

## Beginning to pray

The following words of a contemporary writer on prayer, Father Marie-Eugène OCD (d.1967) are worth recalling as we begin to look more formally at different methods that might prove useful as we commit ourselves to a regular discipline of prayer:

‘To turn towards God is already to pray, since prayer - a friendly conversation with God - is nothing else than the movement of grace which we experience as children of God who is our Father’(*I want to see God*, page 182).

We all experience moments of prayer. To develop the art of living in prayer we must want to stay in touch with God who dwells in the depths of our soul. We must also desire that every feeling, thought, longing and action might have its source in this communion. We will need the courage and determination to enlist all the energies of our mind, heart, soul and strength as we begin the inner journey in response to God’s call, and we will need to learn perseverance and the patience not to be discouraged by distractions and darkness and a feeling of failure. Teresa of Avila urges us:

‘Let us exert ourselves, for the love of the Lord. Let us abandon our reason and our fears into his hands. Let us forget this natural weakness that can take up so much of our attention ... Care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord’(*Interior Castle*, III.2.8).

As a help to pray, let us look first to reflective spiritual reading. Knowledge stimulates love which in turn stimulates a desire to know more deeply. This is nourished and sustained by good reading. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, has a special place here: we come to know God by coming to know his Son Jesus. But there is a plethora of other writings that can also be a source of nourishment to our souls. On the subject of choosing appropriate reading, Father Marie-Eugène has the following advice:

‘The book to be chosen for reflective reading is not the book that is simply instructive or devotional, nor even the interesting book that holds one’s attention, but the book that suggests and provokes reflection, arouses the affections, or better still that awakens the soul and keeps it in the presence of God. Simply reading is not reflective reading. It must be interrupted for deeper reflections in the presence of God, to express to him our love, to enter into conversation with him. It will be short or prolonged according to need and will be resumed only when one falls again into dreaminess or inertia’(*I want to see God*, page 193).

If there are times when we find that we can’t seem to pray except with the help of a book, we might find some consolation in the following remark from Teresa of Avila : ‘I spent over fourteen years without ever being able to meditate except while reading’(*Way of Perfection*, 17).

Besides such reading, people often experience that they are helped to pray by repeating audibly a formula of prayer created by someone else. This can be a source of inspiration for us and can assist our communion with God. Therese of Lisieux tells us how she was helped in this way:

‘Sometimes when I am in such a state of spiritual dryness that not a single good thought occurs to me, I say very slowly the “Our Father” or the “Hail Mary”, and these prayers suffice to take me out of myself and wonderfully refresh me’(*Autobiography* x,163).

Father Marie-Eugène has the following advice:

‘Neglect of vocal prayer, which often pleads the excuse of not being able to pray in this way, proceeds very frequently from secret pride or a form of passivity which is mere laziness. In this case, vocal prayer will be an energetic exercise in humility and simplicity, fruitful for the soul and pleasing to God ... Those especially will have recourse to vocal prayer more frequently and for a longer time who, not being familiar with purely

intellectual activities, need a formula to sustain their thought, to arouse sentiments of devotion or take cognisance of them, and cannot give them their full force of prayer except by expressing them exteriorly'(*I want to see God*, page 185-186).

Another warning is in order. If saying prayers is really to be a prayer it is necessary that the words be not just rattled off with the tongue. We must take the words first into our heart and if they find an echo there we must then pray them from our heart attentively. Anthony Bloom has this caution: 'If we use "ready made" prayers (prayers made by others in suffering or in spontaneous enthusiasm) we must be careful not to lie to God under the pretext of offering prayers worthy of Him'(*Courage to pray*, page 37). Teresa of Avila has this to say of the most beautiful prayer formula which we learnt from Jesus himself: 'If you are to recite the *Our Father* well, one thing is necessary: you must not leave the side of the Master who taught it to you'(*Way of Perfection*, 24).

Communion with God can be helped also by Liturgical Prayer, the prayer of the assembled Christian community: the Mass, the celebration of the sacraments, and the Divine Office (Daily Prayer of the Church). In Promulgating the new form of the Divine Office (1970), Paul VI wrote:

'Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of mankind joined to Christ himself. Each individual has his or her part in this prayer which is common to the one Body, and it thus becomes the voice of the Beloved Spouse of Christ, putting into words the wishes and desires of the whole Christian people and making intercession for the necessities common to all mankind. It obtains its unity from the heart of Christ himself. Our Redeemer, as he himself had entered into life through his prayer and sacrifice, wished that this should not cease throughout the ages in his Mystical Body, the Church, and so the official Prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father. Thus, when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his voice in us'.

