

Prayer 101

by Fr. Matt Hartley

What is prayer?

Whether it is praying the rosary or the heights of mystical contemplation, prayer is fundamentally spending time with God. It is taking time to be with the One who made us, died for us, and wants to fulfill our hearts with His love.

Why do I have to pray?

No relationship can exist without time being spent together. A guy who says he has a relationship with a girl and cares about her but never spends any time with her is lying. If we really believe that God exists, then we have an obligation to worship Him as our Lord. Also, if we love God, then we will want to spend time with Him. We were made for God and we will only find the happiness we seek within a profound relationship with Him.

Doesn't God already know what I need? Why do I have to ask?

First, prayer is more than asking God for stuff. God is not a cosmic candy machine who we get stuff from by popping in a few prayers. He is a loving Father who wants a deep relationship with us. He wants to bring us into His eternal life of the Trinity. Yes, He does know what we need before we ask it, but He wants us to express our hearts and our needs to Him. He could do everything Himself, but He wants us to be active members of His family, the Church, who express our needs to our Father and look out for our brothers and sisters, bringing them to our heavenly Father.

Prayer seems so boring sometimes...

If prayer seems boring, then it's not because God is boring. For those beginning in prayer, sometimes it seems boring because we have become dull to the things of God because of our sins. A husband who has cheated on his wife shouldn't expect to have a fun night out on the town the next day, that relationship has to be healed first. Also, many times we fill ourselves with so much noise that we can't concentrate on God. If we are constantly listening to music, watching tv, on the Internet, etc. it is going to be hard to hear the voice of the Lord because our minds will be so distracted.

If we are trying to get rid of the sins and the noise in our lives, then we will start encountering the Lord more and more. After a while, however, we will eventually experience a dryness in prayer, where the Lord seems to hid on us. This is called the dark night of the senses. The Lord takes away a lot or all of the consolations to make sure we are loving Him for who He is and not just for what He gives us. Do we love the gifts of God or the God who give them. It's easy for a husband to love his wife on the honeymoon or when they are having fun together. But when she is sleeping or sick and he isn't getting anything back, will he still love her. God is still with us in our times of dryness, much more than we think, but He wants to take us to the heights of prayer and union with Himself so He needs to purify us from loving Him just because it feels good to loving Him for who He is. Will I still love Jesus when He is on the Cross?

Do I really have to pray the same way everyday for 60+ years?

I sure hope not. Our prayer life is supposed to grow! While some parts of our life of prayer will never change, like talking to God or other certain vocal prayers, the majority of our prayer life should experience growth over time if we are being faithful to God and really seeking holiness. Many times people's prayer lives don't grow because they are unwilling to get out of certain sins or vices, not opening parts of their hearts to the Lord. We live as we pray and we pray as we live. As we grow in

holiness we will grow in prayer and as we grow in prayer we will grow in holiness.

Like any relationship, we can't expect our prayer life to go from nothing to the heights of mystical contemplation in a week, month, or even a year. But it will grow over time. God really does want every single person to reach the heights of mystical contemplation, if we don't it's not His fault, it's ours. There will be periods of dryness because we are being purified, but if we stay faithful, we will eventually encounter the Lord in deeper ways.

What are the main stages of prayer?

St. Teresa of Avila sets them up like this:

Ascetical Life

1) Vocal Prayer

2) Meditation

3) Affective Prayer

4) Prayer of Simplicity

Mystical Life

5) Infused Contemplation

6) Prayer of Quiet

7) Prayer of Union

8) Prayer of Conforming Union

9) Prayer of Transforming Union

The ascetical life is the prayer we can achieve through our own efforts and ordinary grace. Mystical is where God takes us further than we can go by ourselves, though we still must respond, He is the one primarily acting and we are receiving.

How long should I pray?

The amount of time we spend in prayer depends on how much we have been praying. If someone is starting out, 5-10 minutes a day might seem hard and will be a good starting point. If we have been praying for a while then maybe we can bump that up eventually to 15, 20, 30 minutes or maybe even an hour eventually. If we try to start with a lot of time in the beginning, we will get discouraged and stop praying all together. Prayer is like lifting weights, the more we pray the better we get at it and the more we can do.

Where should I pray?

