

Praying with an Outrigger

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This is a good moment to consider our prayer life. If it seems more difficult or odd right now, it is because real prayer is based on one's experience. There is today, a combination of events that are peculiar to the present. Of course, we want prayer itself to be a part of our reality, shaping this moment. There is more "coming at us" than ever, but prayer helps us to choose what is good, true and beautiful. A heart needs these three to sustain hope.

Praying is relational, initiated by an impulse of grace. It is a response to God. It is a conversation carried out in images, music, words, gestures and, of course, silence. Each person, depending on the moment, will pray with different proportions of ritual action and receptive listening. We learn this by doing.

In my own life, praying is sustained by communal traditions such as Mass and Liturgy of the Hours. Even when I do solitary ritual prayers, I am part of a vast cohort that honors God and is mindful of all the others on our devotional path. Let me mention two strands woven into my own prayer over these past months.

First, I do believe that God "sends" me inspirational texts when I need them. I have been reading short essays from Brian Doyle's "One Long River of Song: Notes on Wonder." Doyle was a practicing Catholic, husband and father who died at age sixty of a brain tumor. But, oh, is he alive in his words! He reminds me that joy can be mined from the smallest moments. He is a good coach if you need help spotting beauties that can lift your heart.

Second, in the difficulties and storms that any of us face, I find studies in Church history to be stabilizing influences. Histories help us to realize that there is much about our era that is not unique. We learn how problems have been met, and how personal character prevails in interesting ways. I think of my historical knowledge as an outrigger that stabilizes my canoe across deep and choppy water. Without knowledge of our history, we cannot recognize where we are, nor can we benefit from other's mistakes. There is a hubris that prevails when we think we are the special generation, originators of all worthy ideas, untethered by unseen influences, or uniformly less primitive than our forebears.

Let me suggest a few books. "The Compact History of the Catholic Church" by Alan Shreck remains a favorite, summarized in fourteen pages at the end. "American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church" by Charles R. Morris brings us to the end of the twentieth century. The title correctly advertises the contents.

Leslie Woodcock Tentler's recent "American Catholics: A History" comes twenty-three years after Morris's book. In these intervening years, public and private archives have been re-scoured, unknown letters have come to light, and researchers have connected the dots to documents previously thought to be unrelated. In reviewing this title for America Magazine, Patrick Gilger rates her book as "both a rigorous and laudable effort to cure us American Catholics of the illusion that our desires have no history."

This brings me to those parts of the Bible that record historical persons and events. These remind us about what good God can do through ordinary people. When I forget that I am an ordinary man, albeit with a Church-bequeathed title, I short circuit what grace demands.

Though it is tempting, I will not assert that academic histories are integral to everyone's prayer life. I am only telling you that such reading is important for me. Church history is an outrigger for my prayer.