

## 14. Prayer



## I. What is Prayer?

Therese of Lisieux:

“Prayer is a surge of the heart;  
a simple look turned towards God,  
a cry of recognition and love,  
embracing both trial and joy.”

Teresa of Avila:

“Prayer is an intimate sharing between friends ...  
taking time frequently to be alone  
with the One who we know loves us.”

“Look at him. He never takes his eyes off you.”

John of the Cross:

“The language God hears best is silent love.”

Ruth Burrows OCD 'Our Father' 1986

see Essence of Prayer 2006 (Burns & Oates) 14-15)

“Most of us find it almost impossible not to think of prayer as a special activity of life, an art that can be taught or learnt rather as we learn to play a musical instrument. So some of us are quick to feel we are proficient and others that we are painfully handicapped, are missing out on some secret or have some lack in our nature which makes prayer difficult if not impossible for us.

We feel there are certain laws governing prayer, techniques to be mastered, and when we have got hold of these, we can pray. Thus we look around for the guru, for the one who has mastered the art and its techniques, and eagerly await to be taught.

When we take up a book or article on prayer we shall probably detect, that if we stop to think, that we are looking for the key, the magic formula that is going to put our prayer right, enable us "to make a go" of this mysterious activity we call prayer.

All this is proof that we are overlooking the fundamental fact that prayer is not a technique but a relationship, that there is no handicap, no obstacle, no problem. The only problem would be not to really want God. We may want a "spiritual life", we may want "prayer", but do we really want God?"

- God who holds us in existence dwells in our hearts, wanting us to ‘live to the full.’
- God does this by drawing us to ever deeper intimacy with himself.
- Whatever kind of mess I may be in, God is wanting to love me, here and now.
- When we doubt this, we have the prodigal son and Mary of Magdala and the thief on the cross and the leper and dozens of others from the gospels to reassure us.

- ‘Come as you are. That’s how I want you. Come as you are. Feel quite at home. Close to my heart, loved and forgiven, come as you are. Why stand alone?’
- No need to fear. Love sets no limits. No need to fear. Love never ends. Don't run away, shamed and disheartened. Rest in my love. Trust me again.
- I came to call sinners, not just the virtuous. I came to bring peace, not to condemn. Each time you fail to live by my promise, why do you think I’d love you the less.
- Come as you are. That’s how I love you. Come as you are. Trust me again. Nothing can change the love that I bear you. All will be well. Just come as you are.’

## II

### Contemplation / Contemplative Prayer

‘Contemplation is nothing but a hidden, peaceful, loving inflow of God. If it is given room, it will inflame the spirit with love’ (Night I.10.6)

‘Pure contemplation lies in receiving’ (Flame 3.36).

‘Contemplation: prayer where I am no longer a tourist, where sense has shifted to spirit – where plenty of insights and aspirations have given way to a less picturesque, more total form of togetherness with God’ (Iain Matthew page 56).

## Contemplation / Contemplative Prayer

‘When the appetite has been fed somewhat, and has become in a certain fashion accustomed to spiritual things, and has acquired some fortitude and constancy, *God begins to wean the soul and place it in a state of contemplation.*

‘When it happens that we are conscious of *being placed in solitude and in the state of listening*, we should even forget the practice of loving attentiveness, so as to remain free for what the Lord then desires of us. We should make use of that loving attentiveness only when we do not feel ourselves placed in this solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or *spiritual listening*’ (Flame 3.35).



John of the Cross likens prayer to the playing of a musical instrument (see Spiritual Canticle 38.4). Inspired by God and enabled by God's grace, in active prayer we are, as it were, practising the art of playing the strings of our heart and mind, learning to ponder the mystery of God and enjoy the harmony of experienced communion. In passive prayer we leave it to God to guide our fingers over the strings.

Teresa : Way of Perfection, 25

‘While you are repeating some vocal prayer, it is possible for the Lord to grant you perfect contemplation ... You are enkindled in love without understanding how. You know that you are rejoicing in the one you love, but you do not know how. You are well aware that this is not a joy that you can attain through understanding. You embrace it without understanding how, but you do understand that it is a blessing you are receiving ... This is perfect contemplation ... In contemplation we can do nothing. God does everything. The work is God’s alone and far transcends human nature.’

When we let go the attempt to control our prayer, we allow a ‘gentle drawing inward’ (Interior Castle IV.3.3). Earlier we were trimming our sails to tack with the gentle breeze. Now we experience ourselves being drawn to let go and yield to an attraction that draws us and over which we exercise no control.

