Of the great many books and articles that have been published on Erasmus in recent years, including some excellent works on his religious thought, we have not been able to find even one that has attempted to make a careful analysis of Erasmus' views on prayer. This omission is doubly surprising when we remember that already in the *Enchiridion*, his first major religious work, he mentioned prayer as one of the two basic weapons needed to carry on the Christian life, and that later in his maturity he wrote two significant works on prayer as well as publishing many moving prayers. While some scholars have been too preoccupied with doctrinal analysis to consider Erasmus' devotional writings, others have probably not expected much wisdom or originality on that subject from the Prince of Humanists. Auer, in an analysis of the *Enchiridion*, has even concluded that Erasmus' discussion was superficial, for he had no mystical gift and little experience with prayer. "Man tut wohl nicht Unrecht, wenn man sagt, dass er nicht sonderlich viel gebetet hat."

In contradiction to this negative judgment stands the fact that Erasmus' writings on prayer were actually quite popular in the 16th Century. Bataillon has established that they had a considerable impact in Spain, even influencing the famous work on prayer by Luis da Grenada. And in Germany, Althaus has proven that Erasmus' prayers were very popular in the Protestant prayerbooks, although his name was often suppressed or forgotten.

In direct opposition to Auer, both Kohls and Halkin have asserted that Erasmus was a man of deep personal prayer, but still only Bainton and Renaudet have attempted to deal with the treatise on prayer itself and they content themselves with relatively brief summaries. Since it could be argued that no interpretation of Erasmus would be complete without some consideration of his views on prayer as a vital part of the Christian life, this deficiency is again surprising and suggests that perhaps the methodology for analyzing prayer and identifying significant historical changes is defective or not widely understood.

We begin with the hypothesis that there are a number of different types of prayer, that there are alternative approaches, not simply supplementary insights, although the weight of tradition and common terminology sometimes obscures the fact. Since prayer is not really an end in itself but a means to the full realization of the Christian life, different visions of the nature of that realization should generate different patterns of prayer. If Erasmus was fighting hard to maintain a distinctive theological position, against the conservative Catholics on the one hand and against the Reform party on the other, he should have developed a distinctive approach to prayer that was appropriate to his commitments. Thus a detailed analysis of his writings on prayer is important not only for completeness but also to help identify and substantiate the distinctiveness of his Christian Humanism. Did he have something particular to say about prayer, or on this subject was he simply falling back on the traditions of the *Devotio Moderna* in which he was raised?

Because of the limitations of space, we will restrict our attention to the treatise on prayer itself, the *Modus Orandi Deum*. It was written in 1524 and was published the following year by Froben in Basel, and appears in the fifth volume of the *Opera Omnia*. We will not be attempting to identify its sources. We assume that Erasmus was working with traditional materials and had no conscious desire to break sharply with them, and yet as
we will try to show he had his distinctive way of reformulating this legacy. Our approach will concentrate rather on themes and attempt to identify the basic structure of thought underlying his various recommendations. At first glance this treatise, Modus Orandi Deum, seems somewhat flawed and perhaps hastily composed. It had no real beginning or ending, no introduction or conclusion, and it rambled along without making clear its major objectives. Moreover it was easily sidetracked into debating certain controversial issues like the cult of the saints and the conduct of public worship. Nevertheless, upon further analysis, it reveals a coherent approach not only for understanding the role of prayer, both public and private, as a vital part of the Christian life, but also for the reformation of many of its customary usages.

While Erasmus did not single it out as clearly and decisively as he might have, he did have a basic principle underlying his discussion of prayer, namely that prayer was an aid in that process of moral transformation that essentially characterized the Christian life. Or as he put it, it was not designed to change God, but to change those who were praying.

But whatever happens in prayer, it pertains to us, not to God. For God is not charmed by hearing His praises, as if He were a man, but in praising Him we more and more come to understand and esteem His greatness. When we remember and exaggerate our evil deeds, it is not done in order that He might be changed by our prayer from wrath to favor, but so that we, acknowledging the greatness of our calamity, should seek after His mercy more vigorously.\(^8\)

Consequently Erasmus was very alert to the relationship between prayer and morality, and used this principle to pick and choose among the traditional elements of prayer.

Among the possible types of prayer, for instance, Erasmus concentrated his attention upon petition, the basic prayer being a plea for divine assistance, for transforming inner strength. Intercessory prayer and confession were treated as secondary topics.\(^9\) Acknowledgement of one's weakness and need for example was a vital step in preparing for petition, but Erasmus had no extended discussion of confession, and no mention of contrition or compunction, perhaps because of his reluctance to stress fear and punishment.\(^10\) His was not a penitentially dominated approach.