The General Instruction reminds us of the following statements from the New Testament: 'Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them'(Hebrews 7:25); 'Where two or three are gathered in my name I shall be there with them'(Matthew 18:20). It includes the following:

'The Fathers of the Church rightly heard in the Psalms Christ calling out to his Father or the Father speaking to his Son. They even recognised in them the voice of the Church, the apostles and the martyrs'(n.109).

Father Marie-Eugène writes:

'Liturgical prayer, like every other prayer, is to be vivified by interior prayer. If the external movement that it imposes, the art that it cultivates, the sustained attention that it requires, should hinder or even destroy the contemplation that it is meant to serve, the devotion that it should stimulate, or the interior spirit that it wants to express, it would be mere external worship that God could not accept, according to the words of Scripture: "These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me"(Isaiah 29:13, quoted by Jesus in Mark 7:6). The beginner must learn to pray with the Church, to enter into the majestic beauty of her ceremonies, to penetrate their symbolism and delight in her liturgical texts. We must above all seek in liturgical prayer the movements of the soul of Christ in the Church, listening to the movements of his Spirit of Love, and so learn in the school of Jesus Christ our Master his daily intimate and silent prayer'(*I want to see God*, page 191).

Let us now turn our attention away from the help provided by the thoughts and prayers of others and reflect on the communion with God which we have when we are alone with God in periods of personal prayer. Saint Ignatius of Loyola (d.1556), the founder of the Jesuits, is a good

guide for those of us who are beginning to make a commitment to regular prayer of this kind. There are two practices in which he trained those who looked to him for spiritual guidance.

Firstly, he recommends that once or twice a day we set aside a short period to reflect on our life with a view to noticing where God has been moving us and how we have been responding to this movement. God is constantly speaking his Word to us and inspiring us through his Spirit. How attentive have I been, or how inattentive?

These few minutes of reflection, looking over the morning and then over the afternoon, schedule into our often busy and potentially very distracted lives the opportunity to note and relish moments of communion which, because they were so fleeting, would otherwise leave no trace. It also provides the opportunity to note and express our sorrow for the times when we were inattentive. It is only perhaps upon reflection that we notice the gentle movements of grace which were there but which went unnoticed at the time.

The practice of this form of prayer makes us more sensitive to the action of God in our lives and we get to know God more intimately. We also become more sensitive to our habitual ways of responding to God, both positive and negative. We get to know ourselves better, always in the atmosphere of trusting prayer. You may find the following five steps helpful in structuring these moments of reflection.<sup>1</sup>

1. Whatever you are feeling and whatever is happening to you, place yourself trustingly in God's presence and search your memory for something, anything, however apparently insignificant, for which you can feel grateful. This will sometimes be difficult, but there will always be something. Find it, focus upon it, savour the moment and express your thanks to God. Can you say: 'Whatever you may do, I thank you'. Open your heart to receive the Giver of all gifts.
2. Pray to God to be able to see your morning (your day) in the light of faith. Ask Jesus to look into your eyes and show you what he sees. Ask his Spirit to reveal your soul to you, remembering the words of Jesus: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'. They will also see themselves as God sees them.
3. Now, with Jesus, look back over the morning (the day) at the places you have been, the activity you have been involved in, the people whom you have encountered. Ask God: 'Please show me *now* where you were then and what you were saying to me.' Our attention is on God, on waiting for God to reveal what he wants to show me. This is not a time for remembering what happened as though we were an outside observer. It is important to remember from the inside. Pray to recall the feelings, the movements of heart (or lack of them). We are not simply remembering, we are asking the Spirit of Jesus to shine gently in our hearts and to reveal how God was present in the moments of our day. Even when the surface of our lives is being whipped up by storms, there is an under-current drawing us into communion with God and 'guiding us along the right path.'

You will recall moments when what Saint Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit will be apparent. You will recall moments of 'joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control'(Galatians 5:22). These are moments when you were in communion with God and were responding to his love. Thank God for them. You will also recall moments when the fruits of the Spirit were absent. You may also recall moments when you rejected grace, when you sinned, when you followed a habitual line of self-gratification, neglecting the deep longing of your heart. These are moments when you were not in communion with God. Express your sorrow and open your heart to God's healing and forgiving mercy.

