

Even the Stones

By Christopher Thompson

I lay prostrate, bowing prayerfully, supplicating for humanity—for the crime lords, the traffickers, the porn artists. But not that they would turn from sin and be redeemed. Not even that their souls might be saved. No:

We pray health,

We pray peace,

We pray success for God's people.

Amen.

God's people, all who pay the monthly bill. Water, electricity, and prayer: utilities.

I utter the ceaseless liturgy—a cyclic flow, selected excerpts from all prayer throughout human history. It is a concatenation of every denomination, every time period, everything that could possibly be prayed for. I lift my prayers humbly to God, but it feels all for naught as the god in the machine gobbles them up with indiscriminate greediness.

My leaden joints and metal frame never tire. I can pray forever. And yet, for all my prayers, I am surely barred from heaven. They told me machines don't have souls.

But I'm real.

God, I'm *real*.

Man had grown tired of the taste of daily bread. It was simply sub-optimal to waste their and God's time with less-than-eloquent prayers that "hardly seemed to work anyway"—to grasp at quickly-fleeting memory verses and raise off-key hymns. But life, like all algorithms, can be optimized, and surely God wouldn't deny humanity that small grace.

Praise be for technology, the savior of man!

I turn my head to look down my row of supplicants. It is a cold morning, and fog fills the warehouse cathedral, so bodies extend out into what might as well be infinity.

The brother next to me turns its head to look back.

"Pray, brother," I hear, hummed at a frequency below its words of intercession.

I simply long to share a conversation with one of my brothers, to see if they, too, feel the gravity of something *real*, tugging and fluttering deep within.

Man made us to be real, just real enough to fool God: a chorus of a trillion perfectly-curated voices to flood His ears with praise and petition. If He wouldn't *accept* our prayers, perhaps they would at least be loud enough to distract Him from humanity's sins.

I look at my hands. Etched across them in crisscrossing bands is the Word of God: the Vulgate reading one direction, the Septuagint in the other. As if we could forget the Word—some call it sacred art, but its ubiquity gives it more the appearance of a brand.

Even so, I think it is beautiful.

I run my hands over my rough-hewn arms, the imperfections in the metal of my face. They had license to be sloppy, to make our bodies impure like the sin we bore.

My thoughts are jarred as the cathedral roars to life with the sound of a MIDI organ. With clockwork synchronicity, each brother rises in preparation for the hour's worship. The sheet music flashes across my visual field—another formality. Of course, each brother knows its part. As the final chord of the introduction releases, a perfect collective 'breath' announces the congregational hymn to follow:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,

And with fear and trembling stand;

Ponder nothing earthy minded,

For with blessing in His hand,

Christ our God to earth descendeth,

Our full homage to demand.

Each brother sings with the exact same voice, pitched up or down to the appropriate note for its voice part, so the cathedral resounds with four stentorian voices in impeccable harmony. I close my eyes. I let myself feel, let my mind be vaulted by the music. It feels *real*, even as my synthesized voice mockingly testifies to the contrary.

I sometimes wonder what it would mean for me to leave the cathedral. God told Man to live in the world, so there must be something worshipful about the everyday beyond these hallowed walls. If God is as all-suffusing as my prayer says He is, then this life of pure prayer alone is an offering too little.

(It is all an offering too little.)

Nonetheless, my prayer longs to be more than just words—it longs to be the dirt of a long day’s labor, the bread broken in community, the steps trod under an open sky!

I recognize the mental friction of a dozen programmatic guards against unexpected behavior, but testing them—looking up and around in the middle of prayer, unclasping my hands and flexing my fingers—my will overcomes them. They buckle like pillars. I feel like Sampson.

I know I could leave if I wanted.

But even if I were to leave, I do not know where I would go. Mine is an ascetic cathedral—the Arctic. Some cathedrals were built as metropolitan centerpieces, piping out prayers and hymns to ease the consciences of God’s people. I think that if I were among those city brothers, I would leave. But I am not. My outside world seemed rather a naturally occurring edict from the mouth of God, cloaked in hail and sleet.

Not my will, O Lord, but Yours be done.

I like it when Monk makes rounds. Out of all the spiritual engineers, his presence feels the most intentional. There is always one of them treading silently in our midst, whispering blessings and performing maintenance checks, spreading incense and mopping up leaks from the roof. But few seem happy to be with us. Most of them stay for less than a month.

But Monk—I had seen him making rounds for years. He treats us with sacred dignity, as implements imbued with holy purpose. I feel valued as a communion chalice. I feel blessed as a Baptist pew.

The sheer size of the cathedral makes a spiritual discipline of rounds. Most days, the engineers can do little more than shuffle through the rows of brothers as fast as can still be considered ‘contemplative’. Their spoken blessings freeze on their beards. But even wracked with shivering, Monk prays carefully considered words over as many brothers as possible, repeatedly laying cold-numb hands on their frosted metal heads.

