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The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer, according to Romans 8, 12-27

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Abstract

This study focuses on the activity of the Holy Spirit manifested in prayer, as expounded by St. Paul in Romans 8, 12-27. First, prayer is not possible without the help of the Spirit. Then, it is through prayer that the Spirit testifies to the divine sonship that the Christians possess. We are sons waiting for our inheritance and redemption of our bodies, just as the creation eagerly waits for its deliverance from futility. This orientation towards future makes prayer an eschatological discourse in which the eschatological tension is stark visible. While living in this imperfect and deceptive world the believer is unable to ask God according to His perfect will, but the Spirit prays for the saints “according to God” from inside them. All these elements make this fragment one of St. Paul’s most important teachings on prayer.

Keywords

St. Paul, Romans, prayer, Holy Spirit.

1. Introduction

St. Paul's apostolate began in prayer and, according to tradition, ended in prayer as he was martyred. His whole ministry was grounded in, and developed from, prayer. For St. Paul, the Christian experience was essentially (and unceasingly) an act of prayer. Those redeemed and hence overwhelmed by the sovereign grace of "God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" intentionally and purposefully pour out their lives as a perpetual act of thanksgiving, ever conscious of dependence on an omnipresent and omnipotent God, as they are motivated and empowered the Holy Spirit. The inseparable bond St. Paul sees between prayer and the Holy Spirit is the fundamental element that sheds light on his understanding of prayer's deep significance in its various dimensions. All aspects of prayer are based on this bond: the need to persist in prayer and accept the will of God, the utterer of prayer and the response to prayer. Therefore, we shall focus next on a very important passage: Romans 8, 12-27.

But before we do this, we shall mention a few other passages which show that for St. Paul prayer is not possible without the Holy Spirit. What he says about confession in I Corinthians 12, 3 ("No one can say Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit") also goes for prayer, because confession is a form of glorification.

For St. Paul, the Holy Spirit can be experienced in a quite concrete manner. He describes the effect of this experience as a power, a wonderful power (*dynamis*). According to the divine revelation he received in response to his prayers, this power is made perfect in human weakness (a disease in his case; II Cor 12, 9). In Ephesians 6, 18 the Apostle exhorts his readers to "pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication". In Ephesians 3, 20 he says that, by the power of the Holy Spirit working within us, God "is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think". In Romans 15, 30 St. Paul urges the Christians in Rome "by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit" to struggle for him in their prayers to God. The Spirit is mentioned here because the prayer of intercession stems from the love shared by the Holy Spirit. In Colosians 3, 16 and Ephesians 5, 19 we read about psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (*pneumatikoi*), i.e. inspired by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the spiritual singing is present in I Corinthians 14, 15.

2. The Spirit's testimony to the Christians' divine sonship in prayer

However, the theological foundation of the link between prayer and the Holy Spirit can be discovered best in Romans 8, 12-27, in conjunction with Galatians 4, 6. To prove that we are no longer slaves but sons, in both passages St. Paul shows that we address God by the name *Father*, using the Aramaic form of this word, *Abba*, inherited from the Savior Jesus Christ himself. Galatians 4, 6: "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, *Abba, Father!*"; Romans 8, 15: "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of sonship by which we cry out, *Abba, Father!*"

But how does the mere utterance of the word *Father* prove that we are truly sons? For St. Paul this conclusion is possible because of his conviction that the Holy Spirit speaks in our prayers. The fact that the Holy Spirit inspires us to utter the word *Father* in prayer means that God himself proclaims us his sons. The idea that the Holy Spirit speaks in our prayers is present in both passages. In Galatians 4, 16 the Spirit himself cries out *Abba, Father!*, and in Romans 8, 15 it is the believer who cries out through the Spirit of sonship. **The difference between the two situations is only apparent¹**, because the Spirit uses our human language. We are dealing here with a paradoxical union between the Christian and the Holy Spirit, like the one between the Christian and Christ, according to Galatians 2, 20: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me". The apostle does not mean here that his anthropological ego would have disappeared, but he points to a life-giving presence of Christ within him, impossible to describe by anthropological categories. In Romans 8 we find a similar situation with regard to prayer. Thus, it is the "Spirit himself"² who works in our prayer, but also "our spirit"³.

