

AN INTRODUCTION TO PRAYER

I was delighted when Canon Michael McMahon asked me to give a presentation on Prayer as part of the programme of Adult Education within our diocese. As Christians there is nothing we do that is more important than making time for God and spending time with God in Prayer.

The volumes of books about prayer remind us that there is a great thirst among people to know more about prayer and to know how to pray. They are also a reminder that there is so much we can learn about praying as well as learning about techniques and methods of prayer. As this presentation is part of the Adult Formation programme in the Diocese of Paisley, then I would recommend that you read Part 4 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on 'Christian Prayer'.

All the great saints throughout history and, all the spiritual directors worth their salt, say that we have to learn to pray, since prayer is our first obligation as well as our highest calling... They remind us repeatedly of St Paul's words: 'Pray constantly' (1Thess. 5:17), As one 19th Century Russian Spiritual writer instructed: "*Make yourself a rule, always to be with the Lord, keeping your mind in your heart and do not let your thoughts wander; as often as they stray, turn them back again and keep them at home in the closet of your heart and delight in converse with the Lord.*"

The great spiritual writers down through the centuries considered a serious discipline necessary to arrive at an intimate relationship with God while at the same time teaching that prayer is essentially a gift from God, and that we cannot truly pray by ourselves but that it is God's Spirit that prays in us. We cannot force God into a relationship, however hard we try, but rather God comes to us on his own initiative. Prayer is 'grace', that is a free gift from God, to which we can only respond with gratitude...

So, the paradox of prayer is that it asks for serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize or manipulate God; but without serious discipline we cannot receive him.¹

John Main OSB writes, "*There is no greater need for the Church and the world today than for a renewed understanding that the call to prayer, to deep prayer is universal.*"² It is a reminder that every single person is called to a life of prayer and at the same time our prayer cannot simply be focused on ourselves and our personal relationship with God: Our prayer must extend to the needs of the Church and the world in which we live and all the people who inhabit it. We pray not only as individuals but also as members of the Church. Finally, we all share in the responsibility not only to pray but to help others to come to a prayerful relationship with God.

¹ Henri Nowen, *Reaching Out*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1976), 114-116

² John Main, *Word into Silence*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1983)

There are many different ways of praying, and we will reflect on some of the ways of praying a little later, however, every form of prayer is of value for they help us to spend time with God in a way that helps us to open our hearts and our minds to his presence so that we are able to listen to his Word.

Questions for Reflection

- A. What ways of praying do you find most helpful?
- B. In prayer, what helps to allow God to take the initiative?
- C. What hinders you from listening to God?

SPIRITUALITY AND PRAYER

The way we pray reflects our spirituality. Many years ago, if I had been asked what kind of “Spirituality” I had, I would have replied by saying, “*Ignatian.*” This would have been because much of what I had learnt up to then about prayer, I had learnt from priests and religious who had immersed themselves in the writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola and in his spiritual exercises. Now, I would say that my spirituality is informed by the spirituality of St. Ignatius and also by that of St. Theresa of Avila and of St. Benedict, but my spirituality is more than the sum of all of these because it is unique to me, because ultimately my spirituality is about the way in which I relate to God.

The way we pray reflects our spirituality and therefore the way we pray reflects the way in which we relate to God and the vision we have of God.

Our spirituality is unique and it reflects the life we live. The spirituality of husbands and wives, parents and grandparents will have something in common, because being a parent, a grandparent or a partner has a bearing on the way we relate to other people and therefore to God. Deacons and priests are members of the family of Diocesan clergy, and share common aspects of their “Spirituality.” This is reflected in the way they dress and in the way in which they serve a parish community or within a chaplaincy ministry or the way in which they pray the Divine Office each day of their lives. Authentic prayer reflects our life and the various ways in which God calls us and we respond. Whoever we are, and whatever shape our lives have been given it is essential that we pray.

In Prayer God takes the initiative

When people talk to me about prayer often they are looking for me to suggest methods or techniques which will help them to pray better or, in the case of some, they simply want to know how to pray. They want to know what they must do to pray effectively. Such a thirst for knowing how to pray has created libraries of books on prayer. I’ve even bought a few. Yet the truth of course is that the effectiveness of prayer does not depend on us but rather on God. Prayer, as I said earlier, is not ultimately about what we do, but rather, it is about what God does. Prayer is a gift. Ruth Burrows OCD writes:

“Almost always when we talk about prayer we are thinking of something we do and, from that standpoint, questions, problems, confusion, discouragement, illusions multiply. For me, it is of fundamental importance to correct this view. Our Christian knowledge assures us that

*prayer is essentially what God does, how God addresses us, looks at us. It is not primarily something that we are doing to God, something we are giving to God but what God is doing for us. And what God is doing for us is giving the divine Self in love.*³

John Main OSB, in “Word into Silence” also says, “*All these masters have agreed that in prayer it is not we ourselves who are taking the initiative. We are not looking for Him; it is He who has found us.... ‘You yourself, do nothing, you simply allow Him to work in your soul.’*”⁴ And of course the great St. Theresa of Avila tells us that all we can do in prayer is to dispose ourselves; the rest is in the power of the Spirit who leads us.