Even more interesting was his handling of adoration and thanksgiving. As the first topic broached in the treatise, it seemed to have a prominent and independent value, but he later made clear that it too was only secondary and ancillary to petition.\(^11\) Praising God made the one praying more eager. In other words, this treatise showed no interest in or even awareness of the mystical elevation of the soul in prayer. The mental prayer of silent waiting before God was not mentioned. Even when he referred to the silent sighing of the soul, the difference between silent and vocal prayer turned out to be primarily the difference between public and private worship.\(^12\) Although of course deep and sincere feeling was mandatory, Erasmus had focused his thought solely upon petition and the conditions that made it effective.

Erasmus' basic principle also provided a criterion for the reform of prayer practices, namely that whatever was not conducive to moral improvement was an abuse or corruption of prayer that needed changing. In particular and most dramatically he criticized kings and magistrates for too much praying.\(^13\) When excessive prayer prevented the exercise of duty, it was an escape from responsibility and showed a superstitious misunder-
standing of the nature of prayer. Not the quantity, but the quality of prayer made a man
pious and faithful before God. Men with public functions should pray briefly before acting
that they might act with wisdom and justice, but if they have more time, it was preferable
for them to study divine precepts, Proverbs, Plutarch, Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, Isocrates,
Xenophon, or politics, ethics and economics in general, rather than consume their time
with the monastic offices. The prince has prayed enough if he has taken care that the
magistracies have been committed to men of integrity, if he avoids war, if he keeps power
out of the hands of the stupid, if he controls witches with a minimum of bloodshed, if
he stabilizes public discipline with holy laws and customs. But if these duties were neglect-
ed and trouble came, only hypocrisy and false religion would prevail. Jesus never turned
away the needy; St. Gregory abandoned prayer to hear petitions; even the Emperor Hadrian
stopped to help.

Erasmus also criticized some popular practices as placing a superstitious reliance on the
quantity of prayer rather than its quality, although with his customary qualifications.
Attendance at Mass early every morning could be good, but frequently it was simply the
superstition that all would go well that day if begun in Church, as with the soldier that
was planning to rob the innocent. Daily prayer to the Virgin could be superstitious,
presumably in the same way, although Erasmus objects even more to the use of Biblical
material that properly pertains to Jesus or the Church. If worshippers were to be edified
properly at Church, prayers must not be too long; they must not bore or weary, for nothing
was worse than a satiates of good things. For the same reason Erasmus wished that the
whole worship of God, hymns, teaching, and prayers, should be in a language known to
the people and thus clearly understood by all. In public prayer as well as private, unsuit-
able or immoral petitions and practices must be eliminated. In particular Erasmus objected
to praying for military victory or paying undue respect to a prince in the worship. Prayers
should be offered for all Christian princes, and indeed even for the salvation of the Turks.

Excessive prayer was also a failure of "certain monks." While earlier Erasmus had com-
mended the monastic offices as an example of doing all things with prayer, here he could
not resist protesting against the weariness and boredom and joylessness that existed among
some monks because of the obligation of extended prayer. If such prayer deadened the
spirit, it destroyed the true value of prayer, driving men away from God instead of
drawing them nearer. When some argued that it nevertheless trained the monks in obedience
and patience, Erasmus answered that it would be better to have them break rocks to develop
patience than to misuse the sacred hymns and prayers of the Church. If prayer was done
under compulsion, it was no longer edifying, and if prayer was not edifying, it was no long-
er truly prayer but a fraud and an offense.

At the personal level as well, excessive or prolix prayer was a problem for Erasmus,
especially in light of the Biblical injunctions to constant and unceasing prayer. Or more
precisely, how could one avoid repetition in the manner of the Gentiles and still pray with-
out ceasing? If repetition meant "loquacity" in the pattern of the Greek poets, the priests
of Baal, or the heretics who chanted night and day, it was clearly excluded, but if it
meant expressing the deep desires of the heart, it was very acceptable on the basis of Jesus
example. Consequently continuous prayer meant never giving up the practice of earnest
prayer, not praying without interruption. In another formulation, Erasmus described un-
ceasing prayer as a figure of speech for frequent earnest prayer, or perhaps all of life became
a perpetual prayer in so far as it was dominated by the constant pious desire for the greatest good. In light of the basic function of prayer, to change the one praying, not to change God, repetition became unacceptable if it was a cover for immorality as with the Pharisees, if it was a substitute for good works, if it was used as a way to impress others or as a basis of pride. On the other hand, if it kept alive an awareness of God's presence and goodness in the midst of life's activities and kept alive the hope for future fulfillment in Heaven, then all of life became a constant prayer even when eating and sleeping.