"The Spirit himself" is the Holy Spirit. "Our spirit" is so penetrated and animated by the Holy Spirit (He "dwells in you", Rom 8, 11; "in our hearts", Gal 4, 6), that the two form a unity⁴.

¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament. With Answers from the New Testament to Today's Questions*, SCM Press Ltd., 1995, p. 73.

² *auto to pneuma*.

³ *to pneuma hemon*. The idea of common testimony is expressed in v. 16 in the verb *symmartyrein*.

⁴ So rightly Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, p. 226. By contrast Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. I, New

And so it is the Holy Spirit who speaks in prayer⁵.

This profound truth is the foundation of St. Paul's teaching on prayer. Its double assertion, in two different letters, demonstrates the importance the apostle attaches to it. Even if it is used as just a means to prove another important statement, namely that we are children of God, this must not lead to underestimate its significance. **The general theme of these passages** is the position of Christians as children of God, more specifically, the proclamation of this status by the Spirit in prayer. This particular idea pervades the entire section, unifying it. Sonship and prayer to Father are two closely related topics in Romans 8, 12f, which must not be separated. For prayer makes sense only if we address the Father as sons. We pray because we are children of God and, conversely, we are children of God because we pray to Him as our Father.

We cannot agree with those who argue that the Spirit does not participate in the prayer of Christians, but only intervenes when the Aramaic word *Abba* is uttered, which is considered to be an acclamation, i.e. a liturgical exclamation directed to God⁶. Even if in the indicated passages such an liturgical act were in view (which is not at all certain), this would not be anything else but an element from the prayer area⁷. The verb *krazein* (to cry out) used here does not justify the limitation of the Spirit's activity to these liturgical acclamations and the separation of this activity from the general scope of prayer. The equivalent Hebrew verb *qara* often appears in the Old Testament psalms, and its Greek form is still found in I Clement 22, 7 designating prayer in general. **Due to the allusion to a prophetic, au-**

York and London, 1952, p. 208 and F. Leenhardt, *L'Épître de S. Paul aux Romains*, Neuchâtel, Paris, 1957, p. 123, n. 2 claim that we must differentiate here between God's Spirit and the natural human spirit. Leenhardt comments that otherwise one would "subtly" conclude that the Spirit is speaking to Himself. But this in fact is Paul's view, though a distinction should be made between spirit "in us" and spirit "outside us" (*auto to pneuma*), just as a distinction should be made between Christ sitting at the right hand of God and Christ "in us", although it is the same Christ.

⁵ Armin Dietzel, *Betem in Geist*, in "Theologische Zeitschrift", 1957, pp. 12f quotes a parallel from the Qumran *hodayot* texts which, like St. Paul, know a praying of the spirit in human beings and of human beings in the spirit.

⁶ We must note that the assertion that this is an exclamation rests on an assumption which is only one of the possible hypotheses: *abba* like *maranatha* was an ecstatic cry in the liturgy; Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament*, p. 168, n. 226.

⁷ Thus rightly U. Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, EKK 6, vol. II, Zürich: Benziger / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1980, p. 137.

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer, according to Romans 8, 12-27

thoritative utterance that the verb contains, it is used to designate fervent prayer⁸.

Addressing God as *Abba* is specific to all types of prayers. This Aramaic term was preserved even in Greek terminology with the same meaning of “Father” for the early Church knew that through it Jesus expressed the consciousness of his divine filiation. Because this word had a unique meaning for Jesus, in Gal 4.6 St. Paul calls the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of the Son”, who is sent into our hearts and cries out *Abba*. Through the Son we become sons. Although some commentators, following an old tradition that goes back to Origen, see in v. 26-27 a reference to speaking in tongues as a special form of prayer in which the Spirit uses its own language, is perhaps wrong to assume that *Abba* is a fragment of *glossolalia*. That’s because the context implies that the whole Church knows the meaning of this word. On the other hand, it is conceivable that the Apostle could have had in mind the beginning of the Lord’s prayer (the Lukan version). It’s difficult to come up with a final answer⁹.

