

Prayer, Part 6

Last week's bulletin article focused on what is called "vocal prayer," which basically refers to prayers with set words – like the Our Father or Hail Mary. Of course, "vocal prayers" can be *prayed* (not thoughtlessly rattled off, but prayed) either out loud or silently in our own minds. Fr John Hardon points out that part of the reason vocal prayers are called vocal is because in all prayer we are using some sort of language (even in "mental prayer") and of course that includes prayers with set words or "formularly" prayers.

There are several topics related to prayer that all tie together very closely, so much so that it's hard to know which one to start with; it might be necessary to go back and forth a little. Since we have just been talking about vocal prayer, perhaps a good starting point is to say a little more about "mental prayer," especially meditation. Mental prayer, in general, is simply raising your mind to God, having a conversation with God, in silence, without any particular set words, just using your own words. A good example of where mental prayer can be used is petitionary prayer (petitionary prayer can also be its own subject so this is one example of what I meant by intermingling various aspects of prayer). We can certainly also offer (say) a Rosary, or any vocal prayer, for some particular petition/intention; petitionary prayer is not limited to mental prayer only, but it is a good example of where/when/how we might use mental prayer (my own words, in silence). I raise my mind to the Lord and plead with Him for what I need, to make me like I am meant to be, to ask grace for others and so on – all of this in a very simple way, in my own words. The Apostles are good examples of speaking to our Lord in a plain, simple way, using their own words; of course *they* did it "out loud" (verbally) since our Lord was present to them in human form. Our Lord is the premier example of mental prayer. In fact, Scripture relates His mental prayer right before His Passion, which was, incidentally, a petitionary prayer. Petitionary prayer is just one example of what we might do in mental prayer. Mental prayer is by no means limited to that. I might just raise my mind to God in thanksgiving or adoration or simply reside quietly in His presence.

Meditation, as mentioned, is a particular form of mental prayer which involves really thinking about a mystery of the faith or the Divine Will. It is one that should be practiced. This doesn't have to be anything "high-level." Take Christmas, for example. You might be sitting quietly alone in your living room with the tree lit up and your Nativity set close by. You look at the Nativity set and start to really think about the birth of our Lord; you might think about the poverty of the scene before you, that there was no room in the inn, the humility of Joseph & Mary, not to mention our Lord, and so on. This is real prayer. How many people, sadly, go through all of Lent without really giving a thought to the greatest act of love in all of human history – the Passion of our Lord, the sacrifice of Christ. Meditation / mental prayer might also involve some examination of my own self – I snapped at my spouse, or some such thing – and then maybe: why did I do that. Or I might recognize some particular vice I have – maybe it's human respect or greed or anger or whatever it might be. This examination of one's self might then lead to mental petitionary prayer – asking for the grace, even the desire, to overcome it. I might spend some time thinking about the real purpose of this life, which then might lead me to think that I could focus on that a little better. Maybe I start thinking about Heaven and what that must be like and it stirs me up to really follow our Lord. All of this is prayer and it's a form of prayer that we do need. Vocal prayers are an indispensable aid to prayer but to limit ourselves to only that is to limit our relation with the Lord.

This is perhaps a good lead-in to two other topics related to prayer that we might intermingle: when to pray and short prayers (mental or vocal). As for when to pray, there are, generally speaking, no strict rules other than participation in Mass every Sunday and Holy Day. A number of good "spiritual directors" strongly encourage people to set designated times and really stick to them, otherwise it is too easy to let it slide. That's probably a good suggestion and it is very consistent with ancient tradition, going back even to Jewish practice. Nonetheless, there are no hard and fast rules, at least not for laity. Maybe, though, a few helpful thoughts can be offered. One is to pray as soon as you get up in the morning. Remember the first commandment – to put God first. This is a good way to put that into practice. It is also just a good way to start the day, a way to focus your mind in the right direction, a good way to offer the whole day to God. Whatever commands a person's attention the first thing in the morning (for simplicity say: God or the world) is probably what orients their mind the rest of the day. This does not need to take a lot of time. You might just kneel down beside your bed for no

more than a couple of minutes, put everything else out of your mind, and simply think of the goodness of the Lord. You don't even need to use vocal prayer. You'll find that this calms you and prepares you for whatever might come that day – you and the Lord for the rest of the day; it's a good way to build your inner room.

