

The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic

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Text taken from: <http://www.nashvilledominican.org/our-vowed-life/st-dominic/nine-ways-of-prayer>. July 15, 2016.

We must praise our Redeemer, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who has deigned to choose such a servant for Himself and make him a father to us, so that his institution of the regular life might mold us and the example of his luminous holiness inflame us. (Bl. Jordan of Saxony)

INTRODUCTION

The *Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic* is a treasured Dominican document on St. Dominic's manner of praying. It was written by an anonymous author, probably at Bologna, between 1260 and 1288. Sister Cecilia of the Monastery of St. Agnes at Bologna (who had received the habit from St. Dominic) and others who had known him personally were most likely the source of this information.

These ways of prayer were the actual practice of our Holy Father. Standing, bowing, kneeling—St. Dominic knew that the gestures of the body could powerfully dispose the soul to prayer. In this experience of bodily prayer, the soul in turn is lifted to God in an act of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication. These ways of prayer are a glimpse into the inner life of St. Dominic and his intense love for God.

I.

This way of prayer was the beginning of his devotion: bowing deeply.



First of all, bowing humbly before the altar as if Christ, whom the altar signifies, were really and personally present and not just symbolically. As it says, 'The prayer of the person who humbles himself will pierce the clouds' (Ecclus. 35:21). He used sometimes to say to the brethren the text from Judith, 'The prayer of the humble and meek has always been pleasing to you' (Judith 9:16). It was by humility that the Canaanite woman obtained what she wanted (Matt. 15:22-28), and so did the prodigal son (Luke 15:18-24). Also, 'I am not worthy to have you come under my roof' (Matt. 8:8). 'Lord, humble my spirit deeply because, Lord, I am utterly humbled before you' (Ecclus. 7:19; Psalms 118). So the holy father, standing with his body erect, would bow his head and his heart humbly before Christ his Head, considering his own servile condition and the outstanding nobility of Christ, and giving himself up entirely to venerating him.

He taught the brethren to do this whenever they passed before a crucifix showing the humiliation of Christ, so that Christ, who was humbled for our sake, might particularly see us humbled before his greatness. Similarly he told

the brethren to humble themselves like this before the whole Trinity whenever 'Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit' was recited solemnly.

II.

St. Dominic also often used to pray throwing himself down on the ground, flat on his face, and then his heart would be pricked with compunction...



St. Dominic often used to pray by throwing himself face down on the ground, and saying "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). He would quote the repentant words of David (2 Sam 24:17), Psalm 43 ("my soul is laid low in the dust, my heart is stuck to the earth") or Psalm 118 ("my soul sticks to the floor; make me alive according to your promise"). He exhorted the young men, "if you cannot weep for your own sins, because you have none, still there are many sinners to be directed to God's love and mercy . . . and for their sake too Jesus wept when he saw them." Dominic also often used to pray throwing himself down on the ground, flat on his face, and then his heart would be pricked with compunction and he would blush at himself and say, sometimes loudly enough for it actually to be heard, the words from the gospel, 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner' (Luke 18:13). And with great devotion and reverence he would recite the words of David, 'It is I who have sinned and done unjustly' (2 Sam. 24:17). He would weep and groan passionately and then say, 'I am not worthy to look upon the height of heaven, because of the greatness of my sin;

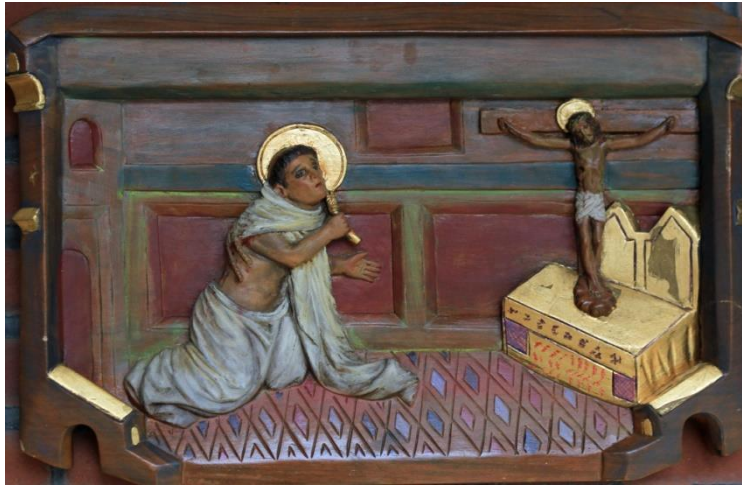
I have provoked your anger and done evil in your sight' (Prayer of Manasseh 9-10). He would also say, emphatically and devoutly, the verse from Psalm 43:25, 'My soul is laid low in the dust, my belly is stuck to the earth.' And again, 'My soul is stuck to the floor, make me come alive according to your word' (Ps. 118:25).

