

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

March 4, 2018

Spiritual Ponderings

Keys to Prayer

During my time in the seminary, I was blest to meet Dr. Nancy Brown. She was an amazing counselor who really helped me learn how to manage and overcome my depression. With her, I went from “surviving life to thriving.” It was also during this time, that my spiritual director gave me a small book on forgiveness written by Fr. Eamon Tobin. The book was titled *How to Forgive Yourself and Other*. At first I dismissed the book because it was not very big or very thick but it turned out to be one of the most helpful books that I have ever read and so I began to look for other books written by Fr. Tobin. Sadly, I never found another book until last year. Dynamic Catholic sent me a free copy of Fr. Eamon Tobin’s new book *13 Powerful Ways to Pray*. I immediately devoured it. I found it to be just what I needed to renew my prayer life. In the beginning of the book Fr. Tobin talks about the Four Keys to Prayer and I thought this would be a great topic to reflect on for the month of March since we find ourselves in the middle of Lent. As usual quotes from the book will be in bold and my thoughts will be a normal font.

Key 1: Developing a Positive Self Image of God and Self

Few factors have the potential to affect the quality of our prayer life as much as our image of God and self. On a human level, the image and feeling we have for another person and how we perceive the other person to feel about us will usually have a tremendous effect on how we relate to that person. For example, we will approach and relate to a person whom we love and whom we love and whom we perceive loves us in a different way than we will to a person for whom we have little or no feeling and whom we think does not particularly care for us. Our own self-image also will affect the way we approach and relate to people. If we have a positive image of ourselves, we will go out to people and relate to them with confidence, assuming they will like us. If we think we are not very lovable, we will approach people with self-doubt, fearful that they may reject us and not find us lovable. And if we believe that people will only accept us when we behave in certain ways, we will be inclined to be unreal with them, behaving only in ways we perceive to be acceptable to them.

I think a universal fact in regard to human nature is that we all want to be liked and included but we also do not want to feel the pain of being excluded. I also know that my image of myself often affects the way I think others will view me. When I feel like I have a very positive self-image of myself I have more courage to introduce myself to others. When my self-esteem is low, I find it harder to go up to someone and introduce myself (even if I already know that person). After reading Fr. Tobin’s book, I can see how this applies to my spiritual life also. When I think of God as a judge and me as a criminal, I find it hard to talk to God. When I think of myself as a child of God and God as my Father, I find it much easier to talk to God.

We need to check the images of God and self from which we operate and become aware of some of the consequences of these images. For example, if we perceive God to be a police-type person who imposes numerous rules and demands strict adherence to them, our relationship with him will be characterized by fear, distance, and perhaps resentment. If we are overly scrupulous, we will believe consciously—or more likely unconsciously—that God is a tyrant who is impossible to please and who is ready to pounce on us for our failures. If we experience God as withholding himself from us, we will be reluctant to petition him for our needs. If we experience him as a loving Father, we will approach him with trust, relaxation, and love. If we experience God as merciful, we will not hesitate to talk to him about our failures, knowing that his love for us is not based on our good performance.

Reading the above quote made me think to the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke’s Gospel. It is amazing that both sons did not know how loving their father was and each of them had a negative image of their father. The young son saw the father as an obstacle to freedom and the older son saw the father as a slave master. Each son related to the father in an unhealthy way.

What helps or hinders us in our attempts to relate to other people will also help or hinder us in our relationship with God.



Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

March 12, 2018

Spiritual Ponderings

Keys to Prayer

“Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at this disposition, and listening to his voice in the depths of our hearts.” – Mother Teresa. The beautiful words from Mother Teresa may inspire us to want to pray but learning how to pray is sometimes more difficult. Fr. Eamon Tobin has written a beautiful book on prayer titled: *13 Ways to Pray*. In the beginning of this book he helps us learn how to pray by presenting us with four keys to a good prayer life. Let us look at key 2. Quotes from Fr. Tobin’s book are in bold and my quotes are in the normal font.

Key 2: Being Honest With God.

