

The Art of Prayer

Prayer is a heart-to-heart dialogue with God, and we have to put our whole heart into it.

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"If in our times Christians must be distinguished above all by the 'art of prayer,' how can we not feel a renewed need to spend time in spiritual converse, in silent adoration, in heartfelt love before Christ present in the Most Holy Sacrament? How often, dear brothers and sisters," Pope John Paul II confided to us, "have I experienced

this, and drawn from it strength, consolation, and support!"[1]

With all your soul

We want to love God our Father with all our strength, putting our whole soul into our prayer, with all its faculties: mind and will, memory, imagination and feelings. God uses them, one by one or all at the same time, as channels to start a conversation with us.

No two times of prayer are the same. The Holy Spirit, source of continual newness, takes the initiative, acts, and waits. Sometimes he expects of us an uphill struggle, when it seems as if there is no reply. At such times, we are more conscious of the serene, tenacious effort of our will to make acts of faith and love, to tell him things, to apply our mind and imagination to Holy Scripture, texts from the liturgy, or passages from spiritual writers—seeking him in

words or simply with a look. The desire to seek God is itself a dialogue that transforms us, even though it may sometimes seem to be going unheard.

At other times, ideas or affections arise readily, making our prayer flow along and helping us to perceive God's presence. Whether our prayer comes easily and is full of ideas and affections or not, what matters is that we place all our faculties in the Holy Spirit's hands. We are his, and he has said: *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*[2]

Mental prayer is a heart-to-heart dialogue with God, in which the whole soul takes part; intelligence, imagination, memory and will are all involved. It is a meditation that helps to give supernatural value to our poor human life, with all its normal, everyday occurrences.[3]

The only rule that God follows is the one he imposed when he created us as free beings: he waits for us to cooperate with him as his children. As we prepare to pray we will act as children should, struggling to keep our attention on our Father God who wants to speak to us. It is not up to us whether our mind works easily in our prayer, or whether our heart is on fire with affections. What matters is our determination to stay open to dialogue, never allowing routine or discouragement to seep in.

Prayer and maturity

God speaks in many ways; prayer is above all listening and answering. He speaks to us in Scripture, in the liturgy, in spiritual direction, and also through the world and the circumstances in our own lives: our work, the good or bad happenings of each day, and our contact with other people. To learn this divine language,

we have to spend time alone with God.

Speaking with God means letting him take the lead progressively in all that we do. Meditating on Christ's life enables us to understand our own life, in order to open it up to grace. We want him to come into our life so that he can transform it into a faithful reflection of his own. God the Father *predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son,*^[4] and he wants to see Christ formed in us,^[5] so that we can cry out: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*^[6]

Especially in the New Testament, the best book for our meditation, we contemplate the mysteries of Christ. We re-live his birth in Bethlehem, his hidden life in Nazareth, the anguish of his Passion.... Assimilation to the Son is the work of the Holy Spirit. However, it is not an automatic

process which, simply because we are baptized Christians, we only need to stand back and watch. We can cooperate in a filial way with God's action by preparing our will, applying our imagination and mind, and allowing good affections to come forth.

That is what Saint Josemaría did, when he understood his own sufferings on considering Christ's agony. *I, who also wish to fulfil the most holy Will of God, following in the footsteps of the Master, can I complain if I too meet suffering as my travelling companion?*

It will be a sure sign of my sonship, because God is treating me as he treated his own Divine Son. Then I, just as He did, will be able to groan and weep alone in my Gethsemani; but, as I lie prostrate on the ground, acknowledging my nothingness, there will rise up to

the Lord a cry from the depths of my soul: Pater mi, Abba, Pater ... fiat! My Father, Abba, Father... your will be done![7]

It is God we are speaking to when we pray, and it is he we are listening to when we read the divine words of Sacred Scripture.[8] "Prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man"[9]—a dialogue in which God the Father talks to us about his Son, so that we may become other Christs, Christ himself.

It is well worth the effort to bring all our faculties into play when we pray about the Gospel.*First of all, imagine the scene or mystery you have chosen to help you recollect your thoughts and meditate. Next apply your mind, concentrating on the particular aspect of the Master's life you are considering—*

his merciful Heart, his humility, his purity, the way he fulfils his Father's Will. Then tell him what happens to you in these matters, how things are with you, what is going on in your soul. Be attentive, because he may want to point something out to you, and you will experience suggestions deep in your soul, realizing certain things and feeling his gentle reprimands.

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In short, we have to pray about our life in order to live it as God wishes. This is especially necessary for people who are seeking sanctity through their work. *What sort of works will you be able to do if you have not meditated on them in the presence of our Lord, so as to put them in order? Without that conversation with God, how can you finish your daily work with perfection?* [11]

As we contemplate the mysteries of Jesus, and the events that make up our own lives, we learn to pray like Christ, whose "whole prayer...is contained in this loving adherence of his human heart to the mystery of the will of the Father (*Eph 1:9*)."[12]

We learn to pray as a child of God, following Saint Josemaría's example.

No matter what the situation, my prayer, while varying in tone, has always been the same. I have said to him: "Lord, You put me here. You entrusted me with this or that, and I put my trust in you. I know you are my Father, and I have seen that tiny children are always absolutely sure of their parents."

My priestly experience tells me that abandonment such as this in the hands of God stimulates souls to acquire a strong, deep and serene piety, which drives them to work constantly and with an upright intention.[13]

Prayer is a short-cut to maturity. It is an essential element of the process by which a person's center of gravity moves from self-love to love for God, and love for other people for his sake. A mature personality means having depth, consistency, continuity: well-defined features that enable a person, each in one's own way, to reflect Christ.

