

PRAYER (PART 1): THE FAITH PRAYED

(C 2558-2758, USC Ch. 35)

Part IV of the *Catechism* is divided into two sections: (1) Prayer in the Life of Christians, and (2) The Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father."

In this article, we will look at:

- What is prayer
- Lessons from scripture
- Five traditional forms of prayer
- Occupational and spousal prayer
- The battle of prayer – four problem areas

What is prayer?

St. Therese of Lisieux writes that "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" (C 2558). Prayer is our graced effort to be *open, attentive* and *responsive* to God whose presence fills the universe and sustains us every moment of every day. Prayer is being vigilant for the God who comes and is present in the events and encounters of daily life. Prayer is the term Christians use to describe their personal relationship with God.

When it comes to prayer, the *initiative* is always with God. We don't find God. Rather, we let ourselves be found by him. We call out to God only because he has been calling out to us.

Prayer: an encounter with our Triune God (C 2565). Prayer is our journey into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. In prayer we encounter God as the loving *Father* who patiently waits for us, his children, to notice him and respond to him (Lk 15:11-32), or as the mother who loves us as a mother loves the child in her womb (Is 49:15). Prayer is conversing with *Jesus* who reveals to us the heart of God – a God of love and mercy. In prayer we converse with the *Holy Spirit*, our divine guide, strength and sanctifier. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us how to pray. He is always praying in us and he helps us to pray when we are weak and do not know how to pray (Rom 8:26-27).

Pause: Who have been your teachers when it comes to prayer?

Lessons from scripture (C 2568-2589, USC p. 464)

In the pages of scripture, we are privileged to be able to catch a glimpse of many people's relationship with God.

Abraham teaches us the importance of faith and obedience in prayer. When God tells him and his family to leave their homeland and go to a land that he will show them, Abraham places his *trust* in God and goes as God has told him (Gen 12:1-4). True prayer will always lead us to a place of greater trust in God and to greater obedience to his directives.

Moses. Ex 33:11 tells us that "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man to a friend." What a beautiful description of the intimacy that exists between God and Moses. But like every close relationship, God and Moses have their stormy moments. The *Catechism* states that Moses balks, makes excuses, and above all, questions (C 2575). Ex 5:22-23 gives us a wonderful example of Moses "having it out with God." Moses says: "Lord, why do you treat this people so badly? And why did you send me on such a mission? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has maltreated this people of yours, and you have done nothing to rescue them." When it comes to prayer, we can learn from Moses how to be truly *honest* with God about our real thoughts and feelings.

Hannah. If we have been raised to keep our emotions in tight check, there is a good chance that we will have a difficult time giving expression to our emotions in prayer. In the Old Testament, Hannah is someone who can teach us to pray not only with our head but also with our heart. 1 Samuel 1:10 tells us that Hannah "in her bitterness prayed to the Lord, weeping copiously." The prayer of Hannah reminds us of a verse in Heb 5:7 that Jesus "offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him."

The Psalms. The *Catechism* states: "The Psalms constitutes the masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament. Prayed and fulfilled in Christ, the Psalms are an essential and permanent element of the prayer of the Church. They are suitable for people of every condition and time" (C 2596-2597). Every mood of the human heart is expressed in the Psalter. The Psalms are a school of prayer for anyone seeking how to speak to God and respond to his action in their lives.

Jesus at prayer (C 2598-2606, USC p. 466). Jesus learned the ways of prayer from Mary and Joseph. From his people he learned the value and importance of *communal* prayer. He was well-versed in the scriptures and often prayed the Psalms.

Jesus desired to share with his disciples the intimate relationship he had with his Father. He taught them to approach God as ‘Abba,’ as loving father. The *Catechism* states that Jesus taught his disciples to pray with a purified heart, with lively and persevering faith, with filial boldness (C 2621).

Prayer in the Church. “The infant church was born in prayer, lived in prayer and thrived in prayer” (USC p. 467). The Letters of Paul show him to be a man of intense prayer. During the Church’s 2,000 years of history, great schools of prayer and spirituality have developed. Hence today, our efforts to pray are enhanced by the prayer traditions of the Benedictines, Carmelites, Franciscans, Jesuits and many others.

Pause: What can we learn about prayer from the above named biblical figures?

Traditional forms of prayer (C 2626-2649, USC p. 467)

In time, the Holy Spirit led the Church to pray in many different ways. The following are five of them.

Prayer of adoration and praise. Adoration is a basic and fundamental prayer gesture of us creatures before our Creator. When we reflect on what God has done and is doing in creation and in us, our response is one of awe, adoration and praise. Adoration and praise are our heartfelt response to who God is. It is our response to God’s magnificence. The final six psalms of the Psalter are beautiful examples of the prayer of praise.