The recollection experienced here is not the result of our decision to simplify our method of praying. It is not the fruit of our controlling our breathing or practising a mantra. It is an experience that we are powerless to induce. Both Teresa and John warn us not to attempt to manufacture this quiet for ourselves (see Ascent II.17.7). There is nothing wrong with practising techniques to quieten ourselves down so long as we don’t confuse this with the quiet that is God’s gift, the quiet that comes with passive prayer.

- (i) We are held in being by God so that we can experience contemplative prayer
- (ii) God wants everyone to experience this loving communion
- (iii) It is not something we can initiate, or learn, or achieve, or control. It is a grace. We can only welcome and receive it.

‘It amazes me to see what goes on nowadays. Anyone who does twopence worth of meditation, if they reach a certain quietness and are aware of a train of inner words, baptises it all as coming from God, and thinks that’s how it is. They say “God said to me”; “I got this answer from God”; and it isn’t that at all’ (Ascent II.29.4).

## I. God is always beyond.

God sustains everything, but is not grasped by anything .

God remains absolute mystery.

## 2. Yet we need to encounter God!

Together these account for most of the deviations in human living – trying to fill the need with something else, or trivialising God so that I can grasp God’ (Iain Matthew page 97).



‘If only you knew the gift of God ...

If you drink of the water that I will give you will thirst for nothing else. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’ (John 4:10, 14).

### III. Active Prayer

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

‘Any prayer is good so long as it engages with Christ.’



‘The Our Father is good; praising is good; pleading is good; set or spontaneous, shared or alone, spoken or sung or silent, Scripture and palms and liturgy and stillness, chapel or garden or mountain or car park – all this prayer is very good if, by believing and loving, we are attending to the Other Person.’



## Some Basic Principles

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).

## I. Spiritual Reading

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.

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).

## 2. Devotional and Liturgical Prayers

### Therese of Lisieux

‘Sometimes when I am in 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.’

### Teresa of Avila

‘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.’

### 3. Meditation

‘For a better understanding of this beginner’s stage, it should be known that the practice of beginners is to meditate and make acts and discursive reflection with the imagination. Those in this state should be given matter for meditation and discursive reflection, and they should by themselves make interior acts and profit in spiritual things from the delight and satisfaction of the senses. For by being fed with the relish of spiritual things, the appetite is torn away from sensual things and weakened in regard to the things of the world’ (Flame 3.32).

John's advice to novices, quoted by Iain Matthew on page 143,  
from José de Jesús María Quiroga, *Don que tuvo San Juan de la Cruz*,  
printed in Ruiz (1968) pp. 511-512)

*'The first thing is to summon up the **mysteries of Jesus** by imagining them. Be present to Jesus as he sits wearied at the well, hot, alone, waiting (John 4). 'Imagine', not in detail, but impressionistically, as entering, not observing.*

*Then **ponder** in your mind the mystery you have evoked. Jesus is there, weary, for me ... He demands no expiation; he wants to quench thirst with living water ... He allows me to be with him,*

*Third, **attentiveness** to God in loving stillness: this is where the fruit of the other activities is plucked, and where the door of the mind is opened to God's light. Attentive in love; desire him there; adore him there; be with him in faith.*

## Iain Matthew page 145

‘The Son who elected to “be with” us has opened new possibilities in prayer. In the gospels people do indeed ask Jesus for things, and praise him for his ministry. But there is a deeper movement, expressed by the attitude of the sinners whose concern to “sit with him”(Mark 2:15), whose happiness is to know themselves “received by him (Luke 15:2). The apostles primary call is “to be with him”(Mark 3:14). In John’s gospel, this is the fruit of Jesus’ resurrection: “abide in my love” – remain, stay with, be with (John 15:9)’.

#### 4. Examen of Consciousness (Awareness Examen)

‘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.

## 5. Prayer of Presence

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).



## '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.

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).

‘Choose an appropriate place. If this is impossible, choose an inappropriate one. But choose one. If the freedom of the other Person is the decisive factor in prayer, then environment cannot be an ultimate problem – nor can “the wrong conditions” be a real excuse.

Not every place is equally conducive for the mind; but any place can hold my desire. Being recollected involves unifying my life around the single desire, to please God: real “devotion” consists in persevering there with patience and humility, distracting oneself, only to “please God” (Night I.6.6.).

## Iain Matthew page 151

This means learning not simply a technique, but a way of living – living for and with Another. Where this is my priority, difficulties in prayer turn out to be so many occasions on which I am affirming my option for God. Praying in the midst of a crammed timetable or a noisy household may not be especially satisfying; but it is a doubly powerful invitation to the One who is waiting for our desire: “You show yourself first and you come out to meet those who desire you” (Sayings 2).