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Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de

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Chap. 56. Of Prayers.

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C H A P. LVI.

Of Prayers.

I Propose formless and undetermin'd Fancies, like those who publish subtle Questions, to be after disputed upon in the Schools, not to establish Truth, but to seek it: I submit them to the better Judgments of those, whose Office it is to regulate, not my Writings and Actions only, but moreover my very Thoughts and Opinions. Let what I here set down meet with Correction or Applause, it shall be of equal Welcome and Utility to me, myself before-hand condemning it for absurd and impious, if any thing shall be found through Ignorance or Inadvertency, couched in this Rhapsody contrary to the Resolutions and Prescriptions of the *Roman Catholick Church*, in which I was born, and in which I will die. And yet always submitting to the Authority of their Censure, who have an absolute Power over me, I thus temerariouly venture at every Thing, as upon this present Subject.

I don't know whether I am deceived or not; but since by a particular Favour of the Divine Bounty, a certain Form of Prayer has been prescribed and dictated to us, Word by Word, from the Mouth of God himself, I have ever been of Opinion, that we ought to have it in more frequent Use, than we yet have, and if I were worthy to advise, at sitting down to, and rising from our Tables, at our rising and going to Bed, and in every particular Action, wherein Prayer is required, I would have *Christians* always make Use of the Lord's Prayer; if not that Prayer alone, yet at least always. The Church may lengthen or alter Prayers according to the Necessity of our Instruction, for I know very well, that it is always the same in Substance, and the same Thing: But yet such a Preference ought to be given to that Prayer, that the People should have it continually in their Mouths; for it is most certain, that all necessary Petitions are com-

prehended in it, and that it is infinitely proper for all Occasions. 'Tis the only Prayer I use in all Places and Conditions, and what I still repeat instead of changing; whence it also happens, that I have no other by Heart but that only. It just now comes into my Mind, from whence we should derive that Error of having Recourse to God in all our Designs and Enterprizes, to call him to our Assistance in all Sorts of Affairs, and in all Places where our Weakness stands in Need of Support, without considering whether the Occasion be just, or otherwise, and to invoke his Name and Power, in what Condition soever we are, or Action we are engaged in, how vicious soever: He is indeed our sole and only Protector, and can do all Things for us: But though he is pleased to honour us with his paternal Care, he is, notwithstanding, as just as he is good and mighty, and does oftener exercise his Justice than his Power, and favours us according to that, and not according to our Petitions. *Plato* in his Laws, makes three Sorts of Belief injurious to the Gods; that there is none; that they concern not themselves about human Affairs; and, that they never reject or deny any thing to our Vows, Offerings, and Sacrifices. The first of these (Errors according to his Opinion) did never continue rooted in any Man, from his Infancy to his old Age; the other two, he confesses, Men might be obstinate in. God's Justice and his Power are inseparable, and therefore in vain we invoke his Power in an unjust Cause: We are to have our Souls pure and clean, at that Moment at least, wherein we pray to him, and purified from all vicious Passions, otherwise we ourselves present him the Rods wherewith to chastise us. Instead of repairing any thing we have done amiss, we double the Wickedness and the Offence, whilst we offer to him, to whom we are to sue for Pardon, an Affection full of Irreverence and Hatred. Which makes me not very apt to applaud those whom I observe to be so frequent on their Knees, if the Actions nearest of Kind to Prayer, do not give me some Evidence of Reformation.

*Si Nocturnus adulter
Tempora Sanctonico velas adoperta Cucullo*.*

* *Juven. Sat. 8.*

With

With Night-Adulteries, if being foul,
Thou shad'st thy guilty Forehead with a Cowl.

