

## Prayer, Part 2

Last week's bulletin article started on the topic of prayer, which will be continued this week. The overarching question taken up will be: how to pray.

The most important thing about "how" to pray is not what words to use, or the "type" of prayer (petition or adoration or thanksgiving), or its content, or how much time, or any other such thing. It is rather a matter of really putting your mind into it. The most essential thing about how to pray is answered by the question of what prayer is. The essence of prayer is raising your mind to God, recollection, conversation with God. So how to pray? Whatever "form" a person's particular prayer is taking at a particular time, prayer *always* entails putting everything else out of mind, bringing our Lord, the angels and saints, mysteries of the faith, etc to mind, speaking directly to our Lord or an intercessor, focusing my mind on Him. That is the starting point of how to pray. Without it, a person is not praying. So how to pray? The most important thing is:

- Recollection                      - Conversation with God.
- Silence                              - Raising your mind to God                      - Go to your inner room

These are all different ways of saying largely the same thing. One of the things that helps with this is remembering that Jesus, Mary, the saints, angels, and so on are all real people who do hear you. Prayer is not just rattling off words, it's not just doing some task. It is a matter of speaking to a real person who does hear you. If you are praying to our Lord (all of our prayers ultimately go to Him) it can be helpful to bring an image of our Lord to mind. Maybe it's the Divine Mercy image or Sacred Heart or any sacred image of Him. If you are praying to our Holy Mother, bring an image of her to mind. It helps with recollection. If you are using (let's say for now) "standard" prayers like the Our Father or Hail Mary, if you are praying the Rosary for example, another thing that will help with recollection is concentrating on the words and what they mean.

Building your inner room. The Lord will bring about the growth in prayer He desires. This growth is in part, or perhaps even entirely, a matter of building that inner room within ourselves, and that won't happen all at once. In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John, our Lord said: my sheep will go in and will go out. St Augustine said that the "going in" means recollection or contemplation and the going out means going out into our everyday lives, taking with us what was received by "going in." It is not always so easy to move from one state to the other, to move in and out. Often, once a person is "out" it is hard to get recollected (go in). And if a person really does get recollected, really does have conversation with God, it can become a dread to "go out." Being able to "go in and go out," then, does take time to develop, partly because of so many demands in everyday life. But as with most things, the old adage of: "practice makes perfect" applies here as well.

Perhaps there is one thing, particular to our own time, that will be especially helpful or even necessary for building the inner room, which is very simply that: **it is ok to do so**; you do have permission to take time to do that. In our age of materialism, of demand for production, of exaltation based not on character but on tangible "accomplishment," the demands on a person can seem constant. These same demands often seem to impinge on me as well. Prayer is too often considered a waste of time, time that could be used for "work" or "service." What a lie. This is not from God, not from our Father, they are not from Goodness Himself, which means they are not good for us, not when they supersede prayer. You not only have permission to say no to these constant demands and make time for prayer, you must do it – for your good, the good of your family, the good of the world. Anything else is foolishness. The demand to skip prayer is a demand to commit suicide. You do not have to listen to that. Husbands and wives – what a tremendous advantage you have here. Encourage one another in this way. Support one another in this way, and teach your children as well. *This* is life – not being a slave to everyone else's demands or to the world. Will you "suffer" if you do it? In a certain sense, yes, probably, but in another sense – not at all because you will begin to know the happiness of Heaven.

After many years of deep, sincere prayer, of personal sacrifice, and of strong preaching and teaching by St John Vianney, his parish of Ars really entered into conversion. Thousands of people flocked to Ars yearly to see the holy man of Ars and to go to Confession to him. All who came there were impressed, even amazed, at the peacefulness and good-will of the people of Ars. What would it be like if this was our pastorate? **Our pastorate could be the New Ars.** Will you take it seriously? Will you participate in the work of your Father?

Will you do your part through prayer? Holiness begets holiness – in both priests and laity alike. Build New Ars right here in this pastorate. Don't look for results – do your part (genuine prayer) and let the Lord do the rest.

