

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 2—IX. Of Common Prayer and Sacraments

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[0 : 00] and homily wherein is declared that common prayer and sacraments ought to be ministered in a tongue that is under standard of the hearers. Among the manifold exercises of God's people, dear Christians, there is none more necessary for all estates and at all times than his public prayer and the due use of sacraments.

For in the first we beg at God's hand all such things as otherwise we cannot obtain, and in the other he embraceth us, and offereth himself to be embraced of us, knowing therefore that these two exercises are so necessary for us, let us not think it unmeet to consider first what prayer is and what a sacrament is, and then how many sorts of prayer there be, and how many sacraments, so shall we the better understand how to use them aright.

To know what they be, St. Augustine teacheth us, in his book intituled Of the Spirit and the Soul, he saith this of prayer. Prayer is, saith he, the devotion of the mind, that is to say, the returning to God through a godly and humble affection, which affection is a certain willing and sweet inclining of the mind itself towards God.

And in the second book against the adversary of the law and prophets, he calleth sacraments holy signs, and writing to Bonifatius of the baptism of infants, he saith, If sacraments had not a certain similitude of those things whereof they be sacraments, they should be no sacraments at all.

And of this similitude they do for the most part receive the names of the self-things they signify. By these words of St. Augustine it appeareth that he alloweth the common description of a sacrament, which is, that it is a visible sign of an invisible grace, that is to say, that setteth out to the eyes and other outward senses the inward working of God's free mercy, and doth, as it were, seal in our hearts the promises of God.

[1 : 48] And so was circumcision a sacrament, which preached unto the outward senses the inward cutting away of the foreskin of the heart, and sealed and made sure in the hearts of the circumcised the promise of God touching the promised seed that they looked for.

Now let us see how many sorts of prayer and how many sacraments there be. In the scriptures we read of three sorts of prayer, whereof two are private, and the third is common. The first is that which St. Paul speaketh of in his epistle to Timothy, saying, I will that men pray in every place, lifting up pure hands without wrath and striving.

And it is the devout lifting up of the mind to God without the uttering of the heart's grief or desire by open voice. Of this prayer we have an example in the first book of the kings, in Anna the mother of Samuel, when in the heaviness of her heart she prayed in the temple, desiring to be made fruitful.

She prayed in her heart, saith the text. But there was no voice heard. After this sort must all Christians pray, not once in a week or once in a day only, but, as St. Paul writeth to the Thessalonians, without ceasing.

And as St. James writeth, the continual prayer of a just man is of much force. The second sort of prayer is spoken of in the Gospel of Matthew, where it is said, When thou prayest, enter into thy secret closet.

[3 : 06] And when thou hast shut the door to thee, pray unto thy father in secret, and thy father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee. Of this sort of prayer there be sundry examples in the Scriptures, but it shall suffice to rehearse one, which is written in the Acts of the Apostles.

Cornelius, a devout man, a captain of the Italian army, saith to Peter that, Being in his house in prayer at the ninth hour, there appeared unto him one in a white garment, etc.

This man prayed unto God in secret, and was rewarded openly. These be the two private sorts of prayer, the one mental, that is to say, the devout lifting up of the mind to God, and the other vocal, that is to say, the secret uttering of the griefs and desires of the heart with words, but yet in a secret closet or some solitary place.

The third sort of prayer is public or common. Of this prayer speaketh our Saviour Christ when he saith, If two of you shall agree upon earth upon anything, Whatsoever ye shall ask, my Father which is in heaven shall do it for you.

For wheresoever two or three be gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Although God hath promised to hear us when we pray privately, so it be done faithfully and devoutly, for he saith, Call upon me in the day of thy trouble, and I will hear thee.

[4 : 23] And Helias, being but a mortal man, saith St. James, prayed and heaven was shut three years and six months, and again he prayed and the heaven gave rain. Yet by the histories of the Bible it appeareth that public and common prayer is most available before God, and therefore it is much to be lamented that it is no better esteemed among us, which profess to be but one body in Christ.

When the city Nineveh was threatened to be destroyed within forty days, the prince and people joined themselves together in public prayer and fasting, and were preserved. In the prophet Joel God commandeth the fasting to be proclaimed, and the people to be gathered together, young and old, man and woman, and are taught to say with one voice, Spare us, O Lord, spare thy people, and let not thine inheritance be brought to confusion.

When the Jews should have been destroyed all in one day through the malice of Haman, at the commandment of Hester they fasted and prayed, and were preserved. When Holofernes besieged Bethulia by the advice of Judith, they fasted and prayed, and were delivered.