While you can pray anywhere and at anytime, it is also good to have a specific time and place to pray. A Church is always the best place because Jesus is there in the Blessed Sacrament. But most people can't go to a Church everyday so it is good to have a quiet place where there won't be many distractions. Many people create a little prayer corner in their room with a crucifix, a Bible, a candle, and some holy pictures that help keep them focused. Some people find it helpful to kneel while praying, others find the discomfort too distracting. We should avoid excessive comfort or discomfort while praying, otherwise we will either fall asleep or only be thinking about the pain. Prayer is about contact with Jesus, whatever place, time, and position helps foster that encounter the most, do that.

When should I pray?

Again, we can pray any time and any place, but we need to have a specific time everyday that we stick to and don't give up. That time should be when we are awake, can focus, and there aren't a bunch of distractions. Usually early in the morning, before dinner, or late at night are the times that work best for most people. You will never *have* time for prayer, you have to *make* time for prayer.

I always get distracted when I pray, what should I do?

The saints actually speak very little about distractions. They simply tell us to calmly turn our minds back to the Lord and continue to pray. The devil will tempt us to beat ourselves up for being distracted so we get discouraged and don't want to pray. That's why we can't let our distractions bother us, we

need to just go back to God.

Very often, our distractions can help us see what we are too attached to. If we are constantly distracted by thoughts about our friends or boyfriend/girlfriend, then we are probably too attached to them and maybe are putting them before God. Or if we are distracted by music or movies flying in our head, it means we have too much of it in our lives. If you are distracted by ideas or things you have to do, write them down and let them go. Some of them could be inspirations from God, others could just be distractions. The main thing is to return our focus to the Lord and not get discouraged.

What if I just don't feel like praying?

Love is not a feeling it's a choice. Sometimes the feelings are there, and that's nice, but when they're not we need to stick with it. It's the tough times that's the test of true friendship and true love. Many of the saints would say that our prayers are most powerful when it's the hardest to pray, because God sees our dedication. The most powerful prayer ever spoken was on the Cross when Jesus said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

In our times of desolation, when it is hard to pray, it is good to remember that it won't last forever and consolation will return. If the dryness is not caused by our own sin and lukewarmness, then God has a purpose in it all. It is good to recall some of the consolations we have received from the Lord and to remember that He is still with us, we just can't sense Him right now.

Vocal Prayer

What is vocal prayer?

Vocal prayer is the most common form of prayer where we speak to God, either out loud or in our minds. Vocal prayer is a conversation with God using words. Vocal prayer can be very pleasing to God because it builds up our own devotion, gives glory to God with our minds and bodies, and is an expression of our hearts.

So vocal prayer is praying the Our Father and Hail Mary, right?

Well, yes, but it is much more than that. The words we say to the Lord need to be an expression of our hearts. We need to have attention and devotion when we pray. Our minds need to be attentive, that is, focused on God. We also need to have devotion, where our hearts are focused on God in love. Someone could have attention without devotion, they are aware of what they are doing but there is not love, like when someone is doing something they don't enjoy (like doing the dishes, etc.). We need to mean what we say when we pray.

But I never know what to say to God?

Don't lie when you pray. We don't need to put on a show or be somebody we are not with the Lord, He sees through all that. Tell Him what's going on in your life, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Ask Him to help you pray, tell Him you want to know Him more. Talk to Him like you would your best friend. He wants you to realize that He's closer to you, understands you, and loves more than anyone else in the universe.

If we get stuck it can be good to have a pattern or some areas we make sure to pray about. A.C.T.S

- 1) *Adoration* - giving glory, praise, and love to God for who He is. He is the Creator of the universe who died for us, our time of adoration is a time to love Him and give our hearts to Him.
- 2) *Contrition* - when we are in the presence of such a perfect and loving God, we realize that we are not so perfect and have sinned against the Lord and others. Contrition is sorrow for our sins, where we tell the Lord our sins and ask His forgiveness.
- 3) *Thanksgiving* - The Lord is always working in our lives and it is good to spend time thanking Him

for what He has done for us. Thank Jesus for dying for you, for His forgiveness in the sacrament of Reconciliation, His presence in the Eucharist, and for all the good things in our lives. We often don't realize just how blessed we are.

4) *Supplication* - this means praying for ourselves and for others. We can spend time asking the Lord to be with us in specific situations and to help us grow in love with Him more. Our world also desperately needs the love of God and we should pray for others as well. This is also the time where we should pray for our enemies, that the Lord would bless them with a knowledge of His love for them and give us the strength to love them as He loves them.

Is it okay to read prayers?

