

## Introduction to Prayer

### Prayer as Relationship

What is prayer? The way I find most helpful to understand prayer is this: think of it as our relationship with God. Think for a minute of your relationship with any person: a friend, or maybe your husband or wife. That relationship takes many different forms. Take a relationship between two people who are attracted to each other. There is the romantic stage, where you cannot get enough of each other and you are intrigued by each other. Then there may come a time of deeper commitment; maybe you get engaged. Then there is the marriage, which enables you to enter into a deeper kind of relationship. That relationship will have wonderful times and will also have very difficult times. But through perseverance, we begin to grow at a deeper level, which is one of the reasons we take vows in religious life, or married life, to help us keep going when it gets difficult. We grow more quickly through the struggles than through the romantic 'highs'. Throughout the relationship, if it is lived well, each person is being changed by the other and formed. We are learning to accept the other person's shortcomings, weaknesses, annoying habits. We are also being enriched by the other person's gifts, and above all by the gift of that person themselves.

It is also worth mentioning that we will not grow through a relationship if we insist on having everything our way. We need to be open to the other person, open to new ways of doing things and also open to having to continually change ourselves. If we are open to that much, there is a very good chance that we will blossom through a relationship.

### Prayer

Now let us turn to prayer. Prayer is how we express our relationship with God. It takes many different forms, just as a relationship with any other person does. There can be a romantic stage especially if we come to a new discovery of faith; there is a time for deeper commitment, where God is drawing us deeper into himself; then there comes a time of plodding along through what seems very ordinary and uneventful times, where we are asked to be faithful. But the point of all of this is **union with God**. We are being led into a deeper and deeper relationship with God until we are united with God at the deepest level. Not only prayer, but our whole life is about union with God. If we are open to it, God will bring it about. St. Teresa of Avila—who was given some very profound insights into the stages of prayer—says that the only thing that prevents us from reaching the fullest union with God in this life, is ourselves. God wants this for us but we often resist because God calls us in ways that we are not always comfortable with.

Most of us are introduced to God as children and we are taught that God loves us and takes care of us. But often we are also given the impression that God is going to be mad if we do wrong, and God is only happy with us when we are good. We tend to develop a picture of God from our parents and authority figures; and not so much from what they say about God, but from what they do. I remember reading about a man whose father was a zealous Christian pastor, but who used to beat him regularly. Even though his father continually told him that God loved him, his experience of his father gave him a very different impression.

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By Father Murchadh O'Madagain

Many of us grow up with a picture of God as some kind of policeman, waiting to catch us out. Hopefully if we persevere in the spiritual life, God will help us to grow to a far more profound understanding of what God is and is not.

### **A new understanding of God**

When we begin to grow into young adults many of us find ourselves getting frustrated with the idea of God that we have grown up with and we rebel. Most of my own peers stopped practicing and so did I. It wasn't that we didn't believe in God, but that we were not happy with the understanding of God that we had. I could not see the point in the mass, for example. I felt that I was being hypocritical being there, since it did not make much sense to me; also because I associated it with too many rules and regulations from growing up.

'You have to go to mass.' I think this is one of the worst things that we are told, because it is almost guaranteed to turn us off at some stage. However, by the grace of God, the Lord brought me back to himself in a new way, because I was still searching. And so I discovered prayer in a completely new way, as a relationship with God. Through a prayer meeting, which I did not have to go to—and I think that is important in itself—I began to develop a personal relationship with God.

Having lapsed as a Catholic during my teens, I came back to my faith through a prayer group. The first kind of prayer that I was introduced to was **devotional prayer**: the rosary. This, as you know, is a way of meditating on the life of Christ, helping us to get to know Jesus better. Secondly I was introduced to the **Scriptures**, the Word of God, where God speaks to us himself through the instrument of these writings. They were written by human beings, but we believe that they are inspired by God, and we accept them as the Word of God. By continually reading them we deepen our understanding of God, how God relates to us and what God asks of us. Thirdly I came across people praising God out loud (**spontaneous prayer**), which was completely new to me. I learnt the importance of giving praise and thanks to God, simply because God is God, the Creator of all things, who deserves our praise and thanks for no other reason than that He is God and not just asking for things, though this is important too. This was new to me, but I came to recognise it as being important.

