

How Busy People Pray

“Pray always.”¹

If we are to take Saint Paul’s words seriously, we see that there must be different forms of prayer; we can’t be on our knees or in church all the time. And given that fact, we are immediately invited to put these forms in some sort of order, starting with the method of prayer that is appropriate for beginners and progressing to contemplation, which mystics talk about. There is something else to note about prayer. Not only is there an ordering in the various ways in which we pray, but as one rises to higher forms he does not abandon the simpler ones. Consequently, the prayers of the proficient will include the same sort of prayer as beginners but now, of course, enriched by his fuller experience.

What are these stages of prayer? The most elementary is vocal prayer, i.e., repeating set forms such as the Our Father. The prayers at Mass would be another obvious instance of vocal prayer. And these, obviously, are the sorts of prayer that busy people can use. How long does it take to say an Our Father or a Hail Mary? And as Catholics we attend Mass every Sunday. All we have to do is listen to what the priest and the congregation are actually saying. For those who make more time for prayer, I might mention the Liturgy of the Hours, sometimes referred to as the Divine Office, a biblically based prayer which priests and religious say every day. You can see now what I meant when I said that the first level of prayer continues in use at all the other levels. No saint, however high he ascends towards God, ever abandons the prayers of the Mass or the Bible. In fact, properly used vocal prayer inevitably leads the devotee to the sublime heights of union with God. Having described how busy people pray, let us now examine what can happen to people who pray.

First, one comes to recognize that prayer of any sort of prayer is answering an invitation. God takes the initiative, and we respond: “We love [God], because he first loved us.”² In this simple statement we have the best rationale for using set prayers, *viz.*, that they have been given to us by God. This statement is most obviously true with regard to the Divine Office and the Mass, both of which make us of the hymnal of God’s people, the Psalms. At Mass the responsorial Psalm is often hardly noticed, but such is not the case in the Liturgy of the Hours, which is essentially a recitation of the Book

¹ 1 Thess 5.17

² 1 Jn 4.19.

of Psalms over a four-week period. Five times a day a selection of psalms is recited—or chanted—complemented by readings from other parts of the Bible. Over the centuries, this simple format has been expanded by the introduction of prayers and hymns, some of which are supremely beautiful. With the near-universal use of the vernacular, these have largely been lost, but the *Vexilla regis* and the *Æterne rerum conditor*, e.g., retain their power wherever Latin is still known and honoured. The point, however, is that the Psalms, as part of the Bible, are inspired. They have been given to us by God so that, when we pray them, we are certain of being heard. This is praying as God himself wants us to pray; the deeper we move into the sentiments there expressed the more we are in tune with God’s will for mankind. Let us, therefore, take a moment to examine the characteristics of these inspired canticles.

First of all they are poetry, and consequently they use highly charged, dramatic language. Consider this powerful metaphor from Psalm 128/129:

Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me. The ploughers ploughed upon my back; they made their furrows long.

Can you imagine a more vivid way of describing the misery of oppression? Or consider this passage from Ps 106/107 describing a storm at sea. (To appreciate the full effect of this passage you should remember that the Hebrews were landlubbers.)

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded, and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits’ end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

The conventions of Hebrew poetry are different from ours. Instead of rhythm and rhyme, it uses repetition with variation. We have already had an instance of this device, in Psalm 128/129 quoted above. It begins, “The ploughers ploughed upon my back.” Then it repeats the idea in different words: “they made their furrows long.” One can open the book of Psalms at

random to illustrate this poetic device. Here's a quotation from Psalm 94/95: "O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!" Here the basic idea—praising God—is repeated four times over. The most striking instance of repetitive variation is found in Psalm 118/119. With 176 verses, it's the longest Psalm in the book, and each verse celebrates the beauty and power of God's law: "In the way of thy *testimonies* I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on thy *precepts*, and fix my eyes on thy ways. I will delight in thy *statutes*; I will not forget thy *word*."

We may call this device intensification by repetition. It is connected with the use of metaphor that I mentioned above. The Bible uses metaphor because God, as transcendent is unknowable in himself. A metaphor provides some hint of what God is like. "He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly moved,"³ for instance, is a way of approaching God's providential care for his people. Or consider the famous opening to the 22nd (23rd) Psalm, which conveys the same idea in a very different manner: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." Another way of saying something similar is found in Psalm 120/121: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the LORD who made heaven and earth."⁴ We need a variety of metaphors to represent the unfathomable richness of the divine reality, and the Bible is abundant in its providing what we need to pray well. In other words, the prayers set down in the Bible express and inform our understanding of God.

