



A Simple Look Toward Heaven

When the Carmelite sister Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) lay dying at the age of twenty-four, a sister paced up and down outside her room, muttering, "What are we going to write about Thérèse, such a young nun with a short life?"

As it turned out Thérèse had written a spiritual journal, at the request of her superior, called *The Story of a Soul*. It was first circulated among Carmelite convents, but soon became one of the most phenomenal spiritual books of modern times, selling in the millions and still widely read and admired today. Her devout parents fostered prayer in the family, and several of her sisters had joined the Carmel. She felt this vocation early and even begged Pope Leo XIII to let her join at age 15.

Eventually Thérèse was admitted to the convent and began to evidence her "little way" of prayer. She understood that God did not ask great deeds of her, only everyday deeds done with great love. When asked by a novice about how to pray, she said, "Think of a child before it learns to read, then talk to Jesus like that." When another novice asked her how to handle dryness in prayer, she said, "Go back to basics. Say the Our Father and Hail Mary very slowly, one word at a time and let each word drop silently into the well of your soul."

Thérèse loved the missions and hoped she could go to Asia, which did not happen. Her letters to a troubled seminarian, Maurice, are filled with firmness and compassion. She finally realized that her vocation was "to be Love in the heart of the Church." Her definition of prayer is widely quoted, "For me prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven; it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy."

Pope Pius XI canonized her on May 17, 1925.

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church...

In my Father's House

A. How did Jesus learn to pray?

The Son of God who became Son of the Virgin learned to pray according to his human heart. He learns the formulas of prayer from his mother, who kept in her heart and meditated upon all the "great things" done by the Almighty.¹ He learns to pray in the words and rhythms of the prayer of his people, in the synagogue at Nazareth and the Temple at Jerusalem. But his prayer springs from an otherwise secret source, as he intimates at the age of twelve: "I must be in my Father's house."² Here the newness of prayer in the fullness of time begins to be revealed: his *filial prayer*, which the Father awaits from his children, is finally going to be lived out by the only Son in his humanity, with and for men. (*Catechism*, 2599)

B. How did Jesus teach us to pray?

When Jesus prays he is already teaching us how to pray. His prayer to his Father is the theological path (the path of faith, hope, and charity) of our prayer to God. But the Gospel also gives us Jesus' explicit teaching on prayer. Like a wise teacher he takes hold of us where we are and leads us progressively toward the Father. Addressing the crowds following him, Jesus builds on what they already know of prayer from the Old Covenant and opens to them the newness of the coming Kingdom. Then he reveals this newness to them in parables. (*Catechism*, 2607)

C. What shall we say of the "Our Father"?

In response to his disciples' request "Lord, teach us to pray,"³ Jesus entrusts them with the fundamental Christian prayer, the Our Father.

"The Lord's Prayer is truly the summary of the whole gospel,"⁴ the "most perfect of prayers."⁵ It is at the center of the Scriptures. (*Catechism*, 2773, 2774)

¹ Cf. Lk 1:49; 2:19; 2:51. / ² Lk 2:49. / ³ Lk 11:1. / ⁴ Tertullian, *De orat.* 1:PL 1, 1251-1255. / ⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* II-II, 83, 9.



1. What is prayer?

Prayer is the experience of meeting God in conversation, words, or even in silence. It is a moment of quiet wonder, which may be accompanied by hymns and gestures of affection for the Lord. Sometimes the event of prayer soars in ecstasy. Most of the time, however, it is like the “old shoe comfort” of a couple quietly at home with each other. Real prayer is always directed to God.

2. Why do people pray?

Once one has surrendered himself or herself to Christ in faith and experienced the return of our Lord’s love, prayer is inevitable. We pray to God because we are *in love* with him and have experienced his love in return. Prayer is then an expression of a divine-human love event. We should acquire the habit of prayer and we also have the responsibility to pray always (1 Thess 5:17).

Tragedy and sorrow frequently move us to pray, often only when the situation seems completely hopeless. Crises also have the capacity to awaken us to the power of prayer. The motives for prayer are as wide-ranging as human ingenuity itself. But love of God would motivate us to pray always.

