

ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF PRAYER

Deacon Michael Bickerstaff | Jul 24, 2022

Why is there so much interest in prayer and yet so little praying? Discover what Jesus teaches us about the essential qualities of prayer.

In my parish ministry and work around the archdiocese, one of the questions I receive most frequently is like the question posed to Our Lord in Luke's Gospel, "He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'" (Luke 11:1)

People simply want to know, "How should I pray? Can you help me improve my prayer life?"

What I have been told by those who ask these questions is that there is much interest on their part in prayer, but very little actual praying. These questions come from people who have been Catholics all their lives and also from those who are newly received into the Church or maybe are just beginning their journey in RCIA. I'm asked by young and old, healthy and sick. Sometimes the question comes from one who is dying... from men and women who, truth be told, could teach me much about prayer.

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH INTEREST IN PRAYER?

Why is there so much interest in prayer and yet so little praying? The first part of that question is rather easy to answer. There is much interest in prayer because God is very interested in us and is calling each of us into relationship with him. We are made for heaven and this life on earth is but the time and place of our pilgrimage—the journey to our eternal home to be with him. God himself placed this desire for him on our hearts.

The Catechism teaches us that there is a universal call from God to each of us... a call to prayer. That is why there has always existed, on the part of man and woman, the desire to seek him. But we are reminded, this desire does not originate in us, God calls us first. And so those who ask for help in their prayer life should first of all be encouraged—given hope from the fact that their desire to pray comes from God.

Isn't that encouraging! We are not faced with the difficult task of "making" God be interested in spending time with us. Our prayer—that is, our spending time with God in conversation—is what God already desires of us and wills for us.

WHY IS THERE SO LITTLE ACTUAL PRAYING?

So now we come to the second part of the question, "Why is there so little actual praying?" Next time you visit your local Catholic book store or one of the big box book sellers or maybe Amazon.com and the Kindle Store, observe how many books have been written about how to pray. There seems to be no end to the number and variety of such books. Many of them are very good, but many of them are not very helpful... some of them may even be harmful.

It seems clear from all of this that many people are dissatisfied with their efforts at prayer and are looking for a better way to pray... a better method, if you will. And maybe therein lies the problem—too many of us have an inadequate knowledge of what prayer is. We are looking for the right method and forgetting that prayer is most of all about relationship—the

relationship—prayer is an encounter with the One who made you and desires to be with you.

THE SAINTS POINT THE WAY

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a Carmelite nun who lived a short twenty-four years in the late 1800s, is a Doctor of the Church. The Church conveys this title on a saint whose teaching is of the highest importance on a particular topic and is applicable to all peoples in all places and in all times. Her teaching on the spiritual life—on prayer—earned St. Thérèse her title. Here is what she had to say, “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.” [i]

These words are very profound, yet so simple. They reflect the simplicity of the foundation of her spiritual life that gave rise to another of her titles, “The Little Flower.” She wrote beautifully and simply on this foundation of her prayer life:

“To love Thee, Jesus, is now my only desire. Great deeds are not for me; I cannot preach the Gospel or shed my blood. No matter! My brothers work in my stead, and I, a little child, stay close to the throne, and love Thee for all who are in strife.

“But how shall I show my love, since love proves itself by deeds? Well! The little child will strew flowers ... she will embrace the Divine Throne with their fragrance, she will sing Love’s Canticle in silvery tones. Yes, my Beloved, it is thus my short life shall be spent in Thy sight. The only way I have of proving my love is to strew flowers before Thee—that is to say, I will let no tiny sacrifice pass, no look, no word. I wish to profit by the smallest actions, and to do them for Love. I wish to suffer for Love’s sake, and for Love’s sake even to rejoice: thus shall I strew flowers...

“O my Jesus, I love Thee! I love my Mother, the Church; I bear in mind that ‘the least act of pure love is of more value to her than all other works together.’” [i]

In this little way, St. Thérèse’s deeds, performed out of love of God and others, became occasions of prayer in which she encountered her God without ceasing. Please note especially the disposition this little saint’s large heart!

