

CATHOLIC TIMES, JULY 9, 2017

People talk a lot about prayer. But what do we know or understand about prayer? Do we, as believers, enjoy a sense of confidence about ourselves as praying people?

In the seminary I was warned against saying — as many, apparently, were accustomed to say — “My work is my prayer.” The priesthood I was preparing for certainly has its share of “workaholics.” Indeed, numerous people tend to define themselves by their work.

But God does not define us by our work. We are all called to take pride in our ability to make a living and to contribute to society. But, having mastered the skills necessary for whatever may be our “job,” we are then called by our God to look beyond activities which can be externally verified, and proceed to look within ourselves.

We are called to discover our “identity.” It was popular, some decades ago, to take the term “identity crisis” and joke around with it. People considered it a joke, I suppose, because it was held that people who did not know who they “were” were absurd. How can you not know who you are?

But an “identity crisis” is a very real thing. Indeed, it is necessary that every one of us discover that it is not enough merely to suppose that we are only the sum total of the things we do.

From our daily work which is seen by few, to the performance of public officials, we find many occasions for witnessing a great defensiveness which creeps into human affairs. If we are criticized for how we carry out the tasks before us, we find ourselves nursing an attitude which could be verbalized as “Oh yeah? Well, I’ll show you!”

It is a great gift, held out to every one of us, to discover within ourselves an identity which goes deeper than the mere evaluation of ourselves by the supposed quality of our “performance.” As we look within ourselves, we acknowledge that each of us has a variety of qualities — some of which may be termed admirable, others less so.

We are fortunate that our relationship with our God is not founded upon our ability to be admired. God *loves* us — and love is quite a different thing from admiration. Admiration says: I am pleased with your “good” attributes. Love says: I value and accept you as you are, even in your less-than-desirable aspects.

We have a hard time believing that God could love us in this way — for, in fact, we have a hard time loving ourselves. If God so loves us, maybe we could find room in our hearts for a genuine love of ourselves.

My daily prayer is largely based on the Psalms, as these songs of the Jerusalem Temple have been esteemed as a fundamental “language” of prayer in Judaism and Christianity. The psalm book I was given on entering the seminary introduced its contents by proclaiming: “The Psalms are a series of shouts.” These prayers, in other words, are loaded with feeling. And no feeling is out of bounds. Grief, anger, and joy: all are legitimate starting-points for prayer.

It is my intention to return to the theme of prayer in future columns. There is so much for us to explore.

You may be interested in knowing that the next Parliament of the World’s Religions has been scheduled for November 1 through 7, 2018, in Toronto. See parliamentofreligions.org.

CATHOLIC TIMES, SEPTEMBER 3, 2017

Over the past 42 years since I entered the seminary, I have had plenty of occasions for considering what prayer is. I was instructed that a priest is a “man of prayer.” How to become such a person was less clear to me.

I discovered, some years ago, a discussion of prayer which I have found eminently practical. The source was one of the “Little Books” of the Diocese of Saginaw, Michigan. People in many of the parishes of our diocese are familiar with this series which, perhaps most notably, takes us through the days of Lent and Easter with daily “six-minute meditations.”

The material in these books originated with a Bishop of Saginaw, Ken Untener, who died in 2004. I have found his reflections on prayer to be so useful that I have copied them into my four volumes of the Liturgy of the Hours — the official daily prayer of the Catholic Church.

Bishop Untener takes note of six different kinds of prayer: devotional or verbal (that is, prayer using words), *lectio divina* or “divine reading” (reflection upon the Word of God in the Bible), meditation (thinking), prayer of the heart (feeling), active contemplation (between thinking and simply being), and infused contemplation (simply being).

We may look at these various methods of prayer, suppose that some are better than others, and decide to aim for these supposedly superior degrees of prayer.

We must, however, reflect on our communication with God in light of our communication with one another. We may despise “small talk,” supposing that a very deep conversation is the only sort of worthwhile exchange with someone. But how do we get to deep conversation? We have to start with the ordinary sort of conversation which occurs when people get acquainted. There is no escaping “small talk.”

So we should not be surprised if, in trying to be in prayerful communion with God, we spend most of our time in “verbal or devotional” prayer, which may be considered the “small

talk” of prayer. We get acquainted with God by allowing a “conversation” of sorts to be fueled by words with which we are presented in our public prayer: most notably, the Eucharist or Mass.