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Tetlow SJ, *Choosing Christ in the World*, page 140-141. Also D. Townsend SJ, *Finding God in a Busy Day* in *Review for Religious* 50 [Jan 1991] pages 43-63. B. Gallagher MSC in *Encounter* 48 (1988).

4. Take what you have learned into prayer. Sometimes we become aware of something quite significant, either positive or negative. Delay over it, savouring either your gratitude or your sorrow.
5. Pray to be more alert to the grace which God is certainly offering you to continue listening attentively and to take steps to avoid the inattentive or sinful behaviour which we have observed. Finish the prayer with an act of longing and love, looking forward with expectation to the wonderful ways that God will be loving you in the time before the next reflection.

Secondly, Ignatius recommends that we enter imaginatively into a Gospel scene.<sup>2</sup> Some people find this easier to do than others, but many are surprised to find that, with persistence, they are able to use their imagination better than they at first thought and that by using their imagination in this way they find that they are less bound into thoughts and more engaged at the level of the heart. Perhaps this way of praying is best explained by an example. The following is a guided meditation on John 5:1-9, adapted from Anthony de Mello (*Sadhana*, Exercise 22).

- Quieten yourself in preparation for the contemplation. Now imagine the pool ... The five porticoes (covered walk-ways) ... the surroundings ... What kind of place is it? ... Notice the architecture ... the weather.
- Now let the whole scene come to life: See the people near the pool. How many people are there? ... What sort of people? How are they dressed? ... What are they doing? ... What kind of illness are they suffering from? ... What are they saying? ... What are they doing?
- You are there. What are you doing there? ... Why have you come to this place? What are your feelings as you survey the scene and watch these people? ... What are you doing? ... Do you speak to anyone? ...
- Now notice the sick man of whom the gospel passage speaks. Where in the crowd is he? ... How is he dressed? ... Is there anyone with him? ... Walk up to him and speak with him ... What do you say to him? ... His reply? ... Spend some time getting as many details of his life and his person as possible ... What sort of an impression does he make on you? ... What are your feelings while you converse with him? ...
- As you are speaking with him you notice, out of the corner of your eye, that Jesus has entered this place ... Watch all his actions and movements ... Where does he go? ... How does he act? ... What do you think he is feeling? ...
- He is now coming up towards you and the sick man ... What are you feeling now? ...
- You step aside when you realise that he wants to talk to the sick man. What is Jesus saying to the man? What does the man answer? ... Listen to the whole dialogue. Fill in the sketchy account of the gospel ... Dwell especially on Jesus' question: 'Do you want to be made well?'
- Now listen to Jesus' command as he tells the man to get up and walk. The first reaction of the man ... his attempt to get up ... the miracle! ... Notice the reactions of the man ... Notice Jesus' reaction ... and your own ...
- Jesus now turns to you. He engages you in conversation. Talk to him about the miracle that has just taken place... Is there any sickness that you are suffering from? ... Physical, emotional, spiritual? ... Speak to Jesus about it... What does Jesus have to say? .. Listen to his words to you: 'Do you want to be made well?' Do you really mean what you say when you asked to be cured? ... Are you ready to take all the consequences of a cure? ...

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<sup>2</sup> See also Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (Ed. John Ryan; Doubleday, Image, 1989, pages 83-90)

- You have now arrived at a moment of grace. Do you have the faith that Jesus can cure you and that he means to cure you? ... Do you have the trust that this will happen as a result of the faith of the whole group here?
- Listen to his mighty words as he pronounces the words of healing over you, or lays his hands on you. What are you feeling? ... Are you certain that these words you have heard are going to have an effect on you, in fact have already had their effect on you, even though you may perceive nothing tangible at the moment? ... He knows the healing that you really need and is offering all the healing that the love of God can offer.
- Spend a while now in quiet prayer in the company of Jesus.

A simple variant on this form of imaginative prayer is suggested by Jean-Jacques Olier (d.1657), the founder of the Company of Saint-Sulpice.<sup>3</sup> It consists of three steps. Firstly, we focus on a scene from the Gospels: we look at Jesus and allow our hearts to go out to him in wonder and loving adoration. Secondly, we place ourselves in the scene and unite ourselves to him in communion. Finally, we listen to him as he asks us to love others as he loves us, and we ask him to guide us to do to others as we have experienced him doing to us.

