

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

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GOD SPEAKS TO US FIRST

This fundamental truth makes it possible for us to pray to God. He has been concerned for each of us long before we became concerned for ourselves.

He desires communication with us.

He speaks to us continually, revealing Himself to us by various modes:

- Through Jesus Christ, His word;
- Through the Church, the extension of Christ in the world (because we are joined together in Christ, God speaks to us through other people);
- Through visible creation around us, which forms the physical context of our lives. (Creation took place in His Son, and it is another form of God's self-revelation);
- Through the events of our lives;
- Through Holy Scripture, a real form of His presence. This is the mode of communication we are most concerned with in prayer.

HE INVITES US TO LISTEN

Our response to God's initial move is to listen to what He is saying. This is the basic attitude of prayer.

HOW TO GO ABOUT LISTENING

What you do immediately before prayer is very important. Normally, it is something you do not rush right into. Spend a few minutes quieting yourself and relaxing, settling yourself into a prayerful and comfortable position.

In listening to anyone, you try to tune out everything except what the person is saying to you.

In prayer this can be done best in *silence* and *solitude*. Select a favorite passage from Holy Scripture, 5 to 10 verses. Put a marker in the page. Try to find a quiet place where you can be alone and uninhibited in your response to God's presence. Try to quiet yourself interiorly. Jesus would often go up to a mountain by Himself to pray with His Father.

In an age of noise, activity, and tensions like our own, it is not always easy or necessary to forget our cares and commitment, the noise and excitement of our environment. Never feel constrained to blot out all distractions. Anxiety in this regard could get between ourselves and God.

Rather, realize that the Word did become flesh – that He speaks to us in the noise and confusion of our day. Sometimes in preparing for prayer, relax and listen to the sounds around you. God's presence is as real as they are.

Be conscious of your sensations and living experiences of feeling, thinking, hoping, loving, of wondering, desiring, etc. Then, conscious of God's unselfish, loving presence in you, address Him simply and admit: "Yes, you do love life and feeling into me. You do love a share of your personal life into me. You are present to me. You live in me. Yes, You do."

God is present *as a person*, in you through His Spirit, who speaks to you now in Scripture, and who prays in you and for you.

Ask God the grace to listen to what He says.

Begin reading Scripture slowly and attentively.
Do not hurry to cover much material.

If it recounts an event of Christ's life, be there in the mystery of it. Share with the persons involved, e.g. a blind man being cured. Share their attitude. Respond to what Jesus is saying.

Some words or phrases carry special meaning for you. Savor those words, turning them over in your heart.

You may want to speak or recite a Psalm or other prayer from Scripture. Really mean what you are saying.

When something strikes you, e.g.,

- You feel a new way of being with Christ. He becomes *for you* in a new way (e.g., you sense what it means to be healed by Christ.)
- You experience God's love
- You feel lifted in spirit
- You are moved to do something good
- You are peaceful
- You are happy and content just to be in God's presence

This is the time to...*pause*.

This is God speaking directly to you in the words of Scripture. Do not hurry to move on. Wait until you are no longer moved by the experience.

Don't get discouraged if nothing seems to be happening.

Sometimes God lets us feel dry and empty in order to let us realize it is not in our own power to communicate with Him or to experience consolation. God is sometimes very close to us in His seeming absence (Ps. 139:7-8). He is for us entirely in a selfless way. He accepts us as we are, with all our limitations – even with our seeming inability to pray. A humble attitude of listening is a sign of love for Him, a real prayer from the heart.

At these times remember the words of Paul:

“The Spirit, too comes to help us in our weakness, for when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words.” (Rom 8:26-27)

Relax in prayer. Remember, God will speak to you in His own way.

“Yes, as the rain and snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.” (Isaiah 55: 10-11)

Spend time in your prayer just being conscious of God's presence in and around you. If you want to, speak with Him about the things you are interested in or wish to thank Him for, your joys, sorrows, aspirations, etc.

Summary: 5 “P’s”

Passage from Scripture: Pick one and have it marked and ready.

Place: Where you are alone and uninhibited in your response to God's presence.

Posture: Relax and peaceful. A harmony of body with spirit.

Presence of God: Be aware of it and acknowledge and respond to it. If nothing happens turn to the prayers you use as reminders of his presence.

Passage from Scripture: Read it slowly aloud and listen carefully and peacefully to it.

Read aloud or whisper in a rhythm with your breathing – a phrase at a time – with pauses and repetitions when and where you feel like it.

Don't be anxious; don't try to look for implications or lessons or profound thoughts or conclusions or resolutions, etc. Be content to be like a child who climbs into its father's lap and listens to his words and his story. When you finish, remind yourself that God continues to live in you during the rest of the day.

Prayer Basics

There are certain “basics” which are helpful for any type of retreat or prayer method. These basic guidelines have been proven true through the lived experience of Christian men and women throughout the centuries.

