

Prayer . . . Some Helpful Hints

How to Begin

Begin your prayer in the following ways:

- *Choose a good time, place, and posture.* It is helpful to choose a place where you can be quiet and undisturbed. Many find it helpful to light a candle or have a crucifix, picture of Jesus or Mary or some other object to help focus their attention in a prayerful way.
- *Quiet and centre yourself.* Focusing on and being aware of your breathing can help you focus. Let your breathing relax and centre you and draw you into your interior space.
- *Be aware that you are in God's presence* that God is within you, in your interior space and all around you, much as the air you breathe.
- *Ask for the grace you seek,* for example, gratitude, sorrow for sins, growing intimacy with Jesus, guidance in dealing with a problem, or greater self-acceptance.

Continue with one of the following prayer methods that suits you best.

Informal, spontaneous prayer

- Slow down.
- Get in touch with what is going on inside of you: your feelings, thoughts, and concerns. Let these rise up within you as you relax.
- Pray from these feelings – whether they are gratitude, love, sadness, joy, anxiety, anger, or excitement. Talk with God or Jesus about what you are feeling and let them respond to you. Carry on a conversation as with your best friend.

Imaginative prayer

Examples are:

- Imagine yourself in a relaxed place in the presence of Jesus. Imagine what Jesus looks like and what it feels like to be in his presence. Then have a conversation with Jesus.
- Imagine yourself being lovingly embraced by Jesus.
- Imagine yourself in the scene of a scripture passage.

Praying with Scripture

- Pick a scene from one of the Gospels and imaginatively put yourself into the scene. Imagine the sights, sounds, smells, people, and things in the scene. Then imagine yourself as part of the scene either as an observer or as one of the characters in the scene. You can dialogue with the characters in the scene or with God about what is going on in the scene.
- Select a scripture passage from one of the Gospels, epistles, psalms or other books of the Bible. Then slowly read through the passage and notice what strikes you or affects you in some way. Then talk with Jesus or Mary about the Passage. Reflect on what the passage has to say to you or what God might be trying to say to you through this passage.

Spiritual Reading (lectio divina)

Read a spiritual book or Scripture slowly and reflectively. The four levels of prayer are lectio (reading), meditatio (reflecting), oratio (responding), and contemplatio (resting).

Journaling

Examples are:

- Write a letter to God. Then write God's response to you.

- Write a dialogue with Jesus, first writing your part and then Jesus' response, etc.
- Write your thoughts, reactions, insights, inspirations, and feelings, how you are moved, as you pray or after you pray.

Prayer of simple presence

Sometimes there are not many words or thoughts in your prayer. You simply feel God's presence and love and your love for God. Just as you can be with a good, long-time friend and not need many words, but just be together in silence, so you can be this way with God or Jesus as you grow in love of God.

Examination of Consciousness (the "Examen")

This is a method of prayerfully reflecting on your life and your day.

- Start by asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to reflect honestly on your day.
- Recall the gifts and blessings of your day, what you are grateful for, and give God thanks.
- Reflect on how God has been present in the events, experiences, encounters, and emotions of your day. How did you meet Jesus in the people and events of your day? How did God call you to respond in these encounters?
- How did you respond to these opportunities and calls that God gave you? How did you respond to Jesus in the people God put in your path today?
- Let God know that you are sorry for the times that you did not respond well to these calls and opportunities.
- Reflect on what particular way God is calling you to grow at this time.
- Ask for God's help to find Jesus in your experience and encounters and hear God's call to you during the following day and respond to them.

- Get in touch with a hurt within you that needs healing. It might be an experience of rejection by someone important to you – a parent, sibling, close friend or mentor. It might be an area of sinfulness in your life. It might be a disappointment or an inner insecurity, self-doubt, loneliness, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, discouragement, or addiction.
- Take this hurt to God and tell Him exactly how it feels – the pain, anger, resentment, fear, or regret. Share these feelings with God. Let God or Jesus comfort you in your pain. Let Jesus comfort you as a friend or God comfort you as your loving parent. Let Jesus hold you; embrace you in your pain.
- If the hurt involves a present or past relationship, imagine what you want to say to the person who hurt you. You could write that person a letter expressing your hurt, disappointment, and anger and then talk with God about what you wrote.