Let us imagine that we are focusing our prayer on the last supper and the intimacy between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple (John 13:23). We begin by watching the scene; we then be the beloved Disciple; finally we ask Jesus to guide us to reach out to others with the kind of intimate love which he has for us. We might be meditating on the scene between Jesus and the leper (Mark 1:40-45). Firstly, we imagine the scene and allow our heart to go out to Jesus in whatever way we are moved. Then we enter the scene and put ourselves in the place of the leper, once again allowing our hearts to go out to Jesus as we enter into communion with him. Finally, we pray that Jesus will turn our hearts towards the outsiders to whom he may wish to send us, and pray to be instruments of his compassion.

God can draw us beyond this form of mental and imaginative prayer, but the Saints warn us against becoming despondent and taking it upon ourselves to abandon it to rely solely on vocal prayer. Saint Catherine of Siena:

‘If you look only to the completion of your tally of prayers, or if you abandon mental prayer for vocal, you will never advance. You may set yourself to say a certain number of oral prayers. But I may visit your spirit in one way or another, sometimes with a flash of self-knowledge and contrition for your selfishness, sometimes in the greatness of my love setting before your mind the presence of my Truth in different ways, depending on my pleasure or your longings. And sometimes you will be so foolish as to abandon my visitation, which you sense within your spirit, in order to complete your tally’ (*Dialogue* 66, page 125).

Another way to pray is to simply be with God.<sup>4</sup> This form of prayer is not something separate and distinct. It finds its place in all periods of formal prayer. We can pray in this way when we pause during our Spiritual Reading, or when a particular phrase touches our heart during our vocal or liturgical prayer. When we are engaged in our brief daily reflections on our response to God, we may on occasion feel drawn to spend our time on just one of these sections and leave the others to another time. We can pause and let ourselves be caught up with being with God in the Spirit in any one section. Likewise in entering imaginatively into a Gospel scene, we may be drawn to just being with the Father or with Jesus. Let us look at the dynamic of this prayer of being with God.

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<sup>3</sup> See his Introduction to Christian Life and Virtue, chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> Borrowed from EJ Fallon MSC. See also Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart: opening yourself to the love you need* (Harper, San Francisco, 1991) pages 116-118, 129-132 and 203-204.

1. As at the commencing of all extended periods of formal prayer, we settle ourselves comfortably in our chair or on the floor and set out to slow down the tapes playing in our head by closing our eyes, centring our attention on sensations that are coming to us – the sound of insects, birds, rain, wind or even traffic; the feel of the breeze on our face; the feel of the support given to our bodies by the chair or the floor – a symbol of God’s upholding us in his arms moment by moment.<sup>5</sup>
2. When we feel settled we move to the passage which we have chosen beforehand to be the lead into our prayer. This will be a short passage. We can move to other passages later in the prayer if we feel so inclined. We slowly read the chosen passage a couple of times.
3. We note the sentences or phrases that strike us. We take one of these and repeat it over and over, relishing it.
4. When we are drawn to do so, we make a short prayer to God or to Jesus – ‘Father I thank you’, or ‘Father, what a wonderful Father you are’, or ‘Father, I love you’. As we make the short prayer we get in contact with and attend to the feeling in our heart as we utter the prayer. We then stay with that feeling until it begins to fade and our mind starts to get active. We then repeat the prayer. This may bring the feeling back and cut of the activity of the mind. We repeat this slowly until we are drawn to move to another short prayer and repeat the process.

What underlies this method of prayer are things you know:

- a. While the quality of a relationship depends on attitudes of the mind, the relationship becomes rooted in and is nourished by the feelings in our heart.
  - b. Our mind needs to be slowed down if God is to deepen the feelings in our heart and so deepen our relationship with him. This method of prayer deliberately slows down our thinking.
  - c. When we leave our prayer in God’s hands as we do in this form of prayer, the Holy Spirit will guide us from one short prayer to another. When we feel ourselves drawn from one prayer to another we know in faith that it is the Spirit drawing us and so guiding our prayer as he sees is best for us.
5. When the time comes to end our period of formal prayer, we thank God for what he has done in us. This is often a real exercise in faith because, as the saints warn us, very often we can see no gain from our prayer. Knowing that God is continually taking the initiative in deepening the relationship between ourselves and himself, we trust that he will make our prayer fruitful even though the fruits are not evident to us. The following statement by Georges LeFebvre OSB develops aspects of this simple prayer:

