

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

May 3, 2014

Spiritual Ponderings

Going Deeper in Prayer

Normally during the month of May, I reflect on different spiritual themes, that I find in contemporary music and I like to refer to those reflections as "iPod Theology." Over the years, I have found it hard to format these reflections in a way that allows me to also print the song lyrics which are often necessary to understand my reflections. I decided therefore this year that I would do something new and that is to continue to reflect on contemporary music on my website www.mayjesuschristbepraised.com. I will also be pondering with you the idea of "how do we go deeper in our prayer?"

Last summer, I had the opportunity to work a Life Teen Summer Camp with Fr. Michael Schmitz. He is the campus minister at the University of Minnesota in Duluth. In addition to his ministry at the college, he is an amazing Catholic speaker who travels around the United States giving conferences to young adults and teenagers. He has also recorded a series of DVD for Lighthouse Catholic Media. This past winter, I was pleasantly surprised to find that we were both published in the same Catholic Magazine called *Shalom Tidings*. His article was called "Going Deeper" and it contained some great insights into prayer that I can't wait to share with you. Quotes from his article will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.

"I want to go deeper in my prayer life, but I'm not sure how to start. What is my first step?" Your first step is the one in front of you. I know that sounds like I'm out of the TV show *Kung Fu*, young grasshopper, but it is true. We all find ourselves at different starting points. That means that our first step is going to be our own; it is going to be very personal and unique to ourselves.

I have come to believe that two of the hardest things to do in life is to start something and not to compare ourselves to others. The truth of matter when it comes to prayer, we know what we need to be doing. We know that we are supposed to go to Mass on Sunday, read and ponder Scripture, and spend time in quiet listening to God. These are very simple things to actually do (more difficult steps may follow) but how often do we spend more energy in creating excuses rather than simply taking the first step.

The second thing I think that we need to realize that God does not judge us by comparing us to others. He knows each of us in the most intimate way. He knows that the gifts that I have are not the gifts that you have and that is fine with Him. I know my prayer life grew leaps and bounds when I stopped worrying how other people prayed and just started praying.

And yet, there are some general guidelines that might apply to your case. A potential first might be your image of God. I cannot stress how important this is to get right. Not only because God deserves to be known as He has revealed Himself, but also because this will shape every subsequent step. If we are under the impression that God needs to be bribed into loving us, or manipulated into helping us, or placated when His "fragile ego" is bruised, then that will shape our prayer. This is the false image of the gods presented in the Greek and Roman myths: the gods were fickle, they couldn't be trusted, their "love" was arbitrary. It is represented quite well in the recent movie *The Clash of the Titans*. In it, the main message is "The gods need us. We grow more powerful the less we pay attention to them."

Our God does not need us but He desires us. God did not create us because He had to or because He wanted people to serve Him as slaves. Our God created us out love. He loves us so much that He would rather die than be without us. He however will respect our freewill to reject His love and thus proves once again that He is self-sufficient. I always love hanging out with people who want to be with me more than hanging out with people who have to hang out with me for one reason or another.

What is your image of God? How much has modern philosophy, ancient myths, authority figures colored your image of God? How can you love God and not your image of God?

A second helpful step might be God's image of us. Ask the question, "What does God think of me?" If we think that we are merely an annoyance to God, this will shape our prayer (it may even cause us to avoid prayer entirely!). God's image of you: you are completely unique in all of creation, you are precious to God, you are worth loving. That last piece is critical. I talk with many people who wrestle with this wound. They do not believe that they are worth loving... especially in their weakness and sin. This wound is in desperate need of healing and this lie is in desperate need of being exorcized.

I spend a lot of time asking the question "What does God see in me?" When you think about it I really am a nobody from a nobody family and most likely you are the same. Yet somehow God desires to have me as a companion in prayer, a co-worker in ministry, and even an adopted son in His Family. I have to constantly remind myself that God does not judge like other human beings. God loves me and has made me special. If God did not love me then He simply would not have created me. Our God does not have to tolerate things that He does not love.

**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
May 10, 2014
Spiritual Ponderings
Going Deeper in Prayer**

Last week, we began a reflection on "How can we grow deeper in our prayer?" For help answering that question, I have turned to an article written by Fr. Michael Schmitz called "Going Deeper" for the magazine called *Shalom Tidings*. Quotes from his articles will be in bold while my reflections will be in normal font.

With these two thoughts in mind, there is a need to take the following step: in spite of the fact that God is infinitely patient with us and has irrevocably chosen us, it is our task to remove any known obstacles between us and God. Here are three possible obstacles: pride, unforgiveness, and distraction.

1. To root out pride, we must become humble. This doesn't mean thinking, "I'm so small, so bad, so inconsequential." It simply means telling the truth. And the first truth is that there is a God, and you are not Him. It means acknowledging that there is Someone infinitely "bigger" and infinitely better than you. And that this Someone believes that you are worth loving. Humility always tells the whole truth; the happy truths and the hard truths. To know if you are humble, ask yourself, "Am I open to being taught, or do I resent instruction and correction?"

My best prayer happens when I stop pretending to be God and start asking God for help. The Pharisees missed Jesus because they did not think that they needed a savior. Tell God about the parts of your life that are screwed up and trust that He wants to listen to you and share with you your pain.

2. The refusal to forgive hardens our hearts to God, to others, and even makes it difficult to know ourselves. If I am aware that I hold bitterness in my heart, I need to make some effort to express that I am choosing to forgive. This can be extremely difficult (and will most likely have to be repeated many times in some cases!). Remember, forgiveness is not excusing someone's actions, and it is not ignoring real pain. It is the choice to "will the good of the other." While our emotions can still be inflamed, our decision to pray for someone's eternal soul (we could say "praying for their conversion...praying that God's will is done in their life") not only fulfills our Lord's command, but frees us.

Sometimes, I refer to God as "my boss." There are times in which I love the assignments my boss gives me. Other times I hate them. There is no assignment that God can give me that I hate more than the one to forgive someone who has hurt me. I hate to forgive others because there is a part of me that feels that when I forgive someone I am setting myself up to get hurt again. When I know God wants me to do something, I don't want to do, I sometimes try to avoid doing it by trying to avoid God by not praying. What I should do instead of avoiding God is to take my lack of forgiveness to prayer and begin my prayer saying "God help me to forgive so and so because I really do not want." Honesty is a good foundation for prayer.

3. Distractions can be anything that diverts our attention from what or who should have our attention at a given moment. Sometimes we utilize diversions for entertainment and stress relief; that's great. If recreation is what we should be doing, then