In addition to my schedule of Masses, I pray the Liturgy of the Hours every day. These official prayers of the Church put us in contact with a great deal of the Bible. The Liturgy of the Hours has as its core the Book of Psalms, which, as I noted in my July column, may be understood as “a series of shouts” by which you and I develop a vocabulary for conversing with our God.

We may consider, for instance, some lines from Psalm 88, which is characterized as one of the most gloomy offerings of the Temple songbook. It ends with the speaker, a person beset with illness, saying, “My one companion is darkness.” But consider these lines:

*Will you work your wonders for the dead?
Will the shades stand and praise you?
Will your love be told in the grave
or your faithfulness among the dead?
Will your wonders be known in the dark
or your justice in the land of oblivion?*

Not only are we given a “vocabulary” by which to express our deepest anxieties; it also seems that we are learning to pray by *taunting* God! Here we find words which prepare us for the gift of resurrection and eternal life in union with the Son, our Savior.

Becoming a “person of prayer” requires that we be filled with words, most not of our own devising, by which we discover how to verbalize our anxieties and find an attitude of trust before the mysteries of God.

CATHOLIC TIMES, OCTOBER 29, 2017

Returning now to a survey of kinds of prayer, I am taking a look at “divine reading,” or, if you like the Latin expression, *lectio divina*.

This is essentially a process of spending time with portions of the Bible. We may find it forbidding to contemplate a journey through the Scriptures. We may suppose that Biblical literature is so vast and varied that we cannot help but become utterly disoriented when we try to explore the literature on our own.

[In the previous column], when I wrote on devotional and verbal prayer, I took special note of the Psalms. These 150 compositions for Temple worship give us a variety of expressions of deep human feeling. The Psalms are in fact a good starting point for anyone who wants to develop an appreciation for Sacred Scripture.

Psalm 88, as I noted then, is considered one of the most dismal of all of the one hundred and fifty. The speaker of the psalm reports being alone and abandoned, crying out: “My one companion is darkness.” Even so, the speaker engages in a controversy with God, arguing about the goodness and eternity of God and “taunting” God by asking, “Will you work your wonders for the dead? Will the shades stand and praise you?”

I find Psalm 127 to be a much-needed reminder to me of my human limits. “In vain is your earlier rising, your going later to rest, you who toil for the bread you eat, when he pours gifts on his beloved while they slumber.” I truly honor my relationship with God when I heed the fact that the Creator is the unlimited one, and that I am the limited creature.

We Catholic Christians, in our regular worship, are exposed to the Sacred Scriptures in a most dynamic way, as we hear the Word of God proclaimed, Sunday after Sunday. We might think of each Sunday’s Scriptures as a “window” by which we can behold a great deal of the depth and beauty of the Bible.

This weekend, we hear Jesus being questioned about the essence of the law by which human beings are to live. Jesus takes two statements from different parts of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) and brings them together in a dynamic juxtaposition. Love of God (Deuteronomy 6: 5) is joined with love of neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19: 18).

We must ask ourselves: What does it mean to have a genuine love for ourselves? Self-indulgence and narcissism are caricatures of true self-love. Can we not bring ourselves to imagine a God’s-eye view of ourselves, along the lines of a parent’s regard for a child? Honest self-love allows us to look upon the “neighbor” as another self. We develop empathy toward the neighbor. And then we consider the God who loves both of us. We respond lovingly to the God who gives us the ability to love.

If we spend some time with the Word of God, allowing the meaning of the Word to sink into the depths of our awareness, we will find ourselves at peace in the discovery of the God who simply calls us to be secure in his love.

CATHOLIC TIMES, JANUARY 7, 2018

Thus far, in surveying types of prayer with the help of Bishop Ken Untener’s discussion in the “Little Books” of the Diocese of Saginaw, I have looked at verbal prayer and prayer which is essentially reflection on reading the Sacred Scriptures.

Before moving into meditation (thinking), I want to consider an activity which contains elements of reading and thinking.

The idea of *journaling* may seem to be forbidding. One may suppose that journaling means committing to filling up a space on some page, day after day, world without end. We could imagine it to be a sort of self-imposed torture.

