

Prayer, Part 4

This week's bulletin article will continue on the topic of "Forms of Prayer." We need help to really pray. If you just tell someone to go pray, they won't really know how. Even people who have developed a habit of prayer need help to pray. Indeed, God Himself – through His servant St Paul – says: "For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

Our Lord, through His Church, comes to our aid in "how to pray." Prayer can be categorized in many different ways (i.e., there are many different forms of prayer). One big aid, or one major form of prayer, one that can be (and should be) used throughout our lives, are "vocal prayers," meaning (more or less) prayers that have set words, prayers like the Our Father and Hail Mary. Last week's article also mentioned "meditation." When using "vocal prayers," the person still has to raise their mind to God. Vocal prayers can't just be rattled off.

A distinction can be made between "mental prayer" and meditation. Both are "free-form" – the person is not using set words – and both are silent (interior). If a distinction is made between the two, it's that in meditation the person is thinking specifically about the mysteries of the faith (e.g., the Passion, Eucharist, Incarnation – whatever it might be) whereas "mental prayer" is more general – it can be any type of conversation with God – maybe, for example, I am pleading with our Lord for help in some area. Mental prayer, then, is more general than meditation. In fact, meditation could be considered a type of mental prayer.

Much of this might seem like nothing more than terminology. And to some extent, that's true. Yet at the same time it can be helpful in understanding "how to pray" – all of these things (vocal prayer, mental prayer, meditation) are genuine forms of prayer, types of prayer that our Lord teaches us in and through His Church.

Before going on with other vocal prayers, mental prayer, or a few words about meditation, there is another "form" of prayer that I want to continually emphasize – namely **stopping by the church and spending some time with our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament**. Why is it that this appeal so often falls on deaf ears? I suppose there are many reasons. One is that it might seem radical or even absurd to many people – why in the world would I go to the church if there's not something going on?! This is like saying: why would I go see an elderly parent unless there's something going on or there's some problem or something like that; I can talk to them on the phone or something, I don't need to see them. Suppose a parent did that with their child – ship them off somewhere and hardly ever see them unless there's some event or problem. What kind of a relation would be formed in that way? Not much of one. If you want to build, maintain, and grow in relation with *anyone*, our Lord included, there is simply no substitute for being with them, in their actual physical presence. Two people who really love each other *want* to be in each other's presence. If a married couple are separated by a long distance (say one of them is in the military), they have all kinds of electronic communication they can use. Are they satisfied with that? No. They're thankful to have those means of communication but they are not enough, they are not satisfied with them, they want to be in each other's actual physical presence.

Why spend time with our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament? Well, what is the essence of Heaven? First, what is meant by 'Heaven' is the complete, ultimate, uninterrupted, and abundant fulfillment or satisfaction of that burning thirst for happiness, a thirst that no person can escape. But what is it that makes Heaven, Heaven? What is the essence of Heaven? It is, as St Paul puts it, "seeing God face-to-face." It is being in the perfect presence of the beloved. But if I don't have any inkling or desire to be in His presence now, here on earth, how can I possibly enter Heaven? If I don't really care about being in His actual and full presence then there is no Heaven for me. If I was forced into 'Heaven' when I really don't care about being in the actual and full presence of God, then Heaven would not be Heaven, it would not satisfy my thirst for happiness. In fact, some of the mystics of the Church have said that those in hell and those in Heaven actually receive the same thing – the love of God – but those in hell experience it as wrath. Our Lord God's full, physical, and real presence here on earth (in this life) is the Holy Eucharist. If I don't want to be in His presence, if I don't desire it, how can I possibly believe that I can experience Heaven since the essence of Heaven *is* being in His presence, in the presence of the beloved. No, ladies and gentlemen, being in the actual presence of God, and desiring to be so, is something that has to be built up in this life, which means spending time with Him in the Blessed Sacrament.

