

3rd Sunday in Advent C + 15 December 2024

So far in our Pray and Prepare Advent program, we have considered why we pray, and two methods for how to pray: through relational prayer, and through the discernment of the movements of the soul. This week, we are going to consider how to get beyond some of the difficulties in prayer, such as distractions and inconsistency. One way to do this is to have a particular *focus* for your prayer, using the Word of God. This kind of prayer is known as *Lectio Divina*, or divine reading. One of the temptations we face in prayer is just sitting there and thinking, that is, just being stuck in my own mind, when the “goal” of prayer, so to speak, communion with God. Prayer should always be centered on, and directed towards God. This is why we said earlier that prayer should always begin by acknowledging that we are in the presence of our loving heavenly Father.

Even more, we began our reflections on prayer by noting that our God is not an unknown deity. God has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, and has spoken to us in His holy Word—the Sacred Scriptures. Regarding the role that the Scriptures should have in our lives, the Fathers of 2nd Vatican Council wrote: “[We] earnestly and especially urge all the Christian faithful, to learn by **frequent reading** of the divine Scriptures the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ. For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ. And let them remember that **prayer should accompany the reading** of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine [words]” (*Dei Verbum* 25).

So how do we do this? Well first, a few preliminaries: it really helps to have a study Bible with footnotes, such as the excellent *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* (RSVCE). The next step is often the most difficult, and that is finding a Scripture passage to pray with, especially if you are not very familiar with the Scriptures. Here are 3 ideas to help here:

1st, following along with the daily readings of Mass is a good place to start, as they are chosen for us, and can be found online such as the USCCB website or in missalettes such as *Magnificat* or the *Word Among Us* (which we gave out at the beginning of Advent). Or, start with a small passage from one of the 4 Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Or, pray through the Psalms. The Psalms are called the “prayerbook of the Church,” and they relate to just about every human emotion and situation we experience. I might also add that just randomly opening the Bible and pointing to a verse is probably not a fruitful way to go.

Anyhow, once a passage is chosen, we can move into the time of Prayer. First, offer a prayer to the Holy Spirit (it can be as simple as “come Holy Spirit”), and slowly *read* the Scripture (**Lectio**) in a “contemplative calm.” Meaning, we should not be in a rush to “get something” out of our reading. Remember, the goal is not some measurable result, but communion with God. And as you read, pay attention to a word or a phrase that sticks out to you. You might want to write these down in a prayer journal. What’s amazing about this way of

prayerful reading is that what stands out to one person will likely be different than what stands out to another. That's the Holy Spirit at work, speaking to us as we need it!

Next is **Meditation**. You may find it helpful to imagine the scene. Are you drawn to a certain character or detail of the scene? If you are meditating on a Gospel passage, are you watching Jesus from afar like Zacchaeus, or does Jesus reach out to you, like the blind man? Using your imagination this way may seem a little different at first, but remember, our imagination is a gift from God, so we should not be afraid to use it to enter more deeply into His mysteries. If you are afraid that you will go off on an imaginative tangent, trust that the Holy Spirit will make you aware and bring you back to prayer.

Or, if you are more analytically minded, you can use your faculty of reason to dive deeper into the text. Such as, what is the meaning behind the words? What is left unsaid? How might Jesus have spoken the words: as a stern rebuke, a gentle encouragement, and so on. After a time of reflection on the Scriptures, bring it home. How might you apply this Scripture to your life? Does it speak to anything in your heart? Are there any concrete resolutions you want to make? **Talk to the Lord** (*Oratio*) about what the text has stirred within you. Ask Him to be present in any fear, doubt, restlessness, or confusion that you might be experiencing.

Next is **Contemplation**. Simply rest in the Lord. Let Him be your Father, your rock, your Redeemer. St. Gregory the Great says that contemplation "*is a flight in which the soul, going beyond the words of the text, enters into union with the divine Word in anticipation of heaven.*" The key here is to stay focused on God. This is the heart of prayer. It's kind of like taking in an awe-filled experience of nature: no words need to be said. Just receive, enjoy, savor the gift from Good God. After you give sufficient time to contemplation, write out a prayer of gratitude, of praise, or even of desire for more if you sense there is "unfinished business" in your prayer. Writing is very helpful, because most of us have short memories, and we so quickly forget the graces we receive—graces given to sustain us in difficult times.

As I mentioned earlier, during the upcoming week, much of our Pray and Prepare focus will be on stillness and quiet before God. We all know how hard this can be, especially these days in which we are bombarded with distractions and a world that tells us we must always be busy in order to have a meaningful life. That is simply not true. Rather, we must come to believe that prayer is the most "productive" thing we can do in time, because together with worship, it is the activity that most prepares us for eternity. And it is the prerequisite for the peace that everyone desires, but so eludes our times. As St. Paul says in our 2nd reading today from his letter to the Philippians: *The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*