

How to pray

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A.C.T.S. No. 1767 (1983)

We regularly talk with people we know. What about talking with God? In this pamphlet Father James Tough gives some ideas that should help us communicate with God.

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29th September 1982.

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Throughout the world today, there appears to be an increasing attraction to prayer, for a deeper communication with God, but the yearning halts there because many do not know how to go about it or stumble along in a hazy, confused state of mind. Somehow or other, they do not seem to realize that we can communicate with God - for that is prayer - in many different ways: a wish, a desire, a word whether spoken or not, a shrug of the shoulders, a sigh, for God knows about every thought or desire we have.

When quite young, St Peter Julian Eymard asked his sister how to pray, but after she had told him, he seemed unimpressed when he said, "Oh, is that all!" Possessed with gospel, childlike simplicity he had always found it easy to talk with God, especially with God in the Blessed Sacrament. After all, "Jesus is there" he said, and what could be easier than to talk with the One Who lived and died for him. Unfortunately, most of us do not have that facility and really have to work at it because prayer often is not as simple as it seems to be. It might sound easy to communicate with the One Who loves us, but for many reasons it is not as easy as it appears to be, but it is good to know this because we might think that mental prayer is not for us.

First of all, we must recognize that union with God means union with Jesus Christ, and because of this, we have to travel with Him through our daily Calvaries before we arrive at His Resurrection as we seek Him present despite His absence in worldliness and secularism. Nevertheless, our love directs and inspires us to do anything in order to reach God, our "ALL" so that we might have deeper life in Him.

The biggest barrier we have to hurdle is our selfishness when we focus our attention on ourselves instead of on Him. and this is contrary to what our Lord expects of us when He told us: "If anyone wants to be a follower of Mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for My sake will find it." (Matt. 16, 24) We would be fooling ourselves if we thought that there is some kind of short cut, even in this modern instant tea, instant coffee age.

It is vital to begin by being convinced that God knows the depth of our sincerity in our desires which, in themselves, are a kind of prayer, for moved by the Holy Spirit we cry out: "I want to see God" even though we "do not know how to pray as we ought." (see James 4: 3&5 and Rom. 8: 26-27) But even as we grope about, we have been promised that "the Spirit will help us in our weakness, interceding for us with sighs too deep for words." (Rom. 8, 26)

This implies that we believe in our ability to pray, and next, that we are communicating with Someone Who is not a million kilometres away but Who is literally present, not only around us but in us, closer to us than we are to ourselves. Then, in our daily life, we can identify with the Psalmist who said many years

ago: "I will walk in the Presence of the Lord in the land of the living." (Ps. 114 (116)) He went on to say: "Where can I go from Your Spirit, or where can I flee from Your face? If I climb the heavens, You are there. If I lie in the grave, You are there . . . You created my soul, my body held no secret from You when I was being fashioned in secret . . . Your eyes saw all my actions . . . O search me, God, and know my heart." (Ps 138 (139))

Already united with God by sanctifying grace, we deepen this union with a few simple words in order to further our recognition of Him present by acknowledging Him as we say "My God, I love You . . . please help me." We know very well that He loves us and wants to help, wants us to be more closely united with Him, but He needs our openness to Him. Already He has assured us that "I have loved you with an ever-lasting love, and now in mercy I have drawn you to Myself." (Jer. 31: 3) for we understand clearly that it is not so much that we have chosen Him but that He has chosen us so that we might take Him into the world around us.

These few remarks might help us see that our prayer must have some basic elements, some of which are faith in the actual Presence of God, sincerity in wanting Him, constant persevering efforts to reach Him in or outside of us, seeking Him and not ourselves, His Will and not our own.

Communication with God

Needless to say, we know that we cannot describe God as He is in Himself but that we know Him only within the limitations of human language. Nevertheless, He can be known and reached by love, and this love of the intangible God comes from the revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ Who said, "I bless You Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children . . . Everything has been entrusted to Me by My Father; and no-one knows the Son except the Father, just as no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." (Matt. 11: 25-27)

But in knowing God, each one of us is different by reason of his individual temperament, personal graces and sacrifices and other considerations, so what attracts one person might not attract another, but whatever the attraction might be, it comes from God Himself Who leads us on His way if we allow Him to do so. Lots of things help us to get close to Him, like music or poetry or the beauty of nature or the many joys or sufferings we experience in everyday life.