Sometimes, wanting to teach the brethren with what reverence they ought to pray, he would say to them, 'The Magi, those devout kings, entered the house and found the child with Mary, his mother (Matt. 2:11). Now it is certain that we have found him too. God and man, with Mary his handmaid, so come, let us fall down and worship before God, let us weep before the Lord who made us' (Ps. 94:6).

He exhorted the young men too, saying to them, 'If you cannot weep for your own sins, because you have none, still there are many sinners to be directed towards mercy and love, for whose sake the prophets and apostles groaned in distress, and for their sake too Jesus wept bitterly when he saw them (Luke 19:41), and similarly the holy David wept and said, "I saw the half-hearted and I pined away"' (Ps. 118:158).

III.

No one, however innocent, should withdraw himself from following this holy example...



For this reason, rising up from the ground, he used to take the discipline with an iron chain saying, 'Your discipline has set me straight towards my goal' (Ps. 17:36). This is why the whole order determined that all the brethren, out of respect for the memory of St. Dominic's example, should take the discipline on their bare backs with sticks of wood every ferial day after Compline, saying the *Miserere* or the *De Profundis*. They were to do this either for their own sins or for those of others whose gifts support them. So no one, however innocent, should withdraw himself from following this holy example.

IV.

He was so accustomed to genuflecting that, when he was on a journey, whether in a hostel after the toils of the road or on the road itself, while the others were sleeping or resting, he would return to his genuflections as to his own special art and his own personal service. This way of prayer he taught more by the example of his practice than by what he said.



After this, St. Dominic, standing before the altar or in the chapter room, would fix his gaze on the crucifix, looking intently at Christ on the cross and kneeling down over and over again, a hundred times perhaps; sometimes he would even spend the whole time from after Compline until midnight getting up and kneeling down again, like the apostle James, and like the leper in the gospel who knelt down and said, 'Lord, if you will you can make me clean' (Mark 1:40), and like Stephen who knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7:59). And a great confidence would grow in our holy father Dominic, confidence in God's mercy for himself and for all sinners, and for the protection of the novices whom he used to send out all over the place to preach to souls. And sometimes he could not contain his voice, but the brethren would hear him saying, 'To you, Lord, I will cry, do not turn away from me in silence, lest in your silence I become like those who go down into the pit' (Ps. 27:1), and other such words from sacred scripture.

At other times, however, he spoke in his heart and his voice was not heard at all (1 Sam.1:13), and he would remain quietly on his knees, his mind caught up in wonder, and this sometimes lasted a long time. Sometimes it seemed from the very way he looked that he had penetrated heaven in his mind, and then he would suddenly appear radiant with joy, wiping away the abundant tears running down his face. At such times he would come to be in an intensity of desire, like a thirsty man coming to a spring of water (Ecclus. 26:15), or a traveler at last approaching his own country. Then he would grow more forceful and insistent, and his movements would display great composure and agility as he stood up and knelt down.

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V.

Our holy father Dominic would stand upright before the altar, not leaning on anything or supported by anything, but with his whole body standing erect on his feet. Sometimes he would hold his hands out, open, before his breast, like an open book, and then he would stand with great reverence and devotion, as if he were reading in the presence of God. ...At other times he joined his hands and held them tightly fastened together in front of his eyes.



