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The Gift of Prayer

by Victor Hoagland, C.P.
based on the New Catholic Catechism 2558-2567

Do you pray? Do you pray often, or only occasionally? Is prayer important to you?

I ask you these questions because prayer and praying are essential for your life of faith. Like breath to the human body, prayer makes the spirit live. Without it, faith dies. On the other hand, a person who prays grows in spirit and life. *Let me tell you some things that may encourage you to pray.*

Prayer is a Gift of God

To begin with, prayer is a gift of God. "Gift" is a good word to describe prayer, because praying is not something we can do of ourselves. "We do not know how to pray as we ought," scripture says. Prayer is a gift God must give, and God gives that gift generously, without consideration of our worthiness or our unworthiness. Sinners as well as saints can pray. People of every religious tradition receive the gift. In fact, every human being is able to pray. The Catholic Catechism reminds us of that by entitling its opening section on prayer The Universal Call To Prayer. (2566-2567)

Yes, all are called to pray. All receive the gift. And, surprisingly, sometimes those thought to be "ungifted" pray best and are graciously heard. That's the lesson Jesus taught in his

parable about the Pharisee and the Publican who together went up to the temple to pray. The Publican, an outsider who thought himself unworthy of approaching God in prayer, was found more pleasing to God than the Pharisee, a professionally religious person, who prayed so effortlessly.

Prayer, then, is God's gift to the strong and the weak, to the smallest child and frailest of the old. It's given to those who say, "I'm not really religious; prayer is beyond me." It's given to everyone, no matter who you are.

That's not to say we can't refuse to pray or we can't neglect it. Like any gift, prayer must be received. If someone gives you a beautiful piece of clothing, you may use it or not. You may take it and wear it. Or, you can throw it in the back of your closet and never look at it again. The piece of clothing becomes a gift unused. "If you knew the gift of God," Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well. A Gift was there before her eyes, but she was blind to it.

How tragic to go through life leaving the gift of prayer unused!

Prayer: God's search for Intimacy with Us

Why does God give the gift of prayer? The main reason is because love of us. God looks for intimacy with us. How strange that sounds! God all-sufficient, all-powerful, all-

knowing, wishes to draw close, to communicate, to speak to us, to seek our response, to hear our prayer. It may seem unbelievable, but it is true.

At the same time, by praying we fulfill the desire we have as human beings to know God. After all, we are made in God's image. Something in our being thirsts for intimacy with God. That thirst is described in the psalms, O God, you are my God, for you I long. For you my soul is thirsting. Like a dry weary land without water . . . so my soul longs for you, my God. Something in us cannot be satisfied unless we are drawn near to God. "Our hearts are restless," St. Augustine says, "until they rest in you." By praying, we rest in God.

The church in her formal prayers often humbly acknowledges that prayer is God's gift and asks God to give and strengthen that gift in us. At the beginning of her daily prayers, the liturgy of the hours, the church prays two verses of the psalm.

O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

O God, come to my assistance.
O Lord, make haste to help me.

Simple, truthful words. I cannot open my lips in prayer unless God gives me the gift. O God, come and assist me; help me that I may approach you.

And God does give this beautiful gift. In prayer God comes and helps; God invites us into the divine presence where we can open our lips and our hearts. There God welcomes our slightest word or cry, our smallest effort. Delighting to give us the gift of prayers. God wishes that we come near to share our hearts and minds, our very life with One who loves us. Prayer is God's precious gift; cherish it always.

Wonder is the basis of worship.

My Witness for the Church

"I love the Church because Christ loved it, loved it to the utmost extreme. I love it even when I discover painful attitudes and structures, which I do not find in harmony with the Gospel. I love it as it is because Christ also loved me with all my imperfections, with all my shadows and constantly gives me the first fruits of his Kingdom so that my love may correspond to his eternal plan. I experience the Church in the celebration of the Eucharist. Christ and the Church with Him remind me of all the limitless evidence of love, grace and mercy. In this the Church helps me to form a grateful memory. If we open ourselves to this and gratefully remember all the good which has flowed to us in the Church and constantly flows to us, then we can and will all succeed in giving even the suffering from the Church its place in the heart of Jesus."

Fr. Bernard Haring, C.S.S.R.

Franciscan Saints, Blessed and Holy Ones June

1. John Patrick Doyle, III Ord. Reg.
2. Christopher Bernsmeyer, I Ord.
7. Joseph Perez, I Ord.
12. Bl. Jolenta, II Ord.
13. St. Anthony of Padua, I Ord.
17. St. Albert Chmielowski, III Ord.
19. Ven. Matt Talbot, III Ord.
21. Father's Day
22. St. Thomas More, III Ord.
23. St. Joseph Cafasso, III Ord.
24. Birth of John the Baptist
28. Francisco de Porras, I Ord.
29. M. Mary Francis Bachman, III Ord.
30. Bl. Raymond Lull, III Ord.

"The lives of the saints depress me, bringing back the longing for a life of penance – for labor among the sick and poor . . . seemed all their life. In hours of desolation it seems as if I had not grace nor strength enough. The greatest miracle is myself, that I should be a Christian, a religious, a Franciscan. Yet, I am so weak bodily, so sensitive mentally, that left

to myself a moment I should not bear up against the least cross."

