

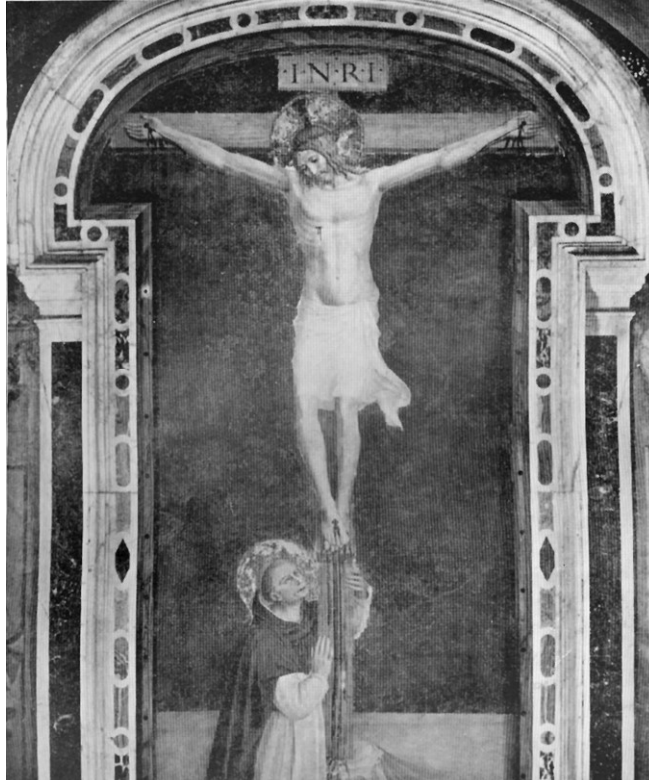
The Battle of Prayer

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ~ Romans 8:26

PRAYER is the raising of one's mind and heart to God¹ (CCC 2559). Prayer is our way of establishing a relationship with God, and this relationship with him is unique and personal for each of us. If we love someone, we look forward to being with, and creating opportunities to communicate with, the beloved. It is the same with God. The initial invitation comes from God as a gift, a grace bestowed on us by a loving God. He looks for ways and occasions to be available to us.

We, out of love for him, should look for times and ways to respond to him. Jesus tells us that we *“ought always to pray”* (Lk 18:1). He emphasizes that, apart from him, we *“can do nothing”* (Jn 15:5), but a lifting up in response to God's prompting requires a conscious effort on our part. Since God has given us free will, without us, *he* will do nothing.

We must first be aware of our own nothingness: we are totally dependent upon God. We must know that he, and he alone, can make Heaven possible for us. Yet Satan stands between us and God, and will do everything possible to keep us from even communicating with God. Life is truly a battle; we par-



The Crucifixion with St. Dominic, by Fra Angelico, 1587-1455

“No matter what form our prayer may take, we contend with obstacles placed in our way by Satan and the weaknesses of our own fallen nature.”

Distraction

Anyone who prays becomes aware of our proneness to distraction. The devil is surely at work and, if we have any true self-awareness, we know that our own human weakness is evident, for we *“do not do what [we] want”* (Rom 7:15) and we know that *“the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”* (Mt 26:41). While these wanderings of the mind cannot be excluded, we must counteract distractions as soon as

participate in the conflict between God and the powers of Hell. In this combat, prayer is a major weapon. Spending more time with God makes us more aware of his presence, strengthens us in virtue, and helps us avoid sin and its consequence, subjection to Satan.

Because prayer requires our own efforts, it is not always easy. We must truly work at prayer. No matter what form our prayer may take, be it vocal prayer such as saying the Rosary, liturgical prayer such as assisting at Holy Mass, or meditative prayer, we contend with obstacles placed in our way by Satan and the weaknesses of our own fallen nature. These difficulties include distraction, dryness, lack of faith, and discouragement.

¹ St. John Damascene, *De fide orth.* 3, 24 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 94, 1089C (Paris, 1857-1866)

we notice them, immediately re-concentrating on our prayers. In dealing with distraction, it is our *effort* that counts; the *willingness* to pray is the paramount disposition of the soul. Willfully entertaining distractions is not a way to manage or eliminate them, and so they must constantly be rejected, without however becoming distressed. Even if our whole time of prayer is one continuous struggle to stay focused on God, it is pleasing to him, for we have been in combat with Satan and did not willingly surrender.

To gain skill in lessening the intrusion of distractions, it helps to consciously develop a sense of solitude to accompany our times of prayer. This sense of solitude is an attitude of mind established over time that, in conjunction with a sense of silence, helps us to become more aware of the presence of God. The sense of solitude and silence reduces the inroads of distraction.

