

Over the past months I have had numerous people in the parish ask me to preach on how to pray, so today, your prayers are answered!

“Lord, teach us how to pray”, the words of the Apostles in today’s Gospel. Prayer is the most important exercise in our spiritual journey to being with God, the Blessed Mother and all the Saints in heaven. Prayer, something we talk about, and poke at every once in a while. Prayer, the place where we expect to find sweetness and light and instead find hard work, and occasional desolation. Prayer, the place where every once in a while, God reaches out and gives us a hug.

Prayer is trying! Trying to have a conversation with God. Trying to be open to the Holy Spirit. Trying to listen to God. Now that is something we have problems with isn’t it? Trying to raise our hearts and minds to God. The essence of prayer is in trying and we don’t like that one bit.

We are Americans and we want to succeed! To master our lives, our work, our environment, we want to succeed and master everything. We have a lot of pride. But in prayer, the first requirement is humility. The willingness to surrender, to open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit and submit our will to the will of God.

Such a difficult task! To learn how to pray, we have to learn humility. The only way to learn humility is to learn to pray. This is another version of what came first, the chicken or the egg? So what comes first, humility or prayer?

Back when I was first learning computer programming on a Radio Shack TRS 80, I think that I just gave away my age; we called this type of problem a ‘do loop’ because it just kept repeating itself until something intervened and gave control back to the operator.

The same logic that would crash the computer, through the grace of God answers our chicken and egg dilemma. The humility to seek God through prayer is a gift, a grace freely given to us by the Holy Spirit. The fact that we are here in this church today is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We can’t recognize God; we can’t love without the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

What about the distractions of daily life? The most common excuses I hear for failing to pray are lack of time and distractions. St. Theresa of Avila said; “we will always have distractions this side of the grave.”

We can minimize the distractions by un-plugging and seeking quiet, but that won't calm the distractions in our mind. The normal worries and cares of daily life. So what do we do with them? They become grist for the mill, subjects for the conversation with God.

And then there is finding the time to pray. Ever notice that we always have time to do what is important to us? For those activities we make sacrifices, re-arrange our schedule, or we just decide not to do other things because they are so important.

When it comes to prayer, can you find 30 to 60 minutes a day? It doesn't ever have to be all at once. Is it worth the time to improve your relationship with everyone you come in contact with? Is it worth the time to improve the quality of your family life? Is it worth the time to deepen and improve your relationship with your spouse? Is it worth the time to find some inner peace? I can tell you, for my wife and I it is well worth the time. Only you can answer that question for yourselves.

Once the decision is made to incorporate prayer into our lives, we are going to encounter resistance. Satan and his minions don't want us to pray and come closer to God. They will put every obstacle imaginable in our way. Embarrassment, fear of failure, fear of intimacy in opening ourselves up to God, as if he didn't already know all about us anyway. Resistance within our families, people who imagine that they have some authority over us trying to tell us or threaten us if we don't stop praying.

Two things we can all count on. First is that every time we start to get close to doing something particularly pleasing to God, Satan is going to pour on the heat (no pun intended) and do everything possible to de-rail our activities. The second is that God is always there to put the devil back where he belongs. Keep in mind that true prayer is always a battle against Satan and his minions and we can push him back with God's grace through repentance.

Prayer is how we radically expose ourselves to the Holy Spirit, but there will be times when it seems like the Holy Spirit, when God isn't paying any attention or even worse pushing back. The desert times, spiritual desolation, or as St. John of the Cross described it; "the dark night of the soul". These are the times in our prayer life that we really don't like. The times when we don't want to pray, when we don't feel good and may in fact feel like we are being pounded into spiritual mush. For those who continue on the path and push through, these are times of incredible spiritual growth.

We have to keep in mind that the common denominator between all the Saints in heaven, Jesus and us is pain. We all have different lives, we all have different motivations, we are all different people. We all feel pain. And yes, there may be periods of comfort and incredible joy, and they are part of my personal experience, but I can't make that guarantee to you. Part of the virtue of humility is moral courage.

When will God answer our prayers? Didn't today's Gospel promise an answer? Not necessarily. God focuses on our salvation and the gifts he gives us are focused on bringing us closer to him so we can spend eternity with him in heaven. God won't answer a prayer that is going to interfere with our salvation. He will answer in ways that we usually don't recognize until long after the fact and in ways that actually make us much happier and are much better for us than what we originally asked.

Other times, we just aren't ready for the answer yet. The height of hubris is trying to force God to follow our schedule and our plan. He has his own plan and although we can recommend a time, we need to follow the example of Jesus in the garden when he said to his Father, not my will, but your will be done.

When do we pray? If we follow the admonition of the Apostles, we always pray. Prayer starts with the intent to pray. Offering our daily work, offering a particularly odious chore, or offering a moment of great joy to God as prayer is a matter of taking the time to make the offering, or to say thanks. So easy to execute, but so hard to remember to make the intention.

Then there is that time we all need to spend in private prayer with Our Lord. Start with a Rosary, or scripture reading. Choose something that tunes your heart and mind, helps you to be open to the Holy Spirit. When the time is right, have your conversation with God. Some times it will be great, some days it will be difficult, most days you will wonder if anyone is listening; don't worry, he is listening.

When a man and a woman marry in the church, they are the ministers of their own sacrament. The clergy provide the words and bless the union. Prayer as a married couple continues the ministerial aspect of the sacrament throughout the marriage. Prayer as husband and wife can in some ways be more intimate than their time in the bedroom.

In the marital act, husband and wife give their bodies to one another. In prayer, they open their hearts and souls to one another and to God making that covenant between a man, a woman and God a reality.

When a family prays together God becomes a member of the family. He is welcomed into a private relationship cementing the bonds between siblings and parents that will sustain the family through all the trials that are a part of life.

Finally there is community prayer, the times we gather here in God's house to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass. So essential to our spiritual lives. Yes we can pray under a pine tree, or on a fishing boat, and we should. However, God has given so much to us and all he asks is for a little bit of time every day, and an hour or so on Sunday.

Will we fall? Will we fail? Of course we will. One of the authors I studied on the subject of prayer has an unattributed quote in one of his books. It says; "when you stop falling, you will be in heaven, but when you stop getting back up, you will be in hell.