

PRAYER - a mystery, a gift of God

Prayer is a mystery and a precious gift. It is a deeply intimate, unique experience of the heart and mind and therefore difficult to describe. Words are often inadequate, although volumes have been written on the subject.

Desire for prayer seems to be the most important part and it is this burning desire that will lead each one on their own unique prayer journey, tentatively following in the footsteps of the saints and mystics.

St Augustine describes prayer as "Raising the heart and mind to God". This God, who is 'in all things', longs for us to search and find Him. As we start to pray, we begin to acknowledge God's presence, whether consciously aware of that presence or not and we start relaxing in the knowledge of His love for us.

Prayer is a personal response to God's presence.

We believe that God desires to reveal His deep love for us, to speak to our hearts. The emphasis is on the relationship. Jesus used to go off into the hills or to a lonely place to be with His Father. So we need to find depth and silence and to create a "sacred space". Sadly, we often choose to fill our prayer time with words, avoiding the silence. This may be from fear, anxiety, ignorance, or simply a lack of trust that He really wants to communicate personally with us.

God alone is the source of prayer and we can only try to follow some basic suggestions.

- 1) Co-operate by trying to be open, generous and sensitive to meeting Him – in whatever way he chooses.
- 2) Wait in expectation, vulnerable, with nothing to offer but yourself, waiting for Him to touch your heart. The attitude is that of Mary's "let it be done unto me according to Thy will".
- 3) Respond in your own personal way, expressing yourself through feelings and intellect. Speak directly to Him. The most important thing about the time of prayer is being there - spending time in God's presence, in whatever way is most appropriate.

Preparation.

Some form of preparation for the prayer time is helpful and the following is suggested.

TIME AND PLACE

Decide when and where to pray. Choose a place where you'll be undisturbed and free to express yourself. Icons, a lighted candle, a few flowers can be helpful in marking this as your 'holy' place.

MATERIAL FOR PRAYER

Choose a passage from Scripture, some prose or poetry, a picture or symbol as a wellspring for your prayer. Use something that appeals to you and suits your present need.

POSTURE.

You may like to experiment with various postures until you find one that is most helpful and appropriate. This may vary from day to day, but cramped muscles can cause unnecessary distractions. So try to ensure that your spine is supported. Most people prefer sitting on a chair with feet flat on the floor or propped on a stool, your hands resting palms up, on your lap. Try to relax your shoulders, mouth and jaw and hold your head in balance. Close your eyes or fix them on the lighted candle or some point in front of you.

YOUR PRESENCE.

Prayer is mostly about becoming still in mind and body and listening. The psalmist says, " Be still and know that I am God". Acknowledge distractions such as outside noises and then put them aside. Become aware, too, of what you feel in your body. At this stage, become aware of emotions, feelings and thoughts that are demanding attention. Acknowledge the feelings; breathe deeply and gently. Breathe in the peace of God and let go of the feelings, tensions and worries as you breathe out. Relax, opening your heart and mind to God.

PRAYER

GRACE

Ignatius suggests starting by asking God for the grace that the prayer may be directed purely to the praise, reverence and service of God – "for His greater glory". The deep desires of your heart are God-given and, as you become quiet, you will probably become aware of your own need for a particular grace for which you can pray.

PRAYER MATERIAL.

When you are ready, go to the prayer material you have chosen and invite the Lord to speak to you. "Speak Lord, your servant is listening".

MEDITATION.

Any scripture or inspirational text may be meditated. Read it slowly, pondering as Mary did, tasting each word and allowing the Holy Spirit to permeate the layers within your heart. When you experience a reaction, whether attracted or repelled, then stay with the word or phrase, listening to what it is saying to you and allowing it to touch your heart. Stay with the word or phrase until you feel satisfied - perhaps for the entire prayer period.

CONTEMPLATION.

In Ignatian terms, contemplation, involves the imagination. It means entering into a scene with Jesus from a Gospel story, and becoming personally present in whatever way seems right for you. Observe the characters, notice the movements and allow yourself to interact with those in the scene. Allow it to unfold and follow its own dynamic, like watching a movie. This is a personal encounter. When you have reached a sense of completion, enter into dialogue or conversation with Jesus. Ignatius calls this the Colloquy.

DIALOGUE/COLLOQUY.

The dialogue that stems from the encounter with God is a most important part of our prayer. Talk to God about the experience. You may choose to be with Jesus, or the Father, or Mary. Speak about your needs, fears, pain, hopes and dreams – “as one friend to another”. Pour out your heart. The prayer ends with thanksgiving and can be expressed in a concrete way - a letter, poem, drawing, dance or a song.

REFLECTION/REVIEW OF PRAYER

At this stage, a short break, to gain perspective, is useful, followed by time in which to review or reflect on your prayer.

First recall the experience and simply note the facts as they happened without interpretation. Notice as many details as you can: impressions, moods, emotions, colours, and atmosphere. Then, reflect on what was happening. These three questions may help your reflection:

1. What did God seem like during the prayer?
2. How did you respond to Him?
3. Did you sense some kind of invitation in the encounter?

JOURNALING

Write down the experience as it happened and the fruit of your reflection. It's useful to record your experience so that you can return to it or refer to it at another time.

IN CONCLUSION

These notes are intended to help you - to begin, or to continue - on your prayer journey. We pray that Our Lord and His mother will be your guide.

