**Welcoming Catholics Home**

October 20, 2015

**PRAYER**: How does prayer build our relationship with God and bring Him into our daily life? What if prayer is challenging for you?

**How does prayer build our relationship with God and bring Him into our daily life?**

We tend to think of prayer as a human action toward God. The Catechism reminds us that God is the initiator of prayer, even if we are not fully aware of this.

God called man into being and it is God who is calling man into relationship with Him. To quote the Catechism, “…the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer.” (CCC 2567) Human prayer, then, is a response to the plea of a living God (CCC 2561) to be in relationship with Him. Again, to quote the Catechism, “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 (for us): his asking arises from the depth of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for Him.” (CCC 2560) (“I Thirst for You Prayer” St. Teresa of Calcutta)

And what is the purpose of God wooing us that we may thirst for Him? In the process of having a living relationship with God through the experience of prayer, our hearts and minds and souls slowly but surely become redirected to God and reconfigured for our ultimate end, which is Heaven.

We build our relationship with God by responding to His initiative towards us. The first step may be simply to become aware of this tireless initiative of God in our lives and seek to be spiritually attuned to ways in which God is revealing His presence and thirst for a relationship with us. This may take some time and perhaps the help of someone like a spiritual director or trusted Christian friend. As one’s awareness of God’s call to relationship increases, then one must consider one’s response. God grants us free will and cannot make us thirst for Him, but He will seek to woo us and attract our hearts to His. Some are not ready; some are not interested; some see no need; some are fearful and some are skeptical. God patiently waits. He will not forsake us. Some respond to this initiative of God with curiosity; some are intrigued, some are in great need of help that the world cannot provide, some experience a simple longing for a means of contact with the Eternal, and some respond with a genuine longing to come to know this God and to love Him and serve Him. But where to start? Prayer!

Prayer is the essence of the lived relationship between God and man. Prayer comes from the heart since it is the heart that prays (CCC 2562). And since only God can fathom the human heart, which is hidden from the world, the heart is the place where we live in relation to God (CCC 2563).

St. Therese of Lisieux describes prayer as “…a surge of the heart…a simple look turned toward Heaven; it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”

But, where to start? What does “relationship building” prayer look like?

Let’s look at some examples from Scripture and try to learn from the great heros of the Old Testatment who first encountered God’s initiative:

* Adam and Eve hid in shame when they heard God say, “Where are you?” That response is not recommended. Instead we look to little Samuel, who responds, “Here I am Lord” or the priest Eli who said, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”
* Noah “walked with the Lord.”
* Abraham’s first prayers were deeds: he built altars on his journeys to offer sacrifice. His first verbal prayers were words of complaint that God did not seem to be fulfilling his promises. His final act of prayer was to have perfectly aligned his heart with God’s and in complete trust be willing to offer his only son as a sacrifice. He was able to do this because he completely trusted God that he could raise men from the dead.
* Jacob’s prayer took the form of wrestling with God all night. The Church has interpreted this prayer as reflecting prayer as a battle of faith and perseverance.
* Moses encounters God in the burning bush and engages in a long debate with God, he balks, he makes excuses and he questions God. He converses with God at length. Scripture tells us God spoke to him face to face as a man speaks to his friend; God spoke clearly and not in riddles to Moses. Through this arduous process, Moses is asked to become God’s messenger, and compassionate collaborator in God’s work of salvation. Moses eventually agrees and becomes the great intercessor for his people and a precursor of Christ, the ultimate intercessor. We learn in Scripture that this extraordinary relationship between Moses and God had its foundation in Moses’ humility, who is described as being more humble than anyone on the face of the earth!
* King David responds to God’s desire for a temple to dwell in where His people’s prayers could flourish and instructs his son Solomon to build the temple in Jerusalem. But David encounters God most notably in being hunted down by Saul. David hides in the caves of Ein Gedi and prays for help. His prayers are recorded in Scripture as the Psalms. They contain the whole span of human emotions and pleas ranging from distress, fright, desperation, profound contrition, immense gratitude and songs of praise. Sometimes all these cries of the human heart are found in one psalm. Not only were the Psalms King David’s prayers, but they were also Christ’s. He was taught the Psalms as a well-formed Jewish boy, and then prayed them as the God-man on the great mission of salvation, all the way to the Cross where we hear Him pray from Psalm 2.
* Elijah, the great prophet, became despairing of life and asked God to take away his life. God’s response was to give him food and drink for the journey he had yet to take. Elijah, drank and ate and went and hid in a cave. God again called out to him and told him to stand on the mountain before the Lord when the mysterious presence of God passed by – not a great wind, not an earthquake, not a fire, but God revealed Himself as a still small voice. Elijah had to listen very carefully and heard God’s still small voice send him on his mission. Elijah longed to see God’s face and was given the answer to this prayer at the Transfiguration, when he and Moses stood next to Christ, the unveiled face of God.

