

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

February 5, 2017

Spiritual ponderings

I would like to devote this month's spiritual ponderings into a series of reflections on prayer with the hope that your prayer life and my own will grow and bring even closer to the Lord.

Prayer, I have come to believe is one of those things that many people tell us we should do but very few people know exactly how to pray themselves and even less know how to teach others how to pray. This is sad because prayer is such an important part of the life of a Christian. If I could go back in time and teach myself to pray as I do now, these would be the ten things I would stress.

1. Pray As You Can

One morning in the parish office the pastor and his two associates were arguing what was the best position for prayer as an internet repair man worked nearby.

"Kneeling is definitely the best posture for prayer," the pastor claimed.

"No, you are wrong," chimed in one of the associates. "I find the best way to pray is to stand up and stretch your hands outward towards heaven."

"You are both wrong," insisted the third priest. "The most effective stance for prayer is lying prostrate face down on the floor."

The repair man could not contain himself any longer. "He fathers," he interrupted, "the best praying I ever did was when I was hanging upside down from a telephone pole."

Growing up many people told me that I needed to pray but no one ever really took the time to teach me to pray. When I entered the seminary, I felt like I was way behind my brother seminarians when it came to prayer. This problem was magnified by the fact that I found myself focusing on the ways other prayed instead of learning how to pray.

One day someone told me that St. Ignatius of Loyola stated that "we should all pray as we can and not as we can't." Upon hearing this statement, I found a new interest in discovering different styles of prayer. This searching eventually led me to me to journaling prayer. As I begin to pray I pretend that I am a child at summer camp and that I am writing my Father in heaven about all the things that have happened throughout the day. There are days in which I write a lot and there are days I write a little, throughout both experiences, I feel that God speaks to me in the silence of my heart as I ponder what to write and what to do next in my life.

I also have a good friend, who loves to write but he has come to realize that his writing is not prayer because all he does put his ideas on paper and there is no conversation taking place with God. He has discovered the best way for him to pray is to use his imagination. He simply imagines Jesus and him having a conversation.

Praying as you can and not as your can't makes sense because each of us is different. My mother who has six children knows that she has to approach each one of us differently because we each have our own needs but more importantly we each have our own talents and strengths. My mother knows that I often I just need someone to talk to and to tell my story to knowing that I won't be judged. My mother has come to learn that the worst thing she can do when I am like this is offer advice because her advice, no matter how good, just makes me angry. On the other hand I have a brother who when telling her his problems wants her advice and if she would offer him none than he would be upset. We are each different in our own ways and thus we each build our prayer life a little differently.

2. Formal prayer/Informal Prayer

If a major league baseball pitcher has only a fastball in his repertoire he will not be a good pitcher. He has to eventually develop an off-speed pitch to compliment his fastball in order to become a better pitcher. In the same way formal prayer (prayers that everyone knows or can memorize) and informal prayer (prayers in which are impromptu or spontaneous) are meant to complement each other.

When I was learning to pray spontaneously and to express to God what was on my heart, I found myself begin to develop a disdain for formal prayers like the Our Father and Hail Mary. A wise priest helped me see the errors of my way when he explained that there are sometimes things that we simply do not have the words to express what we are feeling or what we want and so these formal prayers are a great way of letting God that I trust Him and I want His will to be done despite the fact that I don't have any other word express what is on my heart.

I also know that if my prayer life only consists of formal prayers my relationship with God will stall. It is important that I share with Him what is in my heart through informal prayers. God wants to know what is going on in my life, not because He doesn't know, but because it is a bonding experience and He loves me.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

February 12, 2017

Spiritual ponderings

I hope these reflections on prayers will give you the freedom to discover your own style of prayer that brings you closer to God.

3. Don't Compare

In a small country village in Sicily, there were two brothers, renowned members of the local Mafia. They were mean, bad and very rich. No one had a good word to say about them. Indeed, everyone seemed to have a story about how they had either been cheated or maligned by the brothers.

One day, one of the brothers, Luigi died. The surviving brother, Jo - with a rare touch of conscience felt that something nice should be said about his brother Luigi at the funeral. So he went to the local pastor and said: I know that folk in the village hate us, and they don't know the half of what we have been up to. However, I want you to say something nice about Luigi at his funeral. I want you to say that Luigi was a saint when you preach. If you will agree to do that, I'll show my gratitude by giving \$100,000.00 towards the repair of the church. And here's the check for the amount. If you don't, you know my reputation. The priest thought about it fleetingly agreed and took the check.

