

DIFFICULTIES IN PRAYER

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Introduction

“Prayer is a vital necessity,” which means we can’t survive spiritually without it. St. John Chrysostom wrote: “Nothing is equal to prayer; for what is impossible it makes possible, what is difficult, easy....For it is impossible, utterly impossible, for the man who prays eagerly and invokes God ceaselessly ever to sin.” St. Alphonsus Liguori adds: “Those who pray are certainly saved; those who do not pray are certainly damned.”¹

At first glance the above quotations might seem overstated. However, that reservation is quickly dispelled when we consider the absolute necessity of God’s grace. Nothing we do pleases God that is not motivated and sustained by grace. Consider the words of Jesus on the night before he died: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Prayer acknowledges our helplessness before God, because imbedded in the center of every prayer is the cry, “Help!” This sums up all that I will say here about the necessity of prayer for the focal point of this essay are the difficulties we encounter when we pray.

The State of Sin

Thérèse of Lisieux defined prayer as: “a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love.” Prayer is talking and listening to the God we love. Therefore prayer is absent from the life of a person habitually living in sin because his focus is twisted and turned inwardly on himself. There is no place in his heart for God. Indeed, the very idea of prayer may seem repugnant even frightening. The New Testament lists a number of sins that separate us from the love of God, for example, *Immorality* (Gal 5:19; 1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5; 1 Tim 1:10), *Impurity* (Gal 5:19; Rom 1:24; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5), *Adultery* (1 Cor 6:9), *Drunkennes* (Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 6:10), and *Lovers of Self and Money* (2 Tim 3:2). Certainly *Pornography* should be added to this short listing. Repentance and the elimination of mortal sin (1 Jn 5:16-17) must be the first step in connecting with God in prayer. At this stage the cry, “Lord, save me” is vital.

The Cares of this World

In the parable of the sower Jesus speaks of the seeds cast among the thorns. “They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Mk 4:18-19). A divided heart rarely turns to God because it breeds indifference. To my great regret, for example, I must admit that there was a time when my energies and thinking was primarily focused on my career and worldly success, but there was little time for God as I operated under the fallacy that I was in control.

Aside from being a monumental waste of time, television is a conduit of worldly values. I have never known of anyone who watched much commercial television that had a vibrant prayer life. TV is like pouring water on a fire, except it douses the fire of God’s

¹ *Catechism*, # 2744. I citing the *Catechism* here because its treatment on prayer is a marvelous gift to God’s family. Do yourself a favor and carefully read this section.

love in our hearts. My experience is that as television diminishes the condition that is necessary for prayer. Instead it is used to propagandize behavior that springs from selfish motives: to look good in the eyes of others; to feel the best we can; to be important, powerful, and secure; to satisfy every want.

Distractions

Those who have eliminated serious sin from their lives and who are not absorbed with the cares of the world will readily admit that a life of prayer is still difficult, like slogging uphill against a head wind. Who ever said a vital spiritual life was easy? Certainly, it was not Jesus? The battle of prayer and the battle of the spiritual life is the same battle. It's a battle "against our selves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God."²

It is no surprise that "the habitual difficulty in prayer is *distraction*." When aware of our distractedness, we need to gently refocus on God acknowledging our ineptitude. However, it is a good idea later to examine our distractions because they often reveal our attachments and our failure to live in the present moment. Distractions give us the opportunity to ask God to awaken in us a preferential love for him, and to offer our heart to him to be purified. Distractions make us face the challenge of "which master to serve."³

Temptations⁴

The great temptation in prayer is the thought: "What good does it do to pray?" Sometimes this stems from our disappointment that God has not heard our prayer according to our will. Think of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. There was a prayer much better than yours.

"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, *and he was heard* for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned [in his human nature] obedience [love] through what he suffered; and being made perfect [in love] he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb 5:7-10).

The Father knows what is best for us. We often do not. Consider St. Paul. To shield him from pride he was given a thorn in his flesh, which he called "a messenger of Satan, to harass me" (2 Cor 12:7). Then the Apostle adds: "Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Cor 12:8-9).

Wounded pride can also lead us to abandon prayer. Prayer reveals what we are, namely, helpless sinners. It is both painful and humiliating to recognize the depth of our sinfulness, and how our selfishness has harmed others. However, that is much less agonizing than hearing, "Depart from me," at the end of our life.

² *Catechism*, # 2725.

³ *Catechism*, # 2779; cf. Mt 6:21, 24.

⁴ *Catechism*, # 2728, 2732.

Ultimately, temptations in prayer are a challenge to our faith. What do I truly believe? What are my real preferences? What is my real love?

Dryness⁵

Frequently, at the beginning of a conversion God fills the soul with sensible consolations. I know a man who experienced this in a wonderful way when he was twenty years old. The sense of God's loving presence was so real and tangible, that he could say he didn't believe in the existence of God because he had the experience of God's existence. It was as if God was standing at his side during every waking hour.

But what happens when God tests the genuineness of our love by withdrawing his consolation? Then we face the hard reality. What do I really love? Is it the consolations of God, or is it the God of consolations? Dryness tests the genuineness of our love. That man who once experienced consolations in prayer at age twenty has had dryness in prayer for the last fifty-four years.

Sometimes dryness in prayer is the result of sin or our preoccupation with the cares of this world. In those cases conversion must be the first order of business.

Darkness

The experience of spiritual darkness goes beyond the senses to reach the soul with blackness, thoughts of being unloved and abandoned by God, and awful temptations against faith. A dear friend recently shared that he was going through this exact experience. It is very painful, much like a miniature of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane and his sense of abandonment on the cross. Nothing seem to help. The soul can only cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Mother Teresa of Calcutta experienced this painful spiritual crucifixion for years. In a letter to her spiritual director she wrote of "untold darkness...this continual longing for God...the place of God in my soul is blank...when the pain of longing is so great...I just long & long for God...God does not want me...sometimes – I just hear my own heart cry out – 'My God' and nothing else comes...the torture and pain I can't explain."⁶

Most Christians never have the opportunity in this life to have their love for God perfected in a trial of this nature, because their love is too anemic. They could not bear it.

The Need for Perseverance and the Power of Prayer

St. Paul instructed the Thessalonians to "pray constantly" (1 Thess 5:17; Eph 5:20). Similarly, he commanded the Ephesians: "Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Eph 6:18). This commitment to prayer can only spring from the fervor of our love.⁷

⁵ *Catechism*, # 2731.

⁶ Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, p. 210.

⁷ *Catechism*, # 2742.

Jesus is our model as in all things. Not only did he spend whole nights in prayer, his whole life was a prayerful outpouring of love to the Father for us. In addition Jesus prays with us and in us. “All our petitions were gathered up, once for all, in his cry on the Cross and, in his Resurrection, heard by the Father.”⁸ In addition to the Divine Son, our prayers also draw their power from the Divine Person of Love. “In the end, however, ‘with sighs too deep for words’ the Holy Spirit ‘helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words’” (Rom 8:26).⁹

Conclusion

Prayer is a gift from the God who loves us. He eagerly gives it to those who seek it. To receive this gift we need the courage of becoming a humble little child who abandons unforgiveness, bitterness and judgmentalism, but trustingly surrenders to God’s loving care. The program is simple, but difficult. God’s help is the difference maker.

⁸ *Catechism*, # 2741.

⁹ *Catechism*, # 2630.