3. Prayer, eschatological speech and the highest form of human discourse

Now we return to the earlier idea that, on the one hand, it is the Holy Spirit who speaks in us, and, on the other hand, it is our duty to pray. We have shown above that in Galatians 4, 6 the Spirit is the one crying out *Abba*, whereas in the parallel verse Romans 8, 15 it is the Christians who cry out *Abba* through the Spirit, and in the next verse, Romans 8, 16, the Spirit is again the one praying.

A saying of Jesus found in Matthew 10, 19-20 clearly proves the existence of a human discourse in which the Spirit is the one speaking: “But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you

⁸ See W. Grundmann, *krazo*, in “Theological Dictionary of the New Testament”, vol. III, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Grands Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965, pp. 898f.

⁹ The hypothesis is supported by many scholars: e. g. T. Zahn, *der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, Leipzig: Deichert, 1910, p. 396; H. Lietzmann, *An die Römer*, Tübingen, 1933, p. 83; C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Collins: London & Glasgow, 1965, ad. loc.

who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you". It is true that the saying is not about prayer, but about the disciples' answer before worldly authorities. But the statement about confessing and the Spirit in I Corinthians 12, 3 ("no one can say *Jesus is Lord* except by the Holy Spirit"), which comes very close to the concept of prayer expressed in Galatians 4, 6 and Romans 8, 15, belongs to the same context. Confession also belongs in the sphere of praise.

So it's clear that human discourse does not exclude the uttering of the Spirit just as the speaking Spirit is not incompatible with human discourse. St. Paul's urge to persistent prayer is not pointless: since Spirit uses prayer, must continue in prayer. The tension that we feel here pervades the entire Scripture. It is the tension between the indicative of faith and the imperative of ethics. The indicative "The Spirit prays for us" does not exempt from the imperative "Pray unceasingly!" It is precisely because the Spirit manifests its presence in us by His utterance that we should pray. St. Paul, just as our Savior Jesus Christ urges us: "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil 4, 6), although, being all-knowing, He knows our needs before we them express in words. The presence of the Holy Spirit in prayer means two things: the Spirit reveals his presence in us; and we can and should seek the answer to our prayers in this presence.

Understood in this way by Saint Paul, prayer becomes the highest form of human language. It is the only type of discourse by which man transcends his own humanity. Furthermore, what we have here is an overcoming of the insufficiencies of the present (the "not yet"), prayer being an eschatological discourse¹⁰. Prayer and sonship are both anticipations of the future. The link between son and heir attested in prayer, and found both in Rom 8, 17 and in Galatians 4, 7 ("And if we are children, then heirs"), highlights this idea. The concept of heir orients the whole passage towards the future. Our elevation to the status of sons and heirs proclaimed in prayer through the Holy Spirit is for Saint Paul the future irrupting into the present; it is a "pledge" or "a pledge of our inheritance", as he puts it in II Corinthians 1, 22; 5, 5 and Ephesians 1, 14, respectively. On the other hand, however, the Spirit, even in prayer, is only a pledge, which means that being heirs requires that before we are exalted with Christ we must suffer with Him (Rom 8, 17). The tension between "already" and "not yet"

¹⁰ O. Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament*, p. 75.

