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I Pray, therefore I Am

DOROTHEE SÖLLE[1]

IN THE FOURTH PETITION OF THE LORD'S PRAYER WE PRAY, "GIVE US TODAY OUR daily bread." In his interpretation of this petition Martin Luther made a political suggestion that I find lovely and felicitous, cunning to the point of being subversive and also very revealing for Luther's thought. He suggests that the princes place in their coats of arms, those great emblems of power and strength, a loaf of bread. Again? An ordinary loaf of bread on the crest of a noble family? No lion, no eagle, no falcon—or some other warlike, threatening symbol—but a simple rural, domestic symbol, a food. What would happen to the pride, the honor, the splendor, the public face of a princely house that would do such a thing?

> It would therefore be fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned with a loaf of bread instead of a lion or a wreath of rue, or if a loaf of bread were stamped on coins, in order to remind both princes and subjects that it is through the princes' office that we enjoy protection and peace and that without them we could neither eat nor preserve the precious gifts of bread. Therefore, rulers are also worthy of honor, and we are to render to them what we should and what we are able, as to those through whom we enjoy all our possessions in peace and quietness, because otherwise we could not keep a penny. Moreover, we should pray for them, that through them God may bestow on us still more blessings and good things.[2]

[1]This essay appeared as "Ich bete, darum bin ich," in *Was bedeutet mir Martin Luther? Prominente aus Politik, Kirche und Gesellschaft antworten*, ed. Udo Hahn and Marlies Mügge (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1996) 151-155. It has been translated by Frederick J. Gaiser and printed here with the permission of Neukirchener Verlag, the copyright holder.

[2]Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 450-451.

To pray for bread means to live differently, to conceive of God radically, to live not as masters of life but to receive life as gift.

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Anyone who knows anything about heraldry knows how absurd this suggestion is. Lilies and roses, maybe; symbols of war or the hunt, yes—but a loaf of bread? Such a round, warm, motherly thing, betraying no will to conquer and no posturing attitude!

Luther set the prayer for daily bread in the social context of his own world. And, in that world, what is included under "our daily bread"?

> Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.[3]

Bread is not just the private concern of those who want something to eat. Having bread depends upon a country's economic and political condition. Luther's interpretation predates the modern civil order; that is, in his day, it was not a self-conscious citizenry that provided for itself the necessities of life, nor was this work expected to be performed by autonomous individuals. True, an orientation toward such performance does derive from the reformation and its new valuation of work, but it took centuries for this to become established. Luther himself still thinks quite differently; he is still anchored in the middle ages, understanding a community's government or ruling authorities to be the responsible agents of social duty.

The prayer for daily bread "includes everything that belongs to our life in this world," including first "food and clothing" but then also the "peace and concord in our daily lives" that should be guaranteed by a judicious government. According to Luther's interpretation, bread and peace belong together. "For where dissension, strife, and war prevail, there daily bread is already taken away or at least reduced."[4]

Bread and peace belong together. We can only satisfy the daily necessities when there is peace. The goodness of God, through which we can produce our daily bread, is disturbed by a government bent not on peace but on preparing for and waging war.

> Although we have received from God all good things in abundance, we cannot retain any of them or enjoy them in security and happiness were he not to give us a stable, peaceful government.[5]

No bread without peace. We need to keep that in mind when we pray the Lord's Prayer. People who have lived through war and its aftermath know that all too well. When I was a child, war meant for me first restriction and then hunger; frostbite on my feet because I had no proper shoes; no fuel, no winter coat, finally no house. To pray for daily bread is to pray at the same time for peace. But the sen-

[3]Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, 357.

[4]Luther, "Large Catechism," 450.

[5]Ibid.

tence "no bread without peace" also works the other way around: no peace without bread. As long as the majority of the people in developing countries have no bread, our world will not have peace.

Why should we pray for daily bread? I come now to the theological context for Luther's thought. Why should bread and peace, peace and bread be the content of prayer? Do we have to believe in order to eat? Do we have to believe to be for peace?

One of the chief difficulties in understanding Luther derives from the fact that his opposite, his partner in dialogue, was not, as it is for us, the modern agnostic, the person uninterested in the God question, who regards as superfluous an attempt to answer it, the one who has to justify or apologize for talking about God. This clandestine partner of contemporary theologians simply did not exist for Luther. Luther regards the human as inescapably related to God. Just as one can say nothing meaningful about people without knowing what love is, so one can say nothing without knowing something about the human relation to God. All people are related to God—either they flee from God or they seek him; either they love God or they have made for themselves other gods to cling to. Either they think God is their enemy, as did the young Luther for a long time, or they have experienced God's reconciliation and have been made friend. Luther's thought did not provide for a situation in which people were not in relation to God, not touched by God.

All this runs counter to my own liberal theological education. Since the enlightenment, the dialogue partner for theology has been the agnostic or the atheist, the non-believer. It also runs counter my own life experience, which includes quite naturally many non-Christians.

Still, something in Luther's thought holds me spellbound and captivates me. If one conceives of God radically, must one not, with Luther, make faith—entrusting our lives to God—the subject in a way that reduces everything else to depression and anxiety, diversion and distraction, false gods and self-deception? There is no alternative to God other than hell. That was quite clear to Luther, who knew hell very well. To learn from Luther means always to take seriously this presupposition. It means to conceive of God radically, not as one option among many, one possibility among others. God wants us to live not as though life belonged to us, as though we had the right to place it at our disposal—above all, the life of others—but to live as though we belonged to life. Prayer is the gathered expression of such relatedness to God.

In the spirit of Luther, one can say: I pray, therefore I am. When we pray for daily bread, when we pray daily for something so slight, so easily trivialized, so obvious, so common, then we exist quite differently. Then life is not a game for us to master; it is gift. ⊕

DOROTHEE SÖLLE is emeritus professor of theology at the University of Hamburg, Germany, and at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where she taught from 1975-1987. Her most recent work in English is The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance *(Fortress, 2001).*