of his heart as in a mirror. And when he sees this, his reflection, and knows that he is actually seeing himself in this external thing, then this shuddering and knowing heart is perhaps frightened to death of itself.

Do you remember the nights in the cellar, the nights of death? Loneliness amidst the harrowing crush of people! The nights of hopelessness and of waiting for a senseless death! The nights when the light went out, when horror and impotence gripped one’s heart, when one mimed being courageous and unaffected! When one’s innocently bold and brave words sounded so strangely wooden and empty, as if they were already dead before they even reached the other person? When one finally gave up, when one became silent, when one only waited hopelessly for the end, death? Alone, powerless, empty. And if the cellar really became buried by rubble, then the picture of today’s man is complete. For such are we people of today, even if we already have crawled out of the rubbed-over cellar, even if our everyday has already begun again, even if one attempts to assume again the pose of the courageous and vivacious one (oh, how fundamentally strange this pose is, this role which we want to play for ourselves and others). We men of today are still the rubbed-over because as such we have already entered into an exterior destiny, because the exterior destiny—by God, it is so even if it sounds so fantastic and romantic—is only the shadow of events which have occurred in the depths of men: that their hearts are rubbed-over.

Say it yourselves: How is our heart? Look at this heart, our heart. If God has not yet really freed it into his own infinite
freedom, it is that inward point in our being, where finiteness, agony, hopelessness, the everydayness of our humanity become aware of themselves and consume themselves. That is actually our heart: the heart of fools, the heart of the bitter, the heart of the despair. We cannot flee this prison of our heart. Man can indeed—literally or figuratively—travel, he can plunge himself into his work, he can devote himself to pleasure, he can attempt to console himself through other people, he can stupefy himself on a thousand paths and in thousands of ways so that he deadens that always silently, pitilessly penetrating consciousness, the consciousness of loneliness, of the inescapability, and the nothingness of the earthly. But this everlasting, hasty, and despaired flight is for naught. Suddenly man notices again that he has not escaped at all, that he is like someone who is seemingly healthy but at the same time incurably ill, who has already heard his death sentence, and in the middle of a pleasant diversion, when the old desire for life and joy is rising as if nothing had happened, he is reminded by a small quiet pain that everything is already over and hopeless. Oh, man can go where he wants, he can create caches of his happiness where he wants, he can divert himself over the whole wide world; suddenly he notices again that he was only running around hastily in the dungeon of his life, that he crawled out of one hole in his rubbered-over cellar into another and that everything took place during his imprisonment, that he remains arrested, remains arrested in and to finiteness, to futility, to the everyday, to disappointment, to empty talk, to misery, to the hopeless attempts which we call human life. Certainly there are people who, as it were, sit innocently and without concern in the cellar of the house of their life; they merely consume their provisions, perhaps they still discuss things excitedly, perhaps they still love and make plans—and they have not yet noticed that the entrance to their cellar has already caved in and is buried under rubble. Caved in because death stands above everything and the end is behind everything. But sooner or later even the "vivacious," "optimistic" man will recognize earthly man's situation. And the others have already noticed what man's situation actually is, man in whom the spirit only appears to be the light to illuminate the hopelessness of the situation as when one lights a match in a cellar to discover that it's hopeless. And when this despair has grasped man, when he notices how lonely he is, how alone, how he is doomed to death and yet still crushed by the vanities of the everyday—oh, then man doesn't need to cry out in despair, then he probably doesn't begin to rave—oh, no, there is a much more horrifying type of despair. When despair has become such a normal condition, so self-evident that one doesn't even know the difference any more, that one doesn't even believe in the possibility of another condition, that one is finished, finished with what one calls the illusions of life, finished with what one still wonders about a bit as childlike ideals and ecstasies but then smiles at somewhat bitterly. People with this chronic despair remain in control of themselves, they remain quite normal and everyday. They conduct themselves as all reasonable people conduct themselves. They do their duty, they work, they are very proper and very conscientious, they fall in love and get married, they pay taxes and discuss art and science, and they like to hear or talk occasionally about the meaning and grandeur of human life. But all that is only a facade. All this is only supposed to cover up the innermost, the deepest point of the heart, the wound of the heart from which one slowly bleeds to death, about which one doesn't talk, however, because of propriety (a proper and educated human being is not supposed to despair). All that should only mask the rubbered-over dungeon of our heart in which the real human being is hopelessly held captive, the human being who knows that everything is finite, everything is pathetic, everything is unimportant, everything that we call our earthly life in us and outside of us is doomed to death. Yes, one has found even a stranger way of masking this despair. One says that it is actually the true greatness of man to despair. Only such a despairing one, who has finished and figured out everything and has noticed that behind everything there is nothing, is the actual, the true man, who has elevated himself above the everyday bourgeois, who bravely and honestly professes the only greatness of man that there is: the honest realization of man's nothingness; the greatness of man is the knowledge of his misery. It can be that such an illusion-free realization is the beginning of salvation, that such men are no longer far from the kingdom of God. Because if they are really so despairing, and they don't make their despair into a perverse pride and imagine (for it's nothing else)
man who is unable to come out of the prison of this finiteness into the light, into the goodness, into the one, free, boundless, exalted-above-all-death reality of the living God. One can be a Christian, not because one believes but because one wants to hide one's unbelief for and from himself because this would otherwise frighten oneself too much. Indeed, from the nature of the matter, Christianity is the best disguise of unbelief for man's deceived heart, the best facade to hide the rubbed-over heart.