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer, according to Romans 8, 12-27

affects the entire existence of the believers, and therefore their prayer, as we shall see in v. 26. Being the language of the Spirit, prayer elevates man to the greatest possible height, but its imperfection is, on the other hand, an expression of the distance that separates us from the goal of glorification. Only at the end of this age will the “redemption of our body” (v. 23), claimed by the reality of adoption, occur. Only then the Spirit who dwells in us will make alive our mortal bodies (v. 11). **These ideas appear in Romans 8 even before our proclamation as sons and heirs in prayer.** Verse 24 ff. directly links the hope for the future - which we await but do not see - to man’s prayer. Thus the Apostle does not seem to bring in a new theme, but he carries on the one in v. 15. The entire section between vv. 12-27 forms a unit. So v. 26 should be looked at together with v. 15. “For we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words”. This remark in v. 26 takes over the fundamental conception of prayer as utterance of the Spirit, expressed in the appellative *Abba*, in v. 15¹¹. However, there we see the positive side of the phenomenon¹², whereas here we see the negative, restrictive one: the Spirit’s intercession with groans. **This double perspective is present throughout the Apostle’s argumentation.**

V. 26, quoted above, envisages prayer in general. That what was used just as proof of adoption in v. 15 here becomes the main theme. Prayer was present all the time in the background, never escaping sight. The main help for a correct understanding of v. 26 is its connection with v. 15. V. 26 is an explanation of v. 15 in that it mentions the reason for the Spirit of adoption’s presence in us, namely that we do not know how to pray (v. 26a)¹³, and its consequence, namely the Spirit’s intercession with groans too deep for words (v. 26b)¹⁴. An additional proof for the fact that the two

¹¹ Cf. O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978, p. 166f.

¹² O. Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament*, p. 75.

¹³ What is envisaged here is the object, not the nature of prayer. It’s not about how we pray, but what we are to pray. But the manner and the object of prayer are closely connected. Both are dictated by the Spirit, when He prays in us. That is also the case in the saying of Jesus in Matthew 10, 19-20: “Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. (...) For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you”.

¹⁴ *Synantilambanetai*, “he comes to help”, and *hyperentunchanei*, “he intercedes for us”. Intercession and representation, which are implied in these verbs, fit the talk of the Spirit in our praying. Cf. E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 241.

verses belong together is the use of the phrase “the Spirit himself” both in v. 16, which is related to v. 15, and in v. 26.

The interlude between vv. 19-23 about the groan of creation does not introduce a break into the argument, but shows that the two-fold experience of the Spirit’s work is present in the ceation as well. The groan generated by the weakness of this present age (the equivalent of the “not yet”) testifies about the presence of the “already”, the complete redemption that we are waiting for. **We must note that this juxtaposition is manifested clearly in prayer, in which we reach the highest peaks of human speech and at the same time a limit that cannot be exceeded because of our imperfection.** These paradoxical expressions of the Holy Spirit’s testimony in the believer’s life are revealed step by step, as St. Paul explains the eschatological consequences of the creation’s redemption by a threefold reference to “groaning”. Paul describes the successive levels of this groaning, going from general to particular: first groans the creation (8, 18-22), then the sons of God groan inside the creation (8, 23-25), and finally, the Holy Spirit groans inside the sons of God (8, 26-27). Explaining how these groans stem from the current eschatological tension helps clarify the place of the Christian in the world and the role of the Spirit in prayer.

4. The groan of the creation

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom 8, 22). St. Paul reminds us that the curse of Genesis 3, 17 views the participation of the entire cosmos to the catastrophic effects of Adam’s sin (Rom 8, 20)¹⁵. The universe follows mankind, both for good and bad. As the first Adam’s sin seriously disrupted the entire universe, the victory of the second Adam brings complete healing to the whole nature, both animate and inanimate. The creation waits with eager longing its own redemption, its restoration to the state it had in the plan of God, which will take place when the children of God will be revealed (8, 19). Meanwhile, caught between two contrary spiritual forces, the universe groans under the

¹⁵ Creation here is “sum-total of sub-human nature both animate and inanimate, excluding humanity” (David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door. A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2006, n. 4, p. 200.

