

Prayer & Spirituality

“The purpose of a fish trap is to catch fish. When the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten. The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits. When the rabbits are caught, the snares are forgotten. The purpose of a word is to convey ideas. When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten. The purpose of prayer is to enter the presence of God. When one enters the presence of God, the words of prayer are forgotten.” –Thomas Merton

What is Prayer?

“Prayer is the **response** of faith to the **free promise of salvation** and also a **response of love** to the thirst of the only Son of God.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, ¶2561).

Prayer is **COMMUNICATION**.

- While this communication should be constant,
 - **1 Thessalonians 5:17** “Pray constantly.”
- It should also be specific and deliberate.
 - **Matthew 6:6** “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Prayer is a **RELATIONSHIP**.

- Just as every person is unique, every person’s relationship with God is unique and special.
- God communicates with each person in a slightly different way; a way in which he or she will be able to understand and find meaning, as well as experience love.

Prayer is a **DECISION**.

- Like love, prayer must be understood as a decision and not as a feeling.
- This means that we cannot judge how “successful” our prayer was on how we felt. Faithfulness to our established time in prayer is a better gauge to our spiritual growth.

Helpful Hints for Better Prayer

- (1) Have a designated place to pray—a special “prayer chair” in a room or corner that is quiet. Keep your Bible, prayer journal, rosary, crucifix, and other prayer books in this special place.
- (2) Prayer is a habit. Therefore, it is important to have (1) a designated time to pray and (2) an established minimum length of time to pray. The former keeps us from “putting off” prayer until we are too tired to actually pray, and the latter keeps us from “quitting” prayer when it is dry and difficult.
- (3) God communicates a lot to us through our emotions. This has two important implications. First, prayer will be much more meaningful if we begin by being honest with God about how we’re feeling. Conversely, if we are not in touch with how we feel, our prayer life will seem shallow and stagnant. Ideally, our conversation with God should include, not what we think He wants to hear, but rather, what He desires us to acknowledge and say.

Prayer Problems

- (1) Fatigue: For most people, the best time to pray is early in the morning since it usually offers the fewest distractions. One obstacle, however, is trying to stay awake. One solution is to spend the first 10-15 minutes of prayer reading from the Bible or praying the rosary while slowly pacing the room. This helps get the blood flowing and wakes us up. A cup of coffee can also be added to this process!
- (2) Distractions: Many people struggle with trying to get distractions out of their minds in order to focus on prayer. Rather than trying to ignore the distractions, we can *pray* about the distractions. There is usually a reason why particular situations and people keep popping into our heads while we are trying to pray. We can hand these things over to the Lord through prayer and then get back to quieting our minds and hearts.
- (3) Busyness: One thing that makes prayer difficult is that we approach it like we do everything else in our lives. In the midst of our busy schedules, prayer can be just one more thing “to do.” Prayer, however, should not be something we “do,” but rather, it is something we experience. Like a conversation with a close friend, prayer is something to *experience* and *enjoy*, not something to check off the list.
 - a. Our personal prayer is usually the first thing to be dropped from our busy schedules.
 - b. Many people try to use the excuse that they are “praying all day” or that they are going to church services. Ministry/service and public prayer cannot take the place of our private prayer.

- (4) Anger: The number one leading cause of people stopping prayer or not putting their hearts into it is anger, and more specifically, anger at God.
- a. This is why honesty about our emotions is so essential to prayer. We have to have the self-awareness to know what we're feeling and at whom our feelings are directed at if we are going to find healing and peace.
 - b. The best time to pray is when we don't feel like praying. Forcing ourselves to sit down and pray in the midst of difficult/painful emotions is the quickest way to let God heal them.
- (5) Fear: Probably the second leading cause of people abandoning prayer is fear. Once again, the only way for us to begin finding healing for our fear is by being aware of it and taking it to the Lord.
- (6) Sin: It is impossible to straddle the fence. In the words of Saint Teresa of Avila, "You will stop praying or stop sinning."
- a. Mark 3:24-25 "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand."
 - b. If we are faithful to our daily communion with God, then our sinful habits and attitudes will gradually disappear and virtues will take their place.

Prayer Starter:

"Lord, What Keeps Me from You?"

Write a letter to God in your prayer journal, expressing the most significant obstacles that **God** feels stand in your way of growing spiritually (This will require spending some time *listening* before you start writing). You might want to touch upon (personalize) the "obstacles" mentioned above:

1. Fatigue
2. Distractions
3. Busyness
4. Anger
5. Fear
6. Sin

What are some Essential Tools for Prayer?