A week later, the whole village turned out for the funeral and everyone wondered what the priest would say. After the opening hymns had been sung and the readings had been read, the priest climbed up into the pulpit and delivered his sermon. Eyeing the brother, sitting in the front row, the priest said how evil the pair of them had been. He went on to say how Luigi had cheated, not only in business but on his wife, how he had lied and how had had no concern for anyone but himself. In fact he went on to say what a downright scoundrel Luigi had been.

After ten minutes of preaching in this vein, the priest, being the man of integrity, ended his sermon with these words: "But compared to his brother, Jo - Luigi was a saint!"

Another danger in the spiritual life is to find ourselves comparing ourselves to others. I remember when I had been in the seminary for two years and a potential new student came to Mass. This potential seminarian stuck out like a sore thumb because everything he did was so exaggerated. For example if we could respond "Amen" to a prayer; he would respond "AAAMMMEENNN!!!" While there was a part of me that found this very annoying there was also a part of me that thought that maybe he responded this way because he was going deeper in prayer. This potential seminarian also a much cooler vocation story than me which included being in the navy on shore leave and getting lost on a desert island and being rescued by Catholic monks. My vocations story was nothing near that exciting. Fast forward many years and he is a lawyer and father of three and I am a Catholic priest. Each day I thank God for giving me the grace to get over my desire to think that the other guy had a better prayer life than me.

Sadly in my time as a priest, I have met many people who have given up on praying because they think they know someone whose prayer life is better. They have given into the illusion that prayer is some sort of competition. Prayer though is between you and God and no one else. We can have mentors, guides, and directors who help us mature in our prayer life but we can never say that our prayer life is better or worse than another.

4. Communal/Individual

My parish youth minister is fond of saying "The Catholic life was never meant to be lived alone." As Catholics we believe that God did not come to save us as individuals but rather as a community (a Church). If we take a close look at Jesus' ministry on earth, He made every effort to include others as a part of His ministry and thus community prayer is important to Catholics.

Community prayer is important but this does not mean individual prayer experiences are bad. Quite the contrary there is many times in the Gospel where Jesus would show the importance of private prayer by going off by himself to pray on a number of occasions.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

February 19, 2017

Spiritual ponderings

Let us begin today's reflection with the simple idea of praising God for the fact that he desires to be with us and wants to talk to us.

5. Heart of the Matter

One day I was watching a documentary on the Navy Seals and as a part of this documentary the announcer explained that navy seals were first developed in a response to a problem. As the navy fought the Japanese in the South Pacific it found itself going from one island to the next island. Navy leaders would send airplanes to these islands to get a good view of the land and the different beaches and coves. There was a problem however the pilots and other crewmen could not see the dangerously sharp coral reefs underneath the surface of the ocean and so many of the landing boats would be ripped to shreds by this unseen danger. In response to this navy swimmers began to form groups of underwater swimmers and it was their job to map the underwater coral dangers for the navy and in the process save lives and material. In Europe these divers were also given the task of blowing up the underwater obstacles that the Germans had placed along the coast of France.

Sometimes in our prayer life, I think many of us stay on the surface level and pretend that everything is just fine. The following is one of my favorite prayers:

So far today, God, I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or over-indulgent. I'm really glad about that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed and from then on I'm probably going to need a lot more help. Thank you. In Jesus name I pray. Amen

What I like about the above prayer so much is that it reminds me that prayer needs to be more than surface level. We need to be brave enough to look down deep in us to discover what it is that we really need to talk to God about. It is often these deep thoughts and patterns of thinking that are the real dangers like the coral reefs were to the navy ships.

In my own prayer life, I make it a point to speak to God about what is bothering me. If I am mad at Him, I let God know that I am mad. If I am confused I am brave enough to admit that I don't know something. Finally if I am disappointed or proud of myself, I let God know it to. There is no need to hold back from God. After all He is not going anywhere. He already knows what I have done but my experience of being able to tell Him what I have done and see Him not runaway strengthens my relationship with Him.

How would the world be different if Adam and Eve went to God and told him about the devil's insinuations and lies?

6. Persistence/Consistency

When I was growing up there were sometimes I was so focused on watching television that I would not notice when my grandmother had entered the room despite the fact that she was calling my name. My grandmother would walk up to me and place one of her hands over one of my ears. She would then say "Now that I know that what I want to say will not go in one ear and out the other ear anymore..." She would then proceed to tell me what she had been trying to say.