Why did our Lord create the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? There are several reasons. Yes, it's true that He makes His Passion present to us in Mass so as to make a sort of exchange of gifts – He

(re)presents His gift, His act of love (His Passion), to us and we are to bring our gift (our sacrifices, our acts of love) to Him and this “exchange of gifts” binds the two together. Yes, that’s true. Yes, He also created the Holy Eucharist for Holy Communion – a close, personal, intimate communication with His beloved. But *one* of the *main* reasons He created the Eucharist is so that He can be with His sons and daughters, immediately, directly, physically. There is a real person in our Tabernacles – by His own will and His own design – and He sits there waiting for us to come and visit, to hear our problems and difficulties and petitions, to give us gladness and comfort, the comfort of being in the presence of the beloved. On Holy Thursday when our Lord created the Eucharist, He saw each of us and He knew He would be sitting there waiting for you to come. That is a fact.

Sometimes people will say something like: well God is everywhere and I can pray anywhere – and that’s the reason (or excuse?) for not visiting Him in the Blessed Sacrament. Yes, it’s true God is everywhere and a person can and should pray anywhere. Do you? But even if you do, why does that preclude stopping by the church to pay Him a visit? What is the reason for ruling that out? If you live far away from a truly beloved family member, do you not seek to visit them, to be in their actual physical presence, even though you can call or email or text them any time? In fact, such a response is placing judgement on what our Lord has done. Suppose you were alive 2,000 years ago when our Lord walked the earth in human form, and you heard about Him being nearby. You’ve heard about His magnificent preaching and teaching and all the miracles He worked. Maybe you even go so far as to say – yes, I believe He’s the Messiah and even Divine. But God is everywhere and I’m not going to see Him; I don’t care if God Himself thought it was worthwhile to make Himself physically present so I can be with Him in a familiar way, I know better and I’m not going. That’s just inane. Yet, church-going Catholics, probably unintentionally most of the time, so often do the same thing with our Lord now when He makes Himself physically present to us in the Eucharist; and we once again place judgement on what He has done, deeming our own judgement greater than His.

What do you do if you stop by the church to pay a visit to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament? This is a good question and you want to be a little bit prepared otherwise you will just be itching and stewing to go the whole time. Perhaps the best suggestion is to have some good Catholic reading with you, which can help you get recollected. This could be Scripture or the lives or writings of the saints or some good teacher of the faith. St Teresa of Avila (Doctor of the Church) did this, and Bishop Sheen advocated it as well. The purpose of this is not to make your visit “reading time” but rather just to help you get recollected, get your mind on the Lord. As suggested by Bishop Sheen, read some good Catholic material until a thought strikes you and then put down the reading and ponder that thought; if your mind begins to drift, go back to the reading. One of my favorite books is “The Way of Divine Love” based on the visions of Sr Josefa Menendez. One of the things Jesus speaks of to Sr Josefa is His Passion. It is very engrossing. Many thoughts came to my mind as I sat before the Blessed Sacrament reading His words to Josefa, words – an appeal – He intended for the whole world.

You can certainly use vocal prayer (silently) when you come to the church to pray – the Rosary, for example. But I would encourage you to make this a time for “mental prayer.” A time for meditation – thinking about the mysteries of the faith and the life of our Lord. Pondering His Passion is very fruitful. Reading material is very helpful for “meditation” – it will come almost naturally if you have some good reading material. Your mental prayer before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament can be (and probably should be at times) a time to ask our Lord for needs as well – needs for yourself, your family, the priests, the world. Not just material things – it’s good to ask for real material *needs* – but be sure and ask for the most important things: deeper conversion, freedom from some particular sin, the conversion of others, and so on. I am often little more than old beggar when I go before the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. My tombstone could say: here lies an old beggar.

As with any prayer, it’s fine to start small, maybe even just a 10-15 minute visit once or twice a week. For short visits, you don’t even need reading material to help you get recollected. You just stop in to say “hello,” focus on Jesus’ presence, thank Him, and ask Him for the help you need. **Parents: bring your kids**, but focus on the Lord while you’re there. They *will* learn from your example. It is the greatest gift you can give them. Maybe you’re running errands in town or something, make a point of it to stop by the church. This will be one of the greatest things you teach your kids, one of the greatest examples you can give them. Get them some little Catholic books to bring. They will remember it. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.