

## The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic

The holy teachers Augustine, Leo, Ambrose, Gregory, Hilary, Isidore, John Chrysostom and John Damascene and Bernard<sup>141</sup> and other devout teachers, both Greeks and Latins, have spoken extensively about prayer, recommending it and describing it, telling us how necessary and useful it is, how to do it and how to prepare for it, as well as indicating the obstacles that may arise. In addition to these, the renowned and glorious teacher, brother Thomas Aquinas<sup>142</sup> and brother Albert<sup>143</sup> of the Order of Preachers in their books, and brother William in his treatise on the Virtues,<sup>144</sup> have expounded the subject nobly and systematically, devoutly and attractively.

However, what we must say something about here is the way of praying in which the soul uses the members of the body in order to rise more devotedly to God, so that the soul, as it causes the body to move, is in turn moved by the body, until sometimes it comes to be in ecstasy like Paul,<sup>145</sup> sometimes in agony like our Saviour,<sup>146</sup> and sometimes in rapture like the prophet David.<sup>147</sup> The blessed Dominic used often to pray like this.

We find, in fact, that the holy men of the Old and New Testaments sometimes prayed like this. This manner of praying stirs up devotion, the soul stirring the body and the body stirring the soul. Praying this way used to make St. Dominic dissolve utterly into weeping, and it so kindled the fervour of his good will that his mind could not prevent his bodily members from showing unmistakable signs of his devotion. So, by the sheer force of his mind at prayer, he sometimes rose up in petitions and entreaties and thanksgiving.

Apart from the common ways of prayer in the celebration of the Mass and in the prayer of psalmody in the canonical Hours, which he practised very devoutly both in choir and when he was travelling, and during which he often seemed suddenly to be caught up above himself to speak with God and the angels, his ways of praying were as follows.

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### THE FIRST WAY OF PRAYER

First of all, bowing humbly before the altar as if Christ, whom the altar signifies, were really and personally present and not just symbolically.<sup>148</sup> As it says, "The prayer of the man who humbles himself pierces the clouds."<sup>149</sup> He used sometimes to say to the brethren the text from Judith, "The prayer of the humble and meek has always been pleasing to you."<sup>150</sup> It was by humility that the Canaanite woman obtained what she wanted,<sup>151</sup> and so did the prodigal son.<sup>152</sup> Also, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof."<sup>153</sup> "Lord, humble my spirit deeply because, Lord, I am utterly humbled before you."<sup>154</sup> So the holy father, standing with his body erect, would bow his head and his heart humbly before Christ his Head, considering his own servile condition and the outstanding nobility of Christ, and giving himself up entirely to venerating Him.

He taught the brethren to do this whenever they passed before a crucifix showing the humiliation of Christ, so that Christ, who was so greatly humbled for us, should see us humbled before his greatness.<sup>155</sup> Similarly he told the brethren to humble themselves like this<sup>156</sup> before the whole Trinity whenever the *Glory be to the Father* was recited solemnly. This way of prayer, as illustrated in the picture, was the beginning of his devotion: bowing deeply.

### THE SECOND WAY OF PRAYER

St. Dominic also often used to pray by throwing himself down on the ground, flat on his face, and then his heart would be pricked with compunction, and he would blush at himself and say, sometimes loudly enough for it actually to be heard, the words from the gospel, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner."<sup>157</sup> And with great devotion and reverence he would recite the words of David, "It is I who have sinned and done unjustly."<sup>158</sup> He would weep and groan passionately, and then say, "I am not worthy to look upon the height of heaven, because of the greatness of my sin; I have provoked your anger and done evil in your sight."<sup>159</sup> He would also say, emphatically and devoutly, the verse from Psalm 43:25, "My soul is laid low in the dust, my belly is stuck to the earth."<sup>160</sup> And again, "My soul is stuck to the floor, make me come alive according to your word."<sup>161</sup>

Sometimes, wanting to teach the brethren with what reverence

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they ought to pray, he would say to them, "The Magi, those devout kings, entered the house and found the child with Mary his mother.<sup>162</sup> Now it is certain that we have found him too, God and man, with Mary his handmaid, so come, let us fall down and worship before God, let us weep before the Lord who made us."<sup>163</sup>

He exhorted the young men too, saying to them, "If you cannot weep for your own sins, because you have none, still there are many sinners to be directed towards mercy and love, for whose sake the prophets and apostles groaned in distress, and for their sake too Jesus wept bitterly when he saw them, and similarly the holy David wept and said, 'I saw the half-hearted and I pined away.'<sup>164</sup>

