

August, 1970.

## REPORT - PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

for the Liturgical Commission  
prepared by a Sub-Committee, which consisted of :

The Rev'd. James Grant, Chaplain, Trinity College, Melbourne.

The Rev'd. John Romanis, Vicar of Holy Trinity, Oakleigh, Vic.

The Rev'd. Canon Leon Morris, Principal, Ridley College, Melbourne.

The Rev'd. M.M. Thomas, Trinity College, Melbourne (Convenor).

### Terms of Reference

"The Liturgical Commission would be grateful if you would comment upon:--

1. Whether there is any Biblical or patristic ground for accepting belief in Prayers for the Dead.
2. How far Prayers for the Dead can be regarded as legal and legitimate according to the formularies of the Church of England.
3. Are there any forms of Prayer for the Departed which are regarded as theologically sound and others not?
4. In your opinion, is the prayer in "Australia '69" objectionable in any way? It would be useful also if members could comment upon Series II in the light of your discussion."

### Definitions

Initially, there seem to be widely different definitions of "Prayers for the Dead (Departed)" in operation in the Church. The sub-committee was thus grateful to note, and partially to accept, the tentative definition set out by Canon D.W.B. Robinson (Australian Church Record, April 16, 1970) as one that is a reasonably accurate description of what the phrase, ('Prayers for the Dead') is often taken to mean, i.e.,

"(i.e., prayers which seek some benefit for them).

However, as will be seen in this report, the sub-committee was agreed that such a definition, or description, is inadequate to describe prayers of either commendation, or commemoration, of the faithful departed in the context of prayers for the life of the Church - either in intercession or thanksgiving - in public worship.

Although this sub-committee did not actually attempt to formulate a formal definition of such prayer for the dead, it was unanimously agreed that any such definition should make reference to those prayers for the dead which include commendation, commemoration, as well as those which "seek some benefit for them."

### Procedure

This report begins with an attempt to answer the various questions in the terms of reference (above) and will include a series of appendices (not included in the edition. Available if required. M.M.T.) in which a variety of material is set out.

### Biblical and Patristic Grounds

#### A. The Bible

We are agreed that there is no specific Biblical material, either injunction or precedent, which would serve as an adequate basis for a doctrine of Prayers for the Dead.

The 2 possible Biblical precedents are 2 Macc. xii.43-45 and 2 Tim. i.18.

2 Macc. xii. 43-45 is, of course, subject to the normal interpretation of Article VI.

2 Tim. i. 18 involves a conclusion which is based on what is admitted to be but one of a number of possible interpretations of this verse. Thus J.N.D. Kelly, one of the most recent of commentators who accepts that this is an authentic example of early Christian Prayer for the Dead (indeed, in his view, a prayer of St. Paul) goes on:

"The prayer in question, it should be noted, is an exceedingly general one, amounting only to the commendation of the dead man to the divine mercy."  
(J.N.D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p.171 of the Harper's New Testament Commentaries ed.)

It is to be noted, however, that within the Anglican Communion and indeed within the sub-committee, where this widely held view is shared by some members, these two references do not exhaust the possible Scriptural bases of such a belief, or at least that there is a wider Scriptural support for the practice of commendation of the departed than these two verses indicate. The various concepts of our union with Christ, or of eternal life are interpreted by some to be germane to such practice.

### B. The Fathers

We are agreed that there is an abundant amount of patristic precedent for the practice of "prayer for the dead", and much of it quite free of any implicit doctrine of purgatory, of any kind, and certainly not of a "Romish doctrine".

The earliest examples of such prayers - dating from within the first century, and widely adjudged to be within New Testament times - come from inscriptions on sarcophagi etc. We note that the interpretation of some of these has in fact been challenged, I thus, e.g., whether the initials R.I.P., when used, might indicate requiescit, instead of requiescat, in pac...) but such a challenge is relevant only in a very few examples, the majority being patient of only the interpretation that we do have numbers of specific commendatory prayers for a departed Christian. Inscriptions are however not the only forms of such evidence.

Extant in the liturgies of both East and West, and in the sermons of such fathers as Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, and Athanasius of Alexandria, are specific and complex examples of such prayers. These prayers are, of course, varied in structure, content and theology. Most of them - whether short inscriptions almost identical with 2 Tim. i. 18, or the more elaborately constructed prayers (e.g., in Bishop Serapion's Prayer Book) reflect themes of commemorative and commendatory prayer, and only by a very strained type of exegesis could be interpreted to imply a "Romish doctrine of Purgatory".

However, we agree with the Liturgical Commissioners of the Church of England, who examined these same materials (see their Report on the Burial of the Dead, Alternative Services, Second Series, 1966) when they state that it exceedingly difficult to find in this rich source of material a consistent theology for such prayer.