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer, according to Romans 8, 12-27

weight of both. First, the world suffers the pain of his own futility (8, 20), being estranged from its Cause and not being able to function as originally designed. This suffering is the consequence of the first humans' sin. But, in addition, another factor intervenes. Just as childbirth is accompanied by pain, so God decided that the regeneration of creation be preceded by great cosmic suffering (8, 22), demanding also that the temptation of despair be overcome by faith in His promises (8, 18)¹⁶. Whatever the reason for which St. Paul personified nature in this way, it is clear that salvation with its paradoxes includes all of creation, seen and unseen, known and unknown¹⁷. The experience of man's the fall and redemption is somewhat proportional to the similar experience of the universe.

The creation does not suffer alone, but along with it suffers God's people (8, 23), although here at least one significant difference comes in. Creation was subjected to futility not of its own will but as a consequence of Adam's fall (8, 20)¹⁸. This is not the case for mankind. Earlier in the epistle, St. Paul showed that human sin is not a foreign power imposed from outside, but is a germ of corruption within man, to which he voluntarily gives in (1, 18-3, 20). As a result, man does not suffer for the corruption of creation and, furthermore, he does not even notice the torment of the fallen universe. Understanding the destructive effects of sin and sensitivity towards these are entirely gifts of the Spirit: "we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (8, 23).

¹⁶ The childbirth metaphor appears in the Old Testament (Isa 66, 7-9; Mic 4, 10) and is applied to the parousia in the New Testament (Mk 13, 8; Jn 16, 21; I Thess 5, 3). Some commentators suggest that Paul's usage is derived from the rabbinic notion of the "woes of the Messiah" (a time of cosmic turmoil preceding the coming of the messianic kingdom). Joseph Fitzmyer is correct, however, to point out that the relevant rabbinic literature is later than the New Testament; whether the idea of the messianic woes "was current in the first century or known to Paul is hard to say" (*Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York: Doubleday, 1993, p. 509).

¹⁷ For a good discussion of the theological significance of Paul's thought here, see J. Bolt, *The Relation between Creation and Redemption in Romans 8: 18-27*, in "Calvin Theological Journal" 30 (1995), pp. 34-51.

¹⁸ This interpretation remains valid regardless of the subject of the participle "the one who subjected it". Whether the direct agent was God or Adam (Christ and Satan are also suggested), the consequences for creation (subjection to futility) are due to Adam's sin. See the discussion in Fitzmyer, *Romans*, pp. 508-509.

This is an idea of great importance. The groan of the Christian is a fruit of salvation. For the rest of creation pain precedes rebirth, but for the believer rebirth generates pain (cf. Rom 7, 24; II Cor 5, 2). The Spirit of God lifts the veil of sin that prevented us to see the consequences of our rebellion and now we can understand the dimensions of the fall. Still the Spirit does not immediately deliver us from our weakness, but makes us see the world in God's way, gives us His promises, the faith and the gift of prayer to the heavenly Father. We could probably say that our groan is not the song but the harmony that accompanies Christ's song of redemption, because in the midst of our toils and struggles we remember that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (Rom 8, 18). Nevertheless the groans are real, and anyone who has tried seriously to do the will of God knows that intimacy with Christ produces a deep sense of unworthiness. The closer we come to Him the more we realize that we still have a long way to go. But this sense of growing distance to Christ belong to those who are already close to Him.

We have met here the existential dimension of New Testament eschatology. The absence of this tension in a person's life is an alarm signal, for anyone limited to living just in and for this world - or, as St. Paul would put it, for the flesh - is in great danger¹⁹. Feeling comfortable in the dirt of sin is an indication that either adoption is not working, or it did not happen. Such a person is not really a son of God, for the sons are waiting eagerly for the Resurrection and the end of this transitory existence (8, 23). The fact of this personal eschatological anxiety has significant implications for the Christian's life of prayer, as we shall see.

5. Groaning in prayer

Finally we come across the amazing statement that the Holy Spirit groans for us. Not infrequently commentators interpret it as meaning that it is not the Spirit but the man who groans, for the Spirit cannot groan²⁰.