So I was brought back to my faith and introduced to the idea of having a prayer life. When I was younger I had more of an impression of just *having to pray* because it was something I 'had' to do. But as you get older this is not enough of an incentive to grow in faith, no more than you will go out with someone because you are obliged to, or having a relationship based on asking for your needs. It just does not work like that.

### **The Mass**

As I began to grow in prayer I also began to rediscover the **holy mass** in a new way. This is what we call '**ritual prayer**'. We go through a set ritual each time we celebrate the mass, which has developed down through the centuries, although in fact it has changed very little. But behind the ritual, something extraordinary is happening. First of all we listen to the words of Scripture,

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where God speaks to us. Then we move on to the Eucharist where the Body and Blood of Jesus become present in the form of bread and wine. At face value it may not seem like a very exciting ritual, but obviously it is not meant to be for those who do not have faith. Rather it is for those who believe in it and then it is the most extraordinary prayer of all, because in the mass we become present to Jesus, the Son of God, being offered to God the Father for the sins of humanity, so that we might enjoy eternal life with God. That is what God created us for, and that is what happens during each mass.

So if we begin to take the spiritual journey seriously, we will discover that a prayer life is an integral part of it. It cannot be something that we 'have' to do, no more than a relationship will grow this way. Instead, it will take many different forms throughout our lives, depending on the person and depending on their circumstances.

### Personal preferences

Most of us will have a particular way of praying that we feel is the one that works, and if everyone else could just discover it as well, they'd be sorted. However, it is not that simple. People are different and different kinds of prayer will suit different people. I think the most important rule to remember is: do what works for you and never mind what does not work. It never comes down to one particular kind of prayer being the 'right' one. There are different ways in which we relate to God.

### Prayer of silence

The call of the Gospel is a call to inner transformation. 'Repent and believe in the good news,' or, 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' What does this word 'repent' mean? The word 'repent' can mean several things. We usually think of it as meaning 'atone for your sins.' This is one meaning, but by no means the only one. It can also mean 'turn around', 'change your direction', or as one writer has put it, 'change the direction in which you are seeking happiness.' Look for happiness in the right place. Jesus is calling us to find happiness by looking for it in the right place. Where is the right place? In God, of course. But how do we go 'into' God? First of all by trying to live the way Jesus taught, we are opening ourselves up to the spiritual journey, the journey that leads us closer to God. We are opening ourselves up to the Holy Spirit, who will transform us, if we allow him.

Now one of the things that happens to many people when they have been living their spiritual life for a while is that they begin to feel more drawn to silence. They read the Scriptures and go to the mass, and maybe pray the rosary or use other kinds of prayer, but they also find themselves wanting to spend more time just being quiet. The difficulty with this is that **first** of all we may start feeling guilty as soon as we want to be silent, that we **should be 'doing' something**, such as reading the Scriptures, or praying the rosary. We come from a way of thinking, especially in the Western world, which constantly measures everything in terms of performance and production. What have I done so far? How much have I accomplished, and how far have I left to go? In spite of our best efforts we tend to bring these concepts to prayer as well. So being quiet and

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apparently not doing anything doesn't come easily to us. But these categories simply don't apply to prayer, because we are dealing with the spiritual.

The **second** difficulty in silent prayer is that we are **not really sure what to do**. Am I supposed to make my mind go blank? Is that possible? Am I supposed to hear God saying something to me, or get a particular image? How will I know if this is from God or not, etc?