When it comes to the formal side of prayer, we might escape the ravages of discouragement and frustration that sometimes hit us when we hear that we should pray this way or that way, once we are aware that the different schools of spirituality with their forms of prayer are the contributions of some saint whose personal approach to prayer has been set down in a particular manner. If one form attracts and helps us, we use it, but if it does not we look elsewhere, otherwise we might feel depressed imagining that there is something wrong with us because we cannot pray like Saint So-and-So. This does not mean that we flit about like a bee, but as time goes on we benefit by the ways that we know help us.

The important thing is that God knows what we are looking for, even if we do not seem to be too clear about it. What matters is that, even though we might not express it as beautifully, we have the mind of the Psalmist who said, "Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for You, my God. My soul is thirsting for God, the God of my life. When can I enter and see the face of God . . ." (Ps. 41 (42)) And our Lord encouraged and told us that in our faith and trust in Him we should seek and we shall find, knock and the door will be opened to us. (Mat. 7, 7)

We are all accustomed to vocal prayer, as for example in the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Psalms, in which we express some formula already composed **outside** of us, but it is different in mental prayer where we **begin** the process in our mind. We have a "meaning" and whether we express it or not does not matter, for even though we speak out our meaning, this does not change our prayer into a vocal one. The important thing is that we have something to say even though we might feel incapable of saying it so that, for all practical purposes, we can say that if prayer starts in our mind it is mental prayer. But even here,

the essential part is not the thinking itself but the acts we make when we raise our heart to God. The reflections are there so that we can produce these acts, such as acts of adoration or sorrow and many other similar affective movements of our will. Sadly, many people pray like this yet they do not know they are practising mental prayer, and for this reason become discouraged.

When someone takes on the practice of mental prayer he should understand that the purpose of thinking is to educate and train his mind for prayer, to store up a background knowledge and form a mentality to make him God-conscious so that in this way he knows about God in human terms and he tries to see God in all things and all things in God and His Divine Providence. Normally, listening and learning through the spoken or written word are the sources of knowledge we gain, but there are many other ways this can be acquired. What is important is that we can ". . . set ourselves to know the Lord. That He will come to us is as certain as the dawn, His judgement will rise like the light. He will come to us as showers come, like spring rains watering the earth." (Hos. 5, 15b)

Because of this on-going process we reach a certain facility, and then, in the normal course of events we try to find some system that suits us individually. For example the method used by St Peter Julian was that of the four ends of sacrifice by which he directed his prayer in an attitude of adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and petition.

Difficulties

Rest assured, we will all have difficulties, some more, some less even though we want to speak with someone we love. Many people protest that they are in the "more" category and say "I can't meditate", but that is not true because everybody meditates, i.e., thinks things over throughout the day, whether the subject is that of the Blessed Trinity or what they will be having for dinner that evening.

In this thinking process, we turn things over in our mind, make comparisons, draw conclusions, and at times, perform all kinds of mental gymnastics, but to meditate is not necessarily to pray, and vice versa, to pray is not necessarily to think, i.e. meditate. The chief function of the thinking is to open the door that leads on to affective prayer, the raising up of our heart to God in or around us, so that His Will and ours might become one as we share our love, our apprehensions, our joys, our sorrows with Him.

Unfortunately, sometimes, without necessarily being aware of it, our reflections focus on ourselves and this usually makes us feel miserable, but this is easily remedied when we direct our will, our aspirations and hopes to God in or around us. Whether we express these thoughts or not does not make the least difference because words do not affect our mental prayer, and in any event, God knows what we are thinking or wanting.

We should not slip into the error that vocal prayer is just saying words and that mental prayer must never be vocal because first of all, there is no prayer at all when the mind is completely absent, and secondly, even in the highest form of contemplation words might slip out without our even noticing them.

Undoubtedly, most of us have felt that no matter how hard we try, we do not seem to advance much, but this difficulty might be overcome, or at least lessened, once we know that this is quite normal. The reason for this is that the closer we come to God the further away He seems to be, and the nearer we approach Christ the Light the less we seem to see, one of the paradoxes of the spiritual life, so unless we know about it we can become discouraged. However, once we are aware of this, we can move steadily along the path of faith and trust where the utter simplicity of God affects the simplicity of our prayer and moves into the prayer of acquired contemplation.