Prayer of thanksgiving. In the prayer of thanksgiving, we give gratitude to God for his loving activity in creation and in our redemption, in the lives of others and in our own lives. When we take time out to recognize and give thanks to God for what is good in life, we not only recognize God as the source of all good things, but we also grow in our experience of God as a loving and generous person. In turn, this experience of God leads us to a more generous giving of ourselves to God. Our acts of gratitude to God deepen our relationship with him; hence, the vital importance of taking time out for the prayer of thanksgiving. Without the prayer of thanksgiving, we may think that the blessings of life are not connected to the God from whom all blessings flow.

In recent years, mental health studies have shown that the “attitude of gratitude” is also very helpful to our psychological well-being. For Catholics, the Eucharist is our greatest prayer of thanksgiving.

Prayer of contrition. The *Catechism* states that “asking forgiveness is the prerequisite for both the Eucharistic liturgy and personal prayer” (C 2631). To be careless about sin is to be careless about what separates us from

God and others. Refusing to deal with sin is like refusing to deal with a cancer in our bodies.

If sin is a spiritual cancer that can destroy our relationship with God and others, contrition or prayer of repentance is the gift God gives us to help us to see the ugly nature of sin and the grace to be truly sorry for our sins.

Prayer of intercession. “It is only at the end of this world that we shall realize how the destinies of persons and nations have been shaped, not so much by the external actions of powerful men and by events that seemed inevitable, but by the quiet, silent, irresistible prayer of persons the world will never know” (Anthony de Mello, S.J.).

Prayer of intercession is when we pray for *others* and their needs. In intercessory prayer, we do what Mary does at Cana. We go to God or Jesus on behalf of others. We speak our concerns and trust that God will do what is best. People who cannot be involved in the front lines of the Church’s mission due to age or illness, need to be aware that their role as intercessor or prayer warrior is indispensable for the success of the Church’s mission.

Prayer of petition. Prayer of petition is conversing with God about our own needs, both spiritual and material. Petitionary prayer deepens our awareness of how much we need God at every moment of our lives. When we pray in this way, we can always expect some change in ourselves if not in the external circumstances which prompted our prayer.

What should we pray for? Some people say, “I never pray for myself.” That would be a big mistake. All of us should often pray for the following:

- for the grace to know the will of God and to carry it out faithfully;
- that the Holy Spirit will help us to seek and follow the will of God and to discover and become the person God created us to be and to avoid trying to be a carbon copy of someone else;
- for the grace to be faithful to our *vocation* in life as married, single or religious person; for the grace to fulfill faithfully the duties and responsibilities of our state in life (*career*);
- for God’s help with the nitty details of life, such as decisions, relationships, finances, health issues, etc.

Thank God ahead of time. Before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he gave thanks to God with confidence: “Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I know that you always hear me” (Jn 11:41). When we thank God ahead of time, we are placing our trust in him to

answer our prayer and expressing our confidence in him who always has our best interest and the best interests of others in his heart.

Pause: How do the above traditional forms of prayer feature in your prayer life?

Spousal and occupational prayer

In his book, *The Human Adventure*, William McNamara, O.C.D., speaks about spousal and occupational prayer. Both of these forms of prayer are important and interdependent.

Occupational prayer. As we sit at our desk, walk or drive from one place to another, as we work in the kitchen, garden or garage, or play some sport, we can call to mind the presence of God. Occupational prayer does not mean that we drop to our knees in the middle of these tasks. But it does mean that we should frequently seek to have a sense of God's presence and commune with him. Growing in occupational prayer, enables us to act on Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing" (1Thes 5:17). Occupational prayer is one of the simplest and easiest ways to grow in holiness.

Spousal prayer. Like Jesus, we withdraw from the busyness of the day so that we can be totally available and present to God, our *divine spouse*. If Jesus and all the great saints felt a need to spend periods of quiet time with God, then we who are weak and imperfect must seek to do no less. There are 96 fifteen-minute periods in every day. Surely it should not be a problem for us to give God our total attention for one or two of those fifteen-minute periods. If our occupational prayer is not complemented by regular periods of spousal prayer, it will lack depth and most likely fizzle out.

The battle of prayer - four problem areas

The *Catechism* tells us that sometimes prayer can be "a battle against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union from God" (C 2725). We will now examine four areas that can make prayer or our relationship with God seem like a battle. As you will see, the four areas are connected.

1) Unanswered prayer. When God seems deaf to our prayers of intercession or petition, we may experience a spiritual or faith crisis. We may conclude that God is distant and disinterested to our concerns. Unanswered prayer can cause us to quit praying.

Firstly, when dealing with unanswered prayer, we need *wisdom, honesty and faith*. We need the *wisdom* to know that no prayer goes unanswered. We can always expect God to give us the strength to deal with the circumstances of our lives even if he does not change

them. This seemingly was the experience of the author of Psalm 138:3 who writes: "When I called, you answered me; you built up strength within me." What the psalmist is telling us is that "having God answer our prayers" sometimes involves "having him build up his strength in us."