It can be only but presumptuous of us to assume that in relating to God, in prayer that we would be expected to take the initiative. At its heart, this act of God is an act of pure and unconditional love. Ruth Burrows again expresses this beautifully when she says, “*What is the core, the central message of the revelation of Jesus? Surely it is of the unconditional love of God for us, for each of us: God, the unutterable, incomprehensible Mystery, the Reality of all reality, the Life of all life.*”⁵

Our Role in Prayer is to Receptive to God

In prayer it is God who takes the initiative, however, our role is be make ourselves docile and receptive to God’s initiative. This is where learning to pray plays its part.

So, what do we need to do?

Firstly, we have to have faith. We need to believe that God is present when we pray, even when we do not experience his presence. Prayer is always an act of faith.

Secondly, we need to be faithful to our prayer. In other words, we have to have the self-discipline to prayer regularly. This means we need to think about our day and look to a time when we will be able to pray. It might only be for 10 minutes, but what’s important is that we are faithful to this period of 10 minutes.

Thirdly we reflect on how we begin a period of Prayer. So how do you begin your prayer? Do you formally begin your prayer, perhaps by acknowledging God’s presence? Do you ask God for a particular grace? Beginnings as well as endings are an important part of every conversation; prayer is a conversation so beginning well is of real value.

Questions for Reflection

- A. Our spirituality is unique and it reflects the life we live. How would describe your spirituality?
- B. How would you say that your prayer reflects your life at this time? How has your prayer evolved as you have journeyed through your life so far?
- C. Do you trust God to take the initiative in prayer or do feel that the effectiveness of your prayer depends on you?

³ Ruth Burrows, *Essence of Prayer* (London, New York: Burns and Oates, 2006), 1.

⁴ John Main, *Word into Silence*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), 50.

⁵ Burrows, *Essence of Prayer*, 2

TYPES OF PRAYER

Vocal Prayer

As children, if we are fortunate, our parents, grandparents and teachers will teach us how to pray. Often, they will teach us to pray aloud either formally or informally. We will learn prayers such as the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, the *Glory Be*, as well as other prayers such as the *Grace before meals* and an *Act of Contrition*. They will also teach us to talk to God aloud formulating our own prayers. Such prayers are called vocal prayers or ascetical prayers.

The Catechism of the Church speaks of vocal prayer as follows:

Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life. To his disciples, drawn by their Master's silent prayer, Jesus teaches a vocal prayer, the *Our Father*. He not only prayed aloud the liturgical prayers of the synagogue but, as the Gospels show, he raised his voice to express his personal prayer, from exultant blessing of the Father to the agony of Gethsemane. (CCC 2701)

The need to involve the senses in interior prayer corresponds to a requirement of our human nature: We are body and spirit, and we experience the need to translate our feelings externally. We must pray with our whole being to give all power possible to our prayers. (CCC 2702)

And so, the words uttered as we pray, express not only our thoughts but every part of our being; thoughts, emotions and senses. So, for example, we may pray joyfully when we are happy and want to give thanks to God or we may pray for consolation when we are overcome with grief and sadness.

Among other things, the Catechism teaches us of the importance and validity of vocal prayer. It reminds us that when we pray aloud we are following in the tradition of prayer that was part of the life of Jesus. Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray in this manner. In teaching the Lord's Prayer Jesus offered his disciples the perfect "Vocal Prayer" which brings together everything we need to pray for and directs our prayer to the Father.

The Catechism expresses the place of vocal prayer in community liturgies and prayer. If we think about it, it is not surprising that not only at Mass but also in the celebration of the Morning Prayer and the Evening Prayer of the Church that we pray the *Our Father*.

There are many forms of community vocal prayer that we may celebrate. These include but are not limited to praying the Rosary, the Angelis and the Divine Mercy. Many people gather daily, whether it is in parish Churches, Religious communities or homes, to pray Morning and Evening prayer and other parts of the Liturgy of the Hours also known as the Divine Office.