Sometimes, when he was in a priory, our holy father Dominic would stand upright before the altar, not leaning on anything or supported by anything, but with his whole body standing erect on his feet. Sometimes he would hold his hands out, open, before his breast, like an open book, and then he would stand with great reverence and devotion, as if he were reading in the presence of God. At such times he seemed to be meditating, savoring the words of God in his mouth and, as it were, enjoying reciting them to himself. He had made his own the Lord's practice which we read about in Luke 4:16, 'Jesus went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as it was his custom to do, and stood up to read.' And it says in Psalm 105:30, 'Phineas stood and prayed and the pestilence stopped.'

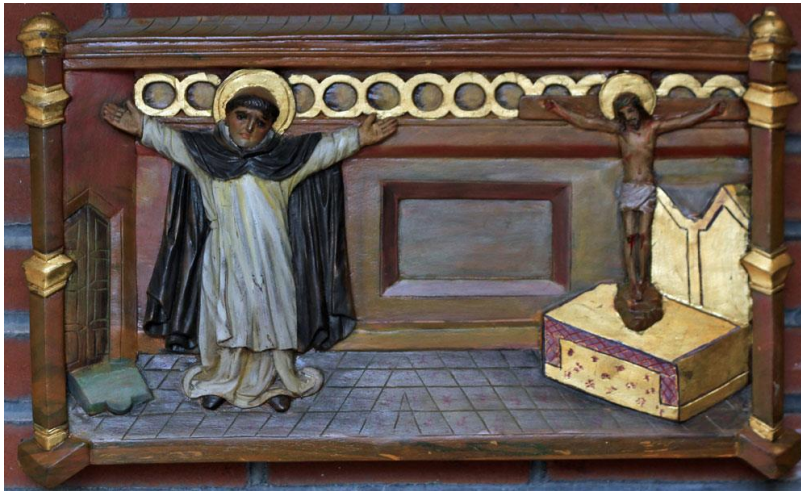
At other times he joined his hands and held them tightly fastened together in front of his eyes, hunching himself up. At other times he raised his hands to his shoulders, in the manner of a priest saying Mass, as if he wanted to fix his ears more attentively on something that was being said to him by someone else. If you had seen his devotion as he stood there, erect in prayer, you would have thought you were looking at a prophet conversing with an angel or with God, now talking, now listening, now thinking quietly about what had been revealed to him.

When he was travelling, he would steal sudden moments of prayer, unobtrusively, and would stand with his whole mind instantaneously concentrated on heaven, and soon you would have heard him pronouncing, with the utmost enjoyment and relish, some lovely text from the very heart of sacred scripture, which he would seem to have drawn fresh from the Savior's wells (Is. 12:3).

The brethren used to be greatly moved by this example, when they saw their father and master praying in this way, and the more devout among them found it the best possible instruction in how to pray continuously and reverently, 'as the eyes of a handmaid are on the hands of her mistress and as the eyes of servants are on the hands of their masters' (Ps. 122:2).

VI.

Our holy father Dominic was also seen praying with his hands and arms spread out like a cross, stretching himself to the limit and standing as upright as he possibly could.



Sometimes, as I was told personally by someone who had seen it, our holy father Dominic was also seen praying with his hands and arms spread out like a cross, stretching himself to the limit and standing as upright as he possibly could. This was how he prayed when God restored the boy Napoleon to life at his prayer at San Sisto in Rome, both in the sacristy and in the church during the Mass in which he rose from the ground, as we were told by that devout and holy sister, Cecilia, who was present with a great crowd of others and saw it all. Like Elijah when he raised the widow's son, he stretched himself out over the boy's body (1 Kings 17:21).

He also prayed in the same way when he rescued the English pilgrims near Toulouse, when they were nearly drowned in the river (cf. 97).

This was how the Lord prayed when he hung on the cross, his hands and arms stretched out, when, with great cries and weeping, his prayer was heard because of his reverence (Heb. 5:7).