When Peter was in prison, the congregation joined themselves together in prayer, and Peter was wonderfully delivered. By these histories it appeareth that common or public prayer is of great force to obtain mercy and deliverance at our Heavenly Father's hand.

Therefore, brethren, I beseech you, even for the tender mercies of God, let us no longer be negligent in this behalf, but as a people willing to receive at God's hands such good things as in the common prayer of the church are craved, let us join ourselves together in the place of common prayer, and with one voice and one heart beg of our Heavenly Father all those things which he knoweth to be necessary for us.

[6 : 02] I forbid you not private prayer, but I exhort you to esteem common prayer as it is worthy. And before all things, be sure that, in all these three sorts of prayer, your minds be devoutly lifted up to God, else are your prayers to no purpose, and this saying shall be verified in you.

This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Thus much for the three sorts of prayer whatof we read in the Scriptures. Now with like or rather more brevity you shall hear how many sacraments there be that were instituted by our Saviour Christ, and are to be continued and received of every Christian in due time and order, and for such purpose as our Saviour Christ willed them to be received.

And as for the number of them, if this should be considered according to the exact signification of a sacrament, namely for visible signs expressly commanded in the New Testament, where unto is annexed the promise of free forgiveness of our sin and of our holiness and joining in Christ, there be but two, namely baptism and the supper of the Lord.

For although absolution hath the promise of forgiveness of sin, yet by the express word of the New Testament it hath not this promise annexed and tied to the visible sign, which is imposition of hands.

For this visible sign, I mean laying on of hands, is not expressly commanded in the New Testament to be used in absolution, as the visible signs in baptism and the Lord's Supper are, and therefore absolution is no such sacrament as baptism and the communion are.

[7 : 27] And though the ordering of ministers hath his visible sign and promise, yet it lacks the promise of remission of sin, as all other sacraments besides do. Therefore neither it nor any other sacrament else be such sacraments as baptism and the communion are.

But in a general exception, the name of a sacrament may be attributed to any thing whereby an holy thing is signified, in which understanding of the word the ancient writers have given this name, not only to the other five commonly of late years taken and used for supplying the number of the seven sacraments, but also to diverse and sundry other ceremonies, as to oil, washing of feet, and such like, not meaning thereby to repute them as sacraments in the same signification that the two forenamed sacraments are.

And therefore St. Augustine weighing the true signification and exact meaning of the word, writing to Januarius, and also in the third book of Christian doctrine, affirmeth that the sacraments of the Christians, as they are most excellent in signification, so are they most few in number, and in both places maketh mention expressly of two, the sacrament of baptism and the supper of the Lord.

And although there are retained by the order of the Church of England, besides these two, certain other rites and ceremonies about the institution of ministers in the Church, matrimony, confirmation of children, by examining them of their knowledge in the articles of the faith, and joining thereto the prayers of the Church for them, and likewise for visitation of the sick, yet no man ought to take these for sacraments in such signification and meaning as the sacrament of baptism and the Lord's Supper are, but either for godly states of life, necessary in Christ's Church, and therefore worthy to be set forth by public action and solemnity by the ministry of the Church, or else judged to be such ordinances as may make for the instruction, comfort, and edification of Christ's Church.

Now understanding sufficiently what prayer is, and what a sacrament is also, and how many sorts of prayers there be, and how many sacraments of our Saviour Christ's institution, let us see whether the Scriptures and the example of the primitive Church will allow any vocal prayer, that is, when the mouth uttereth the petitions with voice, or any manner of sacrament, or other public and common rite or action pertaining to the profit and edifying of the poor congregation, to be ministered in a tongue unknown or not understand of the minister or people, yea, and whether any person may privately use any vocal prayer in a language that he himself understandeth not, to this question we must answer no.

[9 : 57] And first, of common prayer and administration of sacraments, although reason, if it might rule, would soon persuade us to have our common prayer and administration of sacraments in a known tongue, both for that to pray commonly is for a multitude to ask one and the self thing, with one voice and one consent of mind, and to administer a sacrament is by the outward word an element to preach to the receiver the inward and invisible grace of God, and also for that both these exercises were first instituted and are still continued to the end that the congregation of Christ might from time to time be put in remembrance of their unity in Christ, and that as members all of one body, they ought, both in prayers and otherwise, to seek and desire one another's commodity, and not their own without others.

Yet we shall not need to fly to reason's proofs in this matter, sith we have both the plain and manifest words of the scripture, and also the consent of the most learned and ancient writers to commend the prayers of the congregation in a known tongue.

First, Paul to the Corinthians saith, Let all things be done to edifying, which cannot be unless common prayers and administration of sacraments be in a tongue known to the people.