### Why silent prayer?

In the course of their journey he came to a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat down at the Lord's feet and listened to him speaking. Now Martha who was distracted with all the serving said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered: 'Martha, Martha,' he said 'you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her.' (Luke 11:38-42 Jerusalem Bible)

The reason why the Holy Spirit begins to draw us into silence, is because we get to a stage where God wants to do more work in us and God wants us to just be present to him and allow this work to take place. St. John of the Cross—a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic and doctor of the Church—complained about the fact that so few spiritual directors understood the importance of silent prayer and that they would frequently try and send people back to other kinds of prayer when they began to desire silence. He says that not only are the directors sending them backwards, but they may then be trying to do the opposite of what the Holy Spirit is trying to get them to do and this is all happening because they do not understand the spiritual journey properly.

### As well as; not instead of

When we talk about practicing silent prayer, we are not saying that you stop all other kinds of prayer, rather you begin to practice this kind of prayer **as well**. When we think about God, reflect over the Scriptures, or praise God, etc., these are all our thoughts and our words *about* God. If we have a picture of God, or an understanding of God, it is only *our* thought or *our* understanding. It is not God and while it may be a very good thought, or reflection, it is still only our thought or idea. God wants to bring us to a much more profound experience of himself and so He begins to draw us into silence, to a place where we go beyond thoughts and words. It is there in the 'darkness' that we meet God in a deeper kind of way. The difficulty for us is that we are often afraid to go into this darkness, as we are no longer in control in the same way.

The story of Moses meeting God in the cloud on the mountain is often used as an analogy of this kind of experience of God. God met Moses in the cloud, beyond the senses. God is experienced by us in a way that goes beyond the experience of our senses. This is why God brings us into the silence.

What is happening in the silence over a long period? During the time that we give ourselves to God in this way, the Spirit is at work within us, healing the emotions, helping us to unlearn bad

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patterns of behavior. We will not be aware of this at the time. It is only in the long run that we will begin to notice change.

It is also worth mentioning that this kind of prayer is meant for everyone, not just the few. For many silent prayer or contemplative prayer was thought of as only being for a few people, such as those monks and nuns who dedicate their lives to God in a monastery. But this is not what is taught by some of the great writers on prayer such as Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross. In fact St. John of the Cross says that many that people are drawn to praying in silence after a relatively short time.

### **Method**

The next question is how to remain in silence. It is easy to talk about praying for a while in silence—meditating, if you like to call it that—but in practice that can be very difficult to do. This is where a method can be a great help, to enable us to remain in silence with as little distraction as possible. Today I would like to recommend one type of prayer to you that I have found very helpful. It has become known as Centering Prayer, but in fact it is nothing new and goes back to the earliest times in the Church. This kind of prayer is basically an ancient form of Christian prayer that has been reintroduced in more modern language, to help people get into silent prayer again.

### **Where did it come from?**

In 1971 Pope Paul VI asked the Cistercian Order—and these are the monks who dedicate their whole lives to prayer—to help the Church rediscover the contemplative dimension of the Gospel. What became known as Centering Prayer was a direct response to that request. In Spencer, Massachusetts, where a man called Thomas Keating was at the time, the monks were very aware of how so many young people were travelling East to India and other countries seeking spiritual enlightenment. They felt it was a shame that these people seemed so unaware of the rich tradition of the Catholic Church. So they decided to put together some workshops on prayer, but they also decided to explain it in terms of psychology more than spiritual theology, since so many people were easily turned off by the more traditional terminology. It worked and they were astounded at the response that it received.

### **Acquired and Infused Contemplation**

At this point there is an important distinction that I would like to tell you about, which many people get confused over. When people talk about contemplative prayer they are usually thinking about what is called 'infused' contemplation which is a gift that comes to us from God. We can neither bring it on nor make it last. It simply is given and taken away as the Spirit wills. We can only wait for it.

Then there is also 'acquired' contemplation, which is the part that we can do ourselves through some kind of method that helps us to be quiet in God's presence and allow God to work within us. This distinction is very important because often when people hear of a method such as Centering Prayer or any other method that teaches us how to be silent in prayer, they believe that this is claiming to bring on the gift of God which we call 'infused contemplation'. However,

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nothing could be farther from the truth. All this method does is help us be open to God's action and wait on the working of the Holy Spirit.