Place

- Jesus frequently went off by himself to a deserted place to pray to His Father. Find a place that is quiet, and where you will not be distracted by the phone, T.V., or other people.
- Many retreatants find the chapel conducive to prayer, in part because they have been consecrated and made holy by the worship of others. Some are helped by praying before the Blessed Sacrament.
- Your bedroom is certainly an option, especially if you experience the need for more privacy at a particular point in the retreat. You might make the place “holy” by using certain symbols: a cross, a rosary, an image of Jesus, Mary or a saint, etc.
- At times you may want to pray outdoors, whether sitting on the back patio, walking the outdoor Stations of the Cross, or visiting nearby Lake Marindahl.

Posture

- The one point all religious traditions insist on is that the *spine should be erect* during prayer, to maximize our alertness and awareness. For most of us, this will mean sitting with our back straight in a good chair, feet firmly on the floor and hands comfortable in our lap. Lying on the floor is fine, although we run a higher risk of falling asleep!
- You may feel moved by the Spirit to adopt a variety of postures; kneeling, standing, prostrate, etc. We are embodied spirits, so feel very free to speak to God with your body!

Preparation of body, mind and heart

- Before beginning to pray, it’s a good idea to take a few minutes to get ready, especially if you come to pray after physical exercise or a lot of activity.
- Prepare yourself by performing an awareness exercise for several minutes intended to relax your body and focus your mind and heart. You might notice your breathing, or become aware of sensations in different parts of your body. You can focus your awareness by listening to sounds, picking up even the subtlest of them.

Personal Presence of God

- Prayer is not simply “talking to myself”. It is a conversation between God and ourselves, although listening to God is our most basic attitude in prayer. As you begin to pray, be conscious of God’s loving, supportive presence, and that the Holy Spirit is already praying within you. Ask, God to reveal Himself to you in the prayer. Speak from your heart when you feel moved to do so, whether during the prayer, at the end, or both. If you experience doubt or fear, ask for a return of faith, and a deeper awareness of God’s presence and action in your prayer and your life.
- Decide on a name or names for God, the Holy Trinity and for each of the Divine Persons that are meaningful for you and will help you to connect with God from the heart.

Prayer with the Scriptures

- While God speaks to us and reveals Himself in many ways, Holy Scripture is a privileged place to hear God's word and is a real form of God's presence.
- Having quieted yourself and prepared yourself to hear the Lord speak, read the Scripture passage slowly, attentively, prayerfully. There is no reason to rush or even to finish the passage – it is not a homework assignment!
- When you feel yourself drawn to a particular word or phrase, pause and “ponder it in your heart” like Mary. St. Ignatius tells us to stay with whatever brings us fruit, tasting and savoring. These may be moments when God desires to speak to your heart directly. You might be drawn because
 - You experience God's love or feel a new way of being with Jesus (i.e., he heals you)
 - You feel lifted in your spirit
 - You are inspired to do something good or holy
 - You are content just to rest in God's presence
 - You feel disturbed, puzzled, even repelled by something in the passage
- Only when you feel that you are no longer moved by the experience, move on, pausing again when drawn to another word, phrase, idea.
- If you are praying with a Gospel scene (as opposed to a psalm or passage from Paul, for example), you might try this method that employs God's gift of imagination:
 - Read through the passage slowly several times, closing your eyes for one minute between readings, until you no longer need the Bible to see the scene unfold in your mind.
 - Place yourself in the scene somewhere (in the crowd, in the boat), watching...conversing...interacting...
 - Let the entire prayer be guided by the Spirit...don't control or analyze it...let it take on a life of its own, trusting that the Lord truly desires to encounter you, speak to you...

Prayer Time

- St. Ignatius offers this very important rule: *stay at prayer for however long you have committed yourself, without shortening or lengthening it to fit your mood or emotional state.*

A Final Word About Distractions

- *Everyone* experiences distractions in prayer – do not let them discourage you!
- When you find yourself distracted, realize that God is never distracted but is always completely and lovingly absorbed by you, including by your distracted heart!
- When you notice distractions, especially if they are strong and recurring, speak to God directly and honestly about them. Temptations, “negative” feelings – all should be turned over to the Lord. They might be the path to a great grace and deeper relationship with Him.

CONTEMPLATION

In contemplation, we enter into a life event or story passage of scripture. We enter into the passage by way of imagination, making use of all our senses.

Theologians tell us that through contemplation we are able to “recall and be present at the mysteries of Christ’s life.”

The Spirit of Jesus, present within us through Baptism, teaches us, just as Jesus taught the apostles. The Spirit recalls and enlivens the particular mystery into which we enter through prayer. As in the Eucharist the Risen Jesus makes present the paschal mystery, in contemplation He brings forward the particular event we are contemplating and presents Himself within that mystery.

Method:

In contemplation, one enters the story as if one were there:

- Watch what happens; listen to what is being said.
- Become part of the mystery; assume the role of one of the persons.
- Look at each of the individuals; what does he/ she experience? To whom does each one speak?
- What difference does it make for my life, my family, for society, if I hear the message?

In the Gospel stories, enter into dialogue with Jesus:

- Be there with Him and for Him.
- Want Him, hunger for Him.
- Listen to Him.
- Let Him be for you what He wants to be.
- Respond to Him.