Mention has already been made of another time to pray – before meals. That one's fixed.

Part of the reason this series of articles started out by emphasizing what prayer is, is because prayer does not always have to be long or difficult. It is a good practice to make short little prayers throughout the day. They could be either vocal or mental prayers. You might pause briefly – maybe before a big task – bring an image of our Lord quickly to mind, and say: Lord Jesus crucified, have mercy on me; or: please Lord, make me fast and accurate according to your good and holy will. Or, maybe you pause briefly, bring an image of our Lord or an intercessor (Mary, for example) to mind and say: please Lord (or Holy Mother), look out for my son or daughter or spouse or family or whoever it might be. You don't need a particular intention either. You might pause briefly sometime during the day, raise your mind to our Holy Mother, and say: O Mary, conceived without sin, please for us who have recourse to you...and then back to what you need to do. When to pray – any time throughout the day and they can just be short little prayers like these examples or whatever words you choose to use. You will be surprised at how much this can help you.

Another time to pray, maybe one that not everyone would think of right away, is any time you see an accident or hear a siren. Make it practice to pray a Hail Mary or Our Father for the person or people involved. What a good work of charity that is. Think about it if it was you. Wouldn't it be nice if a dozen people were praying for you? The person will probably never know in this life, but the Lord knows and He will reward your charity.

One more thing I will mention in regard to when to pray is nocturnal prayer – praying throughout the night. This was an example given by our Lord Himself. But some caution has to be used here if you are not retired or a cloistered religious. Remember that our Lord does give people real responsibility and it's not His Will that a person neglects their God-given duties. So, you have to know your limits. If God wills this for you, He will give you the grace to do it but if not, then go to bed. St Mother Teresa of Calcutta apparently only slept about 3 hours a day, spending many hours in prayer. But she was given the grace to do that. Another example comes from St John Vianney. He would do long fasts and often got very little sleep. A lady who worked closely with him – she took care of the orphanage – told him once that she was going to do the same and Vianney told her not to. But, she said, you do! Yes, Vianney replied, but God gives me the grace to do it. That was Vianney's work, hers was different. As we grow closer to God, He gives us more and more grace so maybe nocturnal prayer is a grace He will give you later, even if not now. If you are retired and can sleep during the day without neglecting any duties, nocturnal prayer might be something to consider. It is a good work.

The question of when to pray might bring to mind the words our Lord spoke through His servant Paul: pray always, or pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). How is that possible? St Thomas Aquinas takes up that very question and says there are 3 ways in which a person "prays always." The first, he says, is by keeping the appointed times for prayer (as mentioned, fixed times for prayer is an ancient practice). Here he is saying that one way to understand "pray always" is not so much continuously but that I do it regularly, every day, at various time throughout the day. It would be like somebody telling you: always drive your car. What they mean is drive it every day so the battery doesn't go down, etc – not that you have to be driving it all day every day. *However*, Aquinas goes on to say that another way this command is carried out, another thing this means, is praying continuously – i.e., yes, drive the car all day every day. But how is that possible? Aquinas explains. Desire for the true good, for our Lord, is itself prayer and a good and holy desire like that persists all day, every day, even when I have to concentrate on other things like some particular work. It is not unlike the desire of spouses, in a good marriage, to be with each other. That desire is there always, even when they have to concentrate on other things. The constant desire to do good – to serve the Lord – leads to everything I think, say, and do being a form of prayer because I do it to serve Him, out of love for Him. Finally, drawing on the Church Fathers, Aquinas says that a 3rd way to pray always (which is very related to the 2nd) is to give alms.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.