

It was my intention to wrap this series on prayer this week with a summary of main points that could be used for a quick review, something to use as a focal point or reminder or even a sort of “checklist.” But then this past week the Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours had excerpts of a letter from St Augustine to a lady named Proba, who was asking him about this subject of prayer and so I thought it worthwhile to take one more week and present the words of this great Father and Doctor of the Church. One of the reasons this series on prayer has been longer than most, or any other, is simply because of the importance of prayer. St Augustine’s letter, then, is not only highly instructive but it helps to reinforce this point. This emphasis on prayer came from our Lord and has been emphasized in His Church from the beginning (recall Augustine was from the latter 300’s and into the 400’s). Now, the excerpt from St Augustine’s letter...

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Let us always desire the happy life from the Lord God and always pray for it. But for this very reason we turn our mind to the task of prayer at appointed hours, since that desire grows lukewarm, so to speak, from our involvement in other concerns and occupations. We remind ourselves through the words of prayer to focus our attention on the object of our desire; otherwise, the desire that began to grow lukewarm may grow chill altogether and may be totally extinguished unless it is repeatedly stirred into flame.

Therefore, when the Apostle says: *Let your petitions become known before God*, this should not be taken in the sense that they are in fact becoming known to God who certainly knew them even before they were made, but that they are becoming known to us before God through submission and not before men through boasting.

Since this is the case, it is not wrong or useless to pray even for a long time when there is the opportunity. I mean when it does not keep us from performing the other good and necessary actions we are obliged to do. But even in these actions, as I have said, we must always pray with that desire. To pray for a longer time is not the same as to pray by multiplying words, as some people suppose. Lengthy talk is one thing, a prayerful disposition which lasts a long time is another. For it is even written in reference to the Lord himself that he spent the night in prayer and that he prayed at great length. Was he not giving us an example by this? In time, he prays when it is appropriate; and in eternity, he hears our prayers with the Father.

The monks in Egypt are said to offer frequent prayers, but these are very short and hurled like swift javelins. Otherwise their watchful attention, a very necessary quality for anyone at prayer, could be dulled and could disappear through protracted delays. They also clearly demonstrate through this practice that a person must not quickly divert such attention if it lasts, just as one must not allow it to be blunted if it cannot last.

Excessive talking should be kept out of prayer but that does not mean that one should not spend much time in prayer so long as fervent attitude continues to accompany his prayer. To talk at length in prayer is to perform a necessary action with an excess of words. To spend much time in prayer is to knock with a persistent and holy fervor at the door of the one whom we beseech. This task is generally accomplished more through sighs than words, more through weeping than speech. He *places our tears in his sight, and our sighs are not hidden from him*, for he has established all things through his Word and does not seek human words.

We need to use words so that we may remind ourselves to consider carefully what we are asking, not so that we may think we can instruct the Lord or prevail on him.

Thus, when we say: *Hallowed be your name*, we are reminding ourselves to desire that his name, which in fact is always holy, should also be considered holy among men. I mean that it should not be held in contempt. But this is a help for men, not for God.

And as for our saying: *Your kingdom come*, it will surely come whether we will it or not. But we are stirring up our desires for the kingdom so that it can come to us and we can deserve to reign there.

When we say: *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, we are asking him to make us obedient so that his will may be done in us as it is done in heaven by his angels.

When we say: *Give us this day our daily bread*, in saying this day we mean “in this world.” Here we ask for a sufficiency by specifying the most important part of it; that is, we use the word “bread” to stand for everything. Or else we are asking for the sacrament of the faithful, which is necessary in this world, not to gain temporal happiness but to gain the happiness that is everlasting.

When we say: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*, we are reminding ourselves of what we must ask and what we must do in order to be worthy in turn to receive.

When we say: *Lead us not into temptation*, we are reminding ourselves to ask that his help may not depart from us; otherwise we could be seduced and consent to some temptation, or despair and yield to it.

When we say: *Deliver us from evil*, it reminds us to reflect on the fact that we do not yet enjoy the state of blessedness in which we shall suffer no evil. This is the final petition contained in the Lord’s Prayer, and it has a wide application. In this petition the Christian can utter his cries of sorrow, in it he can shed his tears, and through it he can begin, continue and conclude his prayer, whatever the distress in which he finds himself. Yes, it was very appropriate that all these truths should be entrusted to us to remember in these very words.

Whatever be the other words we may prefer to say (words which the one praying chooses so that his disposition may become clearer to himself or which he simply adopts so that his disposition may be intensified), we say nothing that is not contained in the Lord’s Prayer, provided of course we are praying in a correct and proper way. But if anyone says something which is incompatible with this prayer of the Gospel, he is praying in the flesh, even if he is not praying sinfully. And yet I do not know how this could be termed anything but sinful, since those who are born again through the Spirit ought to pray only in the Spirit.

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Notice that St Augustine says: “let us always desire the happy life from God.” This is interesting to me because I did not remember him saying this until this past week when it was in the Office, and yet this is exactly how this series started. I simply drew from Aquinas’ writings on man. Perhaps it is an example of our Lord Himself directing and guiding His Church. In any event, it shows a great consistency in what He teaches in and through His Church. It also reminds us that union with our Lord is the only means to satisfy that irrevocable thirst for happiness, and that prayer is a necessary part in forging that union.

Augustine also said: “it is not wrong or useless to pray even for a long time when there is the opportunity.” This too is striking to me because another thing emphasized in this series was: yes, you do “have permission” to stop and pray. There is a lot of pressure today to think that such things are a waste of time. I also feel pressure to get tangible things done, especially now with 7 parishes. Augustine’s address to this point suggests that this is a perennial temptation, a common trick used to get us to give up our true destiny, our inheritance. I also need to hear from others: yes, this is something you have to do, don’t stop, don’t throw away your sonship for that which will pass away; this is the will of He who is all goodness, who knows all, who is all-powerful, and who will be our judge. I am grateful for Augustine’s words, and the example of all the saints. This past Tuesday was the memorial of Pope St John Paul II. One of the stories I remember about PJP II is that he was supposed to be on his way to the airport and apparently time was tight. In spite of this, John Paul stopped and prayed the Office simply because it was time to pray it. Those with him tried to encourage him to move on, afraid they were going to be late. John Paul prayed the Office. First things first is a rule of life.

This week we will celebrate All Saints Day, a Holy Day of Obligation. Maybe we can begin to see why the Church holds this up as a solemnity and Holy Day. St Jerome (Father & Doctor of the Church, and Scripture scholar) said that ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. But I think we can also say: ignorance of His friends (the saints) is ignorance of Christ; they manifest that which Christ taught. I know the truth, for example, of Augustine’s words and the example of PJP II, but I need to hear their words and see their example or, as Augustine alludes to, I will slide. Am I the only one? It is so easy to fall into spiritual pride, thinking I’m better than that one, or I’m the one who is faithful. But to whom are we comparing ourselves? The person next door or the saints? Knowing the saints protects us from this spiritual pride. When I see St John Vianney, the patron of parish priests, it makes me fall down before our Lord and beg for His mercy. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.