As the Catechism teaches:

Because it is external and so thoroughly human, vocal prayer is the form of prayer most readily accessible to groups. Even interior prayer, however, cannot neglect vocal prayer. Prayer is internalized to the extent that we become aware of him "to whom we speak; thus, vocal prayer becomes an initial form of contemplative prayer. (CCC2704)

Many people who begin their life of prayer praying vocal prayers find themselves progressing to a form of contemplative prayer. However, this should not take away from the value of vocal prayer and many people who have a profound prayer life and relationship with God never find the need to develop a form of contemplative prayer.

Questions for Reflection

- A. When role does vocal prayer play in your life?
- B. What kind of vocal prayers do you pray alone?
- C. When would you pray aloud with other people?

Meditative Prayer

The Catechism of the Church, following in the footsteps of the great saints St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, place meditative prayer or meditation between Vocal prayer and Contemplative prayer. Meditation is a kind of bridge between vocal prayer and contemplative prayer.

Mediation, which is rooted in the Monastic Traditions, is a form of prayer with which we tend to pray using words. A friend of mine and a former Benedictine monk once told me that he never prays without a text. It might be a passage of Scripture but it might also be a passage from a book that he happens to be reading. However, whatever the text might be, we begin by reading a passage with the question in our mind; what is it that God might be saying to me, at this moment through these words?' In doing so, we pray not only with our thoughts, but also with our feelings, emotions, memory and our imagination. All these faculties have been given to us by God and so it is appropriate that we use all these faculties in listening to God. An excellent example of this form of prayer is Lectio Divina.

Another form of meditation is imaginative contemplation also known as Gospel Contemplation which was developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola. St. Ignatius encouraged his companions to read a passage of a Gospel and then to imagine that they are present in the scene. He suggested that they engage all their senses; sight, touch, smell, hearing and taste in their prayer so as to become completely immersed in the scene and engaged in listening to the Lord.

The Catechism teaches us that:

Meditation is above all a quest; the mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking. The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain. We are usually helped by books, and Christians do not want for them: The Sacred Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts of the day or season, writings of the spiritual fathers, works of spirituality, the great book of creation, and that of history the page on which the "today" of God is written. (CCC 2705)

There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters. ... But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus. (CCC 2707)

Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. ... Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *Lectio Divina* ... This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him. (CCC2708)

For your Reflection

- A. Choose a Gospel passage: Read through it a couple of times and then spend a little time imagining that you are present in the Gospel Scene. Try to use all your senses so for example imagine the different smells, such as the scents of the plants and flowers. Feel the heat or the cold; Look at Jesus, listen to Jesus and observe him.
- B. Take another Gospel passage, and this time as you read through it try to hear what God might be saying to you. This is the *Lectio* (Reading) in *Lectio Divina*.

Contemplative Prayer

At its simplest Contemplative prayer is a form of praying without words. According to the Catechism, St. Teresa speaks of Contemplative prayer as being "nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us." (CCC2709)

She says that Contemplative prayer seeks him "whom my soul loves," that is Jesus, and through Jesus, the Father. In this inner prayer we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself.

The essential context of Contemplative Prayer is to be found in the fundamental relationship of our lives, that is, the relationship that we as creatures share with God, our creator. However, before most people these days even begin to reflect on this relationship they need to get in touch with themselves first. Unfortunately, in the world in which we live today, so many people are alienated from themselves. And yet before we can fully engage in a relationship with another we need to have a full relationship with ourselves. To use a cliché, we need to be comfortable in our own skin.

In Romans 5, St Paul teaches, *“Therefore, now that we have been justified through faith, let us continue at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have been allowed to enter the sphere of God’s grace, where we now stand. Let us exult in the hope that is to be ours...because God’s love has flooded our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit, he has given us.”*

He is teaching us that at the heart of our Christian faith is the sending of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, our faith is a living faith precisely because the Holy Spirit dwells within us. At the heart of Christian contemplative prayer is the desire to allow God’s mysterious and silent presence within us to become the reality of our lives that gives meaning, shape, and purpose to everything that we do, and to everything we are.

Therefore, firstly in learning to contemplate we need to learn to pay attention to ourselves. We must become fully aware of who we are as one made created by God who is a loving Father.

In contemplation we do not seek to think about God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit, rather we seek to be with God, and to experience him as the ground of our being.

Learning to be Silent

Contemplative prayer is not the time for words. Our words are wholly ineffective when we come to enter into this deep and mysterious communion with God, whose own ‘Word’ dwells within us.

It is in a deep and creative silence that we come to meet God in a way that transcends all our powers of intellect and language.

Our attempt to achieve this silence may be difficult. It will almost certainly be a prolonged attempt. It is much more than a question of keeping our tongues still; rather it is about achieving a state of alert stillness in mind and heart.