Is the case of the rubbed-over heart hopeless? Is the danger of collapse and being rubbed-over inscrutable in the interior man? What can man do if he is supposed to get out of the dungeon of his disguised cold despair and disappointment? How does the opening of one's heart take place? We can say it with one word: by prayer to God and only by prayer. However, precisely because we want to understand what prayer actually is, we have to speak slowly and cautiously. And ask what man has to do when he finds himself in the situation of the rubbed-over heart.

This is the first thing: he must stand firm and submit to it. When people notice that they are rubbed-over spiritually, then they begin either to defend themselves with the despair of one drowning—just like one buried alive. They plunge into everything, into every form of activity and busyness that gives them the hope that in this way they can delude themselves about their despair. Or they really despair, wildly or in icy calm. They curse, they hate themselves and the world and say there is no God. They say there is no God because they confuse the true God with what they held to be their God. And they are actually right in their opinion. The God that they meant really does not exist. The God of earthly security, the God who saves one from life's disappointments, the God of life's assurance, the God who makes sure that children never cry and that justice enters upon the earth to change the misery of this earth, the God who doesn't let human love end in disappointment. But even this second type of man can't stand firm against despair. They think that they have courageously and honestly drawn the right consequence from their experience of life, but they didn't understand despair correctly, for they saw in it the death of God and not his true advent. No, it is

2. Translator's note: John 11:4 (KJV). "When Jesus heard that, he said, 'This sickness is not unto death, for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.'"

3. Translator's note: Lebensversicherung also means life insurance.
really true. In this occurrence in the heart, let despair take everything away from you, in truth you will only lose the finite and the futile, no matter how great and wonderful it was, even if it is you yourself. You despair with your ideals, you despair with your life’s calculations which were very intelligently, very exactly, and very beautifully ordered, you when your image of God which resembled you instead of the Incomprehensible himself. Whatever can be taken from you is never God. Let all your exits be blocked, only the exits to the infinite will be rubbed-over and the wanes into the really futile. Don’t be afraid of the loneliness and isolation of your inward jail which only seems to be filled with fecklesness and hopelessness, with tiredness and emptiness. Don’t be afraid! You see, when you stand firm and don’t flee despair, nor in despairing of your former gods—the vital or the intellectual, the beautiful and the respectable, oh, yes, that they are—when you you God, if you don’t despair in the true God, if you stand firm—oh, that is already a miracle of grace which shall be bestowed on you—then you suddenly will become aware that in truth you are not at all rubbed-over, that your jail is closed only to emptiness, that its deadly emptiness is only the false appearance of God, that his silence, the eerie stillness, is filled by the Word without words, by him who is above all names, by him who is everything in everything. And his silence tells you that he is there.