Absolutely. While it is very good to spend time talking with God with our own words, prayers that have been written by saints or even the Lord Himself can be very beautiful and help us to encounter God in a deeper way. The Psalms, in the Bible, are a rich source for prayer. We must make sure that these prayers don't just rattle off our lips, but are an expression of our hearts.

Meditation or Discursive Meditation

What is meditation?

Meditation is where the mind tries to know Jesus and His Revelation in a deeper way, bringing it into our minds and hearts so it can effect our lives. Discursive means that it follows a pattern and goes through a series of things instead of being chaotic and going all over the place.

Is this like Buddhist or Oriental meditation?

No, this is very different. Most oriental forms of meditation try to quiet the mind and to focus on a impersonal nothingness, because they believe reality is a big deception. As Christians, we quiet and focus our minds so that our prayer can always be focused on the Holy Trinity and the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Christian meditation is a deeply personal encounter with the God who loves us and the truths He has revealed about reality and ourselves. Prayer without Jesus is not Christian.

Why should I meditate?

If you love someone you want to get to know them better. Meditation gives us an opportunity to not just know things about Jesus Christ, but to know Him personally, who He is, His personality, His life on earth, etc. Coming to know Him and the truths He has revealed more deeply will give meaning and direction to our lives. Moreover, Jesus can encounter us through our imagination. While picturing a scene, He can do something we don't expect, like give us a profound look of love, or say something to us. The Lord created our imagination, He can mess with it to bring us closer to Himself.

Is this just a big head trip?

No at all. Meditation is supposed to engage all of us, our thought, imagination, emotions, and desires deepening our convictions of faith, our conversion of heart, and our strength to follow Christ. St. Teresa of Avila says that meditation consists more in loving than in thinking.

What do I meditate on?

While any truth of the Catholic faith can be a source of meditation, it is very good to start with and spend most of our time meditating on Jesus Christ, His life and who He is. Then we can spend time meditating on the gifts He has given us, like the Eucharist, the Church, the Saints. We can also spend time meditating on the virtues, how they were expressed in Jesus' life and how they can be lived out in our lives. We will never run out of things to pray about and even if we have meditated on something a

hundred times, new things can come to mind because the Holy Spirit is with us when we pray.

How do I meditate?

It can be very helpful to have a method for those new to meditation. Then, when one is comfortable and has been praying for some time, the method becomes natural and begins to fade into the background. The method is a means, not an end in itself. It's meant to help us focus and encounter Christ, to the extent that it does that, use the method.

There are two traditional methods of meditation among the many out there, one by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the other part of Carmelite spirituality (a religious order).

St. Ignatius of Loyola method of meditation:

Preparation

- recognizing the presence of God with an act of faith and reverence
- prayer to ask for the grace of making a good meditation
- picturing the place using your imagination (sights, sounds, smells, etc.)
- prayer asking for the specific grace you wish to receive in this meditation (example: growth in forgiveness)

Body of the meditation

- recalling to mind the material to meditate on (example: picturing the crucifixion scene and everything that happened in it - events, words, etc.)
- using the mind to think about what the material/events/ truths mean and applying it to your own life (example: Jesus forgave us when He was unjustly tortured)
- using the will and heart to arouse devout feelings and affections and making practical, particular resolutions (example: I'm going to forgive my brother for cutting me down)

Conclusion

- conversation with God, thanking Him for the meditation, the specific graces received,
- asking for the strength to keep the resolution, and anything else you wish to tell Him.
- vocal prayer, such as the Our Father, Hail Mary, etc.

Carmelite method of meditation

Introduction

- preparation - recognizing the presence of God and praying for a good meditation
- reading - read the text you wish to meditate on or call it to mind

Meditation

- imagine the material - place, events, words, etc.
- reflection or meditation on the material - its meaning
- heart to heart conversation with God

Conclusion

- thanksgiving
- oblation - giving yourself and everything you have to the Lord
- petition - praying for your needs and the needs of others

How long should I meditate?

The length of prayer time depends somewhat on how much you are used to. It would be very hard to have a decent meditation in 5 to 10 minutes, but it's hard to maintain a meditation for more than an hour. It's okay to meditate on more than one point during our times of prayer so long as we are giving enough time to each point. Remember, it's not about intellectual knowledge, but love and contact with Jesus Christ.

What if I get distracted during meditation?

Then it proves that your human. Distractions are normal and we should just turn our minds back to God and continue meditating. A good spiritual book can help keep us focused in our meditation. The important thing is to not get discouraged and to not give up. If we stay faithful and try to root out the noise in our lives, then distractions will lessen, though they probably won't go away completely until we ascended to higher forms of contemplation.