There is no doubt however that there is sufficient patristic evidence to support those who contend that it was a continuous practice of the Churches in the Patristic period to commend and to commemorate the faithful dead in the context of public worship, and in the burial practices.

## Legality and Legitimacy

### A. Is the Practice Legal?

We are agreed that the practice of Prayers for the Dead is legal according to the formularies of the Church of England.

We quote from the judgement of Judge Gage, Chancellor, in the Coventry Consistory Court, Feb. 3, 1962, In re St. Mary the Virgin Ilmington.

"In Halsbury's Laws of England, 3rd ed., 1955, vol.13, p. 337 there occurs this passage:-

'The practice of praying for the dead is of much earlier date than the doctrine of purgatory. Prayers for the dead do not fall under the same condemnation as the Roman doctrine of Purgatory, and are legal. The use of such prayers has become much more general, as also are inscriptions on memorial tablets and stones containing words of supplication for peace and light for the departed.' "

Judge Gage, after further quotation from the Dean of Arches in Dupuis vs the Parishioners of Ogbourne St. George, goes on:-

"There is nothing that I know of, no canon of the Church, no measure, no authority, which prohibits prayers for the dead and renders them illegal."

### B. Is the Practice 'Illegitimate'?

We note, as well, in the opinion of some (notably Griffiths Thomas) that such a practice, as to the legality of which there is no serious question, might still be thought illegitimate. As in the case of Canon Robinson's definition (already noted) the section in the Prayer for the Whole State of Christ's Church militant here on earth (B.C.P. 1662):

"And we also bless thy holy name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear; beseeching thee to give us grace so to follow heir good examples, that with them we may be partakers of thy heavenly kingdom: "

is not a prayer for the dead, though it may still be thought a form of commemoration or commendation. In Griffiths Thomas's opinion it would be thought illegitimate to go beyond what in his opinion was, historically, the intention of the framers of B.C.P. 1662.

However, this sub-committee was unanimous neither in accepting or rejecting this opinion, as the historical evidence, and its interpretation, admits of other - and in the opinion of the English Liturgical Commissioners, - more cogent interpretation. (see pp. 104-111, of the Report, Alternative Services, Second Series, 1966).

## Sound or Unsound Prayers

We are unanimously agreed that there are Prayers for the Dead which are theologically sound, and yet others theologically unsound. Our problem, as might be expected, was to reach an adequate definition of such soundness.

We are, however, agreed, unanimously, on the criteria which belong to prayers that are "theologically sound". We would list these:-

1. The affirmation that God alone is the source of our hope for the departed.
2. The affirmation that we make our prayer "through" or "in" Jesus Christ, whose work for us men and our salvation is the only source of our assurance.

By this we mean to indicate, emphatically, that we would unanimously reject any prayer which seems to call in question, in any way, the effectiveness of Christ's redeeming work.

3. The affirmation of the various appropriate Scriptural promises and assurances which are traditional in such prayers.
4. Such prayers should be commendatory and/or commemorative in the context of a thanksgiving, especially for the work of Jesus Christ.

From the wide variety of prayers which we considered in our search for adequate criteria, we would note the following as examples of which the majority approved - and ask for your appreciation of the sources of these prayers.

1. Archbishop William Temple

"O Lord our God, from Whom neither death nor life can separate those who trust in Thy love, and whose love holds in its embrace thy children in this world and the next : so unite us to Thyself that in fellowship with Thee we may always be united to our loved ones whether here or there ; give us courage, constancy and hope ; through Him who died and was buried and rose again for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

2. The Roman Canon (traditional)

"Remember, Lord, the souls of thy servants and of thy handmaids, who have gone before us with the sign of faith, and slumber and sleep in peace. We beseech The, Lord, graciously to grant to them and to all who rest in Christ a place of refreshment, light and peace: through the same Christ our Lord. Amen."

3. Canon E.N. West (of U.S.A.)

"O Lord Jesus Christ, who, for the completeness of thine Incarnation didst ordain that even the dead should hear thy saving Gospel; Grant us, by thy victory over death, to know all souls as living unto thee, that we too may love them in that love from which naught shall be able to separate the sons of God ; through thy mercy, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen."

These we list simply as examples of prayers which we agree fulfil one or more of the various criteria with which we would operate. For completeness, as well to do justice to the type of criticism we used, we give an example of a prayer, widely used, but which we agree should be tightened, theologically.

