

Homily - Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

“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.”

For this second homily of what we might call our ‘Catholicism 101’ series, let’s take a deeper dive into what that prayer and petition really involve.

That encouragement from Saint Paul evokes another touching, relatable moment that you may remember from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of Luke, in an encounter between Jesus and his disciples.

They’re well into the start of their active ministry at this point; alongside the twelve disciples, Jesus has commissioned seventy-two of his followers who have gone out on mission into the countryside and experienced remarkable success.

But as they’ve returned from that journey and rejoined Christ, there’s an interesting development.

The opening verse recalls: “He was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.”

The prayer that Jesus shares with them is familiar to us as the core of the Our Father, which we hear in its full form in Matthew’s Gospel.

1500 years later, the great Carmelite mystic and nun, Saint Teresa of Avila, reflected that in giving the disciples the Our Father, Jesus was in a sense giving them in condensed form every possible kind of prayer and petition that one could offer to the Lord.

In fact, by that logic, someone could hypothetically reach the heights of holiness through that prayer alone.

Of course, our relationship with prayer is more complicated than that. We ourselves are more complicated.

I've met a lot of Catholics, and I've never met anyone who *only* prayed the Our Father to make progress in their spiritual life.

But I think we can all relate to the hopeful curiosity of the apostles who asked Jesus - 'teach us to pray.'

Most of us, even those of us who grew up in the Church, have likely not had someone sit us down and intentionally teach us to pray, or at least not in a systematic way that's suitable for a mature adult faith.

We probably know we *should* pray, or pray more, or pray better, but what does that look like?

Well, let's talk about that. I won't profess to be a spiritual master by any means, but there are certain tried-and-true methods and principles that have been handed down through the generations for a reason, so by the end of this reflection, you should have somewhere to start, or something new to try.

First, and most importantly: if you remember nothing else, remember this: Prayer is, at its core, our heart-to-heart conversation with God.

Even the liturgical prayer of the Church, the way we pray as a congregation in Mass, is itself a heart to heart conversation, but prayed as a part of Christ's entire Body, rather than as a single individual.

This sounds basic on the surface but is absolutely wild when you think about it, because we're assuming, and claiming, that we *can* have a relationship with God.

This is something distinctive to our identities as Christians, that by our baptism we can relate to God not as an infinitely distant force or abstract concept, but in the way he has revealed himself to us as a loving Father, as love made incarnate in his divine Son, Jesus Christ, and a love which strengthens us as his Holy Spirit.

We pray because he cares about what you have to say. He cares about your hopes, dreams, and worries.

We pray because like any parent, he desires to know the heart of his child.

So, if you pray with that in mind, it's hard to mess things up.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, the teaching document which summarizes the heart of our theological beliefs, quotes a more recent Saint, St. Therese of Lisieux, who wrote in her autobiography:

“For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”

This is what I would argue is the most important, and simplest, form of personal prayer: mental prayer.

Some of you will remember our Lenten retreat speaker from last year, Meg Hunter-Kilmer - she once pointed out to me that even if you look at the most popular Catholic devotions of all time, like the Rosary, there were still thousands of years of Catholics who reached the heights of holiness without them.

That’s perfectly possible. But you’ll never find a serious Christian who doesn’t engage in mental prayer.

It’s the most basic and most difficult prayer in the world: just an internal conversation with the Lord, in your own words.

To point out something that might be obvious, it takes time to adjust to this when you’re still new to prayer in general, because our recognition of the Lord’s response and presence normally isn’t something we perceive in a dramatic way, and usually not in the normal human experience of dialogue, but with experience you can learn to recognize what we would call the ‘consolations’ of prayer, or encouraging internal signs that the Lord is acting in your heart.

The content of mental prayer can really be whatever is on your heart, just like how the structure of the Our Father includes multiple types of prayer - petitions for our own needs, intercession for other people dear to us or far away, prayer for deliverance from temptation, or to grow in a virtue we need, or in thanksgiving for a blessing we’ve received.

One easy trap to fall into is that because we’re often uncomfortable with learning how to engage in this process of open-ended prayer, many people fill their prayer time with devotional prayers, rosaries, chaplets, novenas, and things which can be read rather than engaging in that more freeform experience of mental prayer.

Now, to be clear, all those devotions are great - but think of them more like spices on a meal, rather than the meal itself.

We also need substance to the relationship, and that substance grows in silence and intimate conversation with the Lord.

Once you have that substance, we can start to add some additional structure and direction.