For where the prayers spoken by the minister and the words in the administration of the sacraments be not understood of them that be present, they cannot thereby be edified. For as when the trumpet that is blown in the field giveth an uncertain sound, no man is thereby stirred up to prepare himself to the fight, and as when an instrument of music maketh no distinct sound, no man can tell what is piped, even so when prayers or administration of sacraments shall be in a tongue unknown to the hearers, which of them shall be thereby stirred up to lift up his mind to God, and to beg with the minister at God's hand those things which in the words of his prayers the minister asketh, or who shall in the ministration of the sacraments understand what invisible grace is to be craved of the hearer, to be wrought in the inward man?

Truly no man at all. For, saith St. Paul, he that speaketh in a tongue unknown shall be unto the hearer an alien, which in a Christian congregation is a great absurdity.

[12 : 05] For we are not strangers one to another, but we are the citizens of the saints and of the household of God, yea, and members all of one body. And therefore, whilst our minister is in rehearsing the prayer that is made in the name of us all, we must give diligent ear to the words spoken by him, and in heart beg at God's hand those things that he beggeth in words.

And to signify that we so do, we say, Amen, at the end of the prayer that he maketh in the name of us all. And this thing can we not do for edification, unless we understand what is spoken.

Therefore it is required of necessity that the common prayer be had in a tongue that the hearers do understand. If ever it had been tolerable to use strange tongues in the congregation, the same might have been in the time of Paul and the other apostles, when they were miraculously endued with the gift of tongues.

For it might then have persuaded some to embrace the gospel, when they had heard men that were Hebrews born, and unlearned, speak the Greek, the Latin, and other languages. But Paul thought it not tolerable then, and shall we use it now, when no man cometh by the knowledge of tongues otherwise than by diligent and earnest study?

God forbid, for we should by that means bring all our church exercises to frivolous superstition, and make them altogether unfruitful. Luke writeth that, when Peter and John were discharged by the princes and high priests of Jerusalem, they came to their fellows and told them all that the princes of the priests and elders had spoken unto them, which when they heard, they lifted up their voice together to God with one assent, and said, Lord, thou art he that has made heaven and earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, etc.

[13 : 44] Thus could they not have done if they had prayed in a strange tongue that they had not understand. And no doubt of it, they did not all speak with several voices, but some one of them spake in the name of them all, and the rest, giving diligent ear to his words, consented thereunto, and therefore it is said that they lifted up their voice together.

St. Luke saith not their voices, as many, but their voice, as one. That one voice therefore was in such language as they all understood, otherwise they could not have lifted it up with the consent of their hearts, for no man can give consent to the thing he knoweth not.

As touching the times before the coming of Christ, there was never man yet that would affirm that either the people of God or other had their prayers or administrations of the sacraments or sacrifices in a tongue that they themselves understood not.

As for the time since Christ, till that usurped power of Rome began to spread itself, and to enforce all the nations of Europe to have the Romish language in admiration, it appeareth by the consent of the most ancient and learned writers, that there was no strange or unknown tongue used in the congregations of Christians.

Justinus Martyr, who lived about one hundred and sixty years after Christ, saith thus of the administration of the Lord's Supper in his time, Upon the Sunday assemblies are made, both of them that dwell in cities, and of them that dwell in the country also, amongst whom, as much as may be, the writings of the apostles and prophets are read.

[15 : 13] Afterwards, when the reader doth cease, the chief minister maketh an exhortation, exhorting them to follow so honest things. After this we rise all together and offer prayers, which being ended, as we have said, bread and wine and water are brought forth.

Then the head minister offereth prayers and thanksgiving with all his power, and the people answer, Amen. These words, with their circumstances being duly considered, do declare plainly that not only the scriptures were read in a known tongue, but also that prayer was made in the same in the congregations of Justin's time.

Basilus Magnus and Johannes Chrysostomus did in their time prescribe public orders of public administration, which they called liturgies, and in them they appointed the people to answer to the prayers of the minister sometime, Amen, sometime, Lord have mercy upon us, sometime, and with thy spirit, and we have our hearts lifted up to the Lord, etc.

Which answers the people could not have made in due time if the prayers had not been made in a tongue that they understood, The same Basil, writing to the clergy of Neo-Caesarea, saith thus of his usage in common prayer, Appointing one to begin the song, the rest follow, and so with diverse songs and prayers passing over the night, at the dawning of the day all together, even as it were, with one mouth and one heart, they sing unto the Lord a song of confession, every man framing unto himself meet words of repentance.

In another place he saith, If the sea be fair, how is not the assemblé of the congregation much more fair, in which a joined sound of men, women, and children, as it were of the waves beating on the shore, is sent forth in our prayers unto our God?