Canon R.W. Lee (of Eorsham, quoted in Macnutt, The Prayer Manual, No. 819)

"Into thy hands, O God, we commend the souls of all our loved ones (especially....) as into the hands of a faithful creator and most loving Saviour : beseeching Thee to grant unto them pardon and peace and, of thine infinite goodness, wisdom and power, to work in them the good purpose of thy perfect will ; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"

We would agree that some such emendation as follows would improve this prayer:

"...and most loving Saviour; and as Thou alone dost grant pardon and peace, we beseech Thee, of thine infinite goodness, wisdom and power, to work in them....."

#### Australia '69 and Series 2

There is no doubt among us that the form of prayer in the Intercession of Australia '69 is NOT objectionable in any way.

We are agreed that this form of intercession is in no way repugnant to Scripture.

We are agreed that this form of intercession is both legal and legitimate, according to the received standards of doctrine and worship of this Church.

We are agreed that this form of prayer is theologically sound.

We are, of course, aware that there are those Anglicans who regard any such form of prayer as being, in some sense, a departure from practices which, with them are customary. But it is not possible to maintain the charge of novelty beyond specific local usage. There is sufficient evidence, from within the time of the English Reformation and the period which produces the B.C.P. 1662, when the debate on this subject was heated, prolonged and thorough, to show that even those who most vehemently opposed anything which might possibly be interpreted as a step towards a "Romish doctrine" were not unaccustomed, even though with some reluctance, to accept the theological validity and pastoral expediency of such commemorative forms of prayer, even in the context of a eucharist.

We are agreed that Australia '69 is much less open to possible suspicion on any traditional grounds against the practice of Prayers for the Dead than any form of Anglican revision since 1662.

Thus, while a majority agreed that the similar petition of Series 2, in similar context of thanksgiving and intercession in no way contravenes the accepted norms of doctrine and worship even of this (Australian) Church, we also agree that it is open to a much wider variety of interpretation, and thus, for some people, would be suggestive of mistaken theology. It is to be noted, of course, that the English Commission, being conscious of this possible variety of interpretation and theology, explicitly makes the petition an optional one. But our examination of this whole question has made us conscious of the surer pastoral 'touch' of Australia '69.

#### Other Comments and Suggestions

Our attention was, of course, focused on the recent controversy in the Australian Church Record, and we would all want to record our thanks for the careful consideration given this matter by the various members of the Liturgical Commission in that debate, and especially to the short letter of Canon D.W.B. Robinson which brought the theological aspect of that controversy to an end. We are of the opinion that the debate underlines the need for the Liturgical Commission to produce, or seek to have produced an examination of the Theology of Prayer, or at least to attempt to state, or restate the principles of corporate worship which are presupposed in its services.

CANON ROBINSON ON AUSTRALIA '69

As a member of the Standing Liturgical Commission who is an Evangelical, may I state:

1. That I consider all prayers for the departed (i.e., prayers which seem some benefit for them) to be unbiblical and also to contravene the principles of doctrine and worship laid down in the standard of our Church, and therefore illegal;
2. That - against my friend and colleague Dr. Sharwood - I consider it would be improper for the Commission to make available forms of prayer for the departed, even at the request of some section in the Church;
3. That I do not consider the words "We leave in your keeping N" to be a prayer for the departed in the sense defined above, or in any sense in which Reformed churchmen have traditionally objected to such prayers, but rather to be an acknowledgement of, and trustful acquiescence in, the will of God Who has removed a Christian from this life and taken him to Himself.
4. That, while I consider these words would more appropriately be used at the committal of the body in a burial service (for which they were first suggested) and are only really appropriate in their present position in regard to someone of whom the congregation has just been bereaved, the words themselves are not ambiguous, and are not capable in their ordinary grammatical sense of being construed as asking a benefit for the departed. (Even should they be ineptly used in regard to someone long dead, they would still not be erroneous in substance, though the notion of "leaving in God's keeping" would be otiose);
5. That I do not approve of allowing a service to include doctrinally doubtful words to be used optionally by such as can agree with them; and that the reason for the words under discussion being in brackets in Australia '69 was not to permit their omission by any who might object to their doctrine, but because it was thought they would only occasionally be appropriate;
6. That, if it be argued that the words, though not grammatically a prayer for the departed, might nevertheless, by vague association, be used by someone as if they were, this objection would apply equally against the petition in the 1662 service "that with (the faithful departed) we may be partakers of Thy heavenly kingdom." Indeed, I believe the Australia '69 words may be in less danger of misconstruction than are the 1662 words.

May I observe incidentally that Evangelicals have, so far as I know, never objected to the words "Father, in Thy gracious keeping / Leave we now Thy servant sleeping," which conclude each verse of John Ellerton's hymn "Now the labourer's task is o'er," found in the evangelical hymn books Hymnal Companion and Church Hymnal for the Christian Year.