

Week Five - The Practicalities of Prayer

Prayer: Mark 4:4-7 (*The Parable of the Sower*)

“Prayer is the life of the new heart. It ought to animate us at every moment. But we tend to forget him who is our life and our all. This is why the Fathers of the spiritual life...insist that prayer is a remembrance of God often awakened by the memory of the heart: ‘We ought to remember God more often than we draw breath.’ But we cannot pray ‘at all times’ if we do not pray at specific times, consciously willing it. These are the special times of Christian prayer, both in intensity and duration.” (CCC 2697)

*Each of us needs to develop certain rhythms of praying, intended to nourish the strength and peace to live from our prayer as both resting place and anchor of hope. It does not happen automatically or simply (once for all). Trial and error and learning is the only way forward...

The Expressions of Prayer

The Catechism lists three types (or expressions) of prayer that correspond to the gesture of faith we make before the Gospel is proclaimed at Mass - we make the Sign of the Cross on our foreheads, lips, and hearts. Lips, minds, and hearts - these symbolize three kinds of prayer: vocal, meditative, and contemplative.

1) Vocal Prayer

- This is the form of prayer that is most readily accessible to us.
- Words, mental or vocal, put flesh onto our interior feelings.
- “The need to involve the senses in interior prayer corresponds to a requirement of our human nature. We are body and spirit, and we experience the need to translate our feelings externally.” (CCC 2702)
- Jesus teaches us to say the most noteworthy of all vocal prayers - the Our Father.
- “Yet it is most important that the heart should be present to him to whom we are speaking in prayer. Whether or not our prayer is heard depends not on the number of words, but on the fervor of our souls.” (CCC 2700)

2) Meditation (Mental Prayer)

- Meditative prayer is above all a prayerful “quest” engaging thought, imagination, emotion and desire.
- This mobilization of our faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ.
- The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain, and we are usually aided by the Bible or other spiritual writings.
- “To meditate on what we read helps us to make it our own by confronting it with ourselves. Here, another book is opened: the book of life. We pass from thoughts to reality. To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are able to discern them.” (CCC 2706)
- “Saint Augustine compare meditation on the mysteries of God to the assimilation of food and uses a verb that recurs throughout the Christian tradition, ‘to *ruminare*’; that is, the mysteries of God should continually resonate within us so that they become familiar to us, guide our lives and nourish us, as does the food we need to sustain us.” (Pope Benedict XVI)

3) Contemplative Prayer

- Perhaps the most difficult and yet simplest form of prayer - “nothing else than a close sharing between friends.” Contemplative prayer is “silent love.” “Words in this kind of prayer are not speeches; they are like kindling that feeds the fire of love.” (CCC 2717)
- Contemplative prayer is the prayer of simple presence with one’s Beloved.
- It is a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty. “It is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more.” (CCC 2712)
- Composure of heart, recollection, gathering up the heart to abide in His gaze of love.” To focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men.” (CCC 2715)
- “Entering into contemplative prayer we let our masks fall and turn our hearts back to the Lord who loves us, so as to hand ourselves over to him as an offering to be purified and transformed.” (2711)

The Battle of Prayer

“Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It *always* presupposes effort... We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. The ‘spiritual battle’ of the Christian’s new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer.” (CCC 2725)

Objections to Prayer: Erroneous notions of prayer (a psychological activity); ‘don’t have the time’; the mentality of the present world (i.e. materialism, hedonism, utilitarianism, etc...); the experience of failure in prayer (discouragement, sadness, disappointment, wounded pride, our resistance to the truth that prayer is a free and unmerited gift of grace...). What good does it do to pray?

1) *Humble vigilance of heart* – through distractions, dryness, acedia, and lack of faith

“The most common yet most hidden temptation is our lack of faith. It expresses itself less by declared incredulity than by our actual preferences. When we begin to pray, a thousand labors or cares thought to be urgent vie for priority; once again, it is the moment of truth for the heart: what is its real love? Sometimes we turn to the Lord as a last resort, but do we really believe he is? Sometimes we enlist the Lord as our ally, but our heart remains presumptuous. In each case, our lack of faith reveals that we do not yet share in the disposition of a humble heart: ‘Apart from me, you can do nothing’ (Jn 15:5).” (CCC 2732)

2) *Filial trust* – proved in tribulation (why do we complain about not being heard?)

*No prayer is ever wasted, even if it is not answered according to our specifications!

3) *Persevering in love* – it is always possible to pray; prayer is a vital necessity (lest we fall back into the slavery of sin); prayer and the Christian life are inseparable.

Developing a Routine of Daily Prayer – times, places, and a structure favorable to praying!