

### Prayer, Part 3

This week's article will continue on the topic of prayer, with the overarching theme of: how to really pray. A couple of more general "topics" – more things related to the right mindset in prayer, things that make prayer real prayer – will be covered first and then various forms of prayer will be taken up.

Humility – a necessary mindset in prayer. Recall one of our Lord's own instructions on prayer – the one about the tax collector and the Pharisee who both went into the temple to "pray." Here's our Lord's own words:

"The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Recall the necessity of prayer in order to satisfy that never-ending thirst for happiness. The reason it's important to keep reminding ourselves of that is because there will be things we don't want to do in order to be able to really pray, and embracing the virtue of humility may often be one of those things.

Notice how the Pharisee has kept a resume in his own mind of all of his supposedly good works, and then has the audacity to go before the great and almighty God and present it to Him. For someone who has begun to enter into conversion – they're taking the faith seriously now, they have some repentance, they're starting to try to really pray, and so on – this will almost always be a temptation that comes to them: 1) to keep a resume of all the prayers, confessions, Masses, etc that I've done, and 2) look at how bad the other guy is and how good I am. This is why our Lord warns about that temptation with this example, because He knows it's a very common tactic to pull you away from Him, to corrupt prayer, and thus steal your only source of true happiness. If that happens, then the person, like the Pharisee, will be alone – i.e., God is not with them, their so-called prayer is not uniting them to the Lord, which is the purpose of prayer. Like a good Father, then, our Lord warns us of this trap. Don't be afraid if this has or does come to you, again it comes to almost everyone who has started to enter into conversion. If you have yielded to it, again, don't be afraid – just bring it to Confession in a simple way (e.g., I've been prideful in my thoughts) and be resolved not to yield to such thoughts again.

In order to really pray, a person has to be imbued, buried, in the virtue of humility. A person can often get the wrong idea of what humility means. One false understanding is that humility means something like: I'm a doormat for everybody (did our Lord appear to be a doormat?), that I just sit in the corner balled up waiting to be kicked around (did our Lord not speak and act boldly and stand firmly?). Yes, following the Lord and genuine humility does entail sacrifice of self; yes, not being a bigshot probably will result in getting dismissed by and scoffed at by others (whoop-de-do, so be it). Humility is necessary for prayer and genuine humility does not involve lack of fortitude or magnanimity, both of which are also virtues.

While there *is* a certain humility before others, the humility we are speaking of here is humility before God. There is far more to say about this than what can be covered here but maybe enough can be mentioned to get started along the right path, with the right thinking. In the Gospel of Luke, *right* after our Lord teaches about prayer with the example of the Pharisee and the tax collector, He talks about being like a child. He does not mean to be childish or babyish or infantile; we are meant to mature. What *does* He mean? Well, what is a child like relative to their parent? Bishop Sheen gives the example of a child reaching up and taking their parent's hand while crossing the street – it is an expression of dependence. The child is dependent on the parent. When crossing the street, they are depending on the parent to know what to do to keep them safe, they are acknowledging that the parent knows best and they trust them. In fact, the child has no choice but to depend on the parent because they themselves do not know. The child *has* to depend on the parent in numerous ways to act in their best interest, to provide for their needs for example; they simply cannot do it themselves. Humility before God is, for one thing, this exact same acknowledgement. When our Lord turned to the Apostles and said: will you also leave Me, Peter said: Lord, to whom would we go. We have come to know that You have the words of eternal life. Peter acknowledges his dependence on the Lord in his response – i.e., in His conversation with the

Lord, i.e., in his prayer. The Psalms say: unless the Lord builds the house, in vain does the builder build, again expressing an utter dependence on our Lord. This is, at least in good part, the humility of prayer.

They have no wine. Our Holy Mother provides us with an important teaching on prayer at the Wedding Feast of Cana. When they ran out of wine, what did she say to our Lord? She said *only*: they have no wine. Notice what she did *not* say. She did not say: send the Apostles to buy more; she did not say we have some at the house, could you go get it; she did not tell Him to work a miracle; she did not even ask Him to provide more. She did not tell Him what to do, how to do it, or when to do it. She simply placed it in His hands, knowing that He would do the best thing possible with it. Bear this example of the great Mother of God in mind. How often people come before our Lord with a whole list of instructions for Him to carry out – exactly what, when, where, and how. Put it in His hand and let Him do what is best in the best possible time and the best possible way.

### Forms of Prayer

All that was said before is needed to really pray, otherwise a person – if they do anything at all – simply babbles like the pagans. None of what has been said to this point can be left behind. But now we also need concrete, tangible ways to pray. There is a lot that can be said under the general heading of “Forms of Prayer” so let us begin with what is meant by the term “vocal prayer,” and the distinction between “vocal prayer” and meditation.

Vocal Prayer. The term vocal prayer has a long history of use in the Church. There is certainly nothing wrong with it but when I first heard it I found it confusing because “vocal prayers” do not necessarily need to be said out loud, i.e., vocally! Furthermore, “vocal prayer” is often spoken of in contrast to meditation. But am I not supposed to “meditate” (think about God, our Lord, the saints, and so on) when using “vocal prayer?” Of course I eventually came to realize that “vocal prayer” refers to “standard” prayers like the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be...and so many others. They are prayers that have set words – a “formula,” if you will. I don’t really have a better word for vocal prayers; I thought of calling them (and have called them at times) “formulary prayers” but that makes them sound rather rote or distant or mechanical. In any event, the important thing is to understand what is meant by the term “vocal prayer” – they are the many standard prayers that we have like the Our Father that have set words. Vocal prayers do not have to be said out loud, and we certainly do need to raise our mind to God when using them – not just rattling off the words. Meditation is prayer (raising the mind to God) without any set words; it is “free-form” in that sense. If I am really thinking (in silence, interiorly) about the Passion, for example, and what it was like for our Lord, that would be called meditation. I suppose, then, the term vocal was used for the “standard” prayers because they *could* be (and sometimes/often times are) said out loud, sometimes in unison with others who also know the prayers; this would be in contrast to what’s called meditation which is almost always (though not necessarily) silent, not spoken out loud. The one (meditation) is almost always silent, while the other (vocal) can be either out loud or silent. Fr Hardon gives a similar explanation for the term vocal prayer: “in practice the distinction between mental [what I called meditation] and vocal prayer is more a matter of emphasis, whether one’s own unrehearsed sentiments predominate (mental prayer) or a person rather employs [formulary] verbal expressions (vocal prayer).”

There are a plethora of vocal prayers in the Church, and it might be helpful to touch on a few of them. The Holy Rosary deserves its own section so that will be saved for later. One I would like to touch on that is perhaps not so well known is called: The 15 Magnificent Prayers of St Bridget. It might be helpful to preface this by saying that there are no prayers or sacred objects (e.g., the Brown Scapular) that work like magic amulets. We have to be committed to following the Lord’s commands, for which there is no substitute. At the same time, for those who sincerely seek Him, our Lord has attached certain promises to certain prayers, the Rosary being a prime example. The 15 Magnificent Prayers of St Bridget is another. St Bridget was a mystic of the Church from the 1300’s and our Lord gave her these prayers. He also attached certain promises for those who prayed them *every* day for one year. The prayers have been approved by the Church but it’s unclear if the promises have been. Regardless, I think our Lord has given them great power to bring about conversion, and especially repentance – the first step on the road to union with Him. They do take a serious commitment – it takes about 40 minutes a day to really pray them – but with great commitment comes great reward.

To be continued next week. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.