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CHARACTERISTICS and ACTIVITIES OF PERSONAL PRAYER

- Summary of PhD Thesis-

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KEYWORDS and HYPOTHESIS

- Prayer - personal prayer
- Communication
- Praise
- Thanksgiving
- Asking
- Intercession
- Confession of sins
- Meditation
- Bible
- Quiet

The **hypothesis** of the dissertation has the target to amplify the content and the form of personal prayer, and to make its practice dependent on personal particularities.

Paraphrasing, we start our study with the hypothesis, that the personal prayer contains more activities that there are in our usage and knowledge. Besides these the practice of different forms and activities of personal prayer depend on the particularities of every individual. It makes possible for every person to choose and use them according to their personal particularities.

ABSTRACT

This study's target is to rehabilitate the personal prayer, because the public and ritual prayer tries to take its place and overshadow its usage. Unfortunately many practicing Christians are contented with praying in the church, neglecting partially or totally private prayers in their homes.

Besides rehabilitating the status of personal prayer, we set as our target the amplification of its content. With other words, we enrich the personal prayer with rarely used or forgotten prayer activities, which are not so usual in the well known classical prayer, and which are separate spiritual activities, and are not considered parts of a prayer. Among these activities there are such as remaining in silence, contemplation, using the Bible in prayer, talking with God, prayer gestures, which according to the results of the analysis of our thesis can be parts of the private prayer. This was our hypothesis, and we try to prove this with the help of bibliography.

Our thesis starts with the general presentation of prayer **(chapter I)**. First we try to answer the question why we need to pray. We quoted from works of various authors such as Borosnyai, Yancey, Foster, Andreasen, Heiler and others. Next we tried to prove the existence of prayer, responding to the attacks of those who criticize this practice, presenting the opinions about this phenomenon of authors living in different ages, and from different fields. After that we approached to this theme from the point of view of the history of religion, from cultic, primitive religions to the prayer from the Bible, from the beginnings through the gospels and the epistles of Paul to the centuries of Christianity. We finished the first part of our thesis with the religious definition of Christian prayer, collecting the definitions provided by the used literature. One of these definitions are from White, who says that "prayer is the breathing of the spirit, the secret of the spiritual power."[1] In the introductive part we treated prayer in general, not mentioning its personal practice.

[1] White Ellen G.: *Rugaciunea*, Bucuresti, 2009, 14

Chapter II continues this theoretical character from theological approach and that of the Bible. In this chapter we put prayer on a very strong Biblical basis. First we present what the Bible says and what authors summarize and comment on the Bible statements about prayer. Rice stated this the most complex way, in seven points.[2] We continue our exposition with a thorough analysis focused on the Old and on the New Testament, laying special emphasis on the demanding analysis of the terminology. We searched and put under microscope the expressions in connection with prayer. In our analysis, we paid special attention – especially in the OT – to references that are linked in any way to prayer. We divided the OT's prayer terminology, besides the *pálal* (פָּלַל) basic term, into four chapters: communication; attitude; emotions; and the terminology of communication from God. After that we presented the forms of prayer in the OT, and life of some outstanding praying persons. Both the analysis of the OT and that of the NT were closed with a recension of prayer, where we summarized the references of every book from the Bible to prayer and to praying. The results of our analysis show that the terminology of NT is not so complex than the one of the OT. We draw the terminology of prayer from the NT in 10 points: 1. Basic terms, 2. Gratitude, 3. Praise, 4. Joy, 5. Asking, 6. Intercession, 7. Confession, 8. Worship, 9. Searching God and 10. Other terms. We mentioned the particularities of praying in the NT, paying special attention on those that are different from the OT, and then we perfected our research with the brief presentation of the life and works of two prominent personalities: Jesus and Paul.

Before continuing with the presentation of the second chapter we would like to underline a novelty of the analysis of the terminology from the OT: we discovered that there is no separate Hebrew term for expressing gratitude, thanksgiving.[3] Out of the twelve expressions of the terminology of praising God, only one expression, *jádáh* (יָדָה) has thankfulness in its semantic content. Not even this is a clear expression, because besides thankfulness it also means praise and confessing of

[2] 1. God gave as a command in the Holy Scripture; 2. Prayer is the instrument denoted by God for Christians to acquire certain things; 3. Through prayer God wants to fill Christians with joy; 4. Prayer is the way that leads out from problems, the antidote of worries and restlessness; 5. Answered prayers are undeniable proofs to skepticism, unbelief, modernism, and unfaithfulness; 6. Prayer is the only way for man to enjoy the guidance of the Holy Spirit while he is doing God's work; 7. „who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10,13). (Rice John R.: *Prayer. Asking and Receiving*, Murfreesboro, 1942, 27-43)