This memory of my grandmother came to mind when I started learning about consolation and desolation in the spiritual life. St. Ignatius of Loyola makes it very clear that God is always present in our lives. If he wasn't we would cease to exist. There are times though in which we know or feel his presence and there are times that He feels absent even though He is always present. St. Ignatius called the times that God feels present consolation and the times in which God feels absent desolation.

A mistake that many Catholics make is the assumption that consolation is the goal of our spiritual life but the real goal of the spiritual life is to learn God's will and to do it because God wants what is best for us. While God does not cause desolation, God can speak to us through desolation according to St. Ignatius.

According to St. Ignatius God allows desolation for one of three reasons. The first reason is that God respects our freewill. If we are not praying, He will not force himself on us. The second reason is that God wants to make sure that we are praying to be in a relationship with Him and not just to get good feelings. Finally God allows desolation to remind us that He cannot be controlled or manipulated and therefore even when we do everything right God may withhold His presence so that we realize that He is in charge and we are not.

No matter what reason God allows us to go through a period of desolation the important message is that we need to remain consistent and persevere in prayer. Like an athlete training for a race, we must persevere in prayer even when we do not feel like it as the athlete preserves in running even when he or she does not feel like it. St. Ignatius goes so far to say if you normally pray for fifteen minutes a day and now don't feel like praying, you should then pray for sixteen minutes a day. This is important because it is the devil that desires you to stop praying.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

February 26, 2017

Spiritual ponderings

Here are some final thoughts on prayer.

7. Devotions

One of my favorite role models growing up was an old lady in my parish named Dorothy. Dorothy stood out to me as a kid because every day she would pray the Stations of the Cross. Watching her pray the Stations of the Cross each day was my first lesson in Catholic Devotions. As I grew up, I would learn to pray the Rosary, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and Mother of Perpetual help prayers. These prayers have a way of drawing me to a calm place where I can recall how God has always been therefore me. Like watching a rerun on television or listening to a favorite song, these devotions invoke in me memories, feelings, and much more of how God loves me.

8. Discernment

St. Ignatius of Loyola in his writings points out that we have three enemies in our spiritual life. The first is ourselves because we are tainted by original sin. Sometimes we feel a need to rebel against God like Adam and Eve did for one reason or another. We need to remember though that this is never a good choice because we are not turning away from a divine dictator but rather we are refusing divine love. The second enemy of the spiritual life is our culture/society/world. The world presents us a path that it says will lead us to happiness and Jesus presents us a different path to happiness. The two paths lead in different directions. If we follow the world's path we will eventually end up a lone and perpetually frustrated because we have turned away Love. Finally the third enemy of the spiritual life is the devil. The devil, who finds himself miserable for having rejected God's will, has decided to try to make us miserable also.

It is therefore important to take the time therefore to discern the messages that we receive in prayer to make sure it is from God or not. A simple tool for discernment that I use is a set of principles. The first principle is that God never condones sin. The second principle is that God never tears us down and finally God never abandons us. If any of my spiritual thoughts breaks the three principles above I know that it is not from God.

9. Unanswered Prayers

St. Paul's in his First Letter to the Corinthian gives us a beautiful description of what "love" is:

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a.)

And St. John tell us "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Therefore everything St. Paul's says about love we can say about God and this is the reason why sometimes our prayers to God goes unanswered. God cannot do anything that will harm us because He is love. It is better to say that God answered our prayers in the negative than to say our prayers went unanswered because "no" is an answer. This gives us a freedom in our prayer because God will not harm us by giving us something we ask for that is ultimately harmful for us.

10. Goal of Prayer

Always remember that goal of Prayer is to help you strengthen your relationship with God. Our God desires to have a healthy and consistent relationship with you. He does not need this relationship but He does desire it. God will do His part in being therefore you and giving you what you need. He will however never force Himself upon you and so He humbles Himself to be present in a way that still requires you to have faith.

One of the best ways that you can develop your prayer life is by joining an accountability group or getting a spiritual director and take time each month to ask yourself the following three questions: 1) where have you seen God

this past month? 2) what have you learned about God this past month? And 3) what are you going to do for God this upcoming month. This is great way to keep your focus on the goal of prayer because you know you will have to answer these questions each month. I had also heard that Mother Teresa each night before going to bed would thank God for five things and ask pardon for five things. She said she did this because it made it easier to see God active throughout her day. She focused on five wrong things because she said it reminded her that she still needed God no matter what others told her.