The purpose of prayer. Having a good understanding of the fundamental purpose of prayer (what it does, what it's for) will answer many questions about prayer, as well as help with the question of how to pray. The purpose of prayer is perhaps best revealed in the "definition": prayer is conversation with God. Why converse with others? What does it do? It builds relation with the other person. Think about a married couple. If they never speak to one another or if they don't have those deeply personal, intimate communications characteristic of married couples, will they have much of a relation, a real marital relation? Of course not. The same is true with God. The essence of Heaven is being with the beloved (our Lord, God). The essence of "getting to Heaven," then – the mission of this life – is building relation with our Lord. And that relation cannot and will not be built without conversing with Him *frequently*, even daily. The purpose of prayer, then, is building relation with our Lord, and for that matter with His friends as well – the angels and saints. This is what you are trying to do when you pray. Remember, our Lord is always faithful, He cannot be otherwise; i.e., He will draw near.

God is not a Vending Machine or a Genie in a Bottle. One way the purpose of prayer helps us to pray – one way it answers the question of how to pray – is that it tells us what not to do, that prayer is not just some tactic for me to get what I want, which seems to be a very common misconception of prayer. It tells us not to treat, or think of, our Lord like a vending machine: I put in my dollar (my 3 Our Fathers) and I get what I want. I want (say) good health, I said some prayers, now, genie grant it to me. This is not prayer! Our Lord is not a genie in a bottle who is here just to grant our every whim and desire. Sincere petitionary prayer (which is good) does not mean: God give me what I want. The root of even good petitionary is relation with God.

Getting started. Many people, even Catholics who get to Mass, don't have a habit of prayer, much less real daily prayer. I'm sorry to say that for too many years the same was true for me. For people who don't have a habit of daily prayer, start small but really pray. Start small, really pray (silence, inner room, raise your mind to God), and the Lord will begin to work with that, He will begin to enter your thoughts. I know of a guy who started small in this way – he prayed an Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be before he left for work in the morning. One morning as he was really praying the Our Father he was struck by the fact that God is in fact really his Father. Another day, while praying the Glory Be, he was struck by the words "now and forever," that there is an eternity. In both cases, this was the Lord working with his small but sincere start. So start small, *but* – really commit to it. It's not negotiable. Refuse to take off in the morning before you've done it, refuse to go to bed at night before *really praying* that Hail Mary. Start small doesn't mean end small! It doesn't mean that we shouldn't, can't, or won't grow in prayer (and growth isn't necessarily a matter of quantity). But when getting started, don't worry about that, the Lord will bring about the growth He desires.

Temptations, determination, perseverance. Is prayer something good or not? There is only one way that man can quench that irrevocable, ever-nagging thirst for happiness and that is with relation with our Lord and His friends. Prayer is a cornerstone, a necessary pillar, in building that relation. So yes, prayer is something good. One thing that means is that there will be temptations against it. From the perspective of the kingdom of hell, it must be stopped because it is a serious threat to the kingdom of misery, death, and destruction. When you set out to make a habit of prayer, then, be aware that temptations against it *will* come. Temptations come to us (often) as "thoughts" in our mind, and they are subtle – i.e., not always easy to recognize as temptations; they often appear to us to be very...*reasonable*...very reasonable thoughts. Temptation doesn't show up and say: hello, I'm the tempter and I'm going to try to swindle you out of your magnificent inheritance and drag you down into misery. No, they are subtle. The easiest way to recognize temptation against prayer is to just simply realize that genuine prayer is necessary, it feeds happiness even in this life, and so thoughts against it are temptations. The reason real commitment was emphasized for getting started is because of these temptations. Determination and perseverance (in the face of difficulty – I just don't want to) are real virtues, they are part of real character, real integrity...and setting yourself on a course of daily sincere prayer will provide plenty of opportunities to practice (and thus strengthen) these great aspects of real character, real maturity.

Next week's article will perhaps begin to focus on "forms" of prayer.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.