

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

April 7, 2019

Spiritual Ponderings:

Prayer: Our Deepest Longing

I am excited to share with you some insights that I have gained about prayer from Fr. Ronald Rolheiser's book: *Prayer Our Deepest Longing*. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my reflections will be in the normal font.

**Spirituality is as real as science. But that is not easy to understand or believe. We live in a world where what is real has been reduced to what is physical, to what can be empirically measured, seen, touched, tasted, and smelled. We live in a world that is for the most part spiritually tone-deaf, where all the goods are in the store window, digitized, or reduced to a flat screen. And so, prayer is a struggle. So are a lot of other things. When the surface is all there is, it is hard to be enchanted by anything to see depth, to be deeply touched by poetry, faith, and love.**

I watched a documentary on one of the streaming services about the history of the Navy Seals. The documentary explained that origins of the Navy Seals can be traced back to World War II when the United States and its allies had to invade Europe and many islands in the South Pacific. Aerial scout flights would report calm beaches that should be easy to invade because they were not able to see deep into the water and see the danger of manmade water hazards and coral reefs. Eventually allies would send experience divers to these beaches ahead of the invasions in order to discover the real hazards to an ally landing. In much the same way, a person's life may look calm and peaceful on the surface. It is only when he or she goes below the surface do you discover the pain, the brokenness, the fear and the insecurity – the woundedness. For prayer to be successful, we have to be willing to go deeper and not just stay on the surface.

**Ultimately, our restless aching is a yearning for God. We need to connect with God. We need prayer. We know this, both in our more reflective moments and in our more desperate moments. It is then that we feel our need for prayer and try to go to that deep place. But given our lack of trust and our lack of practice, we struggle to get there. We do not know how to pray or how to sustain ourselves in prayer.**

The more I pray (talk) to God the more I trust Him and the more I trust Him the deeper I can go in prayer. I used to make the mistake and think that all my experiences had to be mystical experience right off the bat. Now, I see that my relationship with God is like other relationships. The more we trust the other person the deeper our relationships can become. The biggest danger to my relationship with God is not God wanting to do me harm (because God is love) but rather my neglecting my relationship with God because God will not force Himself upon me.

**There is no bad way to pray and there is no one starting point for prayer. All the great spiritual masters offer only one non-negotiable rule. You have to show up for prayer and you have to show up regularly. Everything else is negotiable and respects your unique circumstances.**

The best piece of advice, I received when it came to prayer was to "pray as I can and not as I can't." When I was in the seminary, a lot of guys would pray using a method called "centering prayer" where they would sit in the chapel and meditate on the love of Jesus. The many times, I tried to do this my mind would wander so much that I never felt like God and I connected. Eventually, someone challenged me to start journaling prayer and I discovered that this was the best way for me to pray. This does not mean that I don't pray in other ways, but I just know that this is the best way for me. Sometimes, I think Catholics give up on prayer instead of exploring all of the rich tradition our Church has around prayer. It is also important to remember to give each method of prayer you are trying a healthy amount of time before you decide it is not working for you. Sometimes, some prayer forms need a lot of practice before they become routine. Think of learning to pray like learning to play golf. In golf you are always trying to perfect your swing and in Catholic life you are always trying to better your ability to converse with God.

**Moreover, prayer is not easy because we are greedy for experience. The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen put this well: "I want to pray," he once said, "but I also don't want to miss out on anything---television, movies, socializing with friends, drinking in the world." Because we don't want to miss out on any experience, prayer, is truly a discipline. When we sit or kneel in prayer, our natural craving for experience feels starved and begins to protest.**

Just like homework, exercise, and thing else worthwhile, prayer means giving up other things so we can dedicate ourselves to something we consider more important.

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April 14, 2019

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**We nurse a naïve fantasy both about what constitutes prayer and how we might sustain ourselves in it. What often lies at the center of this misguided notion is the belief that prayer is always meant to be interesting, warm, bringing spiritual insight, and giving the sense that we are actually praying. Classical writers in spiritual assure us that, though this is often true during our early prayer lives when we are in the honeymoon stage of our spiritual growth, it becomes less and less true the deeper we advance in prayer and spirituality. But that doesn't mean we are regressing prayer. It often means the opposite.**

I have been blest to have a good friend name Joe who lives out of state. The first time he came to St. Louis to visit me, I felt like I had to entertain him and show him all of St. Louis. Now when he comes in, I don't feel that pressure. Instead often we just enjoy sitting and talking with each other. In the same way, when I first starting praying, I felt like I had to have some sort of mystical experience to validate my prayer experience. Now I don't feel that way. I also think of one marriage counselor who said good married couples "seize the mundane moments" of life in order to show each other love.

**Prayer is the same. If we pray faithfully every day, year in and year out, we can expect little excitement, lots of boredom and regular temptations to look at the clock. But a bond and an intimacy will be growing under the surface: a deep, growing bond with God.**

Prayer should become a daily habit like brushing one's teeth, exercise, etc.