Acquired Contemplation.

When many good people hear the word "contemplation" they think "this is not for me; I'm just an ordinary everyday Catholic," and in thinking this way they are light-years away from the truth that God wants all of us to pray this way and gives us the grace to do so.

Probably, one of the reasons for this feeling is that, at this stage, we feel completely helpless because deep within us there is a kind of awareness and yearning in our heart for God, but we must simply remain in His Presence, even though we might experience no tangible appreciation of His Presence. It is an important period in our life of prayer and many make mistakes by trying to force the issue, trying to "do something", forcing the "thinking" because they imagine that if they are not doing this something or thinking, then they are not praying. The consequence of this is that the harder they try, the less they achieve, the result being that they become severely discouraged and give up their attempts at mental prayer, failing to realize that God has His part to play in their efforts to reach Him. All He wants now is that we should leave ourselves in His care, humbly and perseveringly and trustingly. In this frantic day and age of "doing things" and intellectualizing everything it can be a real problem.

Clearly, this prayer differs from meditative prayer where the mind actively does the work to produce affective acts, but contemplative prayer is more passive, something like two lovers who are just content to be in each other's company without uttering a word. Or, it is something like an artist who has done all his active work on his canvas, then stands back and sees his inner vision beyond the canvas, the reality behind the sign.

For anyone who wants to be always doing and thinking, the listening process is incomprehensible, nevertheless, our inner vision and listening must go far beyond the external signs of words, thoughts and images and seek the reality behind them, but without being able to grasp them or describe them in such a way that appeals to the senses. One of the masters of prayer, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* expressed it this way: "He may well be loved, but never thought. By love He may be begotten and holden; but by thought, never." (Ch 6) Perhaps the story of the old man in the little church of St John Vianney sums it up when he said to the saint: "He looks at me and I look at Him."

In this unspoken, deep communication with God, one of calmness and peace, there might or might not be any experienced warmth of His love which we far too often expect to have, but we "know" God and not merely know about Him, the knowledge of love, of the scriptural "prayer of the heart", the experience of which remains with us. Many names have been given to this state: prayer of recollection, of loving attention, of silence, of simplicity, of repose, of the simple Presence of God, prayer of the heart.

It is in this way that contemplative prayer goes beyond words as in vocal prayer and beyond thoughts and considerations as in meditative prayer and reaches the Great Reality behind them. But whatever the form of prayer might be, God knows what we want and He knows the depth of our sincerity so that once our life is open to Him we come under the influence of the Holy Spirit with His action and His gifts.

God, as it were, takes over as we seem to have nothing but the sense of His absence rather than that of His Presence because He wants to be loved, not only primarily but for Himself, and this is a thorough test of the purity of our desires. Both psychologically as well as spiritually we are at a stage where we pass from loving Him because we need Him to the state where we need Him because we love Him.

Forgetting our self interest we try to love Him entirely for Himself and not for His consolations, even though there will be normally a deep sense of inner peace; we love Him because He is Who He is, Infinite Love. Never the One to be outdone in generosity, He "touches" our heart and we experience an inexpressible happiness. This particular state is well expressed, by the author of the *"Cloud of Unknowing"* in which he writes: "Be quite sure that you will never have the unclouded vision of God here in this life, but you may have the awareness of Him if He is willing by His grace to give it to you. So lift up your love to that cloud, or more accurately, let God draw up your love to that cloud and strive by His grace to forget all else." (Ch. 9)

Sometimes unwittingly we engage in a fair amount of self deception, so we need a solid gauge of our sincerity which is made evident by examining our daily life to see whether we want what God wants or what we want when it suits us. Without this surrender to His Will there can be no true interior peace

because it makes no sense when we tell Him we love Him and then act against His expressed Will in the authority which He established precisely so that we might know that what we are doing is what He wants. If we act against it by preferring our own judgement and pursuits then this makes of prayer a make-believe world of thoughts in self-centred intellectual gymnastics as we play our games. There cannot be any fruitful union with the One we implicitly reject as we go on the way we prefer in preference to the way He directs. These gymnastics can easily be mistaken for prayer and eventually lead to disillusionment.