And that is the second thing that you should do in your despair: notice that he is there, know that he is with you. Become aware that he has been expecting you for quite some time in the deepest dungeon of your rubbed-over heart. Become aware that he has been quietly listening for a long time whether you, after all the busy noise of your life, and all the idle talk that you called your illusion-free philosophy of life, or perhaps even your prayer during which you only talked to yourself, after all the despairing weeping and mute groaning about the need of your life, whether you finally could be silent before him and let him speak the word, the word that seemed only to be like a deadly silence to the earlier man who was you. You should feel that you are not falling at all when you give up the frantically violent interior anxiety about yourself and your life. You do not despair at all when you doubt yourself, your wisdom, your strength, your ability to help yourself to life and the freedom of happiness; rather, you are with him suddenly as a miracle that daily has to happen anew and never become a routine. Suddenly you will experience that the petrifying visage of hopelessness is only God’s rising in your soul, that the darkness of the world is nothing but God’s radiance which has no shadow, that the apparent waylessness is only the immensity of God who does not need any ways because he is already there. Then you will notice that he actually does not have to enter your rubbed-over heart, rather that you have to comprehend that you should not try to escape from this heart because he indeed is there, and so there can be no reason to flee from this blessed despair to a consolation which would be none and which does not exist. Then you will notice that you have to enter—the free yes of your faith and your love—your rubbed-over heart in order to find there the one who was always there and was waiting, the true, the living God. That is the second thing. He is there. He is in the middle of your rubbed-over heart. He alone. He who is everything and, therefore, looks as if he were nothing. He is there not although but because you otherwise have nothing more, not even yourself.

And then the third and fourth things come by themselves. Then tranquillity comes by itself. Silliness which no longer goes away. Trust which no longer fears. Power which is mighty in impotence. Life which unfolds into death. Then nothing more is in us than he and the faith which is sheerly imperceptible but fills everything and conquers everything and holds everything fast, that he is, there, and we are his. And then tranquility of heart is found. And then our heart begins to speak as if by itself. Quietly and without many words. And then it speaks to God who is in us, who holds us although we are falling, who strengthens us although we are weak, who is near to us although we cannot touch him. Our heart speaks to him. What does it say anyway? Who can
say it? This heart says itself. And therefore no man can actually say what it speaks because one cannot turn a heart into words. It says to its God: “Thou!” Respectfully, but intimately. And when it speaks, all the strength of this heart flows to this present God, and it does not come back. And man forgets himself. And he no longer has his center in himself, but in God, up there, but for the first time really in himself, because God is more interior to us than we are to ourselves. And all the incomprehensibilities of this God spur on with this God even more the risk of jumping over all the walls of one’s own I. For one now knows: There is no salvation inside of these walls, and the more inscrutable his ways, the more devastating his judgments, all the greater is the holy defiance of this heart’s love that flees from God’s judgment and devastating act in this world to him himself. This God is there, there in the heart of consoled despair, and this heart opening itself says to him: “My God and my Lord, my God and my share in eternity.” It says to him: “Abba, dear Father.” It prays to him: “Our Father . . . .” It says to him: “Amen.” It says to him: “Have mercy on us.” It opens itself to him, gives itself, surrenders unconditionally, it listens to his wordless speaking, it trembles in the incomprehensibility of his presence in a pain which would be deadly if it were not the healing pain of eternal love. And everything that the rubbed-over and therein freed heart does and experiences: standing firm and submitting to despair, the consciousness of the rising of God in the fall of man, the tranquility and the words of love to God, all of these are the actual words, that is his prayer.