St. Teresa of Avila, another Doctor of the Church, wrote a simple little poem about her view of God and her prayer life. It is called Teresa’s Bookmark because it was discovered in her prayer book after she died. She wrote on this bookmark:

“Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you.
All things are passing away: God alone never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Whoever has God lacks nothing: God alone suffices.”

Again, so simple, right? So why do so many find it so difficult to pray even when they are determined to pray well?

I think that we are all prone to over complicate things for which we have only a “beginner’s” knowledge and experience and that includes the prayer life. When you have read what the saints have said about prayer, one of the common themes, no matter how simple or complex their teaching, is that prayer must contain these qualities:

- prayer should be humble
- prayer should be urgent
- prayer should be faithful
- prayer should be persistent
- prayer should be expectant
- prayer should rise from a converted heart

THE TEACHING OF THE SAINTS IS THE TEACHING OF CHRIST

And so we return to the Gospel and discover that what these saints have to say to us is founded on what Our Lord taught his disciples. Our Lord’s disciples must have frequently witnessed him praying, or maybe better said, witnessed those occasions when he prayed. They saw the power and great effect of his prayer. And so they asked him to teach them to pray. And so he began by teaching them the “Our Father.”

The readings from the bible for the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C) are: Genesis 18:20-32; Psalms 138:1-2, 2-3, 6-7, 7-8; Colossians 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13.

St. Luke’s Gospel gives us an abbreviated form of what we know today. I am not going to share some “brilliant exposition” of that prayer with you today. I am just going to ask that when you pray it, take time to meditate on its words; take them from your mind and place them on your heart and ponder them. When we recite the words of the “Our Father” we are engaged in the vocal expression of prayer. When we reflect deeply on the words of the prayer, or on a passage of Scripture, or on a truth of the faith or on a person of God, we are using the expression of prayer known as meditation. If we are to advance in the prayer life, we need to practice Christian meditation. Don’t complicate it, just spend time prayerfully thinking about how Jesus answered his disciple’s question.

Jesus wants us to do this and also to learn the essential qualities of prayer. That is why, I believe, he followed the words of the “Our Father” with examples and explanations... to make us think about what we pray and not just mindlessly recite the words of our prayer. He teaches us that prayer requires a certain disposition of the heart, a growing knowledge of self and the One to Whom we pray.

- He told the story of the prayer of “the Pharisee and the tax collector” [ii] contrasting the empty prayer of the proud Pharisee with the humble prayer of the tax collector.
- He told the story of “the importunate friend” [iii] who disturbed his neighbor at midnight. There should be urgency about our prayer—don’t put it off. Don’t give prayer what is left over of our time, give it our prime time, even if that time is most inconvenient.
- He told the story of “the importunate widow” [iv] who persistently petitioned the unjust judge. We must pray faithfully and without ceasing, never losing hope.

- The Catechism reminds us that, “From the Sermon on the Mount onwards, Jesus insists on conversion of heart: reconciliation with one’s brother before presenting an offering on the altar, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors, prayer to the Father in secret, not heaping up empty phrases, prayerful forgiveness from the depths of the heart, purity of heart, and seeking the Kingdom before all else. [v] This filial conversion is entirely directed to the Father.” [vi]
- When Jesus mediated the New Covenant, he formed the Church, the family of God. He teaches us that we are God’s children and we are to approach God as our father. If we know, even imperfectly, the needs of our own children think with wonder and love at what Our Father in Heaven will do for us if we approach Him in Christ’s name. [vii]

Prayer really is that simple—not primarily a method, but a relationship—an encounter with the One who made you and loves you. Spend time with Him just as you do with anyone else who you love and with whom you desire to be closer. And always know Who it is you are with. Let your prayer be humble, urgent, persistent, expectant and faithful. Spend time re-reading the above words of Thérèse of Lisieux. And if at times you find prayer difficult to start, try this... simply praise Him, not for anything He has done for you, but simply for Who He is, giving all glory and honor to God, Who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

FOOTNOTES

[i] St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*

[ii] cf. Luke 18:9-14

[iii] cf. Luke 11:5-13

[iv] cf. Luke 18:1-8

[v] cf. Matthew 5:23-24, 44-45; 6:7,14-15,21,25,33

[vi] Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2608

[vii] cf. Luke 11:11-13

Into the deep...

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