So it is in our relationship with God. If we are honest and open with God, we will feel close to the Lord most of the time. On the other hand, if we treat God as “polite company,” we may find that while we have a “nice” relationship with God, it lacks fire and intimacy. We will probably experience God as a distant figure.

One of the most powerful but often overlooked teachings of the Catholic Church is that our God deeply desires to be with us. Our God is not a God who tolerates us or puts up with us. He is a God who loves us beyond measure.

Many of us have been taught that being angry with God is a sin. As a consequence we are consciously or unconsciously afraid to tell God that we are angry with him. We may think that if we get angry with God he will strike back and punish us. (Perhaps that was our experience as a child when we got angry with our parents, so we learned to hind and not express our anger.) Spiritual directors tell us that most of us are unconscious of our anger with God. For example, if we think that life is unfair, we may unconsciously blame God and be angry with him for allowing such injustice.

If there is one lesson that I wish I could teach everyone in the world, it would simply be that feelings are neutral. They are not good or bad. It is what we do with them that matters. Too often, we spend our time beating ourselves up for things that are beyond our control and this leaves us open to the devil’s antics. For example, when I was suffering from depression, I would get mad at myself for being sad. What I learned through counseling was to take the feeling and use it for growth. I would ask myself why I felt sad and maybe it was because “I felt like no one liked me.” Instead of beating myself up for feeling this way, I looked at this emotional fact and realized that it could not be true because I had many good friends. Dismissing the negative feeling helped me choose to be happy. It was much more productive than beating myself up for feeling sad.

When it comes to prayer, I turned to God and tell him how I am feeling. After explaining to God how I feel, I ask Him to help me explore why I feel this way and what I should do about feeling this way. The great thing is, I now know that there is nothing I can tell God that will scare or drive Him away. God’s love is unconditional.

1. First, name the feeling.

2. Second, Express the feeling

3. Third, Own the feeling and accept them as part of who we are.

4. Talk to Jesus about Your feelings.

Sometimes I think people do not even know that they feel. We can spend a lot of time living in denial by being busy. It is only by addressing issues that we are able to overcome them. In my opinion mindfulness is not necessarily prayer but rather a method of realizing what it is that I should be bring to prayer.

In summary, we need to realize that learning to be real and honest with God involves bringing our whole selves before God: our messy selves, our confused selves, our good selves. It involves learning to talk to God about our relationships, our jobs, our possessions, our sexiest, wildest, most cruel thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and desires. It involves talking to God about our money; how we make it and how we spend it. It involves talking to God about how we use our time and talents. If we really want to know what is important to us, all we need to do is check and see how we use our time, treasure, and talents.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
March 19, 2018
Spiritual Ponderings
Keys to Prayer

“You go to pray; to become a bonfire, a living flame, giving light and heat.” - St Josemaria Escriva. Quotes like this one from St. Josemaria Escriva when I was younger used to aggravate me because they encouraged me to want to pray but did little to teach me how to pray. I think Fr. Tobin’s book *13 Ways to Pray* is great because it is packed with many insights that help me learn to pray. Let us continue to explore Fr. Tobin’s 4 keys to prayer. Quotes from his book are in bold and my commentary is in normal font.

Key 3: Connecting Prayer with Daily Life

One of the biggest challenges of the spiritual journey is the integration of prayer (our relationship with God) to the rest of life. Most of us, particularly men, have a tendency to compartmentalize life. We give sections of our day to work, family and recreation, and only then do we allot to God a portion (too often a leftover portion) of our day.

One of the biggest mistakes we can make as Catholics is to assume that God does not care about what is going on in our life because He does care. Our God wants to hear all about our day. He wants to hear about the things that we found to be exciting and He even wants to hear about the things we found difficult. He especially wants to hear, I think, about the things we do not understand. One of the best ways for me to pray is for me to pretend I am a child at camp writing my heavenly Father about all that is going on – good and bad.

If Jesus is to become Lord of life, he must be invited to guide and permeate every activity of our day. When this happens our whole day—with its religious and secular dimensions—will become one act of worship to the Father.

Faith must permeate every aspect of my life. I am offering praise, witnessing, thanking God etc. by the way I live my life.