Affective Prayer

What is affective prayer?

Affective prayer is a simplified form of meditation where love dominates over thought. Our heart, emotions, and desires are so directed towards the Lord and His Revelation that during our meditation, there is more stuff going on with the heart than there is with the head.

Does this mean I don't have to think about anything?

No, just that what you are thinking about isn't as important as the Person you are responding to. It's impossible to start with affective prayer. Our heart can't be moved if there isn't something to move it, so we need to start with discursive meditation (the earlier stage). Then when the affections of our heart arise, we focus less on thinking and more on loving.

Is this just a bunch of warm-fuzzy feelings?

No, feelings can be a part of affective prayers, but its not limited to warm-fuzzy feelings. Affective prayer touches on the deepest parts of our heart. It is not just an emotional roller coaster, but a loving response to the Lord. Spiritual consolations are nice, but they don't prove anything about our holiness. Affective prayer should engage the heart motivating us to follow the Lord more closely, growing in holiness and charity.

Should I never go back to meditating once I've experienced affective prayer?

Even if someone were regularly experiencing affective prayer, they should not permanently abandon discursive meditation. Our hearts need to be moved by something and discursive meditation provides that. Also, there is a danger of getting lazy and not wanting to probe the depths of our faith, but just get caught up in emotions. The Lord will make it difficult to pray sometimes so that we are motivated by love for Him and not just for what He gives us. St. Teresa of Avila says that sometimes it is necessary to return to the lower stages of prayer even after one has experienced mystical contemplation.

How do I do affective prayer?

It is more something you sense happening and respond to then something you try to begin. You shouldn't force your emotions, the goal is intimacy with Christ, not an emotional rush. While meditating on something, you may begin to respond with your heart, emotions, and desires. Calmly simplify your meditation, not focusing so much on thoughts but on the Person of Jesus Christ, drawing deeper convictions as to how you are going to be more faithful to Him in your daily life. Over time, as we grow in affective meditation, our meditations will simplify and methods will fade into the background and the focus will become much more centered on Jesus Christ.

What are the fruits of affective prayer?

The gage of the quality of our prayer is always the fruits it produces. We should see growth in our life of holiness, growth in virtue and charity towards others. This is not just an intellectual exercise, but an encounter with the living God that should change us.

Prayer of Simplicity

What is the prayer of simplicity?

The prayer of simplicity is a loving gaze on God, one of His perfections, Jesus Christ, one of His mysteries, or some other truth of the faith. It is also called the prayer of acquired recollection, as distinct from infused recollection, because it is the highest level of prayer the soul may attain by its own efforts with the help of ordinary grace. That's why it is part of the ascetical stages of prayer, though it is the bridge between the ascetical and mystical.

What happens in the prayer of simplicity?

It's so simple, it's hard to explain. The discursive thinking used before is now focused into a simple intellectual gaze, kind of like staring at someone. The affections and desires experienced in affective prayer are unified into a simple loving attention to God. It's looking at your beloved Lord with a heart filled with love for Him and all other thoughts and feelings either go away or don't matter.

How do I get to this level?

It's not something that can be forced. As we practice meditation over time, we start to become more aware of the presence of God and have a deeper desire and ability to simply be in His presence. Discursive meditation and affective prayer becomes more difficult and we just want to be in His presence. There are much less distractions and our minds and hearts are focused on the Lord. We will still start with material to meditate on, but once grace starts attracting us, we should put down the book and gaze on the Lord. Once that loving attention begins to waver, we should return to discursive meditation or affective prayer. The prayer of simplicity can sometimes be filled with sweet consolations or be dry. The important thing is that the Lord is present to us.

What are the fruits of the prayer of simplicity?

As we grow in prayer we should be growing in holiness. With the prayer of simplicity, we should begin to notice and foster a greater simplicity of life. We should strive to be less attached to unnecessary things, glamor, expensive stuff, etc. becoming more single focused on the Lord and His kingdom. Our souls will be filled with God and all that stuff will seem bothersome and stuff that hinders us from loving the Lord, who was poor on earth.

Also, the soul will be more attentive to the presence of God during daily life, gazing upon Him and loving Him at all times. His presence will be more powerfully felt during Mass and while reciting vocal prayers. Because we are more aware of the Lord's presence, a glance at our souls will quickly reveal our faults and sins. Everything we do will be done more and more for the love of God and out of the sole desire of pleasing Him.