Such action, as the Son did it, is grace when we imitate him. One cannot actually show someone how to do it. One cannot force someone to let go of the plank one is frantically clinging to although he knows that it cannot save him, the plank of despairsed self-assertion and of self-asserting despair. How little use it is to tell someone: You can swim, you won’t fall, when he desperately protests that he cannot do it, that he is falling. One can only say one thing to him: the grace of ability comes in the form of your freedom. It is no guarantee that eliminates the need to jump by already convincing you forcefully that you won’t fall into the bottomless pit when you let go. One can only say: Don’t worry about your anxiety which wants to be assured before it lets go, before it prays. If you think your heart cannot pray, then pray with your mouth, kneel down, fold your hands, speak loudly, even if it all seems like a lie to you (it is only the desperate self-defense of your unbelief before its death which is already sealed): “I believe, help my unbelief; I am powerless, blind, dead, but you are mighty, light, and life and have conquered me long ago with the deadly impotence of your Son.” One can only say again and again: Your supposed inability with which you excuse your inaction does not precede as a simple fact your willingness, but is your deepest guilt, or—oh, who has fathomed the mind of the Lord—long as you crave the ability and are not in love with your inability (are you certain of that, my poor brother?), is the impotence of the Lord which will save you. But even then: Why doesn’t your knee, your hand, your mouth want to speak what your heart supposedly cannot? Because it would be dishonest? But is it dishonest to act thus with the body when the heart desires to be able to do what it supposedly is not yet able to do? But don’t we agree that your heart should crave what it—as you say—can’t do, to believe in meaning, freedom, happiness, breadth, clear truth, in God? How could you express what is in you with the bitter words, “I can’t do it,” without admitting at the same time that it would be good, is desirable and obligatory to be able to do it? I mean that it’s a fact that grace comes in the form of your free act and it is never so that you only have to wait for it. You can always do one thing, while on your knees and with your mouth: shout into the impotent, unbounded darkness of your dead heart’s wasteland that you yearn for God; one thing you can do that we all have to do: pray.

One thing still has to be said. This remoteness of God would not be the raising of God in our dead and rubbed-over heart, had not the Son of Man—who is the Son of the Father—suffered and done all of this in his heart with us, for us, and before us. He, however, has suffered and done all of this. It happened in the garden from the fruits of which men wanted to press the oil of joy which, however, was in truth the garden of the lost paradise. He lay face down; death had risen in his heart, in the living heart of the world. Heaven was closed and the world was like a huge grave; he alone was in it, buried by the guilt and hopelessness of the world. The angel who looked like death gave him the chalice
of all bitterness for strength, and he fell into agony. The earth swallowed evilly and greedily the drops of the blood from his death-agony. God encompassed everything as a night that no longer promised a day. One could no longer distinguish him from death. In this immeasurable silence of death—the people were sleeping dumbly in sadness—in this deathly silence, the only sign that was still left of God, somewhere the little voice of the Son was floating around. Every moment it seemed ready to be smothered. Then the great miracle occurred: the voice remained. The Son said with this tiny voice—which resembled that of someone dead—to his dreadful God: “Father,” he said to his own forsakenness, “you will be done.” And, in ineffable courage, he committed his forsaken soul into the hands of this Father.

Since then our poor soul has also been laid in the hands of this God, this Father whose deadly decree became love. Since then our despair is redeemed, the emptiness of our heart has become fulfillment, and the remoteness of God our homeland. If we pray with the Son in the intense darkness of our heart and repeat to God his prayer in the garden. In pure faith. No storm of ecstasy will rise up at first when his words mysteriously arise again as our words somewhere in the depth of our heart. But the power will suffice. It will be just enough for each day. As long as it pleases God. And that will be sufficient. He knows when and where our heart will be sufficiently purified (to some extent, it's possible even on earth) to bear the blinding rising of his blessedness, the poor heart that now in faith in Jesus Christ shares the night that for our eyes is nothing other than the blinding darkness of the rapturous light of God, the heavenly night when God is born in our heart for the first time.

Oh, we have now talked a lot about prayer but said little. But perhaps it's a start, a very small impetus for a start that we could make anew and originally in prayer? Just hearing the message is naturally not worth anything. But if we people of today would only try it, would try to accept ourselves as we are, to look at our disguised or acknowledged despair, if we, as it were, descended into the depths of our hearts, if we gave up deceiving ourselves about ourselves, if we had the courage to renounce inwardly what life takes from us anyway—namely everything—if we sud-