If we are to understand more completely how prayer reinforced morality and good works rather than becoming a substitute for them, we need to look at Erasmus' concept of the way prayer worked. The basic function of prayer was to secure divine strength and assistance in the continuous struggle against evil, but its effectiveness depended upon its merit. In sharp contrast with Luther's effort to eliminate merit from prayer, Erasmus accepted it as the basis for his whole approach. God heard only those prayers that deserved to be heard. Consequently Erasmus was obliged to specify the bases of this merit and the factors that produced it. In regard to the former, he generally followed tradition and stressed the necessity of having the right intention, i.e., the proper inner feelings and attitudes. Prayers were heard in proportion to their sincerity, their earnestness, their intensity, their humility, their accordance with God's loving will. "To desire vehemently what God has promised us is just like meriting it."

More interesting and original, however, was Erasmus' implicit belief that prayer had a second function. Not only was it to be the expression of right intention in seeking God's help, but it was itself instrumental in creating that right intention. In other words, in explicitly discussing the basic purpose of prayer Erasmus at two points in his treatise argued that prayer in effect worked indirectly by first stirring up the correct inner feelings and attitudes within the one or ones praying, which then in turn won God's favor. Such a distinction for Erasmus immediately shifted the center of the analysis from psychology to rhetoric, from examining the inner man to analyzing the proper form and content of the prayers themselves. A prayer that did not edify was failing in one of its basic functions.

If prayer functioned like an oration, seeking to convert the listener, it could be analyzed with such traditional rhetorical categories as conquistio, amplificatio, argumentatio and expositatio, addressing God with all the devices for persuading a powerful human ruler. He could be aroused and flattered. The petition must be shown to be in accord with His power, with His will, with His customary action, and with His obligations, i.e., in this case His obligations to His own promises, not to man's merit. All of this was appropriate to the form of prayer, to make a more persuasive appeal for God's favor, but in reality everything was designed not to change God but to transform the inner attitudes of the one offering the prayer. In other words, the character of prayer was really determined by the human listeners; God would respond to the resulting deeper sincerity and earnestness. Praise made the believer more appreciative of God's greatness; confession made him more aware of his need for forgiveness. Devices to arouse God's attention were really to stimulate man's vigor and by professing trust in God's promises alone man was warned not to ascribe anything to himself but to glory in God alone. Likewise calling upon God to keep His promises was designed to strengthen man's trust in His goodness, and entreating Him by the death and resurrection of His Son was to deepen an awareness of the true and only source of salvation.
For our Humanist some forms of prayer were clearly more edifying than others. For instance, a prayer needed to be properly addressed. If aid was sought against various enemies, that petition should be directed to the Father; if reconciliation, to the Son; if strength, to the Holy Spirit. In general the prayer should be addressed to that aspect of the divine that was appropriate to the particular request in question, as in the pattern, send wisdom, Oh eternal wisdom of the Father. Erasmus' own prayers were all carefully and appropriately addressed.

For the same reasons Erasmus was concerned about the language used in praying. While the believer was not restricted to the words of the Lord's Prayer, he strongly recommended the use of Biblical words and phrases. As in a humanist oration, correct language did make a difference. The inspired words of the Bible were not only safer, but they were also more efficacious, for the words themselves possessed a certain *energeia* and God recognized His own words more freely. Or turned around, according to Erasmus' principle, this is to say that Biblical words had a power to stimulate the inner man and strengthen his confidence that he would be heard. Still Erasmus did not rule out the simple words of the sincere heart, and also recommended the collects of the early Church as excellent models of compact, sincere expression.

Beside these factors, Erasmus also favored short prayers appropriate to the context, as already noted, and he mentioned the need for correct order, although he failed to develop that factor apart from pointing to the Lord's Prayer as the supreme model. Even more important, however, in regard to the Lord's Prayer was its function in defining correct content. Effective prayer needed to be correct in substance as well as in form. Many aroused God's wrath by praying for the wrong things, such as the injury of an enemy. Only those matters mentioned in the Lord's Prayer were permissible and in accord with God's promises; praying for one's personal advantage was never justified unless it was subordinate to the desire to serve God more effectively. Those who prayed for health in order to enjoy the world more fully were wrong and unchristian.

In summary, we can conclude that although he was largely working with traditional materials, Erasmus did come up with a characteristic approach to prayer that was consistent with his interpretation of the Christian life and the relationship between God and Man. Prayer played a vital function in the process of moral transformation that was the essence of being Christian. It could not be a substitute for morality or even sharply separated from it. Indeed it worked both directly and indirectly to build up the moral man, through securing God's help in the midst of human weakness and through edification. It had the distinctive role of helping to bring about the very changes that it sought from God. Such an approach was clearly different from the mystical understanding of prayer. It did not seek ecstasy; it did not rise above a concern for petition, and yet it had its own type of profundity and deep sense of God's reality and man's need. Such an approach also differed from Luther and did not share Luther's effort to eliminate merit and to eliminate a concern for quality in prayer. While thus refusing to go along with the new Lutheran position, Erasmus did not accept everything in the older Catholic tradition either but picked and chose those elements that were consistent with his vision of Christian Humanism. The introduction of Humanistic rhetoric was the climax of that effort at synthesis.