Secondly, when our prayers seem to go unanswered, we need to be *honest* with God about our thoughts and feelings. We need to know that it is okay to get mad with God when we are feeling frustrated about his seeming deafness to our prayer. Some spiritual guides believe that when our prayer goes flat and boring, it may be because we are not being honest in our relationship with God. Learning to be honest with God about our real thoughts and feelings is a big growth step in our prayer life. People like Abraham, Moses, Hannah, Jeremiah and the psalmists can be our teachers in this area.

Thirdly, when God seems to be deaf to our prayers of petition and intercession, we need the grace to be able to *trust* that he has our best interest in mind. If loving parents expect their little children to trust that they will only do what is in their best interest, how much more should we place our trust in our God? This, of course, is where a *deepening faith* can help us immensely. An important aspect of faith is trusting that God knows what is best for us. A deepening faith will gradually help us to embrace the wisdom expressed in the piece called "The Weaver."

*My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors He worketh steadily.
Oftimes He weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride,
forget he sees the upper, and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver's skillful hand,
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.*

(Author Unknown)

Pause: How have you experienced God answering and not answering your prayer?

2) Distractions. The *Catechism* tells us that distractions are a "habitual difficulty" in prayer and that they can reveal to us what we are attached to (C 2627). We can assume that the vast majority of prayerful people experience distractions in prayer especially if they live very busy lives. In an age when we have become used to "multi-tasking," we find it even more difficult to focus on one thing. During prayer, our challenge is to try to be as fully present as we can to the Lord. This is

not easy. When we experience lots of distractions in prayer, we may be tempted to cut short our prayer time or to even quit praying, concluding that it is a waste of our valuable time. This would be a mistake. When it comes to the challenge of distractions in prayer, we should take much comfort from these words by St. Francis de Sales: “If the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back quite gently and place it tenderly in God’s presence. And if you do nothing else while at prayer but bring your heart back again and again and place it in God’s presence,...though it went away every time you brought it back, your time of prayer would be very well spent” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*).

3) Prayer in painful times. Prayer can be especially difficult during painful times of life, e.g., sickness, loss of a loved one, guilt, when life is not going well for us. During such times, we may experience God as distant and disinterested. We may conclude that God is the reason for our bad times. Worse still, we may think that God is punishing us for something. At such times, prayer can be a big challenge. The way we normally pray may not work for us. In painful times, we are called to tough it out with God, just as couples tough it out with each other in times of difficulty. As stated above, we must be honest with God about our true thoughts and feelings. We may find some comfort in praying the psalms or seeking the support of faith friends or a spiritual director.

4) Spiritual dryness. In times of spiritual dryness, we feel a sense of the absence of God. We pray but feel nothing. During such times, we can be sure that Satan will be very active, trying to get us to quit praying. But in these times, God may be doing his best work in us, purifying us of attachments to spiritual consolations. In prayer there is always a danger that we may be more attached to the spiritual consolations of our God than to the God of our consolations. It is easy to love God when all is going well and when God is blessing us abundantly. The challenge is to stay faithful to God during those dark times when we have no felt sense of his presence. In times of spiritual dryness, we need to remember that our prayer is good when our hearts are fixed on God, even if it is filled with boring aridity or passionate turmoil.

In times of dryness, it is good to speak with a spiritual director or seek the support of faith friends. It may also be helpful to reflect on the following prayer by the late Fr. Henri Nowen.

Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand. My mind is not able to

concentrate on you, my heart is not able to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone. But in faith I cling to you. I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.

Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort. I want to let you know that I love you even though I do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you even though I often experience despair. Let this be a little dying I can do with you and for you as a way of experiencing some solidarity with the millions in this world who suffer far more than I do. Amen.

Pause: Do you presently have the practice of spending 15 or 20 minutes in quiet prayer? If not, why not?

Action suggestions

If you do not presently have a daily quiet prayer time, consider setting aside one fifteen-minute period every day when you seek to be totally available to God. Spend time with the question: How are my efforts to pray impacting the way I live my daily life, my relationships, the way I spend my time, treasure and talent?

Meditation

*Lord, I do not know what to ask of you.
You alone know what are my true needs.
You love me more than I myself know how to love.
Help me to see my real needs
which are concealed from me.
I do not ask either a cross or a consolation;
I can only wait for you.
My heart is open to you.
Visit and help me;
cast me down and raise me up.
I worship in silence your holy will
and your inscrutable ways.
I offer myself as a sacrifice to you.
I put all my trust in you.
I have no desire other than to fulfill your will.
Teach me how to pray.
Pray yourself in me? Amen.*
(Philaret of Moscow)

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