

# **PRAYER IN A PRIEST'S LIFE**

## Prayer

The place for a priest is in the sanctuary. That is to say, in order to carry out his role as mediator he must live in communion with God. His ministry and life flow from that communion and lead to it.

To be in communion with God we must penetrate to the centre of our being. This inner journey will enlighten us as to how to journey to the heart of people and of the world which is loved by God and of which we are part. In prayer we learn to listen to the feelings, the images, the thoughts, the longings that we find in this inner world, and we learn to discern when these are coming from our soul-connection with God and when they are arising from forces which are resisting the attraction of grace. It is only when finally all our feelings, all our thoughts, all our dreams, all our creative energy, all of loving comes from our own authentic centre, that is to say, from our communion with God, that we experience the full freedom of being ourselves.

Teresa of Avila observes that ‘the door’ to this inner journey is prayer (*Interior Castle* I.1.7). There is nothing so personal or so demanding as prayer. We should not expect it to be otherwise. To enjoy profound communion with the source of our being will require of us much discipline and detachment and a humble and alert listening to the movements of our soul which are being inspired by God. To enjoy communion with God we must set out in a determined way and persevere. Teresa 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

If we are serious about prayer we must be resolute in turning away from serious sin, for it blocks out the light of God and leaves our souls lost in darkness. We should be resolute also in taking steps to cooperate with grace in opposing venial sins. Though these are readily forgiven by God, we should not underestimate the harm they do. John Tauler, one of the Rhineland mystics of the fourteenth century, wrote the following:

What are the obstacles which cause such incomparable harm, depriving people of the precious bounty which fills heaven and earth with its riches while we remain empty and unfulfilled? It is a state which we can observe all around us. You must understand that these venial sins let works of love grow cold, dissipate the affections, drive out and hinder devotion, take away spiritual consolation, and destroy our intimacy with God by bringing about an alienation. Even if such sins do not essentially destroy grace, they nevertheless do great damage by creating situations in which one is apt to lose grace by falling into grave sin. Such is the harm that merely venial sin can cause.

– Sermon 33

He gives as examples giving in to self-gratification, getting caught up in fashionable luxuries, losing of our temper, and the way we hurt back when we are hurt, unwillingness to make the effort to put bad habits behind us, and frivolous talk. 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.

Teresa would also have us ‘set our eyes on Christ’ (*Interior Castle* I.2.11). Jesus will journey with us leading us to a deeper knowledge of the true God – a knowledge through love. He will also lead us to a deeper knowledge of our true selves. 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. 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. We must also be attentive to loving others.

If we are serious about prayer we must also try to live virtuous lives in obedience to God’s will as revealed to us through the ordinary means of God’s providence. We must not be looking for consolations, but learn to embrace the cross. We need to be very careful not to be too self-reliant. This does not mean that we should be overly reliant on others and fail to appreciate the gift of God that we are as well as the gifts that God has given us, but it does mean to keep alert to the truth that all we are and all we have is gift. We are to listen to Jesus reminding us to become like a child in recognising our dependence on God and relying on God’s grace. We would do well to take the advice of Teresa of Avila: ‘Trust in God’s mercy, not at all in yourself’ (*Interior Castle* II.1.10).

In this reflection we limit our comments to pre-contemplative prayer, the kind of prayer we experience when we are responding to grace but have not yet surrendered to love. God, who will not force love, assists us by his grace but does not assume control. We are concerned with what we can do to progress in prayer. Let us begin by establishing some elementary principles.

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

Secondly, Teresa reminds us that 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: ‘It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer’ (*Interior Castle* IV.2.3).

Thirdly, we must constantly remind ourselves that God is offering us the intimacy of this communion. If we continue to respond to God’s offer, we will enjoy it.

Fourthly, whatever happens we must not abandon prayer: ‘Whatever wrong you who practise prayer might do, you must not abandon prayer’ (Teresa, *Life*, 8.5). If we abandon it, we must start again: ‘There is no other remedy for the evil of giving up prayer than to begin again’ (Teresa, *Interior Castle*, II.1.10).

Alphonsus de Ligouri, in his ‘The Practice of mental Prayer’ (1755), writes:

## Prayer

The heart that does not reflect, says Saint Bernard, is not afraid of itself because it does not know itself. It is not aware of its defects or of the obstacles which it will encounter on the way of salvation. And realise that the Pope whom Saint Bernard warned about omitting prayer (if it is true that he sometimes did so) did not neglect his prayer on account of some worldly affairs but on account of matters which were of importance for the glory of God and of the church. Priests should realise that they have all the greater need of the assistance of diviner grace when they are overwhelmed with demands on their time for important matters. Consequently, they need to devote themselves all the more to prayer in order to obtain the strength that they need to carry out their duties. And this holds good not only for those who might be inclined to neglect prayer in order to attend to secular affairs but also for those who omit prayer in order to assist others spiritually, as for example, by hearing their confessions, preaching, or writing.'

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).

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. If we are not praying, we can learn something of 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 cannot really understand any teaching on prayer except to the extent that someone helps to shed light on our own personal experience of prayer. In the words of Teresa of Avila: '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).