The challenge is to make every encounter and event of our week a spiritual exercise every encounter and event of our week a spiritual exercise through which we grow in our relationship with God.

The following prayer that someone gave me I think summarizes the importance of perspective when it comes to prayer.

Prayer of Gratitude from a Different Perspective

Lord, thank you for this sink of dirty dishes, we have plenty of food to eat. Thank you for this pile of dirty, stinky laundry, we have plenty of nice clothes to wear. And I would like to thank you, Lord, for those unmade beds. They were so warm and so comfortable last night. I know that many have no bed. My thanks to you, Lord, for this bathroom, complete with all the splattered mirrors, soggy, grimy towels and dirty lavatory. They are so convenient. Thank you for this finger-smudged refrigerator that needs defrosting so badly, it has served us faithfully for many years. It is full of cold drinks and enough left-overs for two or three meals. Thank you, Lord, for this oven that absolutely must be cleaned today. It has baked so many things over the years. The whole family is grateful for that tall grass that needs mowing, the lawn that needs raking; we all enjoy the garden. Thank you, Lord, even for that slamming screen door. My kids are healthy and able to run and play. All these chores awaiting me says you have richly blessed my family. I shall do them all cheerfully and I shall do them gratefully. AMEN

The more we compartmentalize God and box him in, the more unreal he will be to us and the more we will be alienated from him. Perhaps one reason why God allows our prayer life to dry up is because we have stopped looking for the lord in the laundry room, the store, or the office.

One of my favorite books in the seminary was called: *My Monastery Is A Minivan: Where the Daily is Divine and the Routine Becomes Prayer*, by Denise Roy. The title alone reminds me that I do not need to be in a big fancy Church to pray. I can encounter God anywhere that I am if I but take the time

Let us look at Fr. Tobin's last key to prayer. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.

Key 4: Listening to God in Prayer

True listening in prayer is a real challenge, demanding faith, selflessness, patience, a reflective attitude and courage.

We need faith to believe that God does communicate with us, his people; and we especially need faith to believe that God really does want to speak to us personally.

We need selflessness because listening always demands the ability and willingness to put aside our own need to talk or our desire to be center stage, so that we can listen to others and give them center stage.

We need patience because God does not always speak to us according to our time schedule. He tell us so himself, "Nor are your ways my way." (Isaiah 55:8)

We need to develop a reflective attitude toward life so we can learn to read God's messages as they come to us in the events of daily life.

When someone tells me that they do not pray the rosary because it is too repetitive, I really want to smack them and tell them that is the whole point of the prayer. The rosary is meant to be repetitive because its repetitive nature is meant to calm our minds and slow us down. The rosary and other meditative prayers are meant to help us focus on the present moment. In the book of Kings Elijah discovers God's presence not in the whirlwind or earthquake but rather in the quiet.

Prayer for me in many ways is like art. The more we practice it the better we get at it.

...Prayer is irrelevant when it is merely our attempt to get God to do what we want—to get God to do our will. On the other hand, prayer is very relevant when it is our attempt to discover what God wants of us and our attempt to seek the strength to carry out his will.

Many times throughout the Gospels the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes demand Jesus to perform a miracle and each and every time Jesus refuses to. Our God cannot be controlled. We can never put God in our debt and therefore it is a waste of time trying to force God to do anything for us. God however does care about what is going on in our life because he cares about us. God is the wise person who always knows what is best for us even if we do not want to admit it. He wants to help us carry our cross.

If our primary goal in prayer is to let God know our needs and to ask him to take care of them, we run the risk of developing a kind of professional relationship with God, not a personal one.

A true friendship is not based on a utilitarian relationship. A true friendship is based on a love that wants what is best for the other person even if it requires a sacrifice on our part. There are times in my relationship with my friends where I have to go the extra mile for them (and I do so willingly) without knowing if they will ever repay me. I do this because I like the other person and because I know if things were reverse that they would help me.

Prayer is allowing God to love us; it is our becoming aware of God's great love for us.

The more I waste time with God the more I know He loves me. Prayer is about diving deeper into God's love for me.