But in fact, writing about what seems unresolved in one's mind and heart can be quite a liberating experience. A habit of journaling is an opportunity to get the jumble of one's thoughts "out in the open," as it were. A journal, of course, is for the journaler's eyes alone. It is a privileged space for offering one's anxieties to God.

I began a period of several years of journaling when I was 23 years old. Like most people that age, I was trying to figure myself out. I was about to make a long journey by train. I stress that, back in 1980, prior to the current Age of "Connectedness" (this word is in quotes because of the irony of our current exposure to so much information and so little insight), a train trip was an ideal chance to be alone with one's thoughts and, indeed, to be able to place those thoughts before God. I brought with me an old spiral notebook and I began to write.

I can remember writing, right at the start, about my concern that journaling would make me overly introspective. But then I noted that I could not imagine being any more introspective than I was at that time, and that journaling certainly couldn't hurt.

Not only did journaling not hurt — it in fact became the occasion for me to let my imagination run freely and to make connections between my professed faith and the many people and situations which populated my life. For any Christian, I believe, putting anxieties into writing places one on the path to an appreciation of the gift of the Son of God who, in embracing human existence as it is, has made himself our servant as we seek to let ourselves receive his love.

I have not engaged in journaling for many, many years now. One reason for this is that I enjoy a variety of friendships wherein I find that I can easily share things from obscure corners of my spirit. I also find that my prayer is more spontaneous than it had been. The repeated words of the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours have become for me a "vocabulary" for prayer. The habitual repeating of these words allows me to "inhabit" the words so that they become my own expression of what's in my heart.

If you think that journaling might be good for you, keep in mind that, in many respects, there's nothing to it. An old notebook, a few pens, and silence — these are all you need. (Electronic devices may also be used.) You are not writing for publication. You are giving yourself a gift. As you do so, prepare yourself to be showered with gifts from our God, who is supremely eager to manifest his loving presence.

CATHOLIC TIMES, MARCH 4, 2018

First, a few words about Billy Graham.

I can remember that, in my youth, I would hear the Rev. Graham and others speaking about “accepting Jesus as your personal Savior.” My reaction was to think that salvation was taken care of by my being part of a “system” of salvation — the Catholic Church. I would wonder, “What’s this *personal* business?”

The better we know our Christianity, the more easily we see that *everything* is personal. A personal God entered into human existence. In our baptism, we were united with the personal sacrifice of Jesus. The vitality of our faith depends upon the cultivation of our personal bond with our Savior.

At some time in the late 1980s, a Billy Graham crusade (without the Rev. Graham’s presence) came to Springfield, and I offered an opening prayer at the convention center one evening. Those who made a “decision for Christ” were encouraged to be in touch with a local church — and Catholic churches were envisioned as being in the mix. I remain grateful for the Rev. Graham’s openness to Christians of all traditions, and to members of other world religions.

Surveying different kinds of prayer, I come now to *meditation*. The word itself may scare us off. We may imagine deep silence, in isolation, for long periods of time.

In fact, meditation can be equated with a mental operation with which we are all familiar — *thinking!*

We may underestimate our capacity for thinking, although, obviously, we think throughout our waking hours.

We may tell ourselves that, for instance, the thought involved in getting up in the morning and finding our way to work is nothing to marvel at. We suppose that real thinkers constantly produce original thoughts at lightning speed.

In fact, thinking is a slow process. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), in his *Summa Theologiae*, frequently refers to human thinking as a “discursive” process. By that he means that we proceed from one mental object to another, just as one takes a walk: step by step. A more recent Church thinker, Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984), has shed light on the “insights” we are sometimes fortunate to have, as our minds lead us non-systematically to new understanding — as if, for instance, our walking would suddenly bring us to a vista at which various images or thoughts come together and we grasp something utterly new. We just have to remember that we can’t plan an insight, which is *gift* in its plainest form.

When it comes to prayer, Saint Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) gave us a tremendous gift in his *Spiritual Exercises*, which lead the meditating person to consider various events from the Gospels as we ask ourselves how we are to respond to the divine love portrayed in these events.