Mother Ignatius Hayes

Silence and love

Christ says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). We need silence in order to welcome these words and put them into practice. When we are agitated and restless, we have so many arguments and reasons not to forgive and not to love too easily. But when we "have calmed and quieted our soul," these reasons turn out to be quite insignificant. Maybe sometimes we avoid silence, preferring whatever noise, words or distraction, because inner peace is a risky thing: it makes us empty and poor, disintegrates bitterness and leads us to the gift of ourselves. Silent and poor, our hearts are overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, filled with an unconditional love. Silence is a humble yet secure path to loving.

Brother Christian

LECTIO DIVINA

The Bible is the Word of God and it is God Who speaks to you through it. Pay attention to understand the text and apply to yourself everything about which the passage-speaks.

Considering the benefits and advantages of the ancient practice of the Lectio Divina, we discover that many descriptions add the note of a specific resolution meant to influence the Active Life. So, it becomes a life which is renewed each day in the light of the Word of God over which one has prayed and contemplated. We give the following as one explanation of the method of Lectio Divina.

1. Attentive Reading.

Choose a passage from the Scriptures and read it over very slowly, attentively and devoutly (for 5 - 10 minutes) after having prayed to the Holy Spirit to open your mind and heart to fully understand His message. The Bible is the Word of God and it is God Who speaks to you through it. Pay attention to understand the text and apply to yourself everything about which the passage-speaks.

Let the practice of Francis, filled with faith in God's Word, encourage you. Remember how he opened the Lectionary 3 times in the Church of St. Nicholas to find out what God had in mind for him and his new brothers.

2. Meditation or Reflection.

This is a careful re-reading of the text in an attentive and personal search to understand its meaning for you at this moment. As the ancient spiritual writers put it: you must "chew" and "ruminate" the Word of God and apply what you have read to your life. You must let your life stand before the light of God's Word. Again, look up a text or incident from the life of Francis which would illustrate this for you.

3. Prayer.

This is your way of responding to the God Who has spoken to you. The Word which you have pondered will suggest to you from time to time an appeal for forgiveness, or an expression of thanks for all the graces received, or a trustful surrender to God's loving Mercy, or a plea for help to enable you to accept the Will of God revealed to you in your reflection. Prayer becomes your expression of praise, of love, an outpouring of your heart. As St. Augustine says: "When you read (the Scriptures) it is God Who speaks to you, when you pray it is you who speak to God", and what you speak will be suggested by the very word you have reflected upon.

We have an example in Celano where Francis, reflecting upon the Gospel text is so moved, that he changes it into a prayer of praise to God.

4. Contemplation.

The word you have read is a fragment, a reflection of the Truth which is Christ. Under the guidance of the Spirit, little by little, you will feel the desire to see The One Who has spoken to you, to taste His love, to contemplate His wonderful deeds. Although you feel yourself unworthy of such a sublime gift (for contemplation is a gift) you will expand your heart so as to welcome the Holy Spirit Who makes you live in love and mystical union with God. You will begin to see everything with the eyes of God and enjoy peace. You will even forget yourself to lose yourself in the Praise of God and to rejoice in the Spirit as did Francis.

This is the path to the highest form of mystical prayer where the soul is lost in an ocean of divine love and union with God, anticipating the joys of

heaven.

5. Resolution.

Lectio Divina reaches its goal with contemplation and at this level it would be complete; but there can be further benefits for one's daily life and activities. In the light of the reading which you have prayed over and contemplated, the Spirit makes you understand what you should do, like the answer to the plea of Francis: "Lord, What do you want me to do?" Some explanations of prayer give discernment as one of the fruits of Lectio Divina and then decision or a specific choice to be carried out: "At Your word I will let down the nets." Recall an example from the life of St. Francis.

6. To Live the Word of God.

You must begin to form your life according to the word which you have read, according to the life of Christ which you have contemplated ... to live the Gospel. Again we have the example of St. Francis who was no idle hearer of the Word but hastened to put into practice what he heard.

7. From Daily Life We Return Again To Prayer.

A life full of activity tends to distract you from God and to impoverish your spirit. This in turn shows you the need to constantly return to the Word of God for the light needed to walk according to God's Plan and to pray for the strength to persevere in doing penance. Again, we look to the life of Francis, that "Apostolic Man" dedicated to preaching the message of conversion and reconciliation. The greater part of the year was set aside for prayer and contemplation. The Canons of the Cathedral in Assisi gave him a little room where he spent hours in prayer before preaching a Sunday sermon!

Adapted from: Montanari, Marcello. Un Metodo per pregare: La "Lectio Divina." II Messaggio della Santa Casa. 3, Marzo, 1991 p.69f.

Website Watching

Have you stumbled upon a great website recently that you'd like to share with the readers of SandalPrints? If so, please email it to: Anthony@FranciscanCanticle.com and we'll put it into the next issue under Website Watching. This issue's website of interest: www.AngelsAndSaintsEtc.com

Let us pray for the intentions of those who asked us to pray for them.



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