[16 : 55] Mark his words, A joined sound, saith he, of men, women, and children, which cannot be unless they all understand the tongue wherein the prayer is had. And Chrysostom, upon the words of Paul, saith, So soon as the people hear these words, world without end, they all do forthwith answer, Amen.

This could they not do unless they understood the words spoken by the priest. Dionysius saith, that hymns were said of the whole multitude of people in the administration of the communion. Cyprian saith, The priest doth prepare the minds of the brethren with a preface before the prayer, saying, Lift up your hearts, that while the peoples doth answer, we have our hearts lifted up to the Lord.

They may be admonished that they ought to think on none other thing than the Lord. St. Ambrose, writing upon the words of St. Paul, saith, This is it that he saith, Because he which speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh to God, for he knoweth all things, but men know not, and therefore there is no profit of this thing.

And again upon these words, If thou bless or give thanks with the Spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say, Amen, at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest.

That is, saith Ambrose, if thou speak the praise of God in a tongue unknown to the hearers, for the unlearned, hearing that which he understandeth not, knoweth not the end of the prayer, and answereth not, Amen, which word is as much to say as, Truth, that the blessing or thanksgiving may be confirmed.

[18 : 26] For the confirmation of the prayer is fulfilled by them that do answer, Amen, that all things spoken might be confirmed in the minds of the hearers through the testimony of the truth. And after many weighty words to the same end, he saith, The conclusion is this, that nothing should be done in the church in vain, and that this thing ought chiefly to be laboured for, that the unlearned also might take profit, lest any part of the body should be dark through ignorance.

And lest any man should think all this to be meant of preaching, and not of prayer, he taketh occasion of these words of St. Paul, If there be not an interpreter, let him keep silence in the church, to say as followeth, Let him pray secretly, or speak to God, who heareth all things that be dumb, for in the church must he speak, that may profit all persons.

St. Hirom, writing upon these words of St. Paul, How shall he that supplieth the place of the unlearned, etc., saith, It is the layman whom Paul understandeth here to be in the place of the ignorant man, which hath no ecclesiastical office.

How shall he answer, Amen, to the prayer that he understandeth not? And a little after, upon these words of St. Paul, For if I should pray in a tongue, etc., he saith thus, This is Paul's meaning, If any man speak in strange and unknown tongues, his mind is made unfruitful, not to himself, but to the hearer, for whatsoever is spoken, he knoweth it not.

St. Augustine, writing upon the 18th Psalm, saith, What this should be we ought to understand, that we may sing with reason of man, not with chattering of birds, for oozles and popinjays and ravens and pies and other such like birds are taught by men to prayt they know not what, but to sing with understanding is given by God's holy will to the nature of man.

[20 : 11] Again the same Augustine saith, There needeth no speech when we pray, saving perhaps as the priests do for to declare their meaning, not that God, but that men may hear them, and so being put in remembrance by consenting with the priest, they may hang upon God.

Thus are we taught, both by the scriptures and ancient doctors, that in the administration of common prayer and sacraments, no tongue unknown to the hearers ought to be used, so that for the satisfying of a Christian man's conscience, we need to spend no more time in this matter.

But yet to stop the mouths of the adversaries, which stay themselves much upon general decrees, it shall be good to add to these testimonies of scriptures and doctors one constitution made by Justinian, the emperor, who lived 527 years after Christ and was emperor of Rome.

The constitution is this, we command that all bishops and priests do celebrate the holy oblation and the prayers used in holy baptism, not speaking low, but with a clear or loud voice, which may be heard of the people, that thereby the mind of the hearers may be stirred up with great devotion in uttering the praises of the Lord God.

For so the holy apostle teacheth in his first epistle to the Corinthians, saying, Truly, if thou only bless or give thanks in spirit, how doth he which occupieth the place of the unlearned say, Amen, at thy giving of thanks unto God, for he understandeth not what thou sayest.

[21 : 36] Thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified. And again in the epistle to the Romans he saith, With the heart a man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

Therefore, for these causes it is convenient that, among other prayers, those things also which are spoken in the holy oblation be uttered and spoken of the most religious bishops and priests unto our Lord Jesus Christ, our God, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, with a loud voice.

Let the most religious priests know this, that if they neglect any of these things, that they shall give an account for them in the dreadful judgment of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Neither will we, when we know it, rest and leave it unrevenge. This emperor, Sibelicus writeth, favoured the bishop of Rome, and yet we see how plain a decree he maketh for the praying and administering of sacraments in a known tongue, that the devotion of the hearers might be stirred up by knowledge, contrary to the judgment of them that would have ignorance to make devotion.

