



HOW

to



PRAY

Strategies That Work

Fr. Thomas Connery

Introduction

Wanting to pray better is the first step in praying better. Prayer is a lot like when I first got my iPhone. I looked for directions, and there were none. I thought this was odd; how am I supposed to learn how to do this? You learn by doing. You learn to pray by praying. Where you are deficient, you ask for help, knowing that there is always room to grow.

Approach this booklet in humility, and make those words of the apostles yours: "Lord, teach us to pray."

If you could have been present at any of the scenes from the life of Christ, which one would you choose? A long list probably comes to mind, but I would have liked to have been present when Jesus spent the night in prayer.

At first glance that may not seem so special. Oh, but it is. Think about it: What did Jesus do all night? How did he stay awake? What did he pray about? Did he get restless? What was his posture like? Did he kneel the whole time? Lie prostrate? Get tired and doze off?

His prayer life had to be powerful, and I am not the only one to think so. His apostles noticed and asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). They never asked him how to cure the sick, walk on water or multiply food. Nor did they ask him to teach them how to preach. Prayer was the one thing they asked him to teach. They noticed something was different when Jesus prayed, and they wanted that power and gift.

I want to pray better and probably you do too. I don't pretend to be an expert, but in this little booklet, I offer some tips and guidelines as a help to you. In prayer we are never “there.” We keep learning and growing. Approach this booklet in humility, and make those words of the apostles yours: “Lord, teach us to pray.” For it is only by God's grace that we can pray at all. Together may we grow in this gift and devotion. ●

Getting Started

Not to brag in any way, but prayer has never been a problem for me. Of course, I struggle with the usual ailments of the prayer life—dryness, distraction and sometimes outright boredom. Often I doze off. (Ouch! It hurts having to admit that!) What I mean is that I have never really struggled with the concept of prayer. I have no problem believing that we can communicate with the Divine, the creator of this magnificent universe, and that this God of ours delights in our feeble words. In fact, God looks forward to our prayers; he wants to communicate with us. That is utterly amazing when you think about it.

I didn't grow up in a particularly overly religious household. Mom and Dad were both believers, but there wasn't a whole lot of praying going on. We went to Sunday Mass, but back then, so did everybody else. It was a habit ingrained in all of us. My dad led grace before meals—nothing fancy, just the standard, “Bless us, O Lord...” and rather quickly at that (he didn't want the food to get cold). Mom made sure we said our bedtime prayers. When we were young, she would lead us, but as we got older, we were on our own.

My mom had her torn, aged prayer cards, particularly to St. Jude. I would see her sitting on the couch praying her prayers, eyes closed since she knew the words quite well. I knew better than to disturb her. By observing her I could tell that prayer was important and that God does pay attention to our words.

One of my own earliest experiences of praying intensely and intentionally was at Mass, right after Holy Communion. Many may recall the practice of returning to your place, kneeling down and covering one's face with your hands as you spent time talking to God. I knew no matter how restless I was, this was no time to waste. Those few minutes were to be spent talking to God, about anything and everything: family, school, my crush on a girl in my class and my hopes of being a baseball player. For many years, even in college and seminary, I would make sacred the time after Communion, even remaining behind after Mass was over.

I had a checklist of people and things for which I needed to pray. Each intention received a Hail Mary. I remember going on a weekend retreat while in grade school, and the retreat master came looking for me. I was late for lunch. Me, late for a meal? That never happens, so it had to be something important.

I was busy reciting Hail Marys at the grotto. I had a big list and each needed a prayer. I may not continue that practice today, but I still pray for my special intentions. Not that I was any more spiritual than other kids, but I was just convinced that prayer works. I still am.

Over the years my prayer style has changed. I am not so apt to offer a Hail Mary for each intention, though I still pray my daily rosary. Now and again, I will offer a Hail Mary for a particular need, but my prayer life has evolved. As a priest I recite daily the breviary—that is, the official prayer of the Church that priests are required to say.

The Bible has become a rich source of prayer material for me. I relish reading a passage, pondering it and letting it speak to me. Rather than do all the talking, I now allow God to speak to me. My best prayer time is when I do nothing at all, just sitting still, saying nothing, merely being aware of God's presence. I have found these moments to be the most simple and yet most profound.

So what is your prayer life like? Do you have one? What are your earliest memories of praying, and do you still continue any of them today? Know that

there is no one way or right way to pray. You pray as you can, not as you ought. Prayer is first and foremost seeking God, desiring to be in his presence, a longing for union with him.

The late Bishop Dorsey of Orlando, Florida, used to tell a story about one of his seminary professors, his Scripture teacher. Being a Scripture teacher is no easy task, demanding as it does a wealth of knowledge of languages: Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, French and German. This incredibly intelligent priest kept to the prayer style he had learned as a child, praying from a book containing many of the prayers he learned on his mother's knee. Yes, he loved God's Word in Scripture, but for his devotional time, he would return to the prayers of his childhood. I am sure God was pleased.

Prayer can be very simple. What is needed is the desire to communicate and be with God. Your choosing to read this booklet indicates that you have that desire. If you can glean just one helpful idea from this booklet for your prayer life, it will all be worth it. Small steps lead to great conquests. So not only read this booklet, but make sure you pray. The spirit of God will lead and guide you. ●



While Catholic devotional traditions

and practices offer many options for prayer, we often struggle to make prayer a vital part of our daily lives, not just an occasional event. Fr. Thomas Connery offers some valuable—and realistic—suggestions based on his own effort to develop a fruitful practice of prayer. ●



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