The following considerations might help you in forgiving this person:

Have you ever done anything to anyone similar to what this person did to you? If you have, this could help you feel compassion for the other person.

Can you understand why the other person might have done what they did to you? Perhaps they were acting, consciously or unconsciously, out of their own hurt, fear, or pent-up anger. Having empathy and compassion for the, while not excusing their behaviour, can help you understand and forgive them and let go of the grudge and the hurt.

- What can you learn from this painful experience? How can you grow from it? Perhaps it will help you be more compassionate and understanding with other people's pain and make you a more caring person and a more empathetic listener.
- Finally, turn the hurt over to Jesus for healing, and let go of the hurt. Move on, learning and growing from the experience.

Using a Mantra

Repeat a word or phrase with each breath. You could use the ancient “Jesus Prayer,” repeating with each breath the phrase: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Repeat the first half while inhaling and the second half of the phrase while exhaling.

Or you could use a shortened form of this by simply repeating the word “Jesus” with each breath. You could also make up your own phrase that comes to you in prayer such as “Jesus, I love you” or use a phrase from Scripture such as “Fear is useless: what is needed is trust” or “The Lord is my strength.”

Traditional types of prayer

- Mental Prayer, sometimes called meditation, involves reflecting upon a Scripture passage or other reading such as a daily meditation to see what strikes you in the passage, what insights it might give you. Meditation or mental prayer, as the names suggest, focuses more on mental activity that leads to insights.
- Affective Prayer is prayer from the heart and feelings. It involves less mental activity and more affective movements of the heart such as gratitude, love, sorrow for sins, and praise.
- Other traditional divisions of the types of prayer are: adoration/praise, gratitude, petition, sorrow for sins, and love. It is good for all of these five types to be part of your prayer at different times to make your prayer life full and balanced.

Distractions

A common difficulty in prayer is distraction, namely, thoughts and feelings that distract you from your prayer focus.

- Sometimes these seeming distractions can and should be incorporated into your prayer. If something is bothering you or are concerned to you like a test, a troubling relationship, all the things you need to do, or a feeling of being pressured and stressed, then perhaps that is exactly what God wants you to be praying about. You can talk with God about what is concerning you and make this a part of your prayer. After all, God cares about you and what you care about.

- At other times, distractions are just that. Your mind might be jumbled or scattered. You might be stuck on the surface of things. At these times various centering techniques can be helpful. Or, you can simply acknowledge your distracted state to God and turn your distractedness over and ask God to calm and focus you. Journaling can be helpful or re-reading the passage you are praying over. Many find it helpful to use a candle, crucifix, picture of Jesus or Mary, an icon, a statue, or something else to help focus their attention in prayer. Some find it helpful to pray before the Blessed Sacrament in a chapel or church as a tangible, sacramental way to experience Jesus' presence. Some find listening to music helpful. Many find praying the rosary helpful, and some listening to meditation tapes.

Final Thoughts

Even when not much seems to be happening in your prayer and you do not seem to be getting anything out of it, there is a benefit to putting in the time to pray. The desire and the effort to pray are in themselves a prayer pleasing to God. You will be reaping benefits not obvious at the moment.

Some of the great saints and mystics throughout Church history experienced long periods when their prayer seemed very dry, desolate and unrewarding. But in due time, they grew very close to God, and their lives were taken over by God.

So, do not give up! These times of dryness in prayer can be important times of testing and the purification of your motives. Are you praying just for the good feeling or because you love and want to spend time with God and grow in your relationship with Jesus? Patience is important in prayer.

The great saints of our Catholic tradition as well as all people serious about growing in their spiritual lives have found that in order to grow in their prayer and their relationship with God, a person must set aside quality time for prayer on a regular, daily basis and not just fit it in haphazardly. **As in any relationship, to grow in your relationship with God entails making this relationship, and therefore prayer, a priority.**

You do not have to concentrate or think a lot when you pray. As noted above, there are many different ways to pray. Some are more active, involving a fair amount of mental activity, and others are more simple and affective.

In our Catholic tradition, some find it helpful to pray to a saint such as Mary and ask this saint to intercede for them with God.

Prayer is an adventure. To grow in relationship with God, to let God more fully into your life, to try to listen to what God is saying to you and hear the call of Jesus in your life entails giving up control and going wherever God leads you. This is risky, scary and fun! Enjoy!

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