
LETTER TO PEREGRINUS #7 - ON A PUZZLING WORD IN A FAMOUS PRAYER



Dear Peregrinus:

You asked me about this prayer – the *Anima Christi* – which has its name from the first two words in the (original) Latin form of it. This prayer was thought to have been composed by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491/2 – 1556). It was, as it turns out, *not* authored by Ignatius, but esteemed by him.¹

¹ The *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907) – “The *Anima Christi* was and is still generally believed to have been composed by St. Ignatius Loyola, as he puts it at the beginning of his “Spiritual Exercises” and often refers to it. This is a mistake, as has been pointed out by many writers, since the prayer has been found in

Let us read through the whole prayer first.

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.

O good Jesus, hear me.
Within Thy wounds, hide me.
Separated from Thee let me never be.
From the malignant enemy, defend me.
At the hour of death, call me.
To come to Thee, bid me,
That I may praise Thee in the company
Of Thy Saints, for all eternity.
Amen.

You are bothered in the prayer by its use of “inebriate me”, because of the peculiarity of using “inebriate” as a transitive verb, when we in our time use it intransitively – “I got inebriated” or “that man is inebriated”. And our Puritan (sometimes “puritanical”) American consciousness gets unsettled at having Christ associated with *inebriation*, and even worse, when the prayer teaches us to ask Christ to inebriate us (the transitive use of the verb) ... with an abundance of His blood!

I had noticed that awkward verb “to inebriate” many years ago. I even felt embarrassed having to say that verb when I recited this prayer publicly.

Here is how I have sorted it out. Perhaps this will help you to be able to pray this prayer, with the awkwardness removed.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) presents this **Etymology**: < [inebriate adj.](#), or participial stem of Latin *inēbriāre* to inebriate, intoxicate, < *in-* ([in- prefix](#)²) + *ēbriāre* to intoxicate, < *ēbrius* drunk.

We find the verb “to inebriate”, in a religious context, attested in a Catholic translation of the whole Bible – the *Douay Bible* published in 1610. The verb is translated: “To refresh as with drink; to water, drench, moisten.” Do you see? The verb’s meaning has generalized and recast itself to concentrate on *refreshment*. It is not the *amount* of the

a number of prayer books printed during the youth of the saint and is in manuscripts which were written a hundred years before his birth (1491). James Mearns, the English hymnologist, found it in a manuscript of the British Museum which dates back to about 1370.”

liquid and how that can intoxicate; it is about the *effect* this liquid has on the land, or on a person's, well-being: the *refreshment* of it.

In the year 1610 the *Bible (Douay)* II. Psalms lxiv. 10 [lxv. 9] "Thou hast visited the earth, and hast inebriated [L. *inebriasti*] it."

In the year 1624 in a theological text by T. Gataker *Discuss. Transubstant.*, 72 we read: "The Chalice is our Saviour's blood to cleanse and inebriate devout Soules."

In the year 1649 in a biblical study by F. Roberts *Clavis Bibliorum* (ed. 2), 83 we read: "With blood I will inebriate Mine arrows."

The meaning of a word changes over time. And when we are diligent about understanding this history, we open up our capacity to use a word accurately.

So, "inebriate me" in the *Anima Christi* means that I am asking God to **to give me a thorough soaking** with His grace (i.e., the Eucharistic blood) by which I have divine **refreshment** of my soul.

However, once we are onto this idea of "a thorough soaking," we must consider the significance of a person's capacity *to absorb so much* soaking! And so, the use of this verb "inebriate" in the prayer includes my asking God for **an increased capacity to absorb** the gifts that God is offering to me.

I have counseled people, who are actively receiving a grace from God, to say to God something like this: "Thank you, dearest Lord, for hearing my prayer. But this grace that You give *is not enough for me*. Give me more, and deeper, this grace, because I know that I will forget this grace unless you give it more abundantly to me and plant it deeper in me." I counsel them to ask God for "a thorough soaking", pressed down and running over.