Preparation

As in any state of life, we have to prepare what we are going to talk about with God in the time set apart for formal prayer because He expects this of us, and in normal circumstances, He does not infuse knowledge into us. The remote store of communication is had by our reading and listening, a necessary background for prayer, but then we try to work on our special subject. Whether or not He wants us to dwell on this subject when we approach Him is His prerogative, for sometimes we find that, after having prepared a topic, we are dealing with something that He wants to discuss with us, but unless we know about this, we might consider this a distraction.

How do we go about it; what do we do? Where do we get the subject matter? There are dozens of different ways, but the usual way is to read the scriptures or the psalms or a book on meditations, but instead of just reading, we talk the matter over with God as we read a few lines and then pause and communicate with Him. Meditative reading might be necessary especially when our mind dries up and we start to become impatient. Moreover, this way of going about things can develop into a respectful familiarity with God in any matter, and we can easily continue it throughout the day when we go to work or go shopping or engage in some relaxation because He is always with us just waiting for us to contact Him.

When we meet friends we talk about all kinds of trivialities, and it is the same with God when we can talk about all the little things that He wills or permits to happen to us in our daily joys and crosses. This could be important because we might have been led to believe that He is interested only in ponderous subjects, so we freeze in our openness to Him and become artificial. The last thing that God wants from us is artificiality. It is so easy to forget that in His Divine Providence, little things are big enough to be his means of fashioning us to the image of His Son, so if He does not spurn them, neither should we.

He is our Father and our Friend, not a tyrant who is always demanding some big thing from us. The truth is that nothing escapes His attention, yet we seem to be somewhat afraid - and at times antagonistic - imagining that such intimacy will debase or lessen our appreciation of His greatness. But He, our Father, wants us to be as little children, His children, and children do not lose respect for their parents when they bring them their trivial concerns which sometimes seem mountainous to them.

How, When, Where To Pray

Over the past few years, many different ways have been proposed as the best way, but we are all different, so we pray in whatever manner helps us best to communicate with God without strain whether it be by kneeling, sitting, walking, standing on our head, the reason being that we are a whole, where body and mind work together. In the prayer of contemplation, which requires relaxation, a little experimentation will teach us which position is best, or whether we should keep our eyes fixed on some object, or closed, which is preferable because when the eyes wander, as they will, normally so does the thought and our attentiveness is interrupted.

In meditative prayer, we can pray anywhere at any time in simple fashion by talking with God in or around us, but in formal prayer we need to be alone and quiet. Being alone and quiet is even more necessary in contemplative prayer so that we might more easily give up our whole self and attention to God and follow the example of our Lord Who said, "When you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut the door, pray to your Father Who is in that secret place." (Matt 6, 6) We imitate our

Divine Model as He "would always go off to some place where He could be alone and pray." (Luke 5, 16) It is far better not to be with others in the same room because even the consciousness of their presence, not to mention their idiosyncrasies, can be a psychologically powerful distraction and hindrance to complete relaxation, so the place of prayer can be of immense help in our prayer.

When he was a child, St Eymard's sister found him perched by the tabernacle in the local church and when she asked him what on earth he was doing there, he answered, "Oh, I can listen better to Jesus here." Ideally, the best place objectively is with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, the means He used to be totally with us as both God and man, and in this way, like the Mother of God Who gave Him to us, we can experience the unique dynamic intimacy of God made flesh, Jesus our life and heavenly Food.

The tabernacle is a marvellous focusing point, but even better is the Blessed Sacrament exposed on our altars where it is much easier to talk with Jesus than to go back in time nearly two thousand years, or to His throne in heaven. It takes little trouble to identify with the Psalmist who poured out the ache in his heart when he wrote, "O God, You are my God, for You I long, for You my soul is thirsting. My body pines for You like a dry weary land without water. So I gaze on You in the sanctuary to see Your strength and Your glory . . ." (Ps 62 (63))

Finding time for formal prayer is usually the difficulty most people have to contend with, and furthermore, we should also take into consideration our physical make-up because different people prayer better at different times. A good lead into this is the practice of our Lord because we know that "in the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there." (Mk. 1, 35) Needless to say, there would be no distractions from people at that early hour. The important thing is not to put it off and fall into the trap of saying "I can't fit it in" instead of following the old adage "where there's a will, there's a way."

