

Institute Voluntas Dei - September 2016 Lesson Plan

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In Intimacy with Jesus (pp 17-33, To Enter Into Prayer)

Opening Prayer: (+) May the Lord Jesus touch our eyes, as he did those of the blind. Then we shall begin to see in visible those things which are invisible. May he open our eyes to gaze, not on present realities, but on the blessings to come. May the Lord open the eyes of our hearts to contemplate God in Spirit, through Jesus Christ the Lord, to whom belong power and glory through all eternity. Amen. (Prayer attributed to Origen, 184-254)

Introduction: Prayer is one of the most difficult things to do for a Christian. If it was easy, then more people would do it, and we should more readily see the fruits of prayer in the world and in our personal lives. Even for "good Christians," prayer can feel like 'just saying words' or 'going through the motions.' In reality, we do not initiate prayer, but rather allow the Holy Spirit to pray *through, with and in* us. Prayer, first requires us to remain open to what God is doing in our lives. We can learn from liturgical prayers (i.e., Greek word "liturgy" that means "work") but that prayer is done *through, with and in* the entire people of God. Liturgical prayer involves community. So how do we pray when we are "alone." Personal prayer - which can be influenced by liturgical and traditional devotions & the Liturgy of Hours, is most affective when we enter realize that prayer is about an "*encounter with God,*" a true "*fusion of Two Presences*" - our weak and feeble presence encountering the goodness of "*[T]he [O]ther who is infinitely wise, powerful and good.*" (p 18). Prayer requires humility. We are meeting someone even Greater than the Greatest Presence we can imagine (St. Anselm). It requires attention, knowing that God is always present, even when we're not paying attention. The Cure of Ars, St. John Vianney, patron of all priests, said he learned how to pray from a peasant man who just sat in church silently, who explained that prayer as "me looking at God and God looking at me."

- (1) How do you describe prayer or help people understand prayer?
- (2) How do you overcome the feeling of prayer becoming routine or monotonous?
- (3) Is it appropriate to say "let us put ourselves in the presence of God" before we pray, especially when we are never "out" of God's presence? What have you found is the best way to initiate prayer?

Part 1: Unpacking Prayer: Fr. Parents helps to dispel some common misconceptions about prayer by offering some "visuals" of prayer. He reminds us that prayer affects "every fiber of my being" which "yearns for God" even to the point of "keeping vigil" (i.e., waiting for God), and even warning us to make sure that prayer purifies our conscience, because conscience "is also the presence of God, and your presence *to* God." (p20)

Prayer is also a process of recognizing (1) that God is alive and (2) we have to make a firm resolution to submit ourselves freely to the Holy Spirit. "A prayer that permeates my thoughts, serves as motivation for my actions, [and] assimilates me into Christ. Truly, the constant action of the Holy Spirit is to awaken me to [God's] life, his presence, his actions." (p 21)

- (1) When was the last "good" prayer you had and how did it motivate you to be better?
- (2) Have you ever prayed and felt God wasn't listening? How do you overcome that fear?
- (3) How do you make prayer a regular part of your day?

Part 2: The Phases of Prayer: Fr. Parents explains three phases of prayer: (i) Meditation, which is seeking, reading, observing, listening, absorbing, and synthesizing materials, the way bees gather pollen to make honey. (ii) Mental prayer, which is heartfelt simple, honest dialogue with God. As a bee will return to the hive with what it's collected and prepare its honey, so does a person simply return to God using the materials that have been found, read and observed in order to bring forth fruit. (iii) Contemplation is when a person's "whole being" prays. It's a deeper, perhaps the deepest form of prayer that plunges a person into a mystical union with God. These three phases are simplified 'steps' to demonstrate that prayer is a process that requires practice in order to achieve the ultimate goal of prayer: union with God.

- (1) What other processes of prayer help you to experience a closer union with God?
- (2) What's your favorite material to assist your meditation and mental prayer?
- (3) What's been your "deepest" experience of prayer?

Part 3: The Courage to Practice Contemplation: Fr. Parent sees contemplation as a "hope" for the world. Learning from the Mystics, such as St. & Dr. Teresa of Avilla, her contemplative prayer helped her to become a great reformer, builder, and ultimately a powerful force for good - despite her age, frailty, human limitations and even rejection from her own community. Contemplative prayer transforms us into true theologians, real missionaries, and sowers of peace (pp28-29). But before we can truly enter into a contemplative union with God, we have to take some practical steps, such as (a) making time each day for prayer - like one makes appointments for important people in their daily schedule (b) choosing a favorable place - which can be anywhere as long as we're positioning ourselves in an environment of "certain exterior peace, even practical comfort" (p 31), and (c) being serious about prayer. "Invitations to prayer are numerous everywhere. We are surrounded by them but we are distracted like some drivers who go through red lights.... Do we really want to pray, become beings of prayer? Are we interested in contemplation? If we are, we will have to invest into it a lot of time that we use for other things (p32)"

- (1) What steps have you taken to become deeper in your prayer life?
- (2) What have you "built, created or done" as a reaction from true contemplative prayer?
- (3) How have you become a sower of peace as a result of deeper prayer?

Conclusion: Prayer, at every level helps us to be aware of God's Presence - the 1st of the Voluntas Dei attitudes of the Three 5's. Of this St. Ignatius Loyola says "*He who remembers the presence of God is less open to other thoughts, especially bad thoughts. As long as we believe that God sees us, we are restrained from daring into sin before such a Witness and Judge. In two ways the presence of God is an antidote against sin: first, because God sees us, and secondly, because we see God.*" While the spiritual life is much more than simply "avoiding sin" Fr. Parents tells us that the soul, if more pure, becomes more open to prayer and contemplation. "*Blessed are the pure of heart, they shall see God*" (Mt 5:8). In this year of mercy, as Voluntas Dei members, we are called to be God's presence for the world by encountering God's mercy and becoming a living sign of that same mercy which we have received.

Closing Prayer: "Suscipe" by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)

"Take Lord, and receive all my Liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will - all that I have and possess. You have given all to me; to you, O Lord, now I return it; all is yours, dispose of me wholly according to your Will. Give me only your love and your grace, for this is enough for me. Amen."