He maketh it also a matter of damnation to do these things in a tongue that the hearers understand not. Let us therefore conclude, with God and all good men's assent, that no common prayer or sacraments ought to be ministered in a tongue that is not understood of the hearers.

[22 : 53] Now a word or two of private prayer in an unknown tongue we took in hand where we began to speak of this matter, not only to prove that no common prayer or administration of sacraments ought to be in a tongue unknown to the hearers, but also that no person ought to pray privately in that tongue that he himself understandeth not.

Which thing shall not be hard to prove, if we forget not what prayer is? For if prayer be that devotion of the mind which enforceth the heart to lift up itself to God, how should it be said that that person prayeth that understandeth not the words that his tongue speaketh in prayer?

Yea, how can it be said that he speaketh? For to speak is by voice to utter the thought of the mind, and the voice that a man uttereth in speaking is nothing else but the messenger of the mind, to bring abroad the knowledge of that which otherwise lieth secret in the heart, and cannot be known, according to that which St. Paul writeth.

What man, saith he, knoweth the things that appertain to man, saving only the spirit of man which is in man? He therefore that doth not understand the voices that his tongue doth utter cannot properly be said to speak but rather to counterfeit, as parrots and such other birds use to counterfeit men's voices.

No man therefore that feareth to provoke the wrath of God against himself will be so bold to speak to God unadvisedly, without regard of reverent understanding in his presence, but he will prepare his heart before he presume to speak unto God.

[24 : 21] And therefore in our common prayer the minister doth oftentimes say, Let us pray, meaning thereby to admonish the people that they should prepare their ears to hear what he shall crave at God's hand, and their hearts to consent to the same, and their tongues to say Amen at the end thereof.

On this sort did the prophet David prepare his heart when he said, My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready, I will sing and declare a psalm. The Jews also, when in the time of Judith they did with all their heart pray God to visit his people of Israel, had so prepared their hearts before they began to pray.

After this sort had Manasseh prepared his heart before he prayed and said, And now, O Lord, do I bow the knees of mine heart, asking of thee part of thy merciful kindness. When the heart is thus prepared, the voice uttered from the heart is harmonious to the ears of God.

Otherwise he regardeth it not, to accept it. But forasmuch as the person that so babbleth his words without sense in the presence of God sheweth himself not to regard the majesty of him that he speaketh to, he taketh him as a contemner of his almighty majesty and giveth him his reward among hypocrites, which make an outward show of holiness, but their hearts are full of abominable thoughts even in the time of their prayers.

For it is the heart that the Lord looketh upon, as it is written in the history of kings. If we therefore will that our prayers be not abominable before God, let us so prepare our hearts before we pray, and so understand the things that we ask when we pray, that both our hearts and voices may together sound in the ears of God's majesty, and then we shall not fail to receive at his hand the things that we ask, as good men which have been before us did, and so have from time to time received that which for their soul's health they did at any time desire.

[26 : 10] St. Augustine seemeth to bear in this matter, for he saith thus of them which, being brought up in grammar and rhetoric, are converted to Christ, and so must be instructed in Christian religion.

Let them know also, saith he, that it is not the voice, but the affection of the mind that cometh to the ears of God, and so shall it come to pass, that, if haply they shall mark, that some bishops or ministers in the church do call upon God either with barbarous words, or with words disordered, or that they understand not, or do disorderly divide the words that they pronounce, they shall not laugh, them to scorn.

Hitherto he seemeth to bear with praying in an unknown tongue, but in the next sentence he openeth his mind thus, not for that those things ought not to be amended, that the people might say, Amen, to that which they do plainly understand, but yet, these things must be godly born withal of these catechists, or instructors of the faith, that they may learn, that, as in the common place where matters are pleaded, the goodness of an oration consisteth in sound, so in the church it consisteth in devotion, so that he alloweth not the praying in a tongue not understand of him that prayeth, but he instructeth the skilful orator to bear with the rude tongue of the devout simple minister.

To conclude, if the lack of understanding the words that are spoken in the congregation do make them unfruitful to the hearers, how should not the same make the words read unfruitful to the hearers?

The merciful goodness of God grant us his grace to call upon him as we ought to do, to his glory and our endless felicity, which we shall do if we humble ourselves in his sight, and in all our prayers, both common and private, have our minds fully fixed upon him.

[27 : 53] For the prayer of them that humble themselves shall pierce through the clouds, until it draw nigh unto God, it will not be answered, until the Most High do regard it, it will not depart, and the Lord will not be slack, but he will deliver the just and execute judgment.

To him, therefore, be all honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.