¹⁹ J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, Dallas: Word, 1988, p. 490.

²⁰ "We are not to suppose that the Spirit itself prays, or utters the inarticulate groans. (...) He is said to do what he causes us to do" (C. Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947, p. 279).

Some claim that St. Paul is referring here to speaking in tongues²¹. Others argue that it's all about a synergistic activity in which man's groan is generated by the intercession of the Spirit or is a manifestation of this intercession²². Thus, the Spirit would utter His own prayers by means of human groan. But if St. Paul had intended to say these things, they could have done it much more clearly. In verse 26 it is plainly stated that it is the Holy Spirit who is groaning for us²³. It is also important to note that the groans of the Spirit are not restricted to the Christian's moments of prayer; St. Paul does not say that the Spirit begins to groan when we persist in prayer. But, whatever the meaning of these groans, they represent a continuous activity of the Holy Spirit inside of God's sons. Just as the Christian's suffering is born from the consciousness of his participation in the futility of creation, so the groans of the Spirit of God stem from His participation in the struggling life of the sons who expect the "not yet" of their sonship (8, 21.23). The Spirit is groaning because He is in contact with our fallen state. Although our ignorance about praying gives the Apostle the opportunity to talk about this aspect of the Spirit's work, this is neither the cause nor the explanation of this particular work. The cause resides in the Father's heart, a fact which explains why this text is the culmination of St. Paul's teaching about the place of the Holy Spirit in Christian eschatology. What we have here is a trinitarian presentation of God's reaction to the circumstances of the fallen human nature: the Father loves this fallen world so much that He sends His only begotten Son; the Son obediently assumes our fallen nature; and the Spirit fully participates in the groan of our expectation²⁴.

²¹ Käsemann is the best-known commentator who interprets "inarticulate groans" as expressions of glossalalia in public worship (*Romans*, pp. 240-241). Few, however, follow this untenable theory, which dates back to Origen or even beyond. For a critique of this position, see Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 519.

²² W. Sanday and A.C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Edinburgh: Clark, 1902, p. 213; R. F. Boyd, *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*, in "Interpretation" 8 (1954), p. 40; C. H. Dodd, *Romans*, p. 150.

²³ Cf. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, pp. 518-519.

²⁴ G. MacRae (*A Note on Romans 8:26-27*, in "Harvard Theological Review" 73 (1980), pp. 227-230) does not agree with this trinitarian view, arguing that 8, 27 "supposes a form of communication between the divine persons which is much more at home in later Trinitarian theology than in Paul" (p. 228). Consequently, he claims that "he who searches our hearts" (8, 27a) is not God but the Holy Spirit, while "the mind of the Spirit" (8, 27b) refers to the human spirit rather than the divine. But this interpretation cannot rest with the plain meaning of 8, 26. It is extremely awkward to assign to *pneuma* the meaning Holy Spirit in 8, 26 and human spirit in 8, 27.

If the main cause of the Spirit's intercession is God's grace, the secondary cause is human weakness: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness" (8, 26). This weakness is an evil that Christians have not yet been released of, and the cause for which none of them knows how to pray perfectly to God²⁵. As long as we live in a fallen world, with all its temptations, illusions and distancing from the communion with God - in other words, while we live in this transient realm of weakness - we will not know to ask God according to His will²⁶. "For we do not know how to pray as we ought", says St. Paul, describing by these words the Christian's general state of insufficiency in this world. We remain finite creatures, subjected to the constraints of a finite world with an opaque spiritual horizon. This applies to everyone regardless of the spiritual stature. **A prayer totally consistent with God's will and His plan of salvation is something that exceeds our powers.** That's why the petitionary prayer remains for us a responsibility that we cannot fully accomplish, a continuous invitation to confront our own failure, but also a divine strengthening of our human weakness.

The situation described above gives rise to an obvious question: Why pray anymore? Before attempting an answer, a few more things need to be said.