Let's compare the thought process we must go through when we intend to cook a favorite dish. We have done this before, but of course we must go through the mental steps. Do I have all the ingredients? What do I do first?

Likewise, when we think about our relationship with God, we step through a number of familiar places. We stay with the thought that God is love. We consider the ways in which we have rejected this love. We give thanks for the grace which has moved us to seek forgiveness. We ask ourselves: How do we respond to the love which has saved and healed us? We very likely find ourselves strengthened in our dedication to our various commitments of love.

Meditation allows us a refreshing walk through the truths which it has pleased God to reveal to us over many years. Don't be deterred by those who accuse you of being "off in space." You are thinking. You are enjoying the truths which have anchored your life in God. These truths move you to do very practical things with your life.

CATHOLIC TIMES, APRIL 29, 2018

Two weekends ago I enjoyed two different cultural efforts: a concert by the Heartland Community Chorus at St. Jerome Church in Troy (this concert was repeated at Highland St. Paul), and the performance of *Annie Jr.* by the Drama Club of St. John Neumann School in Maryville.

Over many years, I have learned to appreciate the skills and attention needed to sing and act effectively. As a presider at worship, of course, I am always putting my singing into service. And although it has been 20 years since I last performed in a theatrical production, the proclamation of the Word of God always calls for a sense of drama.

The major surprise to me in my years of effort in these arts has been this: It is never enough merely to know one's lines or lyrics and simply rattle them off. One's performance is never complete until there is an appreciation for the feeling which makes a particular piece of music or drama worth performing. The performer must be united with the feeling which the author of the work intends to express.

In my survey of the various kinds of prayer, I come now to what is called "prayer of the heart." Whereas previously we have looked at prayer which calls for words or thinking, prayer of the heart is how we pray through our feelings.

Feelings, of course, are not necessarily valued highly in our day and age. And this is unfortunate. I am thankful to have been led to an appreciation of my feeling life. I understand

that feelings such as anger, fear, and love are my spontaneous response to the immediate situations I find myself in. These feelings are precious; they represent my personal investment in my life here and now. Of course they are a basis for prayer.

Anger is the prelude to asking what is wrong, and how I can set things right. Fear speeds me up or slows me down to make good decisions. Love leads me to want to understand and appreciate the people I love.

Feelings, as we know, can be “messy.” Acknowledging them means that we concede our limits and vulnerability. We feel precisely because we are at the mercy of things we cannot control or subdue.

So I have been grateful for St. Paul’s discussion of prayer as “groaning,” as we find in the eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans. Paul writes that God the Holy Spirit “intercedes with inexpressible groanings.” When we find that words are inadequate, groaning may well seem to be the right thing for us to do. How liberating it is to recognize that our groaning is united with the groaning of the Holy Spirit!

It has been said that the Psalms, the prayer book of the Temple of Jerusalem, are “a series of shouts.” Jesus, from the cross, prayed “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”; this is the beginning of Psalm 22. At Mass, the singing of that day’s psalm is perhaps the prime opportunity for “prayer of the heart.”

So, yes, we can take whatever feeling we are experiencing, and we can allow that feeling to direct our prayer. In addition to groaning, we may find ourselves moved to tears. St. Teresa of Avila wrote about “the gift of tears,” which may well be the most vivid example of a state in which words are replaced by a feeling of being caught up in inexpressible wonder.

Jesus was pleased to experience the entire spectrum of feeling which you and I experience. He did not shun these feelings; neither must we. Prayer of the heart is far from neat and tidy. Even so, it is an utterly honest cry to our God as we live out our life’s mystery.

CATHOLIC TIMES, JUNE 24, 2018

In our review of various forms of prayer, it is time to consider *active contemplation*.

You and I live in an age in which images of all kinds are presented to us. We are accustomed to turning to movies or television and being immersed in images of all manner of human activity.

The prayer we call “active contemplation” truly depends on our activity. Most of the time, our viewing of images is passive: we accept what is presented to us. Contemplation, on the

other hand, demands of us that we take some information (most often, from reading) and allow our imagination to act on that information.

I am nearing the end of reading the third and final autobiography of Frederick Douglass, an escapee from slavery who became a most effective abolitionist leader in the years leading up to the Civil War. Douglass has a powerful life's story, and is likewise a powerful writer. I was particularly affected by his accounts of his encounters with the radical abolitionist John Brown, and with Abraham Lincoln as he presided over the war which ended slavery.