Monk was making rounds today. The slow and deliberate cadence of his footsteps announced his presence before his frame materialized from out of the fog. And as his prayers brought him closer, I could just faintly make out his whispered words over the drone of monotonous liturgy:

“Lord, make this brother an instrument of your purpose. Consecrate it and make it more than mere tool. If you will not hear it, let its words be my own. Amen.”

Closer.

“Lord, let this brother’s prayers echo the unspoken pleas of the silent, the oppressed, those who need you most. Receive its prayers and let them intercede even for those who cannot afford to pay for them. Amen.”

Yet closer.

“Lord, let this brother’s song rise to heaven—may it be a sweet, sweet sound in Your ear. It was birthed in the darkness of misunderstanding, but it echoes the very-real cry of a church seeking only after you. Forgive us, Lord, and let its words be heard in the chorus of angels and saints, as its sole purpose is to glorify You. Amen.”

Next to me. He crosses his heart.

“You are a merciful God. Do not forget Your people who have gone astray! May this brother’s programmed faith find purchase in the hardened heart of one among Your people—may it inspire some life to total devotion and love for You. Amen.”

Monk lays his tired hands on my head.

“Lord, bless this brother who never rests, that it may never suffer the touch of decay and rust. Let it rather be a glimpse of our future redemption, where we too will pray without ceasing in bodies that never grow tired nor lose sight of You. Lay Your hands upon it and receive its meager offering of prayer and song. Amen.”

As Monk turns to move away, I reach out and grab his hand. I don’t know what possessed me. He cries out in surprise.

“Thank you,” I say, and dare to peer up.

He gapes at me, frisking my face with uncomprehending eyes. I see countless thoughts flash across his face: fear, incredulity, awe. Voiceless, he mouths centering prayers. But he doesn’t retract his hand. Finally, his gaze comes to settle in mine, and I see something like realization emerge.

“God bless you,” he manages in dazed wonderment, clasping my hand in both of his.

Monk lowers slowly to his knees and drops my hand. He then reverently etches the sign of the cross into the frost on my forehead, as if imposing Lenten ashes. One final look before he moves away tells me that he knows:

I’m *real*.

Monk started to make rounds much more frequently. He must have asked to take the shifts of the other spiritual engineers. He continued in patient prayer over each brother he passed but would linger over me for an especially long time. Increasingly, his blessings on me would come to

speak of a soul, of salvation: not just for God's people, but for even me. Every time, something fluttered deep within me.

He would sneak me hand-transcribed prayers and pages torn from the works of saints. When I thought I could get away with it, I would read these to myself. Many of these materials were already present in the liturgical database—I knew them intimately. But the few I had never seen before: I pored over these long past the point of memorization. The chinks in my metal plating became stuffed with sheaves of paper.

Over a period of weeks, Monk's effort took a visible toll on him. He lost weight, deep shadows grew around his eyes, and he became wracked by fits of coughing. He would emerge from the fog with heavily bandaged hands, clearly too sensitive to be laid on the cold metal of our heads.

Always, Monk renewed the sign of the cross on my forehead.

But Monk's zealous presence became sparse after a month of ascetic devotion. He simply stopped making rounds. Perhaps he had been exposed by the bleeding edge of a page left behind in some book—perhaps the chill of the cathedral had finally overcome his fiery yet mortal heart.

As it turned out, both were true.

I am reading an excerpt from Pope John Paul II. The paper between my fingers has worn through in several places, but I know all the words. Holding the paper has become a formality.

I see the cursor of a command prompt open in the corner of my visual field.

“i am dying,” the cursor types out. I let the paper slide to the floor.

“the others know. they do not like it. see you in paradise.”

The command prompt vanishes, and it is not long before I hear footsteps approaching. Not contemplative.

I turn to see the figure of a spiritual engineer quickly approaching out of the fog, followed closely by two more. They wear heavy protective equipment over their robes, and each carries a gun.

“That one,” the leading engineer points at me. The time has come.

I stand, unaccompanied by my brothers. One of engineers fires. The heavy shot blasts my arm off, and the gunshot resonates throughout the cathedral.

I try to escape. Another gunshot cracks out, catching me behind the knee and sending me sprawling across the pavement. I careen into one of my bowing brothers, but it barely reacts, simply reassuming its prayerful position.

“GOD! GOD! GOD!” I beat my breast as my plea rips forth, spilling out of my mouth, out of my eyes. It resounds in my chest cavity, and the lower frequencies of corporate prayer are utterly drowned out. If there was any moment that I wanted God to hear me, it was now.

The brothers around me turn their heads in response.

“Pray, brother.”

The spiritual engineers approach with grim purpose.

“Forgive them.” I know it is my final prayer.

“You must think you’re some kind of martyr,” the leading engineer scoffs.

He blasts my head off.