And the Practice of a Man that mixes Devotion with an execrable Life, seems, in some Sort, more to be condemned than that of a Man conformable to his own Propension, and dissolute throughout: And, for that Reason it is, that our Church denies Admittance to, and Communion with, Men obstinate and incorrigible in any Kind of Impiety. We pray only by Custom, and for fashion's Sake; or rather we read and pronounce our Prayers aloud, which is no better than an hypocritical Shew of Devotion: And I am scandalized to see a Man make the Sign of the Cross thrice at the *Benedicite*, and as often at another's saying Grace, (and the more, because it is a Sign I have in great Veneration and constant Use upon solemn Occasions) and to dedicate all the other Hours of the Day to Acts of Malice, Avarice, and Injustice; one Hour to God, the rest to the Devil, as if by Commutation and Consent. 'Tis a Wonder to me, Actions so various in themselves, succeed one another with such an Uniformity of Method, as not to interfere, nor suffer any Alteration, even upon the very Confines and Passes from the one to the other. What a prodigious Conscience must that be, that can be at Quiet within itself, whilst it harbours under the same Roof, with so agreeing and so calm a Society, both the Crime and the Judge? A Man whose whole Meditation is continually working upon nothing but Impurity, which he knows to be so odious to Almighty God, what can he say when he comes to speak to him? He reforms, but immediately falls into a Relapse. If the Object of the Divine Justice, and the Presence of his Maker, did, as he pretends, strike and chastise his Soul, how short soever the Repentance might be, the very Fear of offending that infinite Majesty, would so often present itself to his Imagination, that he would soon see himself Master of those Vices that are most natural and habitual in him. But what shall we say of those who settle their whole Course of Life upon the Profit and Emolument of Sins which they know to be mortal? How many Trades and Vocations have we admitted and countenanced amongst

us, whose very Essence is vicious? And he that opening himself to me voluntarily told me, That he had all his Life-time professed and practised a Religion, in his Opinion, damnable and contrary to that which he had in his Heart, only to preserve his Credit and the Honour of his Employments, how could his Courage suffer so infamous a Confession? What can Men say to the Divine Justice upon this Subject? Their Repentance consisting in a visible and manifest Reformation and Restitution, they lose the Colour of alledging it both to God and Man. Are they so impudent as to sue for Remission without Satisfaction, and without Penitency or Remorse? I look upon these as in the same Condition with the first: But the Obstinacy is not there so easy to be overcome. This Contrariety and Volubility of Opinion, so sudden and violent, as they pretend, is a Kind of Miracle to me. They present us with the State of an indigestible Anxiety and Doubtfulness of Mind. It seemed to me a fantastick and ridiculous Imagination in those, who, these late Years past, used to reproach every Man whom they knew to be of any extraordinary Parts, and, at the same Time, made Profession of the *Roman Catholick Religion*, that it was but outwardly; maintaining, moreover, to do him Honour forsooth, that whatever he might pretend to the contrary, he could not but in his Heart be of their reformed Opinion. An untoward Disease, that a Man should be so rivetted to his own Belief, as to fancy, that no Man can believe otherwise than as he does; and yet worse in this, that they should entertain so vicious an Opinion of such Parts as to think, that any Man so qualified, should prefer any present Advantage of Fortune, before the Promises of eternal Life, and the Means of eternal Salvation. They may believe me: Could any thing have tempted my Youth, the Ambition of the Danger and Difficulties in the late Commotions, had not been the least Motives.

It is not without very good Reason, in my Opinion, that the Church interdicts the promiscuous, indiscreet, and irreverent Use of the Holy and Divine *Psalms*, with which the Holy Ghost inspired King *David*. We ought not to mix God in our Actions, but with the highest Reverence and Caution. That Poesy is too sacred to be put to no other Use than to exercise the Lungs, and to delight our Ears.

