

Abba Isaac's Four Dimensions of Prayer



“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings who are all in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.”

(1 Timothy 2:1-2 NRSV)

There is rich wisdom about praying, flowing from the chalice of the early Christian tradition in the New Testament and the lives of the desert mothers and fathers. A desert abba, Isaac, summarizes the teaching of Saint Paul and gives practical advice about prayer, inspired from his own experience.

Supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings.

Abba Isaac, echoing St. Paul, said, *“I urge first of all that supplications be made.”* He also said, *“Prayers are those acts by which we offer or vow something to God...We pray when we renounce this world and pledge that, dead to every earthly deed and to an earthly way of life, we will serve the Lord with utter earnestness of heart...In the third place there are intercessions, which we are accustomed to make for others when our spirits are fervent, beseeching on behalf of our dear ones and for the peace of the whole world...Finally, in the fourth place there are thanksgivings, which the mind, whether recalling God’s past benefits, contemplating his present ones, or foreseeing what great things God has prepared for those who love him, offers to the Lord in unspeakable ecstasies.”*

Abba Isaac describes four *specific ways* our yearnings become congruent with “*the mind of Christ*” and are articulated through “*unspeakable*” prayers. He places prayer in the realm of the heart.

Supplications

Abba Isaac said, “*I urge first of all that supplications be made.*’ A supplication is an imploring or a petition concerning sins, by which a person who has been struck by compunction begs for pardon for his present or past misdeeds...*(this) first kind of prayer seems to pertain more especially to beginners who are still being harassed by the stings and by the memory of their vices;...*” Why should supplications be “*first of all?*” Abba Isaac speaks from personal experience. Awareness of vices and sins can be a serious barrier to our relationship with God. Sometimes it is hard to pray when we are “*being harassed*” by these memories, especially if we are new to prayer or have given up. Isaac urges us to let awareness of sins coupled with “*compunction*” (genuine sorrow for “*present or past misdeeds*”) **become** our prayer. As difficult as it may be, this supplication will free us to expand our experience of prayer and grow in love of ourselves, others, and God. Isaac must have remembered Jesus words: “*But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.*”

Prayers

“Prayers are those acts by which we offer or vow something to God...We pray when we renounce this world and pledge that, dead to every earthly deed and to an earthly way of life, we will serve the Lord with utter earnestness of heart.”

Abba Isaac is not referring to prayers articulated with words. The words of the Bible, repeated in meditation are physical, both in their written form and in the sound of the monk's voice. Yet these physical words mirror the presence of the One they describe and lead the monk to **encounter** God. *“Prayers are those acts...”* in which the monk actually meets and becomes formed by the One who is present in the words he has been reciting or chanting. In this form of prayer a person offers or vows *“something to God.”* By letting go of attachment to *“an earthly way of life”* (yet remaining in the world) we offer ourselves to God *“with utter earnestness of heart”*. Our prayer is transformed from words to an experience of God's presence in the center of our being that evokes our desire to *“serve the Lord”* with our whole being.

Intercessions

“In the third place there are intercessions, which we are accustomed to make for others when our spirits are fervent, beseeching on behalf of our dear ones and for the peace of the whole world...”

Modern Christians usually think of prayer as “intercessions.” We pray for something or someone. Abba Isaac reminds us that our intercessions take place in the context of meditation on biblical texts, awareness of our failings, and our desire to “*serve the Lord with utter earnestness of heart.*” Our prayers for other people and the needs of the world can flow from an earnest relationship with God when “*our spirits are fervent.*” In this way our “*beseeching on behalf of our dear ones and for the peace of the world*” will emerge from discernment and experience of what God desires and not be limited solely to our perspective. Intercession bonds us to those for whom we pray. It was an essential part of the desert elders’ vocation to “*love your neighbor.*” As Abba Evagrius said they (and we) are “*separated from all, yet united to all.*”

Thanksgivings

“Finally, in the fourth place there are thanksgivings, which the mind, whether recalling God’s past benefits, contemplating his present ones, or foreseeing what great things God has prepared for those who love him, offers to the Lord in unspeakable ecstasies. And with this intensity, too, more copious prayers are sometimes made, when our spirit gazes with most pure eyes upon the rewards of the holy ones that are stored up for the future and is moved to pour out wordless thanks to God with a boundless joy.” It is significant that Abba Isaac saves his most passionate words to describe giving thanks. Thanksgiving is offered with *“intensity”* in *“unspeakable ecstasies”* both by the mind and the spirit. The mind by *“recalling”* present and past benefits and *“foreseeing what great things God has prepared for those who love him”* is led to gratefulness that transcends words. This is more than a thank-you-note to God! This intensity can lead our spirits to discern God’s eternal love for us and give thanks with *“boundless joy.”* This is fire!

(Excerpted from David Keller. *Desert Banquet: A Year of Wisdom from the Desert Mothers and Fathers*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011)