### THE THIRD WAY OF PRAYER

For this reason, rising up from the ground, he used to take the discipline with an iron chain, saying, "Your discipline has set me straight towards my goal."<sup>165</sup> This is why the whole Order determined that all the brethren, out of respect for the memory of St. Dominic's example, should take the discipline on their bare backs with sticks of wood every ferial day after Compline,<sup>166</sup> saying the *Miserere* or the *De Profundis*. They were to do this either for their own sins or for those of others whose gifts supported them. So no one, however innocent, should withdraw himself from following this holy example.

### THE FOURTH WAY OF PRAYER

After this, St. Dominic, standing before the altar or in the Chapter Room, would fix his gaze on the Crucifix, looking intently at Christ on the cross and kneeling down over and over again, a hundred times perhaps; sometimes he would even spend the whole time from after Compline till midnight getting up and kneeling down again, like the apostle James,<sup>167</sup> and like the leper in the gospel who knelt down and said, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean,"<sup>168</sup> and like Stephen who knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."<sup>169</sup> And a great confidence would grow in our holy father Dominic, confidence in God's mercy for himself and for all sinners, and for the protection of the novices

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whom he used to send out all over the place to preach to souls. And sometimes he could not contain his voice, but the brethren would hear him saying, "To you, Lord, I will cry, do not turn away from me in silence, lest in your silence I become like those who go down into the pit,"<sup>170</sup> and other such words from sacred scripture.

At other times, however, he spoke in his heart and his voice was not heard at all, and he would remain quietly on his knees, his mind caught up in wonder, and this sometimes lasted a long time. Sometimes it seemed from the very way he looked that he had penetrated heaven in his mind, and then he would suddenly appear radiant with joy, wiping away the abundant tears running down his face. At such times he would come to be in an intensity of desire, like a thirsty man coming to a spring of water, or a traveller at last approaching his homeland. Then he would grow more forceful and insistent, and his movements would display great composure and agility as he stood up and kneeled down.

He was so accustomed to genuflecting that, when he was on a journey, both in a hostel, after the toils of the road, and on the road itself, while the others were sleeping or resting, he would return to his genuflections as to his own special art and his own personal service. This way of prayer he taught more by the example of his practice than by what he said.

### THE FIFTH WAY OF PRAYER

Sometimes, when he was in a convent, our holy father Dominic would stand upright before the altar, not leaning on anything or supported by anything, but with his whole body standing straight up on his feet. Sometimes he would hold his hands out, open, before his breast, like an open book, and then he would stand with great reverence and devotion, as if he were reading in the presence of God. Then in his prayer he would appear to be pondering the words of God and, as it were, enjoying reciting them to himself. He had made his own the Lord's practice which we read about in Luke 4:16, "Jesus went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, as he was accustomed to do, and stood up to read." And it says in Psalm 105:30, "Phineas stood and prayed and the pestilence stopped."

At other times, he joined his hands and held them tightly fastened together in front of his eyes, hunching himself up. At other

times he raised his hands to his shoulders, in the manner of a priest saying Mass, as if he wanted to fix his ears more attentively on something that was being said to him by somebody else. If you had seen his devotion as he stood there erect in prayer, you would have thought you were looking at a prophet conversing with an angel or with God, now talking, now listening, now thinking quietly about what had been revealed to him.

When he was travelling, he would steal sudden moments of prayer, unobtrusively, and would stand with his whole mind instantaneously concentrated on heaven, and soon you would have heard him pronouncing, with the utmost enjoyment and relish, some lovely text from the very heart of sacred scripture, which he would seem to have drawn fresh from the Saviour's wells.<sup>171</sup>

The brethren used to be greatly moved by this example, when they saw their father and master praying in this way, and the more devout among them found it the best possible instruction in how to pray continuously and reverently, "as the eyes of a handmaid are on the hands of her mistress and as the eyes of servants are on the hands of their masters."<sup>172</sup>

#### THE SIXTH WAY OF PRAYER

Sometimes, as I was told personally by someone who had seen it, our holy father Dominic was also seen praying with his hands and arms spread out like a cross, stretching himself to the limit and standing as upright as he possibly could. This was how he prayed when God restored the boy Napoleon to life at his prayer at San Sisto in Rome, both in the sacristy and in the church during the Mass in which he rose from the ground, as we were told by that devout and holy sister, Cecilia, who was present, with a great crowd of others, and saw it all.<sup>173</sup> Like Elijah when he raised the widow's son, he stretched himself out over the boy's body.<sup>174</sup>

