

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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I. DISCOVERING PRAYER

It is a mistake to imagine that your prayer won't be answered unless you've something out of a book, some splendid formula of words, specially devised to meet this emergency. If that were so, I'm afraid I should be in a terribly bad position...no, I just do what children have to do before they've learnt to read. I tell God what I want quite simply, without any splendid turn of phrase, and somehow he always manages to understand me.

St Thérèse of Lisieux

You cannot teach anyone to pray, just as you cannot teach anyone to love. Both must be discovered within.

We don't learn to pray the way we learn a language, through grammars and textbooks. For prayer is knowledge not of a thing, but of a Person. It is not so much something we learn as something we become, something we already are. It is growth in relationship, in living, loving intimacy with a Friend.

Prayer is more a discovery than a task, more an adventure than a duty. It is a wish tuned Godwards, an unveiling of ourselves before him. It makes a pilgrim out of a wanderer.

Learning about God

Learning to pray is first of all learning about God: who he is, what he has told us about himself and about his love for us. Prayer always starts with God: for us prayer is a response.

How we approach God in prayer very much depends on our attitude to him. If God is for us a Father and a Friend, someone near to us, then our prayer will be childlike, warm and tender. If on the other hand he is for us a God of wrath and anger, a policeman and a judge, then our prayer can only be cold and distant, nothing but a burden and a duty.

Learning about ourselves

Learning to pray also means learning about ourselves: who we are, what we have received, what we can become. To pray is to release the infinite possibilities hidden within every human heart. To know ourselves as God knows us, to realise how we have been gifted by nature and grace is to break out automatically into prayer.



If prayer is a gift, it is one we have already received. Hidden within the heart of every Christian, given along with the gift of faith is the power to pray. 'Prayer' wrote St Gregory of Sinai, 'is the manifestation of our baptism'. We don't pray just to become holy; we pray because we are holy. 'Become what you are' is a basic principle of prayer and the ideal in all our relationships with God.

Prayer of the heart

There are times in our lives when we can't help praying, when prayer springs spontaneously from our heart: times of crisis and fear, when we automatically call out for help; times, too, of joy and happiness when we feel the need just to say thank you to Someone. But prayer is not only for these special moments. It is the leaven of life, our everyday food and drink. Prayer and life go hand in hand; the heartbeat of prayer is our daily living. Prayer reflects life, gathering it into a unity, giving it voice. Life, in turn, tests our prayer and gives it depth. Thus we pray as we live; we become what we pray.

Gospel prayers

Some people think that prayer is only for the perfect – a way of the saints. Certainly this is not the gospel teaching. The prayers that touched the heart of Christ were the prayers of ordinary simple folk, sinners most of them, like ourselves – the sick, the blind, the lepers, lost sheep and prodigal sons: 'Lord, have mercy ... Lord, have pity'; they were prayers of need, made in faith and trust.

For St Teresa of Avila prayer is a 'royal road'. She said this not because prayer is something exclusive or special but for the very reason that it is an 'open road', free and accessible to all, a road for saints and sinners alike. It is the Lord's own highway leading directly to his presence.

There is nothing professional about prayer. The only expert is the one who prays. St John Climacus expressed it beautifully when he wrote, 'Prayer is God's gift to those who pray'. It is a path that opens up only to those who walk along it. The most important disposition for prayer is to want to get in touch with God. To want to pray is in itself already a prayer.

Pray as you can

Too many people fret and worry over ways and methods of praying. Ultimately, there is only one way to pray – your way. Nothing is so personal as prayer and it should be as unique and special as the one who prays. There are as many ways of praying as there are people who pray. Prayer, like the way you talk or the way you walk, should be uniquely yours. 'No two people', St John of the Cross reminds us, 'walk more than half way on the same road to God'.



Each one has his or her own secret passageway to God and must have the courage to find it. Of nothing in life so much as prayer should we be able to say, 'I did it my way'.

We can spend a lot of time measuring our prayer and judging our progress. Yet prayer in itself is not the barometer of prayer. The only measuring rod of prayer is love and our willingness to share that love with others. Often when our prayer seems poorest in our own eyes, it may be the most precious in the eyes of God.

It is essential to realise, St Teresa remarks, that God does not lead us all along the same road. It may be that someone who thinks herself as going along the lowest road of all is the highest in the sight of God.

Sometimes it is more important to pray than to pray well, more acceptable to God that we just try to pray than that we actually realise that we are doing so.

In the whole world of prayer the practical advice of Dom John Chapman holds true: 'Pray as you can, not as you can't'. In other words, pray as you are, not as you wish you were; pray where you are, not from where you think you should be; pray as you can and not the way others have told you to.

The heart of prayer

Perhaps the most wonderful thing of all to remember about prayer is that God wants us to pray. He sends out the invitations, the door is open, the way prepared. If prayer is a dialogue, it is because God has already spoken and has said, 'Come, I need your love'. In prayer the heart is more important than the lips, the attitude of mind speaks louder than the words we use. It is the prayer behind the 'prayers' that matters, the unspoken prayer that only God can hear. Talking to God is not the same as talking about him; finding him yourself is different from hearing about him from others.

Prayer, then, is more than words. It is sharing – sharing your life with God. It is friendship – God and you together. Above all it is love – first discovering his love for you, and then your response. Prayer is saying 'yes' to God. And to God who has everything, it is the one thing that is ours to give. 'For me', said St Thérèse of Lisieux, 'prayer means a launching out of the heart towards God; a lifting up of one's eyes quite simply to heaven, a cry of grateful love, from the crest of joy or the trough of despair'.

Someone has rightly said that our lives are different from the day we discover prayer not as a last resort, but as a first resort.