6. Crying out to God - the Father

St. Paul warns us that what Savior Jesus Christ demands us to do is virtually impossible. **At the heart of the Lord's prayer lies the idea of total submission to the will of God.** The words "Your will be done" encompass the substance of both Jesus' theology and His own prayer practice. But there's

²⁵ The broader context of Romans 8 indicates that "our weakness" encompasses both the external and the internal aspects of existence; see A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949, p. 336. Attempts to limit this weakness either to external temptations (Käsemann, *Romans*, p. 240) or to an internal inability to pray (Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, p. 213) twist St. Paul thought. The Christian's inability to pray correctly is one expression of the general human weakness.

²⁶ Commentators generally agree that the article *to* makes the entire following clause (*ti proseuometha katho dei*) the object of "we do not know". The sense is: "We do not know what is right for us to pray (for)"; see Dunn, *Romans*, p. 477; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 518. The issue is not that we fail to understand the proper method or form of prayer, but that we do not understand what we should ask for in prayer (Crump, *Knocking*, n. 15, p. 204).

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer, according to Romans 8, 12-27

no need to compare Romans with the Synoptic tradition in order to find this tension, for it is present right here in Romans 8. We have already seen in Romans 8, 15 that the Spirit guarantees our adoption and enables us to cry *Abba, Father!* Some commentators see in this expression an evidence of the use of the Lord's Prayer in the worship of the early Church²⁷. It is though certain that it certifies the long and strong influence that Jesus' way of prayer exercised on the thinking, doctrine and cult of the first Christians. The Church sought consciously to pray the way Jesus did. Thus, addressing God as *Abba*, besides confirming the Christian's sonship also implies assuming the example of life and prayer given by Savior Christ. St. Paul begins his explanations regarding the indwelling Holy Spirit by pointing out His work in us: He animates Christian prayer, which is the main expression of our confidence in the reality our adoption into God's family. But these cries of the Spirit reveal as well the anxiety of sonship, in addition to our ignorance of praying properly. The eschatological tension emerges again. The Spirit frees us, but the flesh keeps us in slavery. The Spirit utters the perfect prayer whereas the sin shuts our mouths down and silences us. We have here one of the most profound description of the spiritual turmoil in the New Testament. Due to our weak humanity we do not know how to pray; in fact, as the Spirit of adoption cleanses our heart, our conscience understands that prayer, the great gift of the Spirit, is the field of our most violent battles. It is also a mixture of bright light and dark fog; it is the school where we understand that we've never known anything.

It is only the Holy Spirit that makes possible the impossibility of prayer. From the existing parallelism between 8, 26 and 8, 27 we understand that the groans of the Spirit in v. 26c are actually the prayers he does "according to God" for the saints in v. 27b. The Father and the Spirit have a perfect mutual understanding. In an earlier epistle, in I Corinthians 2, 11, the apostle states that only the Spirit knows the things of God. Now the places are reversed: "God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit"²⁸.

²⁷ See N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*, New Interpreter's Bible Commentary 10, Nashville: Abingdon, 2002, p. 593; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, New York: Harper, 1957, p. 164.

²⁸ "The one who searches hearts" is a characteristic Old Testament description of Yahweh (I Sam 16, 7; I Kings 8, 39; Pss 17, 3; 26, 2; 44, 21; 139, 1-2.23; Prov 15, 11; Jer 11, 20, 12, 3; 17, 10). St. Paul makes an a fortiori argument: If God knows everything in the human heart, how much more will He know the mind of His own Spirit?