He also prayed in the same way when he rescued the English pilgrims near Toulouse when they nearly drowned in the river, as has been related elsewhere.<sup>175</sup>

And this was how the Lord prayed when he hung on the cross, his hands and arms stretched out, when, with great cries and weeping, his prayer was heard because of his reverence.<sup>176</sup>

The holy man of God, Dominic, did not use this kind of prayer

regularly, but only when, by God's inspiration, he knew that some great wonder was going to occur by virtue of his prayer. He neither forbade the brethren to pray like this nor did he encourage it.

When he raised the boy from the dead, praying standing with his arms and hands stretched out like a cross, we do not know what he said. Perhaps he used the words of Elijah, "Lord my God, I beseech you, let the soul of this boy return within him,"<sup>177</sup> just as he followed his manner of praying. But the brethren and the sisters and the cardinals and the rest who were there were paying attention to his manner of praying, which was unfamiliar and remarkable to them, and so they did not take in the words he spoke. And afterwards they could not ask the holy and extraordinary man, Dominic, about it, because in this deed he had shown himself to be an object of awe and reverence to them all.

However, he did sometimes recite, seriously, deliberately and carefully, the texts from the Psalms which refer to this manner of praying: "I cried to you, Lord, all day long I have stretched out my hands to you" (*Ps. 87:10*) and "I have stretched out my hands to you, my soul is like soil without water before you, speedily hear me, Lord" (*Ps. 142:6-7*).

This makes it possible for any devout man of prayer to understand the teaching of this father, praying in this way when he desired to be extraordinarily moved towards God by the power of his prayer, or rather, when he felt himself being moved by God in a particularly expansive way, through some hidden inspiration, in view of some special grace for himself or for somebody else. He can base himself on the teaching of David, the symbolic expression of Elijah, the love of Christ and the devotion of Dominic.

#### THE SEVENTH WAY OF PRAYER

He was also often found stretching his whole body up towards heaven in prayer, like a choice arrow shot straight up from a bow. He had his hands stretched right up above his head, joined together or slightly open as if to catch something from heaven. And it is believed that at such times he received an increase of grace and was caught up in rapture, and that his prayer won from God for the Order he had founded the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and, for himself and his brethren, such delight and enjoyment in putting the Beatitudes into prac-

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tice, that each one would consider himself blessed in the most profound poverty, in bitter grief, in severe persecution, in great hunger and thirst for righteousness, in all the cares and worries of mercy, and that they would all consider it a pleasure to observe the commandments with devotion and to follow the evangelical counsels. At such times the holy father seemed suddenly to enter the Holy of Holies and the third heaven. And so after this kind of prayer, he bore himself like a prophet, as has been related in the *Miracles*,<sup>178</sup> whether he was rebuking or dispensing or preaching.

To give just one example, briefly, for edification's sake,<sup>179</sup> once at Bologna, after praying like this, the holy master Dominic asked the advice of some of the senior brethren about some decision that had to be made. This was his normal practice because, as he said, something may be shown to one good man which is not shown to another, as can be seen in the prophets. The sacristan then came and called one of the people taking part in this council to go to the women's church to hear a confession, I think, and stupidly added, though not loudly enough to be heard by the holy master Dominic, "A beautiful lady is asking for you! Come at once." The Spirit came upon St. Dominic then and he began to be disturbed in himself, and the councillors looked at him with fear. Then he told the sacristan to come to him, and he asked him, "What did you say?". He replied, "I was asking for a priest to come to the church." And the father said, "Reproach yourself and confess the sin which came to your lips. The God who made all things made me aware of what you thought were your secret words." And he disciplined him there severely and long, so that those who were present were moved to compassion because of his bruises. Then he said, "Now, my son, go your way. Now you have learned how to gaze at a woman in the future: make sure you don't judge of her appearance. And you too should pray that God will give you chaste eyes." In this way he knew what was hidden, rebuked the brother's folly, and punished him and taught him, as he had foreseen it all in prayer. And the brethren were amazed that this was what he said had to be done. And the holy master said, "Our judgments, by comparison with those of God, are nothing better than filth."<sup>180</sup>

So the holy father did not remain long in this kind of prayer, but returned to himself as if he were coming from far away, and at such times he seemed to be a stranger in the world, as could easily be seen from his appearance and his behaviour. While he was praying he was sometimes clearly heard by the brethren saying, as the prophet did,

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"Hear the voice of my supplication while I pray to you, and while I lift up my hands to your holy temple."<sup>181</sup>

And the holy master taught the brethren to pray like this both by his words and by his example. He quoted the verses from Psalm 133:2, "At night lift up your hands to the holy place," and Psalm 140:2, "The raising of my hands like an evening sacrifice."

