

*Fr. Thomas Aquinas is solely responsible for this page.



Phenomenal cosmic powers.
Itty-bitty living space.

Just as you can describe a single oak tree using a variety of different viewpoints (dendrology, biology, art, ecology, etc.), so you can also describe prayer using different modes of expression. Some have tried to capture the experience of prayer using the language of poetry, phenomenology, and prose; some have analyzed prayer in its Biblical roots; some have parsed out prayer into constitutive parts and processes; some have worked on finding the place of prayer in the moral life; etc. There is no one single way of describing prayer, just as no one language can capture the essence of an oak tree. Something that completely revolutionized my life was my study of how St. Thomas Aquinas describes prayer. His language is terse; his vocabulary, technical; his style, drab; his method, recondite; but his insight taps into an unrivaled spiritual fecundity. Lest anyone foolishly believe that true academic work is separate from “real life”, this is a case where what I spent hours trying to comprehend in a rigorous fashion had a profound impact on every possible existential level of who I am and how I live.

When discussing prayer, St. Thomas decides to go the level of metaphysics. Instead of describing how prayer feels, he describes how prayer works; instead of describing the existential impetus to pray, he analyzes the ontology of prayer (what is the “being” of prayer). Instead of describing the color and feel of a Ferrari, St. Thomas is going under the hood to look at the engine. St. Thomas sees the world as an endless concatenation, sequence, and manifold spectrum of diverse causes and effects all tracing their origin back to the original cause, the First Mover (i.e. God). God is the First Mover, not because waaaaaay back before the Big Bang he decided to set things in motion (this is the heresy of Deism!), but because *right now*, and *everywhere*, God is the Cause that causes all causes to cause (say that ten times fast!). God causes some things directly, and other things indirectly through secondary or tertiary causes; just as I can either go to the library myself to check out a book (direct cause) or ask a friend (secondary cause) to go get it for me. For example, God directly causes the existence of a human soul (it can't be produced in a lab using pre-existing matter), but he indirectly causes rain to fall by causing gravity to have the effect of drawing objects to the earth. Causes are the ways that creation responds to the eternal, unmoved motion of God so as to bring about His will in time and space.

St. Thomas says that prayer is a *cause*. God, from all eternity, has and carries out a plan for creation. This plan includes his causing of causes to bring about the effects that He desires. One of the causes that God has created in order to bring about His will, is *prayer*. Prayer is a way by which we humans becomes agents, secondary causes, of the unfolding of God's will. We creatures don't pray so as to change God's mind, but rather, in God's mind, our prayer changes creation. When we pray, our love of God, our presenting of our needs and desires before Him, the lifting up of our mind and heart to Him, makes us *then and there* agents and causes of change in the universe. St. Thomas writes, “It must be that men do certain actions, not that thereby they may change the Divine plan, but by those very actions they may bring about certain effects in accordance to the Divine plan; for we do not pray to change the Divine plan, but that we may obtain that which God has planned to be fulfilled by our prayers.” (*Summa II-II.83.2co*).

Prayer makes us a living, breathing participant, a co-worker with God (cf. 1 Cor. 3:9) in the unfolding of the Divine plan of salvation. Prayer is, for St. Thomas, a portion of God's own power to create; God, Father, Son, and Spirit, is at work in and through our prayer, no matter how humble. In fact, as Fr. Herbert McCabe, O.P. concludes, “It is God who prays. Not just God who answers prayer but God who prays in us in the first place. In prayer we become the locus of the divine dialogue between Father and Son, we are in Spirit and truth.” How is that for revolutionary!



Indulgence

The remission of the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven insofar as their guilt is concerned.