

# PRAYERS AND THOUGHTS

by *Dominicans of the Province of St. Joseph*

November 27, 2019

Recently, I've heard a number of people—from college friends and acquaintances to television commentators—express condolences to others with the words, “I'll keep you in my thoughts.” It's a well-intended sentiment, to be sure, but it also pitifully cries out for more. Since we don't live in the telekinetic world of *Stranger Things*, human thoughts by themselves are unable to produce what they conceive: no matter how hard I try, my thinking about winning the lottery cannot by itself cause me to have the ticket that rakes in the Mega Millions. And so, right along with my lotto-winning imaginings, the well-wisher's assurance to keep another “in his thoughts,” hoping they somehow induce “good vibes” or the forces of karma, falls limp.

Prayers, on the other hand, *always* effect change, and this is because prayers are no mere artifacts of the mind. Yes, they are a type of thought, but even more, prayers are acts of worship that extend up and out from themselves by the very fact that they are motivated by and terminate in the grace of the living God, who is more present to us than we to ourselves. To pray is to give our thoughts and desires over to the One whose thought *actually causes* what it conceives, for what God thinks, *is*. Each of us—and every iota of creation—is a product of a single, grand, creative act of the divine mind, and prayer, as it were, causes both the prayer and the one prayed for to be drawn up cooperatively into the cosmic unfolding of the Lord's providential plan. This means not that God changes his mind when we pray—that he'll give me the lotto bucks that he otherwise has not planned to provide—but instead that *we* are changed: our thoughts and desires are conformed to his, and, with that, our lives become more manifestative of his saving power, which is communicated principally through grace, not cash.

When juxtaposed, the statements “I'll keep you in my thoughts” and “I'll keep you in my prayers” pale in comparison, and if we invert them, the absurdity of their disproportion is only clearer: “I'll think of you” vis-à-vis “I'll pray for you.” Far from derision, however, this ought to stir up in us a profound gratitude for the gift

of prayer and the astounding fact that Christians are really called to become “co-workers of God” and “partakers of the divine nature” (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Pet. 1:4).

The apparent uptick, then, in thought-wishing over prayer-wishing in our culture would seem to be a sorrowful sign of one or both of two things: 1) the number of people who pray has significantly decreased; and 2) those who do pray—*still nearly 80 percent of the population as of 2014*—are reticent to admit so publicly in our secular world. The first is sad, yes, but already reasonably well known *to be true*. The second, on the other hand, would be tragic, for it would mean that those entrusted with the grace of faith have become “ashamed of testifying to our Lord” (2 Tim. 1:8) and have thereby rendered their faith a private affair. True enough, saying “I’ll keep you in my thoughts” is much easier today than mentioning prayer, since thought-wishing is empty of normative power and nigh guaranteed to remain inoffensive to the most critical of nonbelievers. But evading prayer-wishing is also a capitulation of perhaps the principal responsibility of a Christian—namely, that we “make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). That work begins and ends with prayer, particularly in making “supplications, prayers, and thanksgivings for all men” (1 Tim. 2:1).

As a Carmelite nun once put it to me, “To pray is to breathe,” and without it, we die, since prayer provides a channel of grace—our lifeblood—to the soul. It is prayer that lifts the mind to God, that augments our desire for him, and that lays the groundwork for the apostolate by making present to us the Holy Spirit, who *teaches us in that very hour what we ought to say* (cf. Luke 12:12). Thoughts—even the highest of theological thoughts, good as they be—cannot ultimately heal or sanctify others, nor ourselves. But when thoughts are united to and elevated by prayers—and when those prayers are promised publicly and then in fact prayed—the Christian becomes a sower of grace, instilling genuine hope in others and building up the kingdom of God. Each of us, through Baptism, has this call and capacity. May we have the courage to fulfill it to the praise of his glory.