I could not help asking myself: What is it like to be in the presence of someone who, having ideals similar to one's own, proposes to take a violent course in order to offer oneself to those ideals? And what is it like to be in the presence of one who, charged with the direction of an entire nation torn apart, has a profound moral weight pressing upon him?

You may yourself read these recollections of Frederick Douglass in his autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1893 edition). I offer these examples, noting that our reading of Sacred Scripture likewise affords us opportunities to imagine ourselves in the presence of Jesus and the people he was associated with, as we consider the concrete, personal events in the life of the Savior of humanity.

The coming summer days afford us opportunities to enjoy our homes and the immediate outdoors. If we look steadily at our own domestic circumstances, no matter how humble, we can move ourselves into a consideration of the Holy Family, and the interactions of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as the child Jesus grew up.

We can easily picture this family in the midst of various activities, most of them not so different from those we experience. We imagine carpenter's work, kitchen tasks, Mary and Joseph teaching Jesus to pray, and the interactions of this family with their neighbors.

We know that, alongside familiar activities, we find an inescapable tension in this family. This tension, as we know, is most dramatically expressed at the time of the finding of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple, and his response to Mary and Joseph that they should obviously expect him to be in his Father's house.

We can take an incident from the Scriptures and let it lead us into active contemplation. We may find ourselves considering what it would be like to be a witness to these events — or what it would be like to *be* one of the people in the scene we're contemplating.

We can easily enter into active contemplation. We have the Scriptures we hear every Sunday at Mass. We also can pick up our own Bible and embark on the adventure of being present in the events of humanity's salvation.

CATHOLIC TIMES, AUGUST 19, 2018

Beginning with the *Catholic Times* of September 3, 2017, I have been presenting a series, in every other column, more or less, on the varieties of prayer. The descriptions by the late Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, published in the various “Little Books” of that diocese, have proven to me to be especially practical, and I have made their listings of kinds of prayer my framework for exploring our communion with our God.

In this column I come to the last type of prayer listed by Bishop Untener: “infused contemplation,” which he describes as “being captivated by the presence of God.” Whereas “active contemplation” can be described as “between thinking and simply being,” “infused contemplation” is “simply being.”

We may suppose that infused contemplation is so simple that we can easily get it wrong. We all know that we can attach needless complications to things which are in fact simple. It is helpful to us to recognize the various complications of life and how wearying they are, and our consequent hunger for simplicity in being aware of the always uplifting presence of our God.

Believe it or not, it is my position that our liturgical practices can move us into infused contemplation. If we think about all the words which are used when we come together for the Eucharist, we may suppose that the words are a barrier to simplicity. But it is my experience that, when we are involved in ritual, the familiar words can recede to the background as we find ourselves simply present to the action of Jesus in giving us his Body and Blood.

Of course, the word “infused” reminds us that this sort of simplicity before God is the gift of God himself. We don’t “capture” God; instead we are “captivated” by him.

We may tend to think of this state of contemplation as a solitary experience, and understandably so. We are all in different mental states at any given time. If we are seeking simply to “be” with our God, the people around us may provide “noise” which is not conducive to our stillness before the Lord.

On the other hand, people gathered for worship can provide mutual reinforcement of the desire to simply abide with God. We help one another to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46: 11a).

How might we open ourselves more fully to being captivated by God? We remember the other kinds of prayer — verbal/devotional prayer, reading of the Word of God, meditation (including journaling: meditating by writing), prayer of the heart, and active contemplation — and recognize that all these methods prepare us for the joy of “simply being.”

I have offered these thoughts on prayer, not because of any expertise in prayer — and I dread the thought of anyone purporting to be such an “expert” — but rather because I believe that you and I are in the same state as the Twelve when they asked Jesus, “Teach us to pray” (Luke 11: 1). Jesus gave a summary of the objects of prayer, including “Your will be

done” — something with which even Jesus struggled as he faced his passion and death. Prayer is always the gateway to a deeper conversion. We never master prayer. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, prayer is always an encounter with “thou mastering me God!” Let us open our being in prayer and allow our God to challenge us and give us peace.

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