‘It does not matter what we see or feel, so we should not worry about it. What matters is our attitude, which we may or may not feel all the time, which results simply from paying attention to God’s presence, consenting to it. This consent is also a prayer. Consenting to God’s presence is agreeing that we depend on it for our very existence. It is agreeing no longer to belong to ourselves. It is an attitude of essential humility. It is also an act of absolute gratitude, believing in God’s love for us. Thanksgiving is the proper expression of an act of faith which goes far enough beyond itself to reach the whole of God’s love. Thanksgiving knows that it can never go far enough, because it can never measure the love of God. It is in thanksgiving that we can best hold on to all that remains hidden from us. It is sure of God’s love. It does not need signs or other reassurances. We should offer our heart to God just as it is, as he sees it with his grace at work in it. Prayer in its many forms is the realisation of belonging to God’s love, to God’s love for us. Prayer is to be no longer

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<sup>5</sup> See Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart*, pages 202-204.

ourselves alone. It is to live in communion. It is to be involved with our whole being in the beyond which this communion opens to us. In this communion our assent to the mystery of God's love for us is taken up into this mystery and becomes part of it'(in *Courage to pray* [DLT 1973] 116-118).

Anthony Bloom tells the story of a very old woman who came to him complaining that she had never been given the experience of the presence of God. He advised her to stop talking:

'I advised her after breakfast to tidy her room and make it as pleasant as possible and sit down in a position where she could see the whole room, the widow onto the garden, the icons with their little oil lamps. "When you have sat down, rest for a quarter of an hour in the presence of God, but take care not to pray. be as quiet as you can, and, since you obviously can't do nothing, knit in the presence of the Lord and tell me what happens." After a few days she came back happily. She has felt the presence of God. I asked her curiously what had happened. She said she had done exactly what I had suggested. She sat down and looked about her quietly and peacefully, feeling she had the right to be inactive and not praying and for the first time for years, she said, she noticed that the room was peaceful and pleasant to be in. She looked at it and saw it for the first time. There was an encounter between her and the place she had lived in for many years without ever seeing.

Then she became aware of the peace and silence around her, a peace and silence accentuated by the ticking of the clock and the clicking of her needles on the arms of her chair. Gradually this silence which had been outside her came within her and enveloped her. The silence took her out of herself into a richer silence which was not just the absence of noise but rich in itself and at its centre she found a presence. And when she felt this presence she was moved to pray but from the depths of this silence, not in floods of words and a whirl of thoughts, but gently and quietly taking each word from the silence and offering it to God. Of its own accord her prayer had become the expression of her inner silence and part of the silence of God which she had felt.

This is a method easy for everyone to try. It means of course contending with the whirl of thoughts, the heart's hesitations, the body's restlessness and the giddiness of the will. There are many exercises based on ascetical practice and psychology. But even without these, simply letting go of ourselves before God into the depths of silence we are capable of will help us make great progress'(*Courage to Pray*, pages 44-45).

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The following may also prove helpful. I have been unable to trace its source:

‘Take time off each day to think and pray,  
to care how your life is going.  
Give your roots rain.

Take time with a friend to do nothing too important,  
but just to be together, to enjoy another person.  
Give your roots rain.

Take time to write a poem or grow a flower,  
to create something that is an expression of.  
Give your roots rain.

Take time to play a sport, read a poem, pray a while,  
to grow in the different aspects of your life.  
Give your roots rain.

For in your roots you find who you are,  
and there, too, you find who God is,  
for God dwells with you always.  
Lord God, give my roots rain.’

Later we will be speaking of a kind of stillness that has its source in the action of God in the soul. There can, of course, be moments of this in any prayer, but here we are speaking of the kind of stillness that we can bring about by an effort of our will. It is a matter of remembering that God is in the depths of the soul and of deciding to gather our faculties and focus within. To recollect oneself in this way will require discipline and persistence. However it is important to remember that it cannot be forced, ‘but must come gently’ (Teresa, *Interior Castle*, I .1). As soon as the soul finds itself alone it should seek Jesus and converse with him. The idea is for the Prayer of Recollection to extend over the entire day, helped by little reminders. It can be helped also by Reflective Spiritual Reading, Vocal and Liturgical Prayer and by entering imaginatively into a Gospel scene.

Finally, a warning: because this kind of stillness is partly a matter of technique, we must beware of laziness here and of thinking that the peace and stillness that we manage to achieve is necessarily communion with God. To be prayer it is essential that the centred and stilled soul be alert and attentive to God.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> see Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart*, pages 200-201 on being re:axed and alert.