And finally, we must consider Christ and the centrality of prayer in His earthly life. We are called to follow Him in all things. Scripture provides us abundant insight into Christ’s prayer between himself and the Father. As the Catechism describes it, “The drama of prayer is fully revealed to us in” Christ (CCC 2598).

Christ first learned to pray from the heart from His Mother. In the Magnificat prayer we learn that Mary pondered the great works of the Almighty and that she kept all these things in her heart. As a boy, he studied the Hebrew Scriptures and learned the prayers of the Great Hebrew Patriarchs and prophets and learned the Psalms of King David. Christ is powerfully drawn by God to His Temple at age twelve, even at the risk of distressing his parents, and there declares he must be in His Father’s house, the place of prayer for the Jewish people.

As the God-man on his salvific mission, we see Christ seeking out places to be alone with the Father, sometimes praying all night, always interceding for all of mankind to the Father, and most especially before decisive moments in the tasks His Father has asked Him to carry out to fulfill his mission and the mission of His apostles and His Church. The Catechism describes Christ’s prayer as a humble and trusting commitment of his human will to the loving will of the Father, even unto death on the Cross.

Besides the Lord’s Prayer, two Gospels record two specific prayers of Christ (Matthew 11:25-27 and Luke 10: 21-23) that are instructive: The first one is found both in Matthew (after noting the cities that failed to repent) and in Luke (after the seventy apostles returned to Him): “I thank Thee, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, that Thou has hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yes, Father, such was Thy gracious will.” Christ begins his prayer with thanksgiving and acknowledging God as Father and blesses Him for His gracious will in revealing the secrets of the Kingdom to the little ones, the ones with childlike hearts.

The second one is in the Gospel of John (John 11: 41-42) just before the raising of Lazarus, “Father, I thank Thee, that Thou has heard me. I know that Thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by that they may believe that Thou didst send me.” Again, Christ begins his prayer with thanksgiving, and acknowledges God as Father. This time He thanks the Father for always hearing His prayers. He prays this prayer publicly to instruct us that the Father hears our prayers as well.

His prayers on the Cross, known as the “Seven Last Words” reveal the depth of his relationship with the Father built over the course of his earthly life and his complete conformance to His Father’s heart and will to grant good things to His children – even before the reconciliation between God and man has been accomplished by this death on the Cross:

* “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.” - From the Cross, Christ is praying that the Father grant mercy to His executioners.
* “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Christ is praying that the thief who acknowledged Christ’s innocence, be granted the gift of salvation in advance of His death and resurrection.
* “Behold your Mother.” Christ is praying that we become His Mother’s children.
* “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” Christ is praying to surrender and conform Himself to His Father’s plan which was to allow the sin of Adam’s disobedience and the apparent triumph of the evil one to be undone by the Son of the Father being forsaken on the Cross as an unjustly accused and tortured criminal.
* “I thirst.” Christ’s prayer reveals His loving desire to fulfill His Father mission for the reconciliation between God and man. Christ thirsts for us to be restored as God’s children and to live with Him in harmony forever.
* “It is finished” Christ prays to the Father that He has done all that He has been asked to do to fulfill the Father’s mission.
* “Into Thy hands, I commit my spirit.” Christ’s prayer gives over to the Father everything in complete surrender into His trusting hands and His plan of salvation.

Because of Christ’s great salvific act on our behalf and His bringing reconciled humanity into Heaven, our entire relationship with the Father is through the Son. We have access to the Father only if we pray “ in the name of Jesus. (CCC 2664). He tells us if we ask in His name, He will do it. Invoking the holy name of Jesus, therefore, is the simplest way to pray always. (CCC 2668).

Jesus, in his Last Discourse in the Gospel of John, adds another dimension to our prayer and that is the Holy Spirit. He prays to the Father to ask for the Counselor for us, who is the Spirit of Truth, who will be with us forever. (John 14: 16-17) This is the Holy Spirit who will bring the Spirit of Truth into our prayers. The Catechism tells us that prayer comes also from the Holy Spirit and not from ourselves alone. (CCC 2726)

Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Father have the ultimate in relationships among persons that we are to emulate, what St. John Paul called “a Communion of self-giving love.” This is what we are called to experience with God and the pathway is prayer.

