

Prayer of the Month • March 2013

Thomas Wilson

O holy Spirit of grace ! give us a true sight of our miseries, and a sincere shame and sorrow, when we make confession of our sins ; a feeling sense of our need of mercy, and an hope of obtaining pardon, when we beg it for thy Son's sake. May we resign our wills to Thee and to Thy goodness, when we pray for temporal things ; and when we pray for spiritual graces, may we hunger and thirst after righteousness. Give us a real love for Thy Holy Word, and grace to hear it with attention. May we thankfully close with all the means of grace and salvation. When we praise Thee for Thy works of nature and of grace, and give Thee thanks for Thy mercies, let us do it with high esteem and gratitude. Cause us to hear Thy Holy Word with faith and attention, and to profit by what we hear, that we may return from Thy church with a blessing.



‘Preparatory Prayer’ from the *Sacra Privata* of Bishop Thomas Wilson, 1663–1755

This is a thoughtful and carefully worked out prayer. Although described as a ‘preparatory prayer’ it covers a lot of ground – acknowledgement of sin, resignation in God’s will, seeking after justice, attentiveness to God’s word, praise and thanksgiving. It is a well-rounded prayer, mature and deep. It is good to take time to prepare to serve God.

The prayer comes from the *Sacra Privata* of Bishop Thomas Wilson, a collection of private prayers, not intended by him for publication. In fact, the prayers were first published in 1781, more than a century after his death. Although not a comprehensive collection, unlike the *Private Devotions* of Lancelot Andrewes, they do similarly show great depth in spirituality and care in composition, and they bring out Bishop Wilson’s high ideals, particularly with regard to prayer, preaching, and practical action.

Thomas Wilson was born on 20 December 1663 at Burton, Cheshire, the fifth son and sixth of seven children born to Nathaniel and Alice Wilson. Wilson attended The King’s School, Chester, and then Trinity College, Dublin, where he was a contemporary of Jonathan Swift. Switching from medicine to the Church, he was ordained deacon in Kildare Cathedral in 1686. Leaving Ireland, he became curate to his uncle Richard Sherlock, in Winwick, before becoming chaplain to the Earl of Derby. He set aside a fifth of his meagre income for charity, principally for the poor. He was ordained priest and married Mary Patten. The couple had four children, but sadly three of the children died in infancy and Mary herself died at the age of 29, leaving William a widower for fifty years.

Lord Derby coerced Wilson into become bishop of Sodor and Man, which was reputed to be the poorest bishopric in Europe. The see had been vacant for four years when Thomas reluctantly agreed to Derby’s request in 1697. He was to remain bishop for fifty-eight years until his death on 7 March 1755 at the age of 91. During that time he built churches, established parochial libraries, founded schools, became an advocate for the poor, set an example by farming his lands efficiently, raised the standard of behaviour among the clergy, and imposed ecclesiastical discipline. It is said that at his funeral almost the entire population of Man turned out in honour of him.

Colin Lunt