In addition, by making a conscious effort to detach ourselves from worldly things, thoughts, and desires, our prayer time with the eternal love of our life is improved. Practicing the wholesome exercise of self-denial, or mortification, is the best way to accomplish this detachment. Deliberately denying ourselves legitimate pleasures allows us to gain an extraordinary ability to control our desires for the non-legitimate pleasures to which our fallen nature is inclined. Perseverance through everyday efforts in little steps of self-denial, which no one but God need ever know about — simple things such as one spoonful of sugar rather than two in a cup of coffee, or two beers at a party instead of three — can work wonders in giving us self-mastery. This control makes us more confident and competent

in handling difficulties in prayer. In the sixth century, St. John Climacus said: “Fasting makes for purity of prayer.” In this regard, as in so many other matters of skill development, practice makes perfect.

Dryness

Dryness is a term describing a loss of desire or taste for spiritual things. It occurs most often in contemplative prayer (see handout on The Heights of Prayer: Contemplation). Those who reach the level of contemplative prayer best cope with dryness under the guidance of a spiritual director who is competent to help the prayerful soul through these dreadful periods in its spiritual growth. Periods of dryness, however, may occur in anyone’s life of prayer, depriving us of the warmth and comfort we expect when

spending time in union with God. This kind of dryness may be mood-induced and often disappears when we persevere in prayer.

Lack of Faith

Sometimes our prayer life is afflicted with problems that result from a lack of faith. One thing we must never overlook in our prayers is what Jesus expected of those he healed. He seemed always to say, “[Y]our faith has made you well” (Mk 10:52). Faith must be the foundation of all our prayers, and this means concentrating not on the gifts but on the Giver (see CCC 2740). We must be convinced of our dependence upon God, and that the ultimate purpose of our existence is to know, love, and serve him alone. Without these convictions, the devil can tempt us to believe that there is no use for



The temptation of Christ, by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962

***“It is our effort that counts;
the willingness to pray is the
paramount disposition of the soul.”***

prayer, that it is not important enough to take time from other pressing responsibilities.

As we search the Gospels, we are captivated by Jesus' promises: *"Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"* (Lk 11:9), and again: *"[I]f you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name"* (Jn 16:23). We are attracted by the stories of Jesus' healings — the woman who touched the hem of his garment (see Mk 5:25-34), the healing from afar of the centurion's servant (see Mt 8:5-13), the woman willing to accept like a dog the crumbs from the Master's table so that her daughter could be healed (see Mt 15:21-28), the return from death of the daughter of Jairus (see Lk 8:41-42, 49-56).

But the Gospel stories also make us pause to think about the time that Jesus said that a blind man was not sin-afflicted but bore his sufferings so that, when Jesus came along, the glory of God would be made manifest when he was healed (see Jn 9:2-3), or when Jesus said much the same thing before he raised his beloved friend Lazarus from the dead after he had allowed him to die rather than hurry to cure him of his illness (see Jn 11:1-44). Even more thought-provoking for us might be Jesus' inability to heal in his native city because his friends and neighbors could not believe he was other than an ordinary carpenter (see Mk 6:1-6). Another time, he seemed so exasperated with their unwillingness to trust in God's providence that he exclaimed, *"O men of little faith!"* (Lk 12:28). In our own lives, it is helpful to keep a journal of answered prayers, which will show us our own list of small and large miracles of God's providential responses to our prayers. *Faith* is the root of our life and of our prayers. We must believe in *him*, trust in *him*, not in the vehemence or frequency of our prayers. We cannot ever escape the need to believe that he is God, and he is not only the possessor of all good but he is also the one who knows what is *for* our good. He knows best, and we must consciously allow his will to prevail in our lives and in all our prayers.

Discouragement

Discouragement is a difficulty closely linked to lack of faith. Discouragement will often cause us to think that our prayers are not heard and not answered. One might say to oneself: "I've prayed and prayed, I've asked and asked, but I still do not have a

good job, or my child is still sick, or I have yet to win the lottery. My prayers are not heard; God does not answer them." These thoughts may be prompted by Satan, but they are also normal issues that confront us in the honest pursuit of our prayer life.

Jesus gave us a story that shows his awareness of this kind of problem: *"And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.' For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'"* And the Lord said, *'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?'"* (Lk 18:1-8).

The message of Jesus in the Gospels is clear and emphatic. He was blunt in his speech, and though his sayings were hard to accept, he neither altered nor diluted their significance. He let us know that God's *"thoughts are not [our] thoughts, neither are [our] ways [his] ways"* (Is 55:8) by his parable of the householder hiring laborers for his vineyard (see Mt 20:1-16). He told us plainly that, when we pray, we must be mindful that our *"Father knows what [we] need before [we] ask him"* (Mt 6:8).

In the prayer he himself taught us, the Our Father, Jesus gave us guidelines for our own prayer life (see Mt 6:9-13). God the Father is paramount; we must seek *first* the Kingdom of God, and then all that we *need* will be given to us besides (see Mt 6:33). "Need" must be understood from God's viewpoint, not our own. The Father's will, and reverence and glorification of his name, must guide our lives. Our Savior's prayer at the Last Supper and in Gethsemane centered on the Father so strongly (see Jn 14:17; Mk 14:32-39) as to make us mindful that, in our own prayers, we must see the Father, to whom all prayers are ultimately directed, as God the almighty one and not just as an "instrument" to be "used" to secure our own desires. In a state of true dependence and humility, we must truly ask for what *he* wants for his purposes and for us. This is usually not easy.