### THE EIGHTH WAY OF PRAYER

The holy father Dominic also had another beautiful way of praying, full of devotion and grace. After the canonical Hours and the grace which is said in common after meals, the father would go off quickly on his own to a cell or somewhere, sober and alert and anointed with a spirit of devotion which he had drawn from the divine words which had been sung in choir or during the meal; there he would sit down to read or pray, recollecting himself in himself and fixing himself in the presence of God. Sitting there quietly he would open some book before him, arming himself first with the sign of the cross, and then he would read. And he would be moved in his mind as delightfully as if he heard the Lord speaking to him. As the Psalm says, "I will hear what the Lord God is saying in me."<sup>182</sup> It was as if he were arguing with a friend; at one moment he would appear to be feeling impatient, nodding his head energetically, then he would seem to be listening quietly, then you would see him disputing and struggling, and laughing and weeping all at once, fixing his gaze, submitting, then again speaking quietly and beating his breast. If anyone was inquisitive enough to want to spy on him secretly, he would find that the holy father Dominic was like Moses, who went into the innermost desert and saw the burning bush and the Lord speaking and calling to him to humble himself.<sup>183</sup> The man of God had a prophetic way of passing quickly from reading to prayer and from meditation to contemplation.<sup>184</sup>

When he was reading like this on his own, he used to venerate the book and bow to it and sometimes kiss it, particularly if it was a book of the gospels or if he was reading the words which Christ had spoken with his own lips. And sometimes he used to hide his face and turn it aside, or he would bury his face in his hands and hide it a little in his scapular.<sup>185</sup> And then he would also become anxious and full of yearning, and he would also rise a little, respectfully, and bow as if he

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were thanking some very special person for favours he has bestowed. Then, quite refreshed and at peace in himself, he would continue reading his book.

### THE NINTH WAY OF PRAYER

This way of prayer he used to observe when he was going from one country to another, especially when he was in a lonely place. He disported himself with his meditations in his contemplation. And sometimes he would say to his travelling companions, "It is written in Hosea, 'I will lead her into the wilderness and speak to her heart.'" <sup>186</sup> So sometimes he went aside from his companion or went on ahead or, more often, lingered far behind; going on on his own he would pray as he walked, and a fire was kindled in his meditation. <sup>187</sup> And a curious thing about this kind of prayer was that he seemed to be brushing away ashes or flies from before his face; and because of this he often defended himself with the sign of the cross. The brethren thought that in this kind of prayer the saint acquired the fulness of sacred scripture and the very heart of the understanding of God's words, and also a power and boldness to preach fervently, and a hidden intimacy with the Holy Spirit to know hidden things.

And so it happened once, to mention just one story out of many which we leave out, <sup>188</sup> that the devil came to the church of the Friars Preachers in Bologna, in the form of a young man of frivolous, licentious character, and asked for someone to hear his confession. Five priests were brought to him, one after the other. This was because the first confessor was so viciously disturbed and enflamed by his words that he got up from listening to his confession and refused to hear such dreadful things through to the end. The second did the same, and so did the third, the fourth and the fifth. But they went away without saying anything, and they were not prepared to reveal this confession because, as far as they were concerned, the confession they had heard was a sacramental confession, even though this was not how the devil saw it. Then the sacristan approached St. Dominic, who was in the convent at the time, complaining about these priests, because five of them had not been able to hear one sinner's confession. "It's scandalous!" he added; "the priests preach penance and then they refuse to give penance to sinners." Then the holy father Dominic got up from his reading and prayer and contem-

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plation, not, I think, unaware of what was afoot, and went to hear the devil's confession. When he entered the church, the devil came to him and at once the holy father recognised him and said to him, "You evil spirit, why do you tempt the servants of God under this veil of piety?" And he rebuked him severely. The devil disappeared at once, leaving the church reeking of sulphur. And the sacristan was appeased and stopped being angry with the priests.