Two particular practices that are nearly essential, in my opinion, are prayer with Scripture, and prayer in the presence of the Eucharist.

You'll notice, by the way, that those are the two distinct ways in which we encounter and receive the Word of God in the Mass itself - but we need to encounter Jesus outside of Mass, too.

Obviously, there are all sorts of ways we can read or pray with Scripture. Casual reading or more intensive study are both great and wonderful uses of our time, but we should also take time to pray in a more intensive and intentional way with the Bible so that Christ has the chance to speak to our hearts in his Word.

One of the age-old methods of praying with scripture is a classic technique called *Lectio Divina*, which literally just means divine reading.

This is a great way to integrate both Scripture and mental prayer into your day at the same time. In fact, if you're just starting out, this can basically even work like a starter program for a well-rounded personal prayer life.

I'd suggest trying to set aside 15 to 20 minutes at minimum so you can give it proper attention and enter fully into the experience, but you can really do this form of prayer anywhere you have the space and time to pull out your Bible.

It's a four step process - feel free to take notes, but you can also definitely find these steps online as well.

The first step is called *Lectio*, simply, reading. Take a short passage of Scripture, like the Gospel of the daily readings, and simply read through it slowly and deliberately several times. Look for any word or line that stands out to you.

Then, in the second step, *Meditatio*, you reflect silently on *why* that passage stands out to you. Ask questions about it - what was the author of that passage trying to say to the People of God? How is the Lord moving *your* heart as you read it?

Third is *Oratio*, response. Is the Lord calling you to put this into practice in some way? What are the spiritual fruits? A lot of people keep a spiritual journal, or occasionally will make notes in their Bible itself. It's up to you how you want to keep track of it.

Fourth and finally is *Contemplatio*, a concluding period of silent reflection where our time with Scripture leads into an open-ended time of mental prayer. This is a good moment to give thanks for the graces received from his Word, or to ask to be strengthened in the virtues you know you'll need to live out the challenge Christ is giving you.

Do all of that on a daily basis and you'll make some remarkable spiritual progress, pretty much guaranteed.

Now, in addition to this time with Scripture, the other way I urge everyone to make time to pray is in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, here in the Eucharist.

The best way to do this is if you can make it to a time of Eucharistic Adoration during the week, but any time you can get to an open Catholic Church, you can spend time in prayer in Christ's presence.

I try to do this every single morning when I'm able.

Why does this matter so much? Simple: as Catholics, we believe that Jesus Christ is substantially present in the Eucharist which is consecrated here in Mass.

It's not just a symbol - he's here in a real and powerful way, and so having that time of prayer is a face-to-face conversation that is as real as any encounter the apostles had in their journey with the Lord.

This is the immeasurable treasure of our faith - the chance to have a personal audience with Christ himself.

But once again, it's the obvious question: what do I *do*?

Do I just sit there and stare at him for an hour? It can be a hard adjustment to make if we're not used to silence.

A great long-term target to aim for is what we would call a full "Holy Hour" - an hour spent in the presence of the Eucharist, which we get from Jesus's own words in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he challenged his sleeping disciples, "could you not stay awake with me for one hour?"

I've personally found success in breaking my Holy Hours up into three parts: first, a period dedicated to scripture, either using the method of *lectio divina* discussed, or reading a particular passage at more length, or by praying the Liturgy of the Hours.

Then for the second period, maybe another twenty minutes, a time for mental prayer or spiritual reading.

Finally, if I want to include any devotional prayer like the Rosary, that's usually the last thing in the hour.

It could take some time to work up to a full hour, but if you have these different styles and ingredients for a time of prayer, you might be surprised how smoothly it can go.

Once again, though, as far as personal prayer goes, the most important thing isn't that we pray in a specific prescribed way, it's that we actually show up to do it - and do so consistently, just like we'd make time for any relationship that is important to us.

And we have to make sure it's real quality time, when we're able to be engaged, awake, and present to whatever graces Christ wants to offer us when we're in his presence.

Keep showing up for the Lord, and he'll show up for you. You'll be amazed how much progress can be made even after years of feeling like nothing's changed in your spiritual life.

So, for your homework, I encourage all of you to come up with at least one new goal to grow in your prayer, whether it's to try one of these classic methods of prayer, or to invest a certain amount of quality time in that process.

Ask Our Lord as we continue this Mass, just as his apostles did:
"Lord, teach us to pray."

He's the greatest teacher there ever was, or ever will be.

Trust him. Make time for him. He'll take it from there.