

FATHER STANILOAE WROTE THAT “THE PERSON WHO PRAYS ALSO CASTS BRIDGES TOWARDS HIS FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS”. WHAT DID HE MEAN BY THAT?

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Introduction

Dumitru Stăniloae was a Romanian Orthodox theologian who supported that if someone wants to speak about God, he should have a theology of experience.¹ Fr Staniloae is an apophatic theologian according to his eminence Kallistos Ware.² For Staniloae “Apophatic knowledge is not irrational but supra-rational, for the Son of God is the Logos and contains in himself the ‘reasons’ of all created things”.³ His central thesis is that prayer frees us from both ourselves and the confines of nature. We exist and act in a universe of natural laws that drive “complex mechanisms”. We are participants in the natural laws and conversant with nature. We can influence it, for example, when we apply our minds to direct the movement of our bodies, when we grow our food or harm others. Yet unless we are conversant with God, we are limited by the laws of this natural world and are trapped within it by our passions. Only God, who created the universe, is not limited by its laws. Hence by praying to God, we also become free of the boundaries of what we experience through our senses and the laws of nature.

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¹ Marc-Antoine Costa de Beauregard, Dumitru Stăniloae (Paris: Cerf, 1983), 156.

² Kallistos Ware, “Foreword,” in Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox dogmatic theology: The experience of God* (Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), xx.

³ Ware, “Foreword,” xx.

1. The prayer as the way of communication with God and with our neighbour

Fr Stăniloae tries to explain the importance of prayer for a Christian. Through his text “Prayer and holiness”.⁴ He underlines the need for wholeness in prayer, which unites intellect and emotion, mind and heart, to engage in a full relationship with God. The author suggests that effective prayer demands the engagement of both parts of ourselves—the rational mind (*nous*) and the feeling heart. When only the mind is engaged, prayer becomes distant and detached, reducing it to a cerebral exercise. Conversely, the prayer which is driven solely by the heart risks devolving into sentimentality, neglecting the richness of God’s gifts, and the grounding provided by a thoughtful faith, “Pure prayer is concerned with the reuniting of the mind (*nous*) and the heart. Neither mind nor heart can be allowed to remain alone. Prayer that comes only from the mind is cold; prayer that comes only from the heart is sentimental and is ignorant of all that God has given us, is giving us now and will give us in Christ. It is prayer without horizon or perspective, prayer in which we do not know what to thank God for, what to praise him for, what to ask him for. The man who prays in this way has the feeling of being lost in an impersonal infinity. Such a feeling knows nothing of encounter with a personal God. And thus, it is not prayer”.⁵

The emphasis of Stăniloae on a “personal God”⁶ here is also crucial; Stăniloae argues that authentic prayer is relational. A prayer from only one part of our being—mind or heart—results in a fractured, impersonal experience. In contrast, prayer that harmonizes mind and

⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Prayer and holiness* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1996), 8.

⁵ Stăniloae, *Prayer and holiness*, 8.

⁶ Stăniloae, *Prayer and holiness*, 8.

heart becomes a space of communion, where gratitude, praise, and petition are grounded in the acknowledgment of God's ongoing presence and gifts. This is a vision of prayer not as an escape into infinite abstraction but as an encounter, marked by depth and intentionality, with a God who is personal, present, and profoundly involved in our lives. It echoes the broader spiritual tradition that sees prayer as transformative, not just a conversation but a practice that reorients the self, drawing every aspect—rational, emotional, and spiritual—toward unity with God.

Stăniloae explains that the “pure prayer is concerned with the reuniting of the mind (*nous*) and the heart”⁷ is the path which reflects a profound aspect of Christian mysticism, specifically the concept of *theosis* or divinization, where the ultimate goal of human spiritual life is to unite with God through grace. In this union, God's infinite light—his divine nature and consciousness—illuminates the human soul, transforming it to reflect God's attributes through the action of the Holy Spirit. The prayer creates the fertile heart to accept God's grace. The infinite God becomes accessible to the finite man through the uncreated actions of God and his love for us, “The infinity of God cannot be experienced apart from his love for us. This love of God for us calls to our love, and it is with the heart, the organ of love within us, that we experience his love”.⁸ God's qualities, particularly his “conscious light” or divine wisdom, permeate and elevate the human spirit, creating a dynamic and reciprocal relationship: just as God becomes “humanized” by his dwelling within man (as seen in the incarnation), humanity is “divinized” by becoming a vessel for God's presence. This is not about merging into God's essence in a way that loses individual identity, but

⁷ Stăniloae, *Prayer and holiness*, 8.

⁸ Stăniloae, *Prayer and holiness*, 8.

rather about reflecting his attributes, as the finite becomes capable of manifesting the divine within human limits.⁹

This transformative process is described as the work of the Holy Spirit, who is both the agent of divine illumination and the one who enables humans to receive God's light. But for all of this we need prayer. The Holy Spirit seals Christian's pure prayer and illuminates him, allowing him to partake in divine life while still remaining distinctly themselves, endowed with God's love and wisdom.¹⁰ Through this divinization, humanity not only grows closer to God but also fully embodies the purpose for which it was created: to be a mirror of God's infinite love and consciousness in the world.¹¹

To sum up, in the prayer for God, whole human nature body, and mainly heart and mind should take place. Only in this way, Christian can "know" God and God can rest in him through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

2. The person who prays also casts bridges towards his fellow human beings

"The person who prays also casts bridges towards his fellow human beings". With these words, Stăniloae expresses the basic view of the Church that in order for prayer to God to be pure and to be heard, it must have the initial condition of forgiving our neighbor. This thought is deeply rooted in Christian teaching, where forgiveness is a necessary condition for true union with God through prayer. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, emphasizes that before we approach God, it is

⁹ Stăniloae, *Prayer and holiness*, 8.