### How to remain in silence

Let us now look at this one method which can help us to remain in silence while praying, just open to the action of God's Spirit within us.

#### Guidelines for Centering Prayer

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

### The Prayer Word

- The sacred word: Amen, Abba, Joshua, Jeshua, Sanctus, Let Go, Peace, Yahweh, Love.
- Don't change the prayer word, once you are happy with it.
- The word expresses your intention to give yourself to God completely, to be present to him. It is an expression of love, if you like. You consent to his action, his working, within you.
- In a way it is the most self-less kind of prayer, as you keep nothing back for yourself, all is given to God, even your thoughts.

### The intention

Perhaps what is most important here is the intention. Two people sitting in a room, both thinking...

### Our Father

The normal time that is recommended is twenty minutes or half an hour, twice a day. It is good at the end of the twenty minutes, or however long you think you can give it (anything is better than nothing), to just silently pray the Our Father as a way of 'coming out' of the prayer, as you will often find it is not good to suddenly stop. It is like waking from sleep too fast. Even if you

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decide you cannot possibly give it this time, it is a good way of being silent in the presence of the Lord from time to time.

### **How can we make time for this?**

The difficulty for most of us is how to find time for prayer because most of us are so busy. I would suggest that we will never find time for prayer, any more than we will probably not find time for a relationship. But we make time for what is important to us. If we see prayer as being an important part of our journey with God, then we will make time for it. The good thing about something like Centering Prayer is that we can do it almost anywhere: on a train or bus, in a waiting room, or at home. Normally what is recommended is twenty minutes in the morning and the evening, but anything is better than nothing.

### **In the long run**

Without going into detail, as it would take too long here, what is happening when we give ourselves to this prayer practice regularly, is that the Holy Spirit is gradually beginning to heal us at the deepest level. All of us carry emotional wounds going back to the beginning of our life, which are stored in the unconscious. Sometimes this can be helped through counselling or other means. But this kind of prayer is probably the simplest and most effective way to allow the Lord to heal us at the deepest level.

The deep rest that we begin to experience when we regularly go into this kind of prayer, is the ideal way for us to relax in the divine presence of the Holy Trinity (present within us since our Baptism). Then we begin to let down the guard of our unconscious and this allows the Holy Spirit to heal the deep hurts we carry. We experience the healing of these hurts in the form of thoughts or emotions that suddenly come to the surface while we are praying. You may even experience tears at times, and not even be sure why. All we have to do is allow this to happen and continue to rest in God's presence.

### **A Question**

In the past many of the great writers on prayer have taught that one should never begin with prayer of meditation, but that this is only for later on. However, Keating and others now disagree, saying that the former teaching was fine in a time where Christianity was much more accepted throughout Europe and America, and most of society was God fearing. But today this is not the case. If this kind of prayer encourages people to rediscover the spiritual life, even if their motives are not the right ones, why should people not be encouraged?

### **If you want to know more:**

*Open Heart, Open Mind*, by Thomas Keating.

*Invitation to Love*, by Thomas Keating.

*Intimacy with God*, by Thomas Keating.

*Centering Prayer*, by Basil Pennington.

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### Further Resource Books

- \* Keating, Thomas, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation*, New York: Continuum, 2000.
- , *Open Mind Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, New York: Continuum, 2000. (Good one for beginners)
- , *The Mystery of Christ: the Liturgy as Spiritual Experience*, New York: Continuum, 2001.
- \*—, *Intimacy with God*, New York: Crossroad, 2002.
- Baer, Randall N., *Inside the New Age Nightmare*, Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1989.
- Climacus, John, Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (trans.), *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982.
- Cassian, John, Colm Luibheid (trans.), *Conferences*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, New York: Paulist Press, 1985.