The holy man of God, Dominic, did not use this kind of prayer regularly, but only when, by God's inspiration, he knew that some great wonder was going to occur by virtue of his prayer. He neither forbade the brethren to pray like this nor did he encourage it. When he raised the boy from the dead, praying standing with his arms and hands stretched out like a cross, we do not know what he said. Perhaps he used the words of Elijah, 'Lord my God, I beseech you, let the soul of this boy return within him' (1 Kings 17:21), just as he followed his manner of praying. But the brethren and the sisters and the cardinals and the rest who were there were paying attention to his manner of praying, which was unfamiliar and remarkable to them, and so they did not take in the words he spoke. And afterwards they could not ask the holy and extraordinary man, Dominic, about it, because in this deed he had shown himself to be an object of awe and reverence to them all.

However he did sometimes recite seriously, deliberately and carefully, the texts from the Psalms which refer to this manner of praying, such as Psalm 87:10. 'I cried to you, Lord, all day long I have stretched out my hands to you' with the rest of that psalm, and Psalm 142:6-7, 'I have stretched out my hands to you, my soul is like soil without water before you, speedily hear me, Lord.'

This makes it possible for anyone who prays devoutly to understand the teaching of this father, praying this way when he desired to be extraordinarily moved towards God, or rather, when he felt himself being moved by God in a particularly expansive way, through some hidden inspiration, in view of some special grace for himself or for somebody else, on the basis of David's doctrine, Elijah's symbolism, Christ's love and Dominic's devotion.

VII.

He was also often found stretching his whole body up towards heaven in prayer, like a choice arrow shot straight up from a bow (Is. 49:2).



He was also often found stretching his whole body up towards heaven in prayer, like a choice arrow shot straight up from a bow (Is. 49:2). He had his hands stretched right up above his head, joined together or slightly open as if to catch something from heaven. And it is believed that at such times he received an increase of grace and was caught up in rapture, and that his prayer won from God, for the order he had founded, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and, for himself and for his brethren, such delight and enjoyment in putting the Beatitudes into practice that each one would consider himself blessed in the most profound poverty, in bitter grief, in severe persecution, in great hunger and thirst for righteousness, in all the cares and worries of mercy (Matt. 5:3-10), and that they would all consider it a pleasure to observe the commandments with devotion and to follow the evangelical counsels. At such times the holy father seemed suddenly to enter the Holy of Holies and the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2). And so, after this kind of prayer, he bore himself like a prophet, as is related in his miracles, whether he was rebuking or dispensing or preaching. Just one example must be given here, briefly, for edification's sake.

Once at Bologna, after praying like this, the holy master Dominic asked the advice of some of the senior brethren about some decision that had to be made. This was his normal practice because, as he said, something may be shown to one good man which is not shown to another, as can be seen in the prophets. The sacristan then came and called one of the people taking part in this council to go to the women's church, to hear a confession, I think. He added, stupidly, though not, as he thought, loudly enough to be heard by the holy master Dominic, 'A beautiful lady is asking for you; come at once.' Then the Spirit came upon St. Dominic and he began to be disturbed in himself, and the councilors looked at him with fear. Then he told the sacristan to come to him and he asked him, 'What did you say?' He replied, 'I was asking for a priest to come to the church.' And the father said, 'Reproach yourself and confess the sin which came to your lips. The God who made all things made me aware of what you thought were your secret words.' And he disciplined him there severely and long, so that those who were present were moved to compassion because of his bruises. Then he said, 'Go, my son; now you have learned how to gaze at a woman in the future. Make sure you do not judge of her appearance. And you too should pray that God will give you chaste eyes.' In this way he knew what was hidden, rebuked the brother's folly and punished him and taught him, as he had foreseen it all in prayer. And the brethren were amazed that this was what he said had to be done. And the holy master said, 'All our justice, by comparison with that of God, is nothing better than filth' (Is. 64:6).

So the holy father did not remain long in this kind of prayer, but returned to himself as if he were coming from far away, and at such times he seemed to be a stranger in the world, as could easily be seen from his appearance and his behavior. While he was praying he was sometimes clearly heard by the brethren saying, as the prophet did, 'Hear the voice of my supplication while I pray to you and while I lift up my hands to your holy temple' (Ps. 27:2). And the holy master taught the brethren to pray like this, both by his words and by his example. He quoted from Psalm 133:2, 'At night lift up your hands to the holy place,' and Psalm 140:2, 'The raising of my hands like an evening sacrifice.'

VIII.

