

Active Prayer

What we can do to be open to God's gift

Some Basic Principles

In *Yielding to Love* Chapter II, I outline some basic principles to be kept in mind when we reflect on prayer:

First, it is important not to forget that, since prayer is loving communion with God, and since God is always the one to begin the communion, the best prayer is the prayer which God is offering.

Let us gratefully accept and treasure whatever communion God is offering us now, for God knows our present capacity to respond. We need to remember that to turn towards God is already to be in prayer.

Secondly, we must constantly remind ourselves that God is offering us the intimacy of this communion.

Thirdly, the value or quality of our prayer is measured by the fruit which it produces in our lives: our obedience, our humility and especially our love.

Teresa writes (Interior Castle IV.2.8):

‘It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer.’

Fourthly, whatever happens, Teresa tells us: ‘we must not abandon prayer’(Life 8.5). If we do, she offers the only remedy: we must ‘begin again’(Interior Castle II.I.10).

Fifthly, we should not expect the journey to be one of simple progression: ‘There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it is not necessary often to return to the beginning’(Teresa, Life 13.15).

Sixthly, it is important to follow the advice of Teresa and ‘set our eyes on Christ’ (Interior Castle I.2.II).

Jesus will journey with us leading us to a deeper knowledge of the true God – a knowledge that comes through love.

He will also lead us to a deeper knowledge of our real selves, for in Jesus we see what it means to be made in God’s image and likeness.

We see also who we are called to be.

Furthermore, we see by comparison how sinful we are. This acts as a warning. It nurtures humility and safeguards us from thinking that any value we have comes from ourselves.

It reinforces our longing to gaze on God, the sole source of all good.

Seventhly, if we are serious about prayer we must be resolute in turning away from sin, for it blocks out the light of God and opens our souls to darkness.

We will need a resolute will to detach ourselves from whatever is cluttering up our lives and holding us back.

This will vary from person to person, and according to each one's state of life.

If we are serious about prayer we must try to live virtuous lives in obedience to God's will as revealed to us through the ordinary means of God's providence.

Finally, while there is some value in studying prayer ‘from the outside’, we will only truly be helped to the extent that we are praying.

Without praying we can learn what God is doing in people’s lives and we can get some idea of the intimate communion to which God is inviting us. However, we can understand what other people tell us about prayer only to the extent that their words shed light on our own personal experience of prayer.

Teresa herself tells us this: ‘As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer they will be really obscure for one who has not had experience’(Life 10.9).

Spiritual Reading ‘Yielding to Love’ Chapter 16

‘Reflective spiritual reading is an important aid to prayer. It helps to nourish our imagination and our mind, and so it helps to stimulate love. This in turn leads to a desire to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of God. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, has a special place here. We come to know God by coming to know God’s Son, Jesus. There is, however, an abundance of other writing that can also be a source of nourishment to our souls. It is important to remember that spiritual reading is not a substitute for prayer.

“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 God our love, to enter into conversation with God. It will be short or prolonged according to need and will be resumed only when one falls again into dreaminess or inertia” (Father Marie-Eugène OCD I want to see God page 193).

In Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate was a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha.

It had five porticoes in which lay many invalids

– some blind, some lame, and some paralysed.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there

and knew that he had been there a long time,

he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'

The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one

to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up;

and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.'

Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.'

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

A simple variant on this form of imaginative exercise 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.

Examen of Consciousness Yielding to Love Chapter 14

‘Good musicians take great care of their instruments. Violinists are constantly checking the tension on the strings to keep their violins in tune. In a similar way, if we are committed to a life of prayer we need to monitor our lives, for the quality of prayer is best assessed by examining our attitudes and reactions. As Jesus said: ‘you know a tree by its fruit’(Matthew 12:23).

- Place myself in God's presence. What do I feel grateful for today?
- Ask Jesus to let me see my day through his eyes.
- Ask Jesus to show me now what he was trying to show me during the day: the good and the bad.
- Delay on anything that stands out, expressing gratitude or sorrow.
- Pray to be more attentive and sensitive to God's inspiration.
- Conclude with an act of longing and love.

Prayer of the Church's Liturgy Yielding to Love chapter 12

‘Knowing how helpful prepared prayers can be, the Church offers us prayers that help us, as a community, celebrate the Mass and the various sacraments. We are also invited to join our Christian brothers and sisters in offering morning and evening prayer as well as prayer for other times of the day. This is sometimes called the Prayer of the Hours or the Divine Office. It is a structured form of prayer, which includes hymns, psalms, Scripture readings and prayers of petition.

In promulgating the new form of the Divine Office in 1970, Pope Paul VI wrote:

‘Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of humankind 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 humankind. 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.’

‘If we are faithful in preparing ourselves to receive the gift of prayer by applying ourselves, through meditation, to getting to know God better by getting to know God’s Son, we will find that our meditative reflections tend to become simpler. This is the way with conversations between friends. It is also the way with God. Teresa writes: ‘I am not asking you to do anything more than look at him. Who can keep you from turning the eyes of your soul towards the Lord? ... He never takes his eyes off you’ (Way of Perfection 26.3). ‘It is good to reflect for a time ... but we should not always weary ourselves in seeking these reflections, but just remain there in his presence with the intellect quiet. If we can, we should occupy ourselves in looking upon him who is looking at us. Keep him company. Talk with him. Pray to him. Humble ourselves before him. Delight in him’ (Life 13.22).

Teresa speaks of God dwelling within the soul in her Life 40.6, and in her Spiritual Testimonies 14. In her The Way of Perfection we read: ‘Speak with Him as with a Father, a Brother, a Lord and a Spouse ... He will teach you what you must do to please Him ... Remember how important it is for you to understand this truth – that the Lord is within us and that we should be there with Him ... The fire of Divine Love is the more readily enkindled in those who pray in this way; for they are so near the fire that, however small the blaze that has been fanned by the understanding, any small spark that flies out will cause them to burst into flame. When no hindrance comes from outside, they remain alone with their God and are ready to become enkindled (Way of Perfection 28).

This simple prayer of recollection can extend over the entire day. God can touch our hearts in this way when we pause during our spiritual reading, or when a particular phrase captures our attention during our vocal or liturgical prayer. Likewise in entering imaginatively into a gospel scene, we may be drawn just to be with God or with Jesus ...

Prayer is a gift from God that always catches us by surprise. However, it is a gift that God is certainly offering to us. Hence the call of Jesus and the advice of his saints, that we engage ourselves on a journey into prayer, a journey of reaching out towards God in order to welcome God and yield to God's love.

In the prayer of simple awareness we have gone as far as we can go in active prayer.'

‘Prayer Word’

Martin Laird has an excellent treatment of the ‘Prayer Word’ in his ‘Into the Silent Land’(DLT 2006). It is a simple ‘word’ that your own soul is at home with (for example ‘Jesus’ or ‘You are in me and I am in you’), spoken on the breath as we breath in and out. He speaks of ways in which, as prayer deepens, we deal with distractions. At the beginning the prayer word acts as a place of escape from distractions. Then later as a place from which we can gaze at the distraction without comment while staying in communion. Finally, the distraction is drawn up into the prayer and becomes part of the communion. Laird writes: ‘All distractions have within them the silent depths we seek, the flowing vastness of presence that eludes every grasp of comprehension. Therefore distraction do not have to be got rid of for them to relax their grip and reveal their hidden treasure’(Laird page 75.9).