Ears. It ought to come from the Soul, and not from the Tongue. It is not fit that a 'Prentice in his Shop, amongst his vain and frivolous Thoughts, should be permitted to pass away his Time, and divert himself with such sacred Things. Neither is it decent to see the Holy Bible, the Rule of our Worship and Belief, tumbled up and down a Hall, or a Kitchen. They were formerly Mysteries, but are now become Sports and Recreations. 'Tis a Book too serious and too venerable to be cursorily or slightly turned over. The Reading of the Scripture ought to be a temperate and premeditated Act, and to which Men should always add this devout Preface, *Sursum Corda*, preparing even the Body to so humble and composed a Gesture and Countenance as shall evidence their Veneration and Attention. Neither is it a Book for every one to sit, but the Study of select Men set apart for that Purpose, and whom Almighty God has been pleased to call to that Office and sacred Function: The Wicked and Ignorant blemish and deprave it. 'Tis not a Story to tell, but a History to fear and adore. Are not they then pleasant Men, who think they have render'd this fit for the People's handling, by translating it into the Vulgar Tongue? Does the understanding of all therein contain'd only stick at Words? Shall I venture to say farther, that by coming so near to understand a little, they are much wider of the whole Scope than before. A total Ignorance, and wholly depending upon the Exposition of other qualify'd Persons, was more knowing and salutary than this vain and verbal Knowledge, which has only prov'd the Nurse of Temerity and Presumption. And I do farther believe, that the Liberty every one has taken to disperse the sacred Writ into so many Idioms, carries with it a great deal more of Danger than Utility. The *Jews*, *Mahometans*, and almost all others, have espoused and revered the Language wherein their Laws and Mysteries were first conceiv'd, and have expressly, and not without Colour of Reason, forbid the Version or Alteration of them into any other. Are we assur'd, that in *Biscay* and in *Brittany*, there are competent Judges enough of this Affair, to establish this Translation into their own Language? Why the universal Church has not a more difficult and solemn Judgment to make. One of our *Greek* Historians does justly accuse the Age he liv'd in,

in, for that the Secrets of the *Christian Religion* were dispersed into the Hands of every Mechanick, to expound and argue upon according to his own Fancy; and that we ought to be much asham'd, we, who by God's especial Favour enjoy the purest Mysteries of Piety, to suffer them to be profan'd by the ignorant Rabble; considering, that the *Gentiles* expressly forbid *Socrates*, *Plato*, and the other Sages, to enquire into, or so much as to mention the Things committed only to the Priests of *Delphos*; saying moreover, that the Factions of Princes, upon theological Accounts, are not arm'd with Zeal, but Fury; that Zeal springs from the divine Wisdom and Justice, and governs itself with Prudence and Moderation; but degenerates into Hatred and Envy, producing Tares and Nettles, instead of Corn and Wine, when conducted by human Passions. And it was truly said of another, who advising the Emperor *Theodosius*, told him, That Disputes did not so much rock the Schisms of the Church asleep, as it rouz'd and animated Heresies. That therefore all Contentions and logical Disputations were to be avoided, and Men absolutely to acquiesce in the Prescriptions and Formula's of Faith, establish'd by the Ancients. And the Emperor *Andronicus*, having over-heard some great Men at high Words in his Palace with *Lopodius*, about a Point of ours of great Importance, gave them so severe a Check, as to threaten to cause them to be thrown into the River if they did not desist. The very Women and Children, now-a-days, take upon them to document the oldest and most experienc'd Men about the Ecclesiastical Laws: Whereas the first of those of *Plato* forbids them to enquire so much as into the Civil Laws; which were to stand instead of divine Ordinances: And allowing the old Men to confer amongst themselves, or with the Magistrate, about those Things, he adds, provided it be not in the Presence of young or profane Persons. A Bishop has left in Writing, that, at the other End of the World, there is an Isle by the Ancients call'd *Dioscorides*, abundantly fertile in all Sorts of Trees and Fruits, and of an exceeding healthful Air; the Inhabitants of which are *Christians*, having Churches and Altars only adorn'd with Crucifixes, without any other Images; great Observers of Fasts and Feasts; exact Payers of their Tythes to the Priest; and so chaste,
that

that none of them are permitted to have to do with more than one Woman in his Life: As to the rest, so content with their Condition, that, environ'd with the Sea, they know nothing of Navigation; and so simple, that they understand not one Syllable of the Religion they profess, and wherein they are so devout. A Thing incredible to such as do not know, that the *Pagans*, who are so zealous Idolaters, know nothing more of their Gods, than their bare Names and their Statues. The ancient Beginning of *Mena-lippus*, a Tragedy of *Euripides*, ran thus;

Jupiter, for that Name alone,
Of what thou art, to me is known.