That adage applies also to the length of time we spend in prayer, for many, undergoing the normal difficulties of prayer try out the excuse "I don't have time; I'm too tired; I need my rest." In meditative prayer we can communicate with God reasonably well in half an hour, but in contemplative prayer we need an hour or so - without going to mathematics - if we want to rest in God and unwind from the active and distracting life we might have to lead, sometimes identifying activity with zeal. If our activity deprives us of our prayer, then we should re-examine our life, as our Lord made clear to one of His saints when he told her "I want you, not what you do."

We need the time to unload our imagination and calm down our inner self, and this is not always easy because of our daily preoccupations, nevertheless, it is necessary, as the Author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* points out: "Work hard at it, therefore, and with all speed; hammer away at this cloud of unknowing - and take your rest later! It is hard work and make no mistake for the would-be contemplative; very hard work indeed, unless it is made easier by a special grace of God, or by the fact that we have become used to it over a long period." (Ch 34)

Distractions

Very few people can pray without distractions, but this is quite normal even though we would love to be without them, forgetting that we have to deal with practical affairs throughout the day which can intrude into our communication with God.

Some distractions take us away from our thought, but there are others which are merely the harmless wandering of our imagination while our mind to all intents and purposes is idle and empty, yet our will, our desire is still fixed on God. Many people feel upset that they cannot keep their mind on their subject and become dissatisfied, and better still (although they think it is "worse still") humbled, even though their prayer is just as good although it does not make them "feel good". All this does is to give us a practical demonstration that we are human beings, so provided the dissatisfaction does not bring on discouragement but deepens in us the true knowledge of ourselves, then all is well. We can rest assured that God does not worry about such distractions because He sees our intention.

Probably our worry comes from imagining that thinking is praying, so that when we think well we conclude that we have prayed well, very likely inflating our ego, whereas some other person might slink away like a wet cat after battling with distractions, or trying to keep awake and making occasional apologies to God. Such a prayer can be very efficacious as it roots us more firmly in humility and not in pride or despondency, and again, these distractions might be the means God uses to get us to think about what He wants us to consider and not dwell on our pet subject in which we delight. Delights are no criterion of the value of our prayer but might be a criterion of the good state of our health.

Because it is of the highest importance, it bears repeating that in meditative prayer we have been actively engaged in working solidly on our thoughts and affections during which time we usually talk **to** rather than **with** God, but things change a good deal as time and perseverance usher us into the advanced stage when we must be more passive when the paradox of prayer, as well as of the spiritual life becomes more evident.

Temperaments differ, of course, but someone who has the wrong idea that unless he is thinking and doing something - even trying all kinds of gimmicks - he is not praying, falls into the trap which is as old as the hills. "I can't think; I'm getting nowhere; I'm getting nothing out of prayer; it's a waste of time; what's the use etc., etc." are some of the discouraging thoughts that try our perseverance and our faith, for it is a matter of both. The sad truth is that many who reach this stage of prayer give it up and no longer try to get closer to God in contemplative prayer.

Instead of bemoaning the fact that we are human beings, once we know that this is a positive step along the path of prayer then we can offer up to God present our desires, even though He knows all about them, but without any sense of despondency. If He wants it that way, who are we to wish otherwise? The encouraging aspect is that the understanding of our human weakness and limitations can bring deep interior peace as we leave ourselves in the arms of the One Who loves us.

When we follow this acceptance we follow in the "kenosis", the self-emptying of our Lord, for no matter what our aspirations might be, the only way we can reach God is to come down in our self-estimation; we must decrease in order that He might increase. The higher we want to go, the lower we will have to go and put ourselves at the disposition of the Holy Spirit, quite a difficult proposition in the egocentric world in which we live.

The humility coming from true knowledge of ourselves does not produce discouragement but the peace that comes from God and an inexpressible joy because we know that we have abandoned ourselves into the care of Infinite Love. During this apparently sterile period of mental frigidity and hardness, it is a mistake to return to the A.B.C. of prayer, once again under the false impression that we must be thinking and doing, otherwise we are not praying.

With the inner hunger and thirst for God gnawing within us, we have to leave ourselves completely at His disposal as He holds the reins guiding us along the path of faith and not of feeling. In this way, our prayer is the prayer of inner yearning, happy to be in either light or darkness because we know that He knows and loves us, just as He wants and knows that we love Him, and that He wants us to persevere in our search for Him and will give us the grace to continue this search.

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