In the Psalms, Scripture also addresses a variety of topics. We express sorrow for having offended God: "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD! LORD, hear my voice!"⁵ We ask for mercy when we are contrite: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!"⁶ We rejoice in the greatness of God: "Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful!"⁷ There is another sort of Psalm that does not come easily to our lips.⁸ I'm thinking of those in which the Psalmist lays claim to an absolute innocence. Consider this phrase from Psalm 25/26, which has parallels in many other Psalms: "Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked

³ Ps 161/162.2.

⁴ Ps 120/121.

⁵ Ps 190/130.

⁶ Ps 50/51.2.

⁷ Ps 149.

⁸ Nor do the "cursing Psalms," such as Psalm 108/109 and the end of Psalm 136/137, come easily to our lips, but I defer discussion of them.

in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. . . . I walk in faithfulness to thee.” Who could that utterly virtuous person possibly be? As I raise the question, I am sure that one figure comes immediately to mind, namely our Saviour, Jesus Christ. He is the innocent one surrounded by enemies who unjustly attack: “Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me gall for food, and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.”⁹ Saint Matthew himself instructs us to recognize Christ in this Psalm: “And when they came to a place called Golgotha . . . they offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.”¹⁰ Thus do the Psalms provide us with the key to the Christian reading of the Old Testament. We read the Bible backwards, starting with Jesus and interpreting what preceded his coming among us in the light of his words and actions.

Using the book of Psalms teaches us a fundamental principle of all prayer, viz., repetition. It also shows us that there are two ways of repeating. The first is what I have called repetition with variation, i.e., saying the same thing in different words. The second is to use the same words, but varying our attitude each time we repeat them. If you think about it, you can see that to say the same phrase twice is not the same as saying it once. “I love you”—or “I hate you”—repeated gains tremendously in intensity. That is why we say “Lord have mercy” over and over again at the beginning of Mass. We really mean it or, at least, we should. Similarly, we repeat, “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us” at Communion because we need that purification before daring to receive the host. There are also many prayers that are the same in every Mass: “Lord have mercy,” “Holy, holy, holy,” the “Our Father,” and so on. To pray with the Church is to accept that these are sentiments that we can repeat over and over again without exhausting their meaning. Each time I attend Mass I bring a new way of understanding their significance for the Christian life, just as each year, at Christmas or Easter, say, I am a different person responding to the announcement of Christ’s coming or of his saving death and resurrection.

The elementary method of prayer—vocal prayer in set forms—can be compared to a theory of education that was popular at one time, although I don’t know if it’s still in vogue: spiral learning. The idea was to have the student come back to the same topic, but each time at a deeper level. God’s

⁹ Ps 68/69.

¹⁰ Matt 27.33-34.

education is of that sort. We know, for instance, that Scripture describes several covenants between God and man: with Adam and Eve, with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and finally, the new covenant in Christ Jesus. Each covenant has its peculiarities, but also similarities that mark the ongoing involvement of God with his people; a covenant is a covenant. Our prayer should imitate this divine method of dealing with mankind, in that we approach the same topics, address the same needs using the same words, but going more deeply into the relationship God has established with me in Jesus. Consider something as simple and commonplace as blessing ourselves with holy water when we enter a church. It's a symbolic renewal of my baptism, when water was used to welcome me into *the* Church, capital C. We bless ourselves; the cross reminds us of Jesus dying on the cross, and the words, which refer to the Trinity, invite us to reflect on the mystery of the one God—Father, Son, and Spirit—who was revealed to us in Christ Jesus. Both of these—the cross and the Trinity—are inexhaustible mysteries that invite the sort of reflection that leads their sensitive user to higher forms of prayer, such as the prayer of quiet.

People who pray will find themselves moving beyond repeating prayers into other, highly personal forms of prayer. I mean something different from the gasp for divine aid that desperate individuals will send up, something like the sailor lost at sea who prayed, “O God, I haven't bothered you for forty years. Get me out of this, and I won't bother you for another forty.” A *habit* of prayer leads one to spending more time in prayer, combined with a personalizing of, especially, the Psalms of praise. The culmination of this spiritual journey, reached for some mystics here on earth and by everyone who enters heaven, is the prayer of union.¹¹ Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross remain the honoured guides into these exalted regions. ❧

¹¹ Father Jonathan Robinson of the Toronto Oratory has written an excellent book on prayer: *On the Lord's Appearing*. Information about it is available in the IDEAS file under the title “A Book Review.”