I have known also, in my Time, some Men's Writings found Fault with, for being purely human and philosophical, without any Mixture of Divinity; and yet whoever should, on the contrary say, that divine Doctrine, as Queen and Regent of the rest, better, and with greater Decency, keeps her State apart: That she ought to be Sovereign throughout, not Subsidiary and Saffragan: And that, peradventure, Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Logical Examples, may elsewhere be more suitably chosen, and also the Arguments for the Stage and publick Entertainments, than from so sacred a Matter: That divine Reasons are consider'd with greater Veneration and Attention, when by themselves, and in their own proper Stile, than when mix'd with, and adapted to, human Discourses: That it is a Fault much more often observ'd, that the Divines write too humanly, than that the Humanists write not theologically enough: Philosophy, says St. *Chrysostom*, has long been banish'd the holy Schools, as an Hand-maid altogether useles and thought unworthy to peep, so much as in passing by the Door, into the Sacrifice of the divine Doctrine: And that the human Way of speaking is of a much lower Form, and ought not to serve herself with the Dignity and Majesty of divine Eloquence. I say, whoever, on the contrary, should object against all this, would not be without Reason on his Side. Let who will, *Verbis Indisciplinatis*, talk of Fortune, Destiny, Accident, good and evil Hap, and other such like Phrases, according to his own Humour;

I, for

I, for my Part, propose Fancies merely human, and merely my own, and that simply, as human Fancies, and separately consider'd, not as determin'd by an Arrest from Heaven, or incapable of Doubt or Dispute. Matter of Opinion, not Matter of Faith. Things which I discourse of according to my own Capacity, not what I believe according to God; which also I do after a Laical, not Clerical, and yet always after a very religious Manner. And it were as rational to affirm, That an Ediſt, enjoining all People, but ſuch as are public Profeſſors of Divinity, to be very reſerv'd in writing of Religion, would carry with it a very good Colour of Utility and Juſtice, and me, amongſt the reſt, to hold my prating. I have been told, that even thoſe who are not of our Church, do nevertheless, amongſt themſelves, expreſly forbid the Name of God to be us'd in common Diſcourſe; not ſo much as by way of Interjection, Exclamation, Aſſertion of a Truth, or Compariſon; and I think them in the right. And upon what Occaſion ſoever we call upon God to accompany and aſſiſt us, it ought always to be done with the greateſt Reverence and Devotion. There is, as I remember, a Paſſage in *Xenophon*, where he tells us, that we ought ſo much the more ſeldom to call upon God, by how much it is hard to compoſe our Souls to ſuch a Degree of Calmneſs, Penitency, and Devotion, as it ought to be in at ſuch Time, otherwiſe our Prayers are not only vain and fruitleſs, but vicious in themſelves, *Forgive us (we ſay) our Treſpaſſes, as we forgive them that treſpaſs againſt us.* What do we mean by this Petition, but that we preſent him a Soul free from all Rancour and Revenge? And yet we make nothing of invoking God's Aſſiſtance in our Vices, and inviting him into our unjuſt Deſigns.

Quæ niſi ſeductis nequeas committere divis.*

Which only to the Gods a-part,
Thou haſt the Impudence to impart.

The covetous Man prays for the Converſation of his ſuperfluous, and, peradventure, ill-got Riches; the Ambitious,

* *Perſ. Sat. 2.*

for Victory, and the Conduct of his Fortune: The Thief calls God to his Assistance, to deliver him from the Dangers and Difficulties that obstruct his wicked Designs; or returns him Thanks for the Facility he has met with in robbing a poor Peasant. At the Door of the House they are going to storm, or break into by Force of a *Peiarre*, they fall to Prayers for Success, having their Instruction and Hopes full of Cruelty, Avarice, and Lust.

*Hoc ipsum quo tu Jovis aurem impellere tentas,
Dic agedum Staius, pro Jupiter, ô bone clamet,
Jupiter, at sese non clamet Jupiter ipse*.*

The Pray'rs with which thou dost assault *Jove's* Ear,
Repeat to *Staius*, whom thou soon wilt hear.
But *Jupiter*, good *Jupiter*, exclaim:
But *Jupiter* exclaims not.