[3] See more II.2.1.1.2.1.2. second expression: *jádáh*

sins. Looking for an explanation, the Lexicons of the OT include the notion of thankfulness as a part of praise, so, it can be considered an expression of praising God.[4]

We presented the theme from theological approach in the third part of the chapter. The object of our study was the determining role of the picture of God. Opinions in this field proved that the picture that a man creates about God, makes his prayer experiences unique. We consider ideal the thoughts of E. White, according to whom Jesus Christ has to be the best friend for a praying person. The theme of the picture of God was perfected by the four models based on the works of Theissen, Varga Zsigmond, Frielingsdorf, and Muntág Andor. Theissen presented God who respects the liberty of man; Varga favours the model of Lord-servant, Frielingsdorf talks about the positive and negative pictures of God. He identified four categories: the punishing Judge-God, the Death God, God the Accountant, and God the Drover. Examples were concluded by the model of Muntág with seven points. Moreover, we think that in prayer we have to recognize the works of God's hands that created this means of communication, to maintain the relationship with man. By this not only man can talk to God, but God also, moreover, God can answer human being's questions and requests. Naturally, this can be realised in many ways. We observed that this does not come into existence by the initiative of man; it is more likely to be the answer of man being confronted with God's grace.

Chapter III of the research presents the formal aspects of praying. Its main value is that classifies and analyses in detail the gestures of prayer. These are the followings: standing position, bowing, kneeling, prosternation, sitting position, walking, lying position, hiding the face, function of eyes, and the eleven various positions of hands: hands lifted up, laying on of hands, folded hands, hands put together, hands held together, arms and palms kept in form of a cup, cross position, hands lifted from elbow, crossing hands, hands hiding the face and chest-slapping. After these we mentioned briefly the auxiliary aspects: dressing, place of prayer, the volume, and the duration of prayer.

[4] Harris R. Laird (ed): *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago, 1999, 364 Westermann, Claus: *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, Richmond, John Knox Press, 1965, 26-27 in Harris

Chapter IV has a psychological approach to prayer. First, it presents its inner psychic references, the physiological circumstances, and its affective, moral and social resources. We are looking for the psychological reasons of prayer. According to the general approach, based on the specific literature, prayer does not mean other than an instinct towards life on a higher level. This was followed by the identification of functional goals of prayer in five points: 1. Meeting God, 2. Dialogue between God and man, 3. Source of help in the struggle with Satan, 4. Exposure, placing the praying person under the influence of God, and 5. Asking for everyday help. Based on the biography, in the third part of the chapter we tried to identify the psychological mechanisms of effects. We drew the conclusion that praying has an influence on the psyche of man, self-knowledge, concepts, and consequently on his deeds. Prayer connects man to the world of God, and reveals the mysteries of the spirit. Next followed the psychological analysis of prayer, from three approaches: from the approach of history of religion, then the analysis of influence of feelings and personality. Opinions of history of religions was based on researches of Grom, Bunea and Theissen; the analysis of influence of feelings on statements of Shand, Bloom and Heiler, the analysis of the influence of personality was based on the model of personality of Jung. According to his opinion, we can set the typology of personality from two points of view. The first is according to the general behavior, which qualifies people as introverts and extroverts, while the second takes into consideration the spiritual activities: thinking, feeling, perceiving and intuition. The grade of development of these four functions influences the personality of man, including the particularities of prayer. Here we proved the second statement of our hypothesis, according to which the customs of praying depend on the particularities of personality. Putting in other words, every single person does and experiences praying differently.

The fifth point of the fourth chapter presented prayer as man meeting with himself. This statement was based on three opinions: that of co-authors Ann and Barry Ulanov, Klessmann and Hézser, after them we made it clear, that prayer can bring to the surface not only the unsolved experiences and sins, but man’s inner reserves. Since besides the bad inclination and negative memories, man has abilities and positive reserves, according to our conclusions, praying not only solves problems, but brings into evidence the inner potential. This is another novelty of our

thesis. Although not every researcher shares this opinion, but based on the proofs of bibliography, we sustain the truth of this statement.

We ended the chapter with a detailed description of prayer research and with the presentation of the results. I would like to point out one, which is the most authentic and undeniable proof for the efficacy of prayer. Travis Davis, the editor of Newsmax's Mind Health Report published the result of an analysis carried out by neuro-scientists (e.g. Andrew Newberg) by scanning the brain, according to which regular prayer causes a modification in four centers of the brain: in the frontal lobe, anterior cingulated cortex, parietal lobe and in the limbic system.[5] There have been similar studies with similar results and it was shown that prayer activates different parts of human brain, that are in connection with concentration and the border between the praying person's inner and outside world. This discovery proves, and it can be observed with human eyes that there are physical modifications in the brains of praying persons, which brings a revolution in the direction of research, and makes the power of prayer and the efficacy of prayer researches undeniable.