¹⁰ Matthew Pulis, Ljiljana Ćumura, and Luke J. Buhagiar, "Prayer, civic engagement and culture: A comparative study of Serbia and Malta," *Sociološki Pregled* 58, no. 4 (2024): 370-401, at 371.

¹¹ Stăniloae, *Prayer and holiness*, 8.

important to have a pure heart towards other people. This means that if we hold a grudge or if we have not forgiven our neighbor, we prevent our prayer from being honest and open.

Stăniloae implies that forgiveness is an act that frees us from the burdens of anger and bitterness, allowing us to stand before God with true humility and purity. When we forgive, we not only open our hearts to God, but we also reflect his divine love, taking the first step toward restoring peace and unity in our relationships. Forgiveness, therefore, is not just a moral command, but a spiritual tool that prepares the heart and mind to receive God's grace. In essence, it is an act of faith and obedience that helps us experience the true power of prayer, approaching God with a free heart.

In the Lord's Prayer, we ask to be forgiven but also, we should forgive the others. The prayer shows us that our salvation comes through the forgiveness of our neighbour. A Christian should remember "bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do"¹², and "whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses".¹³

The prayer is our dialogue with God for our fellow human it is upheld not only by remembering him in prayers but to really forgive him in our heart. Only after this our mind becomes united with God in a state above prayer.¹⁴ The prayer leads us to the forgiveness to the other people. Forgiveness can also improve relationships with people and finally with God. When we hold onto anger and resentment, it can

¹² Col. 3:13 (New King James Version).

¹³ Mark 11:25 (New King James Version).

¹⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Seven mornings with the Father Stăniloae – Dialogues with Sorin Dumitrescu*, (Bucharest: Editura Anastasia, 1992), 121.

damage our relationships with others and prevent us from creating new ones. Through forgiveness, we can restore damaged relationships, strengthen existing ones, and build new ones based on trust and mutual respect. The forgiveness will help our prayer to reach God so our heart will be the place of love of the other.¹⁵

To sum up Prayer is the conjugation, between man and God in unity and between man and man. It means actual reconciliation with God, the mother of tears and also their daughter, the forgiveness of sins. It is the bridge to pass over tribulations and a support to our weaknesses but at the same time to unite with the other man through forgiveness.

Conclusions

Fr Stăniloae knew the importance of prayer. Prayer is Christian insofar as it is communion with Christ and extends throughout the Church, which is his Body. Its dimensions are those of Christ's love. In Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus encapsulates the entirety of the Mosaic law into these two commandments, emphasizing that a life pleasing to God is rooted in love—love for God and love for others. The command to love God “with all your heart, soul, and mind” calls for an all-encompassing devotion that goes beyond ritual observance to a relationship of profound reverence and commitment. It reflects the idea that our thoughts, emotions, and will are to be aligned with God's purpose and character, integrating faith into every facet of life.

Equally revolutionary is the command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” which calls believers to empathy, compassion, and respect for all people, transcending divisions of social status, ethnicity, and

¹⁵ Stăniloae, Prayer and holiness, 9.

personal bias. It shifts the focus from self-centeredness to a world-view where the well-being of others is seen as equally important as our own. To build bridges with the others means to forgive the others and to pray for them and their salvation. This pairing of love for God with love for others challenges believers to mirror divine love in their actions, creating a transformative ripple effect in communities and society.

Together, these commandments provide a holistic framework for Christian ethics, guiding how believers engage with God, themselves, and the world around them. This teaching inspires countless acts of charity, justice, and kindness, demonstrating the belief that true faith is inseparable from selfless love and compassion. Stăniloae supports that it is love in our relationship with God, then, that sets us free. The same applies in our relationship to other human beings. “Only a relationship of pure love with another person can set us free from the world outside and from ourselves”.¹⁶

¹⁶ Stăniloae, *Prayer and holiness*, 18.

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Abstract

This paper examines the theology of prayer in the thought of Dumitru Stăniloae, a prominent Romanian Orthodox theologian. Emphasizing an apophatic yet experiential approach, Stăniloae posits prayer as the primary means of communion with the personal God, integrating mind and heart in the pursuit of theosis. Prayer, animated by the Holy Spirit, enables the human person to transcend natural limitations and participate in divine life. Furthermore, the paper highlights the relational dimension of prayer, where forgiveness and love toward others become essential conditions for genuine communion with God. Thus, prayer is both a transformative encounter with the divine and an ethical imperative that binds love for God with love for neighbor, constituting the foundation of Christian spiritual and communal life.

Keywords: Dumitru Stăniloae, prayer, romanian theology, love, holiness.

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