The following words of a contemporary writer on prayer, Father Marie-Eugène OCD (d.1967) are worth recalling as we begin to look 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

Teresa of Avila defines prayer as 'friendly communication, and frequently solitary conversation, with him who we know loves us' (*Life*, 8.5). We recall her advice: 'It is for you to look at him; he never takes his eyes off you' (*Way of Perfection*, 26.3). We recall also the words of John of the Cross: 'The language which God hears best is silent love' (*Maxims on Love*, n. 53). Nearer to our own time, Therese of Lisieux writes:

Prayer is a surge of the heart; a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.

– *Story of a Soul*

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom writes:

Prayer is the search for God, encounter with God, and going beyond this encoun-

ter in communion ... It arises from the awareness that the world in which we live is not simply two dimensional, imprisoned in the categories of time and space, a flat world in which we meet only the surface of things, an opaque surface covering emptiness. Prayer is born of the discovery that the world has depths; that we are not only surrounded by visible things but that we are also immersed in and penetrated by invisible things. And that this invisible world is both the presence of God, the supreme, sublime reality, and our own deepest truth ... Living only in the visible world is living on the surface; it ignores or sets aside not only the existence of God but the depths of created being. It is condemning ourselves to perceiving only the world's surface ... The human heart is deep. When we have reached the fountainhead of a human being's life we discover that this itself springs from beyond. The human heart is open to the invisible. Not the invisible of depth psychology but the invisible infinite, God's creative word, God himself.

Returning to ourselves is thus not a synonym for introversion but for emerging beyond the limits of our limited selves. Saint John Chrysostom said 'When you discover the door of your heart you discover the gate of heaven.' This discovery of our own depths goes together with the recognition of the depths in others. Each has his or her own immensity. I use the word 'immensity' on purpose. It means that the depth cannot be measured, not because it is too great for our measurements to reach it, but because its quality is not subject to measurement at all. The immensity of our vocation is to share the divine nature, and in discovering our own depths we discover God.

– *Courage to pray*, pages 5-6

### Spiritual Reading

As a help to pray, let us look first to living a reflective life. This can be helped by reflective spiritual reading, so long as we do not confuse reflection with prayer, or think of spiritual reading as a substitute for prayer. Prayer is listening to God and responding in love. Reading and thinking about God is important as providing a nurturing environment for prayer. 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 cannot 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*

## Prayer

*of Perfection* , 17).

### Prayer formulas

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. 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 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

### Prayerful reflection over the day

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. 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?

These few minutes of reflection, looking over the morning and then over the afternoon, scheduled 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.

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'. We will also see ourselves as God sees us.

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.

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.

#### Entering imaginatively into a Gospel scene

Ignatius also recommends that we enter imaginatively into a Gospel scene. Some people

## Prayer

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? ...

- 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 in his *Introduction to Christian Life and Virtue*, chapter 4. 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.

Teresa of Avila accepts the appropriateness of applying our mind at this stage, but has the following advice to ‘those who work almost continually with the intellect, engaging in discursive thought and meditation’:

They do well because nothing further has been given to them, although it would be good if they engaged for a while in making acts of love, praising God, rejoicing in his goodness, that he is who he is, and in desiring God’s honour and glory. These acts should be made as far as possible, for they are great awakeners of the will. Such souls would be well advised when the Lord gives them these acts not to abandon them for the sake of finishing the usual meditation.

– Interior Castle IV.1.6

## Prayer

Different temperaments need to find different ways to meditate. In every case she insists that what matters in prayer is our love: ‘Not everyone has the kind of imagination that makes meditating possible, but everyone is capable of loving ... Progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much’ (*Foundations* 5.2).

### Prayer of simply being with God<sup>1</sup>

Another way to pray is to simply be with God. 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.

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 holding us in his arms moment by moment.

When we feel settled we move to the passage which we have chosen beforehand to lead us into 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.

We note the sentences or phrases that strike us. We take one of these and repeat it over and over, relishing it.

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 off 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. Firstly, 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. Secondly, our minds need to be slowed down if God is to deepen the feelings in our hearts and so deepen our relationship with him.

This method of prayer deliberately slows down our thinking. Thirdly, 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 God sees is best for us.

<sup>1</sup>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.

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. Teresa of Avila speaks of this simple prayer:

The soul collects its faculties [memory, imagination, mind and will] together and enters within itself to be with its God.

– Way of Perfection 28.4

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? ... In the measure you desire him you will find him. God never takes his eyes off you.

– Way of Perfection 26.3

It is good to reflect for a time ... but we must sometimes remain by his side with our minds hushed in silence. 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

You need never withdraw from this loving communion ... Go within yourself even during your ordinary occupations.

– Way of Perfection, 29.5

It may not be at all easy to recollect oneself in this way. While it requires discipline and persistence, it is important to remember that recollection cannot be forced. 'but must come gently' (*Interior Castle* II,1). As soon as the soul finds itself alone it should seek Jesus and converse with him. Teresa suggests that an image of Jesus might help:

You will find it very helpful if you can get an image or a picture of the Lord – one that you like – not to wear around your neck and never look at, but to use regularly whenever you talk to him. He will tell you what to say.

– Way of Perfection, 26

There is an even deeper kind of stillness that has its source in the action of God in the soul, drawing us into contemplative prayer. There can, of course, be moments of this in any prayer, but our focus in this present reflection is on 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. A warning may be in order: 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.