

## Sanctity Series: Navigating the Spiritual Life

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### Growing in Prayer

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#### I. Romans 8:9-11; 14-23; 26-27

"But you are not in the flesh; **you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.** Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if **Christ is in you**, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also **through his Spirit that dwells in you...**

...For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. **When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God**, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with **eager longing** for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was **subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope** that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, **groan inwardly** while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies...

Likewise **the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."**

#### II. Mechanics of prayer.

##### A. Review of the Catholic understanding of grace.

Catechism of the Catholic Church on grace.

CCC 1996 Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the **free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.**

CCC 1997 **Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life:** by Baptism the Christian participates in the grace of Christ, the Head of his Body. As an "adopted son" he can henceforth call God "Father," in union with the only Son. He receives the life of the Spirit who breathes charity into him and who forms the Church.

##### B. Prayer comes from our communion with the Blessed Trinity in the life of grace.

Catechism of the Catholic Church on life in the Blessed Trinity.

CCC 260 The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity. [See Jesus' prayer in John 17:21-23] **But even now we are called to be a dwelling for the Most Holy Trinity:** "If a man loves me", says the Lord, "he will keep my word, and my

Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him" (John 14:23)...

["Divine economy" refers not only to God's actions to bring about the world's salvation and redemption, but to *all* of God's dealings with, and interactions with, the world, including His Creation of it.]

**CCC 261 The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life.**

**CCC 2565** In the New Covenant, **prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit.** The grace of the Kingdom is "the union of the entire holy and royal Trinity . . . with the whole human spirit." (St. Gregory of Nazianzus) Thus, the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him...

C. Prayer is a gift of grace.

Catechism of the Catholic Church on prayer as a gift from God and a response from man.

**CCC 2559** ...He who humbles himself will be exalted [Lk 18:9-14]; **humility is the foundation of prayer,** Only when we humbly acknowledge that "we do not know how to pray as we ought," [Rom. 8:26] are we ready to receive freely **the gift of prayer.** [St. Augustine says:] "**Man is a beggar before God.**"

**CCC 2560** "If you knew the gift of God!" [Jesus says in Jn 4:10] The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. **Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. [St. Aug. says:] "God thirsts that we may thirst for him."**

**CCC 2567** **God calls man first.** Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet **the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response...**

III. What should prayer look like?

A. It should look like Jesus' prayer because **it is Jesus' prayer.**

**CCC 2564** Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ. It is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, **wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man.**

B. It is directed to the Father; so let His Son *Jesus* pray.

IV. Misconceptions about prayer.

A. "*What if I change God's mind?!...I don't want to change God's will! I'm sure it's better than mine.*"

"*What if God doesn't want what I want to pray for?*"

"*What I want to pray for may not be what God wants me to pray for.*"

"*God is going to have His way anyway, so why pray at all?*"

B. St. Thomas Aquinas - "Grace builds upon nature." Grace works **with** (our) nature; it builds upon it. Our Redeemer is the Word made flesh who suffered and died for us, and He is also the Word through Whom all things were made. Ergo, our Redeemer is our Creator. He knows how to fix what we broke. It is our *sinfulness* that is contrary to nature, **not** the grace that restores, heals, and elevates our nature to participate in the divine life of the Blessed Trinity.

C. Garrigou Lagrange, Thomist of the 20th cent. - "Prayer is not in opposition to the designs of Providence and does not seek to alter them, but actually co-operates in the divine governance, for when we pray we begin to wish in time what God wills for us from all eternity. When we pray, it may seem that the divine will submits to our own, whereas in reality it is our will that is uplifted and made to harmonize with the divine will." (Providence, p. 210)

## V. Difficulties in prayer.

### A. Lacking faith.

CCC 2732 The most common yet most hidden temptation is our lack of faith. It expresses itself less by declared incredulity than by our actual preferences. When we begin to pray, a thousand labors or cares thought to be urgent vie for priority; once again, it is the moment of truth for the heart: what is its real love? Sometimes we turn to the Lord as a last resort, but do we really believe he is? Sometimes we enlist the Lord as an ally, but our heart remains presumptuous. In each case, our lack of faith reveals that we do not yet share in the disposition of a humble heart: "Apart from me, you can do nothing."

### B. Not willing to pray; we must choose to pray.

CCC 2650 Prayer cannot be reduced to the spontaneous outpouring of interior impulse: in order to pray, one must have the will to pray. Nor is it enough to know what the Scriptures reveal about prayer: one must also learn how to pray. Through a living transmission (Sacred Tradition) within "the believing and praying Church," the Holy Spirit teaches the children of God how to pray.

CCC 2710 The choice of the time and duration of the **prayer arises from a determined will**, revealing the secrets of the heart. One does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has the time: one makes time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dryness one may encounter. One cannot always meditate, but **one can always enter into inner prayer, independently of the conditions of health, work, or emotional state**. The heart is the place of this quest and encounter, in poverty and in faith.

### C. Expect prayer to be difficult; it's a combat, a battle, a drama...

CCC 2567 ...As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama. Through words and actions, this drama engages the heart. It unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation.

CCC 2573 God renews his promise to Jacob, the ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel. Before confronting his elder brother Esau, Jacob wrestles all night with a mysterious figure who refuses to reveal his name, but he blesses him before leaving him at dawn. From this account, the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance.

CCC 2612 In Jesus "the Kingdom of God is at hand." He calls his hearers to conversion and faith, but also to watchfulness. In prayer the disciple keeps watch, attentive to Him Who Is and Him Who Comes, in memory of his first coming in the lowliness of the flesh, and in the hope of his second coming in glory. In communion with their Master, the disciples' prayer is a battle; only by keeping watch in prayer can

one avoid falling into temptation.