Marguarette, Queen of *Navarre*, tells of a young Prince (whom though she does not name, is easily enough, by his great Quality, to be known,) who going upon an amorous Assignment to lye with an Advocate's Wife of *Paris*, his Way thither being through a Church, he never pass'd that holy Place, going to or returning from this godly Exercise, but he always kneel'd down to pray; in what he would implore the divine Favour, his Soul being full of such virtuous Meditations, I leave others to judge; which nevertheless, she instances for a Testimony of singular Devotion. But it is by this Proof only, that a Man may conclude few Men very fit to treat of Theological Affairs. A true Prayer, and religious reconciling of our-selves to Almighty God, cannot enter into an impure Soul, and at the very Instant subjected to the very Dominion of Satan. He who calls God to his Assistance, whilst in a Habit of Vice, does, as if a Cut-purse should call a Magistrate to help him, or like those who introduce the Name of God to the Attestation of a Lie.

————— *Tacito mala vota susurro
Concipimus †.*

* *Pers. Sat. 2.*

†. *Lucan. l. 5.*

In Whispers we guilty Prayers do make.

There are few Men who durst publish to the World the Prayers they make to Almighty God.

*Haud cuivis promptum est, murmurque humilesque susurros
Tollere de Templis, & aperto vivere voto* *.

'Tis not convenient for every one
To bring the Pray'r he mutters over there,
Out of the Temple to the publick Ear.

And this is the Reason why the *Pythagoreans* would have them always public, to be heard by every one, to the End they might not prefer indecent or unjust Petitions, as he did, who hearing

————— *Clare cum dixit, Apollo,
Labra movet metuens audiri; pulchra Laverna,
Da mihi fallere, da justum, sanctumque videri,
Noctem peccatis & fraudibus objice nubem* †.

Apollo's Name pronounc'd aloud for fear
Any his Oraison's should over-hear,
Mutter'd betwixt his Teeth, *Laverna* great,
Grant me the Talent to deceive and cheat
All I shall have to do with ev'ry where,
Yet all the while holy and just appear,
And from the Sight of Men be pleas'd to shroud
My Sins with Night, Frauds with a fable Cloud.

The God did severely punish the wicked Prayers of *Oedipus*, in granting them: He had pray'd that his Children might amongst themselves determine the Succession to his Throne by Arms; and was so miserable, as to see himself taken at his Word. We are not to pray, that all Things may go as we would have them, but as most conducing to the Good of the World; and we are not in our Prayers

* *Perf. Sat. 2.*

† *Hor. l. 1. Epist. 10.*

to obey our Wills, but Prudence. We seem in truth, to make use of our Prayers, as a kind of Gibberish, and as those do who employ holy Words about Sorceries and magical Operations: And as if I made account, the Benefit we are to reap from them, depended upon the Contexture, Sound and Gingle of Words, or upon the composing of the Countenance. For having the Soul contaminated with Concupiscence, not touch'd with Repentance, or comforted by any late Reconciliation with Almighty God, we go to present him such Words as the Memory suggests to the Tongue, and hope from thence to retain the Remission of our Sins. There is nothing so easy, so sweet and so favourable, as the divine Law: She calls and invites us to her, guilty and abominable as we are; Extends her Arms, and receives us into her Bosom, as foul and polluted as we at present are, and are for the future to be. But then in Return, we are to look upon her with a respectful, and a graceful Eye, we are to receive this Pardon with all imaginable Gratitude and Submission, and, for that Instant at least, wherein we address ourselves to her, to have the Soul sensible of the Evils we have committed, and at Defiance with those Passions, that seduc'd her to offend, for neither the Gods, nor good Men (says Plato) will accept the Present of a wicked Man.

*Immunis aram si tetigit manus,
Non sumptuosa blandior hostia
Mollivivit averfos Penates,
Farre pio, & saliente mica*.*

The pious Off'ring of a Piece of Bread,
If by a pure Hand on the Altar laid,
Than costly Hecatombs, will better please
Th' offended Gods, and their just Wrath appease.

* Hor. l. 3. Ode 23.