In other words, the distinctiveness of Erasmus' approach to prayer lies in his integration of prayer with the process of moral elevation. Moral elevation was the essence of the Chris-
tian life, and it meant a change of inner attitudes, the raising of one's sight from immediate, selfish desires to a more noble and exalted concern for the common welfare of all of God's sons. Consequently Erasmus stressed the proper form and the moralizing content of prayer, so that it would in fact be elevating. Consequently his prayers often seemed abstract and formal, because the elevating function took precedence over the need for personal expressiveness, in sharp contrast with Luther's concrete and personal pattern. This priority of elevation also explained why Erasmus saw no major difference between private and public prayer. The moral function of prayer was uppermost in his mind.

In conclusion to further clarify Erasmus' originality, one might ask whether he has in fact developed a new approach to prayer suitable to Christian Humanism, or whether he has not largely drawn his insights from the Devotio Moderna. A thorough answer to this question would require a detailed comparison of Erasmus with the major Devotio writers, something impossible at this point, but a few brief comments might still be in order. In so far as Erasmus was concerned with the purity of intention, with earnestness, sincerity, inwardness, and humility, he was following the main line of Devotio tradition. In so far as he also had a tendency to see prayer as a form of meditation, a way of controlling and changing inner attitudes and feelings, here too he was in accord with Devotio tradition, where meditation was of central concern. Nevertheless for Erasmus the type and function of meditation has shifted significantly. Whereas for the Devotio meditation was in a sense an end in itself, designed to cultivate the affections, to stimulate an intense attachment to God that made all else of little importance, for Erasmus meditation was subordinated to morality, designed to establish and maintain higher moral ideals and motivation. Consequently Erasmus' approach had a distinctly this-worldly cast in contrast to the other-worldliness of the Devotio. While both would oppose empty formalistic prayer, Erasmus was concerned with prolixity, with excessive time devoted to prayer at the expense of moral responsibility, whereas the Devotio sought to extend prayer as greatly as possible and favored a simplified life where activity would not disrupt meditation. While Erasmus turned to rhetoric for guidance and inspiration, seeing the prayer itself as a kind of persuasive exhortation, the Devotio, particularly with Mauburnus and Gansfort, turned to various systems or schema for controlling and disciplining the mind. Whereas Erasmus saw all of prayer as petition or subordinate to petition, the Devotio sought to rise above petition to adoration. In other words, while both envisioned the Christian life as a process of growth in cooperation with divine grace, Erasmus saw it as growth of moral character in service to God while the Devotio saw rather the growth of the devout soul in inner preoccupation with God, and each developed an understanding of prayer appropriate to their basic orientation. Each type of prayer had its own legitimacy, its own profound sense of God's reality and a warmth of human feeling in response to that reality, and yet they were different. Erasmus had no desire to break sharply with the devotional heritage of the Church and yet he did significantly reformulate it to fit a new context.

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Notes

3 Paul Althaus d. al., Forschungen zur Evangelischen Gebetsliteratur (Hildesheim, 1966), p. 25, 32, 66-73; these results are summarized by Wilhelad Paul Eckert, Erasmus von Rotterdam, Werk und Wirkung (Köl n, 1967), II, 463-464, 476-479; the popularity of Erasmus' discussion of the Lord's Prayer is also described, Ibid., 468.


5 Roland H. Bainton, Erasmus of Christendom (New York, 1969), 244; A. Renaudet, Études Érasmiennes (1521-1529) (Paris, 1939), 185-186; like Auer, Renaudet feels that Erasmus falls short of the depth of mysticism, Ibid., 176-177.

6 Ibid., 13, 43.

7 J. Clericus (ed.), Desiderii Erasmi Roter dami Opera Omnia (Leiden, 1703-1706), V, col. 1101A-1132E.

8 Ibid., 1127E; on the basic purpose of prayer, cf. 1102E-1103A, 1110F-1111A.

9 Intercessory prayer was mentioned as one type of petition, Ibid., 1104A; it was stressed as one defense of the cult of the saints, 1117A-1118E; and it was mentioned as one type of appropriate short prayer, 1132B.

10 The chief discussion of confession occurs in Ibid., 1114B; cf. also 1111C, 1128E, and 1130E.

11 Ibid., 1101A-1103A; 1126A-1127E; 1111F.

12 Ibid., 1128A-1128C.

13 Ibid., 1129D-1130D.

14 Ibid., 1130A.

15 Ibid., 1132A.

16 Ibid., 1132C-1132D.

17 Ibid., 1128D-1129A.

18 Ibid., 1128D; although earlier he only advocated encouraging the people to read the collects and lessons in the vernacular to themselves, Ibid., 1126A-1126B.