

## SOME THOUGHTS ON PRAYER

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Our contemporary world is a busy, harried world. Life in America races at a dizzying pace. There never seems to be enough time: not enough time at work to finish each of the myriad tasks we are given; not enough time for our spouses, children, families, and friends; not enough time for ourselves; not enough time for God. We tend to address first those issues which are demanding our greatest attention. So we quieten the crying child, prepare the next meal, fix the leaking roof, pay the tax collector. When day is done, there simply isn't enough time to do everything and so we add today's undone chores to tomorrow's list. We put on hold those things which are least demanding, least abrasive, and least rewarding. This is life in contemporary America.

Our God is a nondemanding God. Not that God doesn't expect us to be moral, loving Christians, but this is a nondemanding expectation, a very patient expectation. God, unlike anything else in our lives, is willing to wait a lifetime for us. There is no shouting, pounding at the door, or direct threats to our well-being. Our God is an infinitely patient God, a quiet, unobtrusive God, a God who loves us by "letting us be" who we are.

Because God is a patient God, we tend to place other more demanding duties, responsibilities and relationships first in our lives. This is the Twentieth Century American-way. Unfortunately, our relationship with God--a relationship sustained primarily through the sacraments and the life of prayer--tends to be given last place and the least amount of time in our lives. What is most important becomes, all too often, that which is most neglected.

God calls each one of us to a deep intimate, loving relationship with the Most Holy Trinity. We hear this plainly in the words of Jesus in his priestly prayer at the last supper: "I pray . . . that all may be one as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be (one) in us" (John 17:20-21). The Catholic Church teaches that all Christians are called to loving union with God in this life! But such union is made possible only through a life of committed prayer--prayer that is true to the Gospel call "to pray always and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

### **OBSTACLES TO PERSONAL PRAYER**

One of the major stumbling blocks in the life of prayer is the idea that prayer is primarily something we do, like working, studying, playing sports or sewing. The emphasis all too often is on what we do, and so we tend to gauge our "success" or "failure" in tangible terms, that is, by what we get out of prayer. Does it make me feel good? Is prayer good therapy? Is it satisfying? Am I getting holy? The big problem with this point of view is that prayer becomes merely a means to some end. And its "success" depends on how well we perform, how well we play the spiritual game. Sadly, this is a typical view of prayer in our society today.

Authentic Christian prayer is prayer in the Holy Spirit--the Spirit of sonship and daughtership which empowers Christians to cry out "Abba! Father!" This is the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ. "It is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16). Prayer, then, is primarily what God does in us, for us, with us. The

quality of prayer cannot be gauged by how we feel, by how holy we seem to be, by how satisfying or consoling it is. The quality of prayer is judged above all else by the degree of our love in the imitation of Jesus Christ. Prayer-in-love is not a means, but an end in itself. It begins and ends in God.

The true purpose of personal prayer is to open in love to God who dwells within us. To open in this way is to wait and listen patiently in faith. Personal prayer is not communal prayer strictly speaking. Communal prayer is an opening to God and other people through liturgical celebrations, rites, sacraments, and other forms of prayerful fellowship. Both personal and communal prayer are absolutely necessary to the life of faith.

The obstacles to personal prayer are not so much environmental, not "out there," as much as they are "in here," in the heart and the mind, in our dispositions and attitudes. These obstacles may include fear, sin, laziness, pride, greed, envy, etc. The steps to personal prayer must deal with these obstacles.

### **STEPS TO PERSONAL PRAYER**

There are five important steps to personal prayer:

1) *Participation in the sacramental life of the Church*, especially the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Eucharist is the foundation of the life of prayer; it is "communion" with the Body of Christ which is the Church. Communal prayer makes possible and gives life and grace to our personal prayer.

2) Cultivation of a deep desire and a longing for God. When you love someone, you

want to be with them, to be close to them. This desire for deep intimacy with God is a gift. (It is made possible through step one above.)

3) *Removal of the obstacles to God.* Inordinate desires are the most dangerous obstacles. (Desires are inordinate when we desire something more than God; that is, they block our love for God.) They plague our inner being with restlessness and dis-ease. Since these obstacles are largely interior, this means cultivating religious self-discipline which is traditionally called asceticism. Not only do we need to exercise the mind and the body to keep them strong and healthy, but we must also exercise the spirit. We must become, like Paul, spiritual athletes for God, determined to win the race for our salvation. The aim of asceticism is not spiritual pride, but "purity of heart" (uncluttered mind) which makes possible a single-minded devotion to God. This mental "asceticism" keeps our attention on the presence of God speaking to us moment by moment in every situation of life.

4) *Preparation and planning.* Personal prayer can be and should be at times completely spontaneous, but this is not enough. It should be supported by our: a) discovering more about the life of prayer through study and reading; b) finding prayer and meditation methods which are best suited to us; and c) organizing one's life of prayer so that it has its proper time and place among one's important daily commitments. (Right attitude and good habits are very important to successful planning.)

5) *Entering into the Word of God* as the point of departure for the life of prayer. Actually, the Word of God (Jesus Christ, Sacred Scripture) is the beginning, the means, and

the end of all our prayer. The traditional stages of prayer are a) *lectio divina* (divine reading) which is the slow reading and musing over Sacred Scripture by which the heart is opened and touched by the Word of God; b) *meditatio* (meditation) has many forms and may use words, images, and reflection to move us to a peaceful, loving awareness of God; c) *oratio* (prayer) is the spontaneous prayer of the heart in confession, adoration, petition, praise, and thanksgiving; d) *contemplatio* (contemplation) is the grace of inner quiet in which words, thoughts, and images fade and a general loving awareness of God alone is left; it is a gazing at God in faith, hope and love. These steps often require spiritual guidance in order to avoid the pitfalls that await even the most advanced souls in the life of prayer.

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