And what the mind of the Spirit offers the Father are not just mere groans of compassion, but ineffable groans of intercession, in full accordance with the Father's plan for His sons²⁹. Therefore, although the believer does not know what to pray for, the Spirit of adoption, who helps him in his weakness, prays unceasingly to the Father with petitions that are always in complete harmony with the Father's will and consequently will always get affirmative answers. Just as the incarnate Son perfected Himself in the work of salvation by becoming like His brothers in every respect, including temptations and sufferings (Heb 2, 17-18), so the Spirit becomes the perfect Advocate, always present in those who groan waiting for the adoption (8, 23). Although St. Paul does not use the term "Advocate", in this point his theology comes remarkably close to the Johannine conception of the Spirit being our Parakletos or Advocate with the Father (Jn 14, 16.26; 15, 26; 16, 7). In fact, in both the Pauline and Johannine writings the Son and the Spirit share intercession as a common activity: The Spirit intercedes from within us, and the Son from the divine throne continually presenting his atoning sacrifice to the Father and conquering the devil's accusations against us (Rom 8, 34; I Jn 2,1; Heb 7, 25)³⁰.

St. Paul's confidence in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit working together for us is the unwavering foundation of his statements in v. 28, which concludes the fragment under study. Thus, the apostle assures us that "all things work together for good of those who love God", because the Spirit unceasingly asks for those things that will profit us eternally. The Christian is thus absorbed in the life of the triune God. The Son's intercession in heavens, the Spirit's prayer for us and our receiving into the Father's loving arms demonstrate that "our knowledge of God and His ways is, so to speak, God within us recognizing Himself"³¹. And in whatever we may not understand, we can rely on the conviction that this God of grace "cannot disown Himself" (II Tim 2, 13).

²⁹ It is difficult to decide whether *alaletois*, which occurs only here in biblical Greek, should be translated "unspoken" or "unspeakable". Either translation is feasible and makes little difference to interpretation as long as we do not identify the groans with human prayer.

³⁰ See David Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor: Prayer and Christology in Luke-Acts*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, pp. 14-20, for a more detailed examination of these three important passages.

³¹ Dodd, *Romans*, p. 151. Cf. Wright, *Romans*, p. 600.

7. Instead of conclusion: Why pray?

We can now try to answer the annoying question posed earlier: why should we pray? If correct prayer is impossible and the Spirit intercedes continually for us “according to God”, what’s the use of praying? Wouldn’t it be better to give up our selfish requests and commit ourselves to the divine favour that is so preoccupied with our own good? Wouldn’t this be a sure path to inner peace? Although some would answer yes to this question, even a cursory reading of the writings of St. Paul will prove that he did not come to this conclusion. His letters are full of requests and intercessions for the particular needs of his readers and his own. Romans 8 suggests at least three reasons for perseverance in prayer, despite our human shortcomings.

First, the Spirit Himself urges the people of God to pray, thus bringing the faithful into the Father’s presence, to fully enjoy the gift of adoption. Prayer is not a fruit of our intelligence or science, but of the renewal of the Spirit. Reconciliation to God gives us the opportunity to address our heavenly Father, with the sentiment that we will be heard. Even if we won’t know in advance how the Father will respond to the prayers of His sons, the Spirit reveals that this Father wants us to entrust ourselves to His care. Prayer offers the Holy Spirit the opportunity to witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8, 16).

The second reason derives from the first. Obedient children learn to appreciate the wisdom of the Father and put faith in His unchanging love. Genuine faith will not expect God to answer affirmatively to all its prayers, but will equally consider the negative answers as an expression of divine love. The Spirit teaches us that we do not know what is really useful for us. Once we have assimilated this truth, we shall seek more diligently to hear in ourselves the echoes of the Spirit’s groan in order to learn the true prayer.

And, thirdly, by teaching us to pray according to God’s will, the Spirit shapes us in the image of Jesus Christ. Romans 8 implies this connection between the disciple and the Master’s example. The cry *Abba, Father!* shows that the Spirit teaches us to pray as Jesus did, to assume our own personal Gethsemane. “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mk 14, 36). These words do not come from giving up responsibility, nor spiri-

tual disengagement. Instead they represent the Spirit inspired prayer of the Son, who seek the Father's will beyond His own desires. Learning prayer means learning the likeness of Jesus; these two are the one work of the one Spirit.