3. What is the value of prayer words, hymns, or gestures?

The words, rituals, and hymns of prayer have a sacred character. They are windows onto the sacred and trails we can follow to enter the holy clearing where our faith-filled ancestors were privileged to have access.

These prayer *formulas* are the residue of a people’s encounter with God. For example, the psalms are an institutional memory and expression of a people of faith and their rendezvous with God. The words of the psalms have a resonance with the divine and intimations of a loving communion with the Lord. Psalm words, like rituals and hymns, wake us up to the glorious presence of God striving to reach us.

Many prayers, old and new, are printed in the Appendix of this book. You will find them beginning on page 105.

4. Why do we need to practice meditative prayer?

Meditation concentrates on the role of the heart in prayer. This does not exclude the activity of the mind; rather, it moves the mind to a more restful state of contemplation of God. Through meditation we are introduced to the inwardness that allows us to put our whole heart into prayer words, hymns, and gestures. Without it, we run the risk of formalism in our liturgies and in our common and personal prayers.

By meditating, we save public prayer from being a dry stalk. Some spiritual guides say that it may take as much as one hour of meditation to enter the prayer of the heart that unites our soul to prayer words or hymns used for public prayer.

But at the same time, formal and devotional prayers, whether spoken or sung, can lead us to meditation. Meditation and formal prayers complement one another.

5. Should we rely on our urge to pray, or should we engage in regular prayer time?

We need both. Regular, daily prayer may run the risk of becoming routine and cause us to lapse into formalism, while waiting for inspiration to pray may result in our never praying at all. To rely solely on regularity could dry up our spirit, and we would never meet God.

The Catholic tradition is to reiterate the ritual words and gestures shaped over the centuries of our history in order to meet the Spirit over and over again. This happens especially in the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. The very act of going to our houses of worship every day or on Sunday is a recommitment to God. Our personal life of meditation nourishes the prayer of the heart and provides us with the inward peace we need for prayer.

6. Should we concentrate on ourselves or on God when we pray?

Prayer is an event of relating between ourselves and God. As in any relationship, prayer usually begins with self-awareness and the preparations necessary to be open to the coming of the Lord into our hearts. As we move into a spirit of expectation, we become blessed with God’s presence. Our concentration shifts to God, because his inherent attractiveness solicits our attention, and we are lost in wonder.



7. Is prayer the same as thinking deep thoughts?

Profound thinking about divine topics is not the same as prayer. Calculated thinking can be as prized a thrill for us as that of an athlete who takes delight in muscle power and physical agility. Mental agility, however, is not the same as praying.

We must guard against the illusion that contact with disembodied thought about spiritual truths serves as prayer. Thinking great or even holy thoughts is not the same as meeting God. In fact, the outcome could be that the profound thinker would merely be creating his or her own God, instead of being shaped and renewed by the living God.

8. Is prayer the same as having religious feelings?

Feelings, whether exalting or superficial, do not automatically mean that we have an audience with God. Pleasant religious feelings may or may not accompany real prayer. The example of many of our saints advises us to seek the God of consolation, not the consolations of God.

It is popular today to speak of the need for religious experience. But the term “experience” can be misleading for those who live in a culture where constant emotional stimulation at a surface level is the norm. Feelings may range from simple “pins and needles” to “Grand Canyon speechlessness.” Too many people identify simply being stunned as a profound experience.

A deeper reason for emotional apathy is the loss of fidelity to long-lasting love relationships. As a result, too many people stagger from one stimulation to the next, sipping from the cup of life but never drinking deeply. In the words of poet Ernest Dowson, “I cried for madder music and thirsted for stronger wine.”

A religious experience is like a deepening love relationship. In each instance we are on a voyage, much the way we would be on a sailboat, silently catching the wind. We seek to meet God with patience, persistence, and spiritual discipline. There will be times when the person is so directly in touch with God that feelings do not matter.

We should remember that all prayer, like faith, is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who moves us to pray, presides over our prayer, and brings it to fulfillment.

9. What obstacle do we face in our efforts to secure the concentration needed for prayer?

The environment in which we live holds a higher regard for distraction than for concentration. Today’s communications revolution causes many people to be hooked on news and entertainment. We have forgotten how to retire from the noise and how to seek to make sense, meaning, and purpose out of the noise that seems to be everywhere around us.