Chapter V has a central place concerning the elaboration of the theme. From this point on we started to focus on personal prayer. We elaborated the concrete activities, which according to our hypothesis can be classified as parts of private prayer. In the first part of the chapter we dealt with the obstacles and conditions of prayer. We gathered the obstacles on basis of bibliographical references in the field: Christian Bible Lexicon, Summy Tippit, Knapp-Fisher, Maxwell, Ulanov and others. After this we proved the conceptual base of prayer efficacy, then we concluded the conditions in eighteen points: sincerity and pure heart; feeling of need; humbleness; faith or trustfulness; based on promises; asking in the name of Jesus; the intercession of the Holy Spirit; asking according to God's will; expressing the request; repentance; obedience to God; noble goal and unselfishness; enthusiasm; regular and persistent; practicing solitary and collective prayer; praise and thanksgiving; doing the human part. In the following parts we classified the personal prayer, first according to its occasions, forms and types, then according to its activities. We identified nine basic prayer activities, out of which we cast the light on some forms of manifestation The nine basic activities are the following: *silence;*

[5] See: http://w3.newsmax.com/newsletters/mhr/prayer_video.cfm?PROMO_CODE=DC28-1 (2012-09-12)

praising God and thanksgiving; communication; confession of sins; request; interceding; Bible-prayer; contemplation and devotion. There are five forms of practicing silence linking to God; solitude; introversion; orientation to God and gesture prayer. Within the frame of praise and thanksgiving we devoted separate analysis to worship, its musical form and thanksgiving. Five forms of Bible-prayer is recommended: 1. Reading as a personal message from God; 2. Praying the prayers of the Bible; 3. Asking the fulfillment of promises; 4. Contemplating on teachings, and 5. Studying the Biblical principles as a manual of prayer.

After certifying the validity of the nine activities from bibliography, we presented a model that we recommend, according to which we can practice at least in three ways: each form in only one prayer, some of them in one occasion, or separately, only one activity at a time. The thirteen prayer activities are as follows: *tuning to God; praising God; giving thanks; dialogue; self-examination; confession of sins; request, Bible prayer; meditation; interceding; promise; dedication and waiting.* We think that certain prayer activities can be unpleasant or difficult to practice due to personal particularities, but this is natural, personal particularities are the selective criterion in their selection and practice. We ended the chapter with the characteristics of personal prayer as time is concerned: duration, outwatch prayer and unceasing prayer.

In the final **Chapter VI** we continue the practical approach to personal prayer. First we collected the aspects referring to psychical and spiritual efficacy: therapeutic effect, psychic and mental effect, source of power, divine wisdom and guidance, meeting and experiencing unity with God, and spiritual results. The second subchapter deals with the physical and practical effects: the visible transcendental intervention of God, the effect of prayer upon behavior and health. The third point of the chapter named references to counseling and pastoral care. The subjects of this part are: the personal and vocational practice of private prayer, particularities of praying according to the model of personality, pastoral care particularities based on the book of Job, and finally we presented a model to develop willingness to pray and abilities to pray. This is not explored thoroughly, because the creation of a concrete plan of development requires more research and

analysis. The model of our thesis is an indication only; that would be the subject of another, a new research.

As final conclusion we can say that in prayer, in this communicative curiosity, we see the expression of the desire and instrument of human soul to be in relationship with God and with oneself. This is not a human designed practice, because the creation is not able to create something like this; but it is the gift of God, to provide a bridge above the sin made abyss between man and God, between the individual and his own soul, and between the self and fellow men. This is an instrument that cannot be replaced with anything else, it is not bound to any single place or form, it is not exclusive, but it is dispensable for those who do not long for its advantages. As those who practice this in an honest manner, their lives transform, enrich, and get to spiritual dimensions that are not available by any other religious, therapeutic and psychological instruments. The advantage of praying is first of all spiritual, but its psychical-mental and physical results are not to be ignored. Someone can pray secretly, but the results are visible, because all who pray with honesty, from pure heart and with faith, will undergo some changes. Concluding briefly, we can notice from everything that was mentioned above, the nature and the depths of personal prayer cannot be described with human words. We do not have to talk or to dissert about this, but to practice and to live the prayer. True prayer is not only a religious or spiritual practice, but it is a way of life. It is a living that enriches, transforms and connects humans.