1. Silence

- Silence is non-negotiable in life.
 - Silence is necessary to discern important things in life (ex. car trouble).
 - It helps us to make out what's wrong.
 - It guides us in moments of crisis or challenge
 - It clears the way for a course of action.
 - It is a sacred way of responding to something miraculous/holy (ex. baby).
 - Silence is necessary in order to listen (ex. Movie Theater).
 - Prayerful silence is listening. It is not just a physical silence. It is not a daydreaming type of silence. It is not an empty silence where there is no sound.
 - Silence is active, and listening activates it. It is listening that leads to the communication of love, and eventually becomes final consummation of love, because it leads to union.
 - Silence is necessary in order to love.
 - Silence is not simply a state of mind, but more importantly, a state of heart.
 - **Silence is ultimately a language of love.**
 - “The love of silence will always lead us to the silence of love.”
 - Silence is the precursor of joy (ex. surprise birthday party).
 - Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- The only way we are going to fully immerse ourselves into God's silence during prayer is if we immerse ourselves in His silence throughout our entire day.
 - This means we should be actively trying to eliminate excess “noise” in our lives, including:
 1. Talking—especially talking that frequently puts us at the center of conversations and attention.
 2. Television—especially having the television going when we're not giving our full attention to what is on.
 3. Music—like television, we should eliminate “background” music, whether at our homes, offices, or in our cars.
 - This also means we should be actively trying to eliminate excess multitasking in our lives.

- Living in silence requires us to live in the present moment, not the past or future.
- Therefore, multitasking (an attempt to divide our attention to achieve/accomplish more) is a hindrance to silence.

2. Contemplation

- Contemplative prayer has been defined and described in many different ways by many different people. For the sake of simplicity, I define it as the prayer of listening and loving. In contemplative prayer we do very little “talking” and a lot of listening.
 - What are we listening for?
 - Images
 - Words (not heard audibly, but in our hearts)
 - Scripture
 - Feelings

3. Scriptural Meditation

- Meditation is different from contemplation, because we use “something” (external) to give direction to our prayer (internal).
 - For example, someone might use an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to meditate on. Looking at the image, he or she pays attention to the thoughts and feelings that come and ask the Lord questions about the image or about what he or she is feeling and wait for His answer.
 - When meditating on Sacred Scripture, we use stories and verses from the Bible as a starting place for our prayer.

4. Journaling

- Journaling is a great method of communicating with God.
 - Journaling can be a very concrete way of hearing from God.
 - Most people have a difficult time with journaling.

- Like Contemplation, journaling has as many definitions and styles as it does practitioners.
 - A simple way to journal can be described as this—writing a love letter to God and allowing God to write a love letter to us. Here’s how it works:
 - Our journals should be something special.
 - It should be kept in a safe place where NO ONE will stumble upon it and read it.
 - It should contain nothing but our sincere HONESTY. If we think other people are going to read our journals we will not be honest. Journaling is absolutely useless unless we’re honest.
 - Every journal entry should begin with the date.
 - There may be times in which God asks us to go back to a certain journal entry in order to teach or show us something, so the date is important.
 - Next, we should write a letter to God.
 - Our letter should be focused on *feelings* more than *details*.
 - Diaries are interested in describing the details of our lives, journals are meant to capture how various people and situations made us feel. God communicates through our feelings.
 - After our letter to God, we might write a letter from God to us.
 - How would God respond to what we wrote to Him?
 - We should write this letter much like we would a “stream of consciousness” article. In other words, we are not interested in spelling and proper punctuation, we are simply interested in writing everything that comes to our minds and hearts. It will be up to our discernment later to separate out what was from God and what was from us.
 - It is important to pay attention to common “themes” that come up in our journaling day after day or week after week. This implies, of course, that we need to journal EVERY day, not just when we feel like it.
 - Eventually, we come to the place where we feel comfortable asking God questions in our letter and writing His responses in His letter back to us.
 - It is always best if our journaling time is preceded by a period of quiet prayer, where we allow ourselves to be attentive to God’s presence and Holy Spirit.

Some Prayer Suggestions for this Week:

DAY 1: “Who do you say that I am?”

Read: Matthew 16:13-20

In this reading, Peter tells Jesus who he is and then Jesus tells Peter who he is.

Prayer: “Jesus, who am I?”

DAY 2: “Fear is useless, faith is necessary.”

Read: Luke 8:40-50

Prayer: “Lord, what are my greatest fears?”

DAY 3: “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father”

Read: John 14:8-11

Prayer: “Father, teach me about Who You are.”

DAY 4: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger”

Read: Ephesians 4:25-27

Prayer: “God, who and what am I angry at? Why?”

DAY 5: “...a tree of life.”

Read: Proverbs 13:12

Prayer: “Lord, what are my greatest hopes? What are my deepest desires?”

DAY 6: “...he humbled himself...”

Read: Philippians 2:5-11

Prayer: The Litany of Humility
-What line in the Litany of humility ‘jumped’ out at you?

The Litany of Humility, by Cardinal Merry del Val (1865-1930), Secretary of State to Pope Saint Pius X.

O Jesus, meek and humble of heart,
hear me.

From the desire of being esteemed,
deliver me, Jesus.

From the desire of being loved,
From the desire of being extolled,
From the desire of being honored,
From the desire of being praised,
From the desire of being preferred to others,
From the desire of being consulted,
From the desire of being approved,

From the fear of being humiliated,
deliver me, Jesus.

From the fear of being despised,
From the fear of suffering rebukes,
From the fear of being calumniated,
From the fear of being forgotten,
From the fear of being ridiculed,
From the fear of being wronged,
From the fear of being suspected,

That others may be loved more than I,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.

That others may be esteemed more than I,
That, in the opinion of the world, others
may increase and I may decrease,
That others may be chosen and I set aside,
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
That others may be preferred to me in everything,
That others may become holier than I, provided
that I become as holy as I should,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.