



Meditating on the *Anima Christi* *Savoring an ancient prayer, line-by-line*

From the syndicated column “The Prayerful Heart”
By Julie McCarty

(Note: See the end of the article for the full text of the prayer called “The Anima Christi.”)

St. Ignatius of Loyola taught a method of prayer in which a person uses the words of a familiar prayer for meditation. Praying very slowly, one pauses to meditate on a single word or phrase for however long it is spiritually fruitful. For example, one might spend an entire hour pondering the two words “our Father.” No rushing. One can focus on other parts of the prayer on the following days if necessary.

Ignatius suggests using the prayer called the *Anima Christi* (“Soul of Christ”) in this fashion. Although often found in Catholic prayer books, my own experience with this prayer is rather limited. So, one afternoon, I decided to try a little prayer experiment. Would I be able to pray with just one prayer for an entire hour? What insights might the *Anima Christi* offer me, a lay woman living seven centuries after it was written?

My reflections

When I say the opening lines slowly, they sound tender, pleading, and loving:

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.

Because these ardent requests sound almost romantic (to me, at least), I wondered if the anonymous medieval writer might have been a woman mystic.

The line “Blood of Christ, inebriate me” fascinates me. It sounds almost immoral, as if one would get drunk on the Sacred Blood. Then I recall having read something about “sober inebriation,” a spiritual gift or condition in which a person is overflowing with joy in God’s presence, while at the same time being alert, awake, and pure of heart.

Yes, Lord, inebriate me with your presence.

O good Jesus, hear me.
Within thy wounds hide me.

Suffer me not to be separated from thee.
From the malicious enemy defend me.

Who are my enemies? I suppose the original writer had to fear illness, barbarian invasions, or fighting in the Crusades. But who are my enemies? And doesn't Jesus say to love my enemies?

Is my enemy someone of a different race, religion, or nationality? Is my enemy conservative or liberal, Democrat or Republican, heterosexual or homosexual? Is my enemy the person at Mass who wants to kneel/stand during the Eucharistic prayer? Or the family member or co-worker I just can't forgive?

Christ was quite plain in his teaching about loving one's enemies. With all the recent talk about who may and may not receive Communion, I wonder to myself if the refusal to love enemies might be grounds for staying away from the Eucharistic table.

After much thought, I decide that none of the people I mentioned are really the enemy. Human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are not the enemy.

The real enemy is within myself. This enemy reveals itself when I pursue material things, worldly diversions, or human praise over spiritual values. That part of me that chooses sin is the real enemy.

Yes, Lord, from the malicious enemy defend me. Keep me from destroying myself—or hurting others.

In the hour of my death call me
and bid me come unto thee,
that with thy saints I may praise thee
for ever and ever.

At the mention of the saints, I am reminded that the spiritual journey is not just about "me and Jesus." The people we think are our enemies are also called by God to sainthood. I spend some time praying for others.

Yes, Lord, at the hour of my death, gather me into the company of your saints.

After my experiment

I was surprised to discover that my reflections on the *Anima Christi* didn't really end with that hour of prayer. "Who is my enemy?" was a question that would pop up in my mind again and again in the days that followed. I began to notice the many subtle ways the media—and the rest of us—often cast people into the role of opponents, rather than portray them as spiritual brothers and sisters.

Because of this new awareness, I consider my experiment with Ignatius' prayer method a success. On second thought, that was no experiment. It was prayer.

The *Anima Christi*

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Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within thy wounds hide me.
Suffer me not to be separated from thee.
From the malicious enemy defend me.
In the hour of my death call me
and bid me come unto thee,
that with thy saints I may praise thee
for ever and ever. Amen.