In the words of Teresa of Avila, our minds have become like “a drunken monkey or (like) an unbroken horse.” Too many people turn to tranquilizers, sex, or drink for momentary relief for their upset minds and aching souls. In fact, they are choosing the short-term dulling of an ache over the long-term cure of the cause.

10. Are guides available to help us learn to concentrate our inner resources?

The rich tradition of the Catholic Church possesses resources that can be helpful for spiritual discipline and the habit of inwardness. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola provides an excellent guide for concentrating our inner resources. With these exercises we can learn to interweave our own thinking and yearning with a faith that learns how to rest in the presence of the Lord and to take note of God’s inner direction.

St. Teresa takes another approach. She takes us through stages of spiritual growth or “loves.” In the first love, we encounter both a joyous beginning and our first obstacles, which help purify our love. In our second love, we begin our lifelong journey in identifying with Christ, a trip marked by peaks of light and valleys of darkness. In our third love, we arrive at a stable, simple union with God where we are not self-conscious about our relationship with God.

11. Are there any other such works to help us develop our prayer life?

Yes. In the tradition of St. Benedict we have the riches of liturgical prayer and meditative readings of the Bible, as well as spiritual authors. In these readings we are taught how to get in touch with the prayer of the heart. Thus, in the rhythm of liturgy, common prayer, and divine



reading, we are brought to inwardness that leads to stable prayer. Further information on approaches to prayer may be found at Catholic libraries and religious bookstores.

12. How can we choose the method of prayer that is best for us?

Selecting a method of prayer is like selecting clothing. We usually pick clothing that suits our temperament and meets the demands of the day. We should search in faith and patience for what is best and never forget that a method is a *means* to an *end*. A prayerful meeting with God is our goal; the methods are possible routes we can take.

Whatever method we choose for prayer, we are emptying our souls of needless preoccupations so that we may be filled with God. We shut off our minds, bodies, and emotions in order to be open to the Spirit. We alter our *mind*-states that we may have God alter our *soul*-states. We cease to seek *self*-induced energy as we open ourselves to *God*-induced energy. The method is *not* the message, but the means to an end.

13. Why doesn't God answer all our prayers?

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Thy will be done." When Jesus told us to seek and we shall find, he was teaching us that prayer reveals the will of God for us. That will is full of love and care. God is always answering our prayers, but an answer may be a loving *no* as well as a loving *yes*.

In the story of Job, bad things happen to a good man. Job prayed to have these things taken away, but the more he prayed, the more he realized what it is like to be in touch with God's loving will. "I know that my Redeemer lives...then in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25, 26). However mysterious God's will may be, it discloses that he was on Job's side.

God may not still all the storms that face us, but he will still the storms in our hearts. At Gethsemane, Jesus showed us the truest goal of prayer. He asked that the cup of suffering be taken away. Then, he concluded his prayer with a phrase from the Our Father, that of "Thy will be done" (Mt 26:42).

LIVING THIS MESSAGE

If we don't pray we will not have a relationship with God. No prayer, no communication. A Christian's life without prayer is like a marriage in which the spouses fail to communicate with each other. It is like trying to have a friendship but never talking to one another. Prayer is the soul of faith, hope, and love. Such virtues require a daily dose of prayer.

Great saints spent many hours a day in prayer. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta often prayed more than three hours a day before the Blessed Sacrament. While our busy lives and responsibilities would not permit such large commitments of time to prayer, much can be accomplished by acquiring the habit of regular prayer. Many Catholics join the legions who attend daily Mass. Others give an hour a week to adoration of the Eucharist. A good number of Catholics set aside a half hour of quiet time each day with God, usually in the early morning hours.

Sense where God is leading you. Do not let a day go by without turning your heart to God. Let your heart surge to the divine and wait for the love of God to touch you.

DISCUSS THIS MESSAGE

What is my prayer life like and what should I do to improve it?

READ MORE ABOUT THIS MESSAGE

Catechism for Adults: Chapters 35 and 36, "God Calls Us to Pray," and "Jesus Taught Us to Pray," pages 461 – 495.