CCC 2725 Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort. The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ, as well as the Mother of God, the saints, and he himself, all teach us this: prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God. We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. The "spiritual battle" of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer.

CCC 2733 Another temptation, to which presumption opens the gate, is acedia. The spiritual writers understand by this a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart. "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." The greater the height, the harder the fall. Painful as discouragement is, it is the reverse of presumption. The humble are not surprised by their distress; it leads them to trust more, to hold fast in constancy.

CCC 2734 Filial trust is tested - it proves itself - in tribulation. The principal difficulty concerns the prayer of petition, for oneself or for others in intercession. Some even stop praying because they think their petition is not heard. Here two questions should be asked: Why do we think our petition has not been heard? How is our prayer heard, how is it "efficacious"?

#### D. Distractions and dryness.

CCC 2729 The habitual difficulty in prayer is distraction. It can affect words and their meaning in vocal prayer; it can concern, more profoundly, him to whom we are praying, in vocal prayer (liturgical or personal), meditation, and contemplative prayer. To set about hunting down distractions would be to fall into their trap, when all that is necessary is to turn back to our heart: for a distraction reveals to us what we are attached to, and this humble awareness before the Lord should awaken our preferential love for him and lead us resolutely to offer him our heart to be purified. Therein lies the battle, the choice of which master to serve.

CCC 2730 In positive terms, the battle against the possessive and dominating self requires vigilance, sobriety of heart. When Jesus insists on vigilance, he always relates it to himself, to his coming on the last day and every day: today. The bridegroom comes in the middle of the night; the light that must not be extinguished is that of faith: "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'"

CCC 2731 Another difficulty, especially for those who sincerely want to pray, is dryness. Dryness belongs to contemplative prayer when the heart is separated from God, with no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones. This is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if dies, it bears much fruit." If dryness is due to the lack of roots, because the word has fallen on rocky soil, the battle requires conversion.

#### E. What we do outside of prayer impacts our prayer life.

1. Being a good listener is important. Since prayer is a gift we need to be receptive in order to pray well.

Fr. Frey, hard charging leader and, still, quite a *vocal* priest, today would tell you that his greatest ministry is "listening". There is a reciprocal relationship between listening to others and listening to God. Conversely, we are more likely to be able to listen to our neighbor and give them our hearts if we spend time trying to listen to Him. Crack "the code of silence" we experience in prayer by listening to others well.

People who met and spoke with Saints like St. John Paul II and Bl. Mother Theresa have often remarked how these holy people, who were also world famous, were able to give their *entire*

*attention* to whoever was speaking with them. Listening to others well can help us listen to God well, and vice versa.

## 2. Practice the presence of God.

CCC 2697 Prayer is the life of the new heart. It ought to animate us at every moment. But we tend to forget him who is our life and our all. This is why the Fathers of the spiritual life in the Deuteronomic and prophetic traditions insist that prayer is a remembrance of God often awakened by the memory of the heart "We must remember God more often than we draw breath." But we cannot pray "at all times" if we do not pray at specific times, consciously willing it. These are the special times of Christian prayer, both in intensity and duration

## VI. Using meditation to pray.

A. Do we know the God we pray to? We can't love who we don't know. Reading the Bible is good for the heart that seeks to love God. It helps us pray because it introduces and reintroduces us to God over and over again. With the help of Scripture, and other good spiritual works, we come to realize more and more that we do not know how good God really is.

B. Reading Scripture has indulgenced benefits. The Handbook of Indulgences states, "A partial indulgence is granted the Christian faithful who read sacred Scripture with the veneration due God's word and as a form of spiritual reading. The indulgence will be a plenary one when such reading is for at least one-half hour" (80).

(Keep in mind that there are several requirements for acquiring a plenary indulgence. The Apostolic Constitution on Indulgences explains: "To acquire a plenary indulgence it is necessary to perform the work to which the indulgence is attached and to fulfill three conditions: sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion and prayer for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff. It is further required that all attachment to sin, even to venial sin, be absent. If this disposition is in any way less than complete, or if the prescribed three conditions are not fulfilled, the indulgence will be only partial...")

C. Know the power of the Psalms.

CCC 2587 The Psalter is the book in which The Word of God becomes man's prayer. In other books of the Old Testament, "the words proclaim [God's] works and bring to light the mystery they contain." The words of the Psalmist, sung for God, both express and acclaim the Lord's saving works; the same Spirit inspires both God's work and man's response. Christ will unite the two. In him, the psalms continue to teach us how to pray.

CCC 2588 The Psalter's many forms of prayer take shape both in the liturgy of the Temple and in the human heart. Whether hymns or prayers of lamentation or thanksgiving, whether individual or communal, whether royal chants, songs of pilgrimage or wisdom meditations, the Psalms are a mirror of God's marvelous deeds in the history of his people, as well as reflections of the human experiences of the Psalmist. Though a given psalm may reflect an event of the past, it still possesses such direct simplicity that it can be prayed in truth by men of all times and conditions.

## VII. Why we need to pray.

A. Prayer reveals us to ourselves.

CCC 2563 The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic or Biblical

expression, the heart is the place "to which I withdraw." **The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death.** It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant.

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B. Prayer comes from our hidden center, the part of us that is beyond us (reason, psychic drives, etc.) and so we need to pray in order to find our belonging-to-God. Only God can do this, we have to let Jesus pray to the Father in us. The heart is too far outside of our own reach. God is bringing our prayer about. We have a certain perception of the prayer, but the whole prayer from beginning to end is being orchestrated by God acting within our hearts. We need to let God show our hearts to us.