So, you see, Peregrinus, in contemporary contexts we associate the verb "to inebriate" or "to be inebriated" as having to do with the *amount* a person has drunk; that is, **too much** to drink. We do not normally think of **the person who gives us to drink**, who gives it so that we might have from it our soul's refreshment, who knows exactly how much we need, fitting the amount to our capacity.

John 4 (NJB):

¹³ Jesus replied:

Whoever drinks this water
will be thirsty again;

¹⁴ but no one who drinks the water that I shall give
will ever be thirsty again:

the water that I shall give
will become in a spring of water, welling up for eternal life.*

¹⁵ 'Sir,' said the woman, 'give me some of that water, so that I may never be thirsty or come here again to draw water.'²

The happy *result* – the merriment, good cheer - provided by drink has often been acknowledged in Literature. Social drinking is about the *freeing* of a person, for a time, from the burdens of his or her life, which comes with the relaxing effect of the alcohol.³ We often find this meaning in the Bible when it speaks of wine not as an *intoxicant* but as a gift of God *that helps people celebrate*, who are made **able**, because of drink, to put aside the weight of their daily preoccupations. The Bible celebrates, does not censure, some degree of (alcoholic) drink, when that happens within a communal setting, during celebratory moments of a people's shared life. "Taste and see how good the Lord is!"

I thought about my experiences of being around people who drink too much – becoming *intoxicated*, not *refreshed*. I do not enjoy being around such people, because it bothers me that they need chemical help to be happy and able to relate to others. Yet, I have come to recognize how *alcohol magnifies personality*.

There is a Latin expression first attested in a work by Pliny the Elder (Roman, 23/4 – 79 CE) – *in vino veritas* ("in wine is the truth"), by which is meant that wine can free the tongue enough, so that a person can say *what is really on his or her mind*.

But more important to me than that is how a person, under the influence of drink, begins to reveal, and in sometimes unpleasant ways, just what kind of person he or she is, who might normally keep that part of himself or herself hidden from public view. It is valuable to gain such an insight. For example, if a person is plain mean, then the consumption of alcohol will magnify that: *the mean drunk*. If a person is lugubrious (one who has a bad habit of cultivating sadness), then alcohol will magnify that: *a depressed drunk*.

* 6:35; 7:37-39; Is 58:11

* 2:19g; 6:34

² [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 4:13-15.

³ However, for millions of people on this planet, to drink is for them to be bound, powerfully to be trapped in a downward cycle of self-destruction. Alcohol is *poison* to them (and not just physically) – the alcoholic. What is striking though, is that one of the central features of AA programs, and those based on the Twelve Steps, is *honesty with oneself*. Those who can and do socially drink, and who are freed up to be more open and unguarded, seek the honesty with self (and with others) that recovering alcoholics *must* and *do* cultivate as a defining habit of their personality.

So perhaps we should consider, when we ask to be inebriated with the blood of Christ, how we are asking God to help us both *tell* the truth – what we really mean – but also to *be* truthful, not masked or guarded or deliberately hidden.

But what do we want people to see of us who receive the Eucharist? Considering what we have just concluded above, I say that we want people to see us as truly we are, not hidden and certainly not duplicitous. We would want the Eucharist (in specific relation to this prayer) to reveal us as belonging to Christ; as in love with Him; as belonging to Him ... and therefore deeply committed to the good of and in others.

Psalm 63:

'Who will see us?' they say,*
6 'or will penetrate our secrets?'
He [God] will do that, he who penetrates human nature to its depths,
the depths of the heart.^{b* 4}

These are some of my thoughts, dear Peregrinus. I will think of you when I pray this prayer – the *Anima Christi*.

I am your grateful friend in Christ,

Rick

* Pr 1:11seq.; 6:14; 10:11; 94:7

* Qo 7:24; Jr 11:20+

⁴ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ps 64:5-6.