Mature people are like well-tuned pianos. A good piano does not seek to display its "brilliance," or make unusual or surprising sounds. The surprise is that it always produces the correct note, and its brilliance consists of being able to be used to play fine pieces of music. It is reliable; it responds in the way it is expected to, and that is what makes it a good instrument. To attain the reliability and trustworthiness of maturity is quite a challenge.

The best way to succeed is to contemplate our Lord's Humanity. He helps us to discover and repair the keys that are not working properly. In some people it may be their will that is reluctant to carry out what God wants of them. Others may realize they lack human warmth, which is so necessary for family life and apostolate. Others may be very energetic, but have a tendency to haste and disorder, and are ruled by their emotions.

It is a never-ending task. It means detecting any faulty reactions, any off-key notes humbly, determined to improve, but with no impatience or discouragement, because we know that God is looking at us with immense love and understanding. How important it is to learn to see our lives through our Lord's eyes! Speaking with him awakens a passion for the truth in us, because we are in contact with Truth itself.

Then we lose any fear of knowing ourselves as we really are, and we want to see ourselves without the escapes offered by our imagination or the distortions caused by our pride.

When we contemplate reality from within our conversation with God, we also learn to read people and events objectively, without the ever-changing filters of sentiment or utility. That is also where we learn to love the greatness of a God who loves our littleness, as we contemplate so many surpassing mysteries.

True Prayer

This people honors me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.

[14] This is God's lament in Scripture, who knows that all men and women need to set their heart on him to achieve happiness. That is why in prayer the readiness of our will to discover what God wants, love it, and

put it into practice, is the most important use of our faculties. "The worth of the soul lies not in thinking much but in loving much."[15]

Oftentimes, to pray by loving will require an effort, which we will often have to make without receiving any consolation or apparent fruit.

Prayer is not a question of what you say or feel, but of love. And you love when you try hard to say something to the Lord, even though you might not actually say anything.[16] As his children, we trust our Father God to grant each of us the gifts we most need, when we most need them. *Remember that prayer does not consist of making pretty speeches, or high-sounding or consoling phrases. Sometimes prayer will be a glance at a picture of our Lord or of his Mother, sometimes a petition, expressed in words; or offering good works, and the fruits of faithfulness... We*

have to be like a guard on sentry-duty at the gate of God Our Lord; that's what prayer is. Or like a small dog that lies down at its master's feet. Do not mind telling him: Lord, here I am, like a faithful dog, or better still, like a little donkey, which will not kick the one who loves it.[17]

The same happens in human friendship. When we are with other people, we sometimes cannot think of anything to say; nothing comes to mind, in spite of our efforts at conversation. Then we look for ways to prevent any impression of coldness: a kind look, some thoughtful action, listening carefully, a sign of interest in their concerns. All truly human experiences can show us possibilities for talking to Jesus, perfect God and perfect man.

Given that faithfulness and perseverance are other names for

love, we will find ways of praying even when our mind, will, imagination or feelings escape our control. At such times, love can find other ways to express itself. ***Your mind is sluggish and won't work: you struggle in vain to collect your thoughts in God's presence: there's a complete blank! Don't try to force yourself, and don't worry. Listen to me: it is time for your heart to take over.***[18]

When we come to talk to God, even if our thoughts don't respond, our conversation need not be interrupted. Even when we notice that in spite of our sincere struggle we have been distracted and dull, we can be sure that we have pleased God our Father with our good desires, and that he looks on our efforts with love.

Prayer and deeds

I would go as far as to say, without fear of being mistaken, that there are many, countless, ways of praying. But I would like all of us to pray genuinely, as God's children, not gabbling away like hypocrites who will hear from Jesus' lips "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven"...

When we cry "Lord!" we must do so with an effective desire to put into practice the inspirations the Holy Spirit awakens in our soul.

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In order to put those inspirations into practice, we need to make frequent resolutions. The purpose of reflecting on God's commands is action, not merely to occupy our minds with pious thoughts. We want to listen to our Lord's voice and do his will. *Your prayer cannot stop at mere words. It has to lead to deeds and practical consequences.*[20]

The prayer of God's children must have apostolic results. The apostolate shows us another aspect of love in prayer. We want to learn again how to pray so as to be able to help others. It is there, in prayer, that we will find the strength to lead many people along the paths of dialogue with God.

We do not pray alone because we do not live alone, and do not want to. When we place our lives before God, we will necessarily talk about what is most important to us: our fellow-Catholics, our families, friends and acquaintances; those who help us, or those others who do not understand us or make us suffer. If our will is in the right place, and we are not afraid of complicating our lives, we will be able to hear God's suggestions in our prayer: new apostolic horizons and creative ways of helping other people.

Our Lord, from within our soul, will help us to understand other people, to make the right demands on them, to lead them towards him. He will give lights to our mind so that we can read people's souls; he will purify our affections; he will help us to love with a love that is stronger and cleaner. Our life as apostles is worth what our prayer is worth.

[1] John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2004, 25

[2] *Mt 20:15*

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 119

[4] *Rom 8:29*

[5] Cf. *Gal 4:19*

[6] *Gal 2:20*

[7] *The Way of the Cross*, I, 1

[8] Cf. Saint Ambrose, *De Officiis Ministrorum*, I, 20, 88

[9] Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 25

[10] *Friends of God*, 253

[11] *Furrow*, 448

[12] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2603

[13] *Friends of God*, 143

[14] *Is* 29:13; cf. *Mt* 15:8

[15] Saint Teresa of Avila, *Foundations*, Ch. 5, no. 2

[16] *Furrow*, 464

[17] *The Forge*, 73.

[18] *The Way*, 102

[19] *Friends of God*, 243

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