Sober and alert and anointed with a spirit of devotion which he had drawn from the words of God which had been sung in choir or during the meal, he would settle himself down to read or pray, recollecting himself in himself and fixing himself in the presence of God.



The holy father Dominic also had another beautiful way of praying, full of devotion and grace. After the canonical hours and the grace which is said in common after meals the father would go off quickly to some place where he could be alone, in a cell or somewhere. Sober and alert and anointed with a spirit of devotion which he had drawn from the words of God which had been sung in choir or during the meal, he would settle himself down to read or pray, recollecting himself in himself and fixing himself in the presence of God. Sitting there quietly, he would open some book before him, arming himself first with the sign of the cross, and then he would read. And he would be moved in his mind as delightfully as if he heard the Lord speaking to him. As the Psalm says, 'I will hear what the Lord God is saying in me, because he will speak peace to his people and upon his saints, and to those who turn to him with all their heart' (Ps. 84:9). It was as if he were arguing with a friend; at one moment he would appear to be feeling impatient, nodding his head energetically, then he would seem to be listening quietly, then you would see him disputing and struggling, and laughing and weeping all at once, fixing then lowering his gaze, then again speaking quietly and beating his breast. If anyone was inquisitive

enough to want to spy on him secretly, he would find that the holy father Dominic was like Moses, who went into the innermost desert and saw the burning bush and the Lord speaking and calling to him to humble himself (Exod. 3:1ff). The man of God had a prophetic way of passing over quickly from reading to prayer and from meditation to contemplation.

When he was reading like this on his own, he used to venerate the book and bow to it and sometimes kiss it, particularly if it was a book of the gospels or if he was reading the words which Christ had spoken with his own lips. And sometimes he used to hide his face and turn it aside, or he would bury his face in his hands or hide it a little in his scapular. And then he would also become anxious and full of yearning, and he would also rise a little, respectfully, and bow as if he were thanking some very special person for favors received. Then, quite refreshed and at peace in himself, he would continue reading his book.

IX.

Sometimes he went aside from his companion or went on ahead or, more likely, lingered far behind; going on his own he would pray as he walked, and a fire was kindled in his meditation (Ps. 38:4).



He also used to observe this way of prayer when he was going from one country to another, especially when he was in a lonely place. He disported himself with his meditations in his contemplation. And sometimes he would say to his travelling companions, ‘It is written in Hosea, “I will lead her to a lonely place and speak to her heart”’ (Hos. 2:14). So sometimes he went aside from his companion or went on ahead or, more likely, lingered far behind; going on his own he would pray as he walked, and a fire was kindled in his meditation (Ps. 38:4).

A curious thing about this kind of prayer was that he seemed to be brushing away ashes or flies from his face, and because of this he often defended himself with the sign of the cross. The brethren thought that in this kind of prayer the saint acquired the fullness of sacred scripture and the very heart of the understanding of God’s words, and also a power and boldness to preach fervently and a hidden intimacy with the Holy Spirit to know hidden things.

Thus it happened once, to mention just one story out of many which we omit, that the devil came to the church of the Friars Preachers in Bologna in the form of a young man of frivolous, licentious character and asked for someone to hear his confession. Five priests were brought to him, one after another. This was because the first confessor was so viciously disturbed and enflamed by his words that he got up from listening to his confession and refused to hear such dreadful things to the end. The second did the same and so did the third, fourth and fifth. But they went away without saying anything and they were not prepared to reveal this confession because, as far as they were concerned, what they had heard was a sacramental confession, even though it was the devil's. Then the sacristan approached St. Dominic, who was in the priory at the time, complaining about these priests, because five of them had not been able to hear one sinner's confession. 'It's scandalous,' he added, 'the priests preach penance and then they refuse to give a penance to sinners.' Then the holy father Dominic got up from his reading and prayer and contemplation, not, I think, unaware of what was afoot, and went to hear the devil's confession. When he entered the church, the devil came to him and at once the holy father recognized him and said to him, 'You evil spirit, why do you tempt the servants of God under this veil of piety?' And he rebuked him severely. The devil disappeared at once, leaving the church reeking of sulfur. And the sacristan was appeased and stopped being angry with the priests.