We come to experience ourselves, at the same time, both totally relaxed and totally alert. This is the stillness of totally awakened concentration.

Although we have said that Contemplative prayer is not about words, it is often to help us as we begin a period of contemplative prayer to use a “Mantra.” We may find it helpful to use a mantra throughout our period of prayer.

MANTRA

In the sixth Century, the great spiritual writer, John Cassian, suggested that in order to become still in prayer that we take a single short verse, which we repeat over and over again. He based his teaching on the words of Jesus found in Matthew 6: 7-8, in which Jesus says, we should not babble as other people babble. Prayer, he says, is not a matter of talking to God; rather, it is about listening to and being with God. If we wish to listen to God and to be with him, we must become quiet.

Choosing one's Mantra is important. It should be a word 'hallowed' over the centuries. Perhaps the best-known mantra in Christian meditation is '*Maranatha*' from the Aramaic meaning '*Come Lord, come Lord Jesus.*' It is used by St. Paul at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, and St. John uses it at the end of the Book of Revelations. Other possibilities are, Abba, and the name of Jesus.

In order that the Mantra is effective, we have to be faithful and persistent. As we persevere in praying with a mantra, the mantra begins to sound, not so much in our head but rather in our hearts. In other words, it becomes rooted in the depth of our being.

In starting to pray with a mantra we have three primary aims,

1. To say the Mantra for the full duration of the period of prayer. This will normally take time to achieve and requires patience. We cannot force anything to happen but we must say our mantra without any haste or expectation.
2. To say the mantra throughout the period of prayer without interruption while staying calm in face of all distractions.
3. To say the Mantra throughout the period of prayer quite free of all distractions. The surface areas of our mind are now in tune with the deep peacefulness at the core of our being. At this point we have passed beyond thought, imagination and all images. We simply rest in the presence of God dwelling within us.

In this we respond to Jesus who calls us to leave all things and follow Him. (Lk 9:23)

These stages cannot be forced and will come about in their own time. As we persevere we enter ever more deeply into relationship with the Spirit who is love, dwelling in our hearts, enlightening us and vitalizing us.

Contemplation summons us to open our hearts to this Spirit, paying attention this presence within us.

In doing so we pay attention to our own true nature with Christ, we become fully ourselves, and in doing so we enter the fullness of the life Jesus won for us. We see ourselves as we are.

Praying in this manner becomes a journey of self-discovery and of self-affirmation. Through prayer we come to the realization of intimate union with God.

In this prayer we find ourselves living in the present moment, not focus on the past or the future, but the here and the now.

An Exercise in Contemplative Prayer

1. Spend some time choosing a mantra. It should be a word or a phrase that has some significance for you

2. Decide of the length of time for a period of prayer. If this is new maybe just 10 minutes. Acknowledge that you have come into God's presence and begin your prayer.
3. After you finish your prayer, finish it in a formal way, for example by praying the Our Father. Reflect back on your experience.

A Metaphor to reflect back on the various Forms of Prayer

St. Theresa of Avila offers us a simple metaphor to bring together the different types of prayer that we have been reflecting on: Vocal Prayer: Meditative prayer and Contemplative Prayer.

St. Teresa of Avila uses the metaphor of bringing water to a garden to represent the relationship between grace, human effort, and gift of contemplative prayer.

- A. First Water:** drawing the water up from a well by the use of a bucket. In this image we find ourselves praying with words aloud. The prayer is effective just as drawing water from a well will enable us to water the garden. However, as an active form of prayer it is labour intensive and takes effort.
- B. Second Water:** use of a water wheel and aqueduct. This form of watering a garden is less labour intensive. It is used by St. Theresa as a metaphor for meditation. Although this prayer is more passive than vocal prayer it still requires a certain amount of effort, whether it is in reading the texts or engaging the imagination.
- C. Third Water:** effluence from a river or stream so that one no longer labours to transport the water to the garden. This metaphor brings us to contemplation using a mantra. This form of prayer demands little labour from the person praying although she needs to remain alert and centred on her mantra. It is a passive prayer which requires that we are simply open to God who dwells within us.
- D. Fourth Water:** gentle and abundant rainfall. The water for the garden is simply received without any effort. This metaphor refers to prayer, which goes beyond the intellect, the imagination and every emotion. Here is where the person praying is simply and totally in union with God. It is totally passive for she is totally at one with God.

Finally remember, when it comes to praying there is no right or wrong. Pray in a way that is relevant to your life and your relationship with God today.

Also, although you may find that your prayer is usually of a contemplative form, they will be times when you find yourselves praying a vocal prayer, such as the rosary or a meditative prayer such as the *Lectio in Lectio Divina*.