From the Old Testament Patriarchs and prophets, and Christ himself, Scripture has revealed many things about prayer that we can adopt and apply to our prayer life with the intention of building a relationship with God:

1. Rather than hiding, its better to respond when we heard God calling us.
2. Our prayers can take many forms: walking with God, deeds to honor him, even complaints, wrestling with Him over things on our hearts, questioning God, conversing at length.
3. We learn that sometimes God will ask hard things of us and we have to ask Him for the grace to conform ourselves to His will.
4. We learn God is attracted to those who approach Him with humility. (See Litany of Humility)
5. We learn God desires our prayers especially where He dwells – in any Catholic Church or chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.
6. We learn that we don’t have to use our own words to pray, that the Church encourages us to pray the Psalms that Christ prayed, where we will find a prayer for every longing of our heart. The Church asks its children to pray with it every Sunday the greatest prayer of the Church which is the Mass. The Church gives us many other prayers and devotions recommended to us by Mother Church (the Lord’s Prayer, the Rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, Stations of the Cross, the Litany of Loretto, etc.)
7. We learn that God reveals Himself in a still small voice, so that we must become very quiet and find places of silence so that we might hear Him.
8. We learn from Mary, as Christ did, to pray from the heart, and that she can help us learn to pray as she did her son.
9. We learn from Christ to find a place to pray where we can be alone, go into a room and close the door.
10. We learn to include in our prayers the needs of others, to become intercessors for those in need, including persons we know and persons we don’t know.
11. We learn to begin our prayer by thanking God and acknowledging Him as Father.
12. We learn to seek to be childlike in our prayers so that we too may receive the secrets of the Kingdom.
13. We learn to pray with confidence, like Christ, that God always hears our prayers.
14. We also learn directly from Christ that we are to always pray in His name, and unite our prayers with His, because our life is now in Him, and it is He who prays for us and hears us and brings our prayers to the Father as our Savior and Advocate.
15. We learn we must also invoke the Holy Spirit to bring the Spirit of Truth into our prayers and because prayer does not come from us alone.
16. We learn from the Seven Last Words that God longs to give us many good gifts through our prayers: mercy, Heaven, the Mother of God to be our mother, reconciliation with God, salvation.

What if prayer is challenging?

If you find praying challenging, don’t worry. You are not alone. There is an entire Article in the Catechism about the challenge of prayer. (CCC 2725-2745) Its title is a bit more dramatic. It’s called, “The BATTLE of Prayer.” The Catechism states in the first paragraph, that “prayer is a battle.”

Why would that be? Who would benefit from our having difficulty with prayer, for our becoming discouraged, for our having no particular feelings or spiritual thoughts, for our not believing God is listening, for our simply giving up, for our never quite finding the time, for our always becoming distracted?

Yes, the evil one is most interested in you NOT turning your face, your mind, your heart in God’s direction and finding union with Him in prayer. So be aware when these impediments to prayer occur, that you are engaged in the battle of prayer.

How do we resist these temptations away from prayer? The Catechism has suggestions for us:

1. In the case of distraction, once you realize that you have become distracted, (and this includes while you are at Mass), simply return your mind and heart to the prayer you intended to pray. Use this distraction as a point of information about something else you are attached to.
2. In the case of dryness, turn your heart and mind out of sheer faith to the Passion of Jesus to help deepen your faith and enliven your heart.
3. In the case of being tempted by other priorities in your life when you start to pray, realize you are at a moment of truth about what at that moment is most important.
4. In the case of stopping your prayer routines or disciplines, realize that it is often that “ the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” We are human and this is our tendency. Simply begin again and return to whatever practices of prayer you have with humility and perseverance.
5. In the case of not believing God is listening or even stopping prayer all together because our petitions seem to go unanswered, you need to reflect on your petitions and ask yourself if you are praying as you ought? Are you praying with humility, with thanksgiving, with openness to God’s answer and timing, with trust that He is always about your well-being and salvation and would never answer a prayer contrary to your Good.

What if you don’t pray at all because you don’t know where to start, or how to start, or what to do? Here are some suggestions to get you started:

1. Don’t worry about getting anything right. Just the desire to pray is a prayer.
2. Imagine Christ presents Himself to you in the flesh and asks to spend some time together just to talk. What would you like to say to him, to ask him? You can have that conversation in the Church sanctuary. It is open from 6 AM until after 9 PM every day. Its often empty and you can go and sit alone by the Tabernacle and have that conversation any time you wish.
3. On Wednesday’s from 9:30 AM until 7:30 PM, you can see Christ face to face in the Monstrance. There is a famous description of prayer in the presence of Christ in the Monstrance. “He looks at me and I look at Him.” That’s prayer.
4. Open your Bible to the Psalms. There is a psalm that speaks to each person’s heart. Just keep reading until you find the psalm that at least has a few phrases that expresses the depths of your heart. Read and reread that psalm. Know you are praying with Christ as He prayed and prays the Psalms continuously.
5. Think of five blessings in your life that you had nothing to do with and that you can’t explain why and how they came to you and thank God for them.
6. Find a quiet time and place in your daily life – even if it is alone in your car somewhere – and seek to return to that time and space each day and dedicate a period of time to God. You can talk to Him, you can pray a decade of the Rosary with an intention for your family, you can ask for help in the challenges that lie ahead each day, you can thank Him for answered prayers, you can read Scripture, perhaps the readings for that day’s Mass, you can sing Him a hymn (song is prayer). Just dedicate that time and place regularly to Him, no exceptions.
7. Ask Mary to help lead you to respond to the love her Son has for you.
8. If all else fails, just whisper, “Jesus” over and over.