

Explanation of “*The Way of Christ*”

From the “Introduction” in SPIRITUAL SUBSTANCE: *The Heart of Christianity*

The Way of Christ (SUPPLEMENT ONE) gives you a simple, yet truly effective, way to pray. Follow “The Way” today! When you “Ask God the Father to take your will” and to give you “His will in return” in The Four Step Prayer, you are not asking God to remove your free will, but to take and receive your love, your heart, and to give you His love, which is His will for you, in return. It is similar to the spiritual language found in this passage of Sacred Scripture: “I will take from you your heart of stone, and I will give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 36:26) Here, the Lord God, through the prophet Ezekiel, is not saying that He will physically remove our heart and give us a new heart, but that He will spiritually remove our hardness of heart and give us His meekness and humility. In other words, He will convert our hard heart which is stubborn, proud, angry and rebellious into a meek and humble heart which is open, loving and obedient to God.

The spiritual offering of The Four Step Prayer corresponds to the sacramental offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as can be seen in the “Prayer over the Offerings” for the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time—“Receive, O Lord, the sacrifice of conciliation and praise and grant that, cleansed by its action, we may make offering of a heart pleasing to You. Through Christ our Lord.”

The Way of Christ recommends that you “repeat these steps as many times during the day or night as is necessary in order to keep yourself in a right relationship with God.” Our Lord and Savior repeated His prayer three times in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.” (Matt. 26:44) What was this prayer of Christ to His heavenly Father? Essentially, it was The Four Step Prayer. “He went a little further and fell to the ground, with his face touching the earth, and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will, but your will be done.’” (Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42) This prayer is the heart of the “Our Father” (“The Lord’s Prayer”). All prayer is reducible to the “Our Father,” and the

“Our Father” is reducible to—“*Thy will be done.*” It is the one prayer necessary. “Yes, Lord, Your will be done.” Following the example of Jesus Christ, it would be good to repeat The Four Step Prayer two or even three times, especially upon awakening in the morning, in order to help open your soul more fully to God’s will and grace, His love and life, unless once is enough. You may simply, but sincerely, add (once or twice) at the end of the first time—“Please take my will, Heavenly Father. Please grant me Your will in return.”—thus repeating the equivalent of—“Father, ... not my will, but your will be done.” (Luke 22:42) Beyond this morning offering, the time to return to The Four Step Prayer is when you are aware of being out of order, not at peace, or disconnected from God. That is, when you have taken your heart and will back from Him in order to sin, or when your heart has been pulled apart from God (or drifted away from Him) in some way. As described in *The Way of Christ*, confess your sin, if you need to, and then offer your heart and soul back to God in the four steps.

There is another way of practicing The Four Step Prayer (when one is alone) that some may find helpful. Begin by doing steps one and two, kneeling down with your face touching the ground. Then, stand up and look up to heaven while you do steps three and four. You are, thereby, representing the death and resurrection of Christ, both physically and spiritually. (In like manner, Catholic priests offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass “with hands extended,” thereby imitating Christ on the Cross—*Roman Missal.*)

Finally, The Four Step Prayer may also be compared to the “*Suscipe*”—a prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola which is a loving exchange between God and the soul. “Receive, O Lord, all my liberty. Take my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. Whatever I have or hold, You have given to me. I give it all back to You to do with as You will. Give me only Your love and Your grace, and I am rich enough and ask for nothing more.”

No matter how far we go or how much we grow in the spiritual life, The Four Step Prayer will always be a good way to pray at times. However, the way we examine our conscience and deal with sin will change over time. Spiritual beginners in the ascetical life should actively pursue self-knowledge of their sins in order to remove them and replace them with the opposite virtues by prayer and practice, changing their way of thinking to think with Christ, their way of loving through self-denial of selfish desires, their way of acting through self-discipline and good habits. Spiritual proficients in the mystical life of infused contemplation, on the contrary, should increasingly let go of this introspection and self-examination, while focusing their attention on the presence of God within them. The Living Flame of Love, the Holy Spirit, will reveal their sins to them while burning them out and infusing the opposite virtues. They will still need to actively deny themselves in order to practice the virtues, but this will be in docility to the

promptings of the Holy Spirit in imitation of Jesus Christ our Lord. Those who have come to perfect love and freedom of spirit in union with God, enjoy self-forgetfulness in the presence of God, profound peace and interior recollection. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Cor. 3:17) Still, they may need to “wash their feet” of venial sin and imperfection by Confession and fasting. (John 13:10)

Therefore, at the beginning of the spiritual life read “The Seven Capital Sins” outline in *The Way of Christ* for your nightly examination of conscience. If there is some sin that you still need to clean up, confess it to God and ask for the opposite virtue with the intention of doing better tomorrow in practicing that particular virtue and avoiding that particular sin. Once you have become familiar with *The Way of Christ*, you will no longer need to read through The Seven Capital Sins every time, but simply use them as a reminder. Our focus in the spiritual life should be on Jesus Christ, “Do whatever He tells you.” (John 2:5) So, “let us rid ourselves of every weight and sin that clings to us ... while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.” (Heb. 12:1-2) Remember, also, that temptation is not sin, but the opportunity to grow closer to God by the practice of virtue, that is, by rejecting the temptation to sin and choosing to do God’s will, with prayer and effort.

Just as we repeat The Four Step Prayer whenever we need to, we should also confess our sin to God whenever we need to, at least praying to Him quietly in our mind and heart when we cannot privately speak out loud or kneel. For Catholics, this personal confession does not replace sacramental Confession, but rather, complements it. In the same manner, The Four Step Prayer does not replace the Mass, but relates to it as the prayer of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane relates to His sacrifice on Mount Calvary and the Last Supper. In this way, we bring together the interior and the exterior, the private and the public, the personal and the sacramental, for a full and whole spiritual life in Jesus Christ. “Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord.” (Eucharistic Preface)