**Why is it so difficult to pray regularly?**

**Some reasons are obvious: over-busyness, tiredness, and too many demands on our time. But there are other reasons too, suggested by monks and people we think of as mystics. The problem we have in sustaining prayer, they say, is often grounded in the false notion that prayer needs to be exciting all the time, including prayer and church services, and nobody has the energy to be alert, attentive, intense, and actively engaged every minute.**

**Like eating, prayer is meant to respect the natural rhythms of our energy. As we know from experience, we don't always want a banquet. If we tried to have a banquet every day, we would soon find coming to the table burdensome and we would look for every excuse to escape, to sneak off with a quick sandwich by ourselves. Eating has a natural balance, banquets alternate with quick snacks, rich dishes with simple sandwiches, meals that take a hole evening with meals we eat on the run. We can have high seasons only if we mostly have ordinary time. Health eating habits respect our natural rhythms our time, energy, tiredness, the season, the hour our taste.**

**Prayer should be the same, but this isn't generally respected. Too often we are left with the impression that all prayer should be high celebration, upbeat with high energy. The more variety, the better than shorter. No wonder we often lack the energy to pray and want to avoid church services!**

We have to be careful that we do not confuse liturgy with entertainment. We don't come to Mass to hear the priest tell us what we want to hear but rather to hear how we can live the Gospel better. Learning to eat better and exercise regularly will help me avoid major illnesses and more in the same way going to Mass and learning to live the Gospel will help remind me of what is important and help me to avoid sin.

It is also important to realize that being in a relationship is hard work. We have to avoid changing prayer styles to often and realize that sometimes being a relationship means simply being with the other person.

**What is needed is a clearly defined prayer form that does not demand of you energy you cannot muster on a given day.**

I call my mother every day. Sometimes we talk for 10 minutes and sometimes we talk for an hour. No matter how long our conversation is on any given day, every day that we talk, our relationship gets better.



**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius**

**April 21, 2019**

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**We unconsciously nurse the idea that we can pray only when we are not distracted, not angry, not emotionally or sexually preoccupied. We think God is like a parent who wants to see us only on our best behavior. So, we go into God's presence only when we have nothing to hide, are joy-filled, and feel we can give proper attention to God in a reverent and loving way. Because we don't understand what prayer is, we treat God as an authority figure or a visiting dignitary—as someone to whom we don't tell the real truth. We don't tell God what is really going on in our lives. We tell God what we think God wants to hear.**

This quote hit me very hard. It made me realize that there have been times in my life when I have only prayed when I thought I "looked good" before God and there were times that I avoided prayer when I thought I "did not look my best." Being reminded of God's love for me, inspired me also to appreciate God all the more and has helped me to stop trying to earn God's love and instead I simply try to remind myself each day of God's love. This is possibly the reason why the Mass starts off with the Penitential Rite which reminds us of how God loves us despite the fact that we are all sinners.

**Every thought or feeling is a valid entry into prayer.**

Another big lesson I have learned in life that I wish I could get others to understand is that "thoughts and feelings" are neutral. They are not good or bad. It is what we do with them that matters. Becoming angry at my brother for example is not a sin but wishing him harm is. I could take that anger instead of sinning and turn it into a moment of grace where I choose to forgive my brother instead of wishing him harm.

In learning to manage my depression, I practice something that psychologists call mindfulness. This is the idea that it is a healthy to be aware of one's emotions so we can address them correctly. For example, when I find myself being angry, I don't become mad at myself for being angry, but instead I sit down and pray and ask God to help me understand why I am angry and what are the healthy ways that I can come use that anger for good.

**We live in a world of instant and constant communication, of mobile phone and email, of iPods that contain who libraries of music, of televisions packages that contain hundreds of channels, of malls and stores that are open twenty-four hours a day, of restaurants and clubs that stay open all night of sounds that never die and lights that never go out. We can be amused, distracted, and catered to at any time.**

**While that has made our lives wonderfully efficient, it has also has conspired against depth. The danger, as one commentary puts it, is that we are all developing permanent attention deficit disorder. We are attentive to so many things, that ultimately, we aren't attentive to anything, particularly to what is deepest inside of us.**

Silence is important for the spiritual life.

At the end of the day, we expect that God is disappointed with us and we will greet us with a frown. The tragedy and sadness here is that avoid God when we are most in need of love and acceptance. Because we think God is disappointed in us, especially at those times when we are disappointed in ourselves, we fail to meet the one person, the one love, and the one energy—God—that actually understands us, accepts us, delights in us, and is eager to smile at us.

I always look forward to seeing my mother at the end of the day because I knew that she would always love me no matter how my school day was. I feared my dad because I could never seem to do anything right for him. Sadly, there are times in which I think of God being more like dad even though intellectually I know God always loves me. Every morning I must wake up and remind myself of how God loves me. Another important reason to pray each morning.



**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius**

**April 28, 2019**

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