*"We must truly ask
for what he wants for his
purposes and for us.
This is usually not easy."*

If we are faced with the troublesome thought that our prayers are not heard, we must not blame God.

In our relationship with him, he cannot be at fault. He is God; there is nothing wrong with him. If, therefore, our relationship with him has a problem, the trouble must be in us. Unwittingly, our prayer may be a problem of selfishness: Lord, give me this, give me that. We think we seek first the Kingdom of God and his will, but we are really more focused on ourselves and our needs as we see them, rather than wanting what God knows is for our good. We are, as St. James says, “*men of double mind*” (Jas 4:8).

When our prayers are burdened with our own self-centered petitions, when we seek some good that we deem important, as we see things, in the eyes of God, we may be asking for the wrong things; our concerns may reveal a woeful lack of understanding of the “*one thing ... needful*” (Lk 10:42). There is some likelihood that our problem with prayer is really a problem of our failure to understand our priorities — that is, that God and the things of God are first. It is helpful to keep in mind the anecdote told of the child who, when asked whether God had answered her prayer, said simply: “Yes. He said No.”

The Transformative Power of Prayer

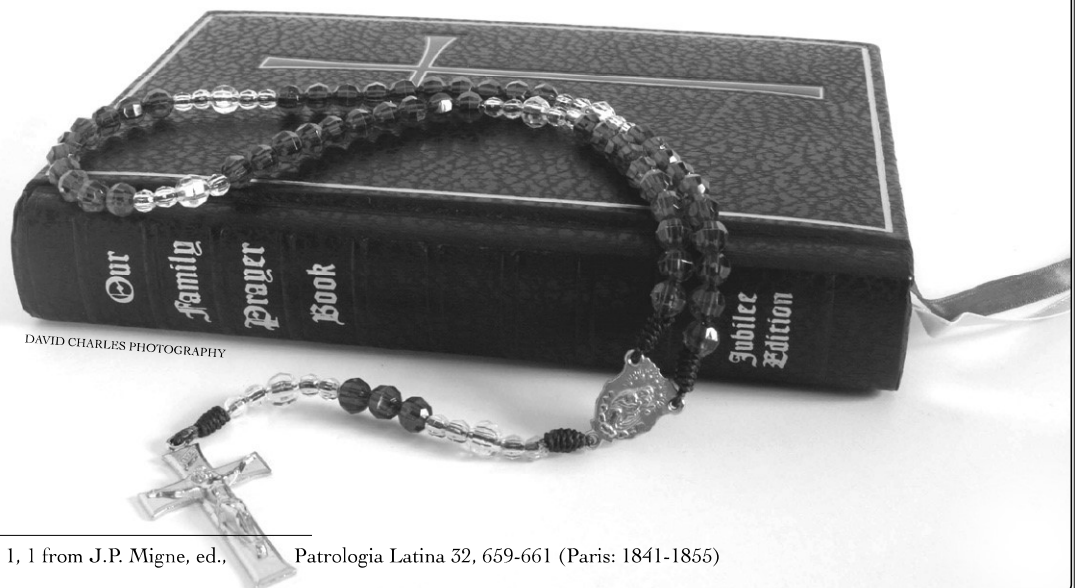
When we pray in faith, if we persevere and not lose hope or give up, the answer may, and often does, come in the form of our own transformation of heart.

“The real purpose of our prayers is to make us holy.”

God works in us, deepening our faith and leading us to admit our dependence on him more clearly

and to long for him more urgently. Prayer, it must be remembered, is a holy thing that is available to us as a means of communicating with an eternal God. It is wrapped in mystery. St. Augustine tells us that “our heart is restless until it rests in [God]”² (CCC 30); he is the final answer to all our prayers.

The more we pray, the more we will be able to pray, and as we become more skilled at prayer we can more easily overcome the obstacles to prayer. The real purpose of our prayers, as members of the Church struggling to attain Heaven, is to make us holy. We must strive valiantly to gain eternal life. Nothing else really matters or makes sense. We must bring all our thoughts, words, and deeds into harmony with the will of God. The more we pray, the better we will pray. Through continued prayer, we are led by greater faith to see our life on earth as only a prelude to eternal joy with God. The more pleasing we are to God, the more we will find him entering our lives and taking care of our needs and those of our loved ones with an infinite, paternal solicitude. Faith, real faith, is itself the fruit of earnest prayer, as the man knew who encountered Jesus crying passionately: “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” (Mk 9:24). We can then rest peacefully in the arms of a God of love who loves us first and always. “Love only me,” he seems to say, “and I will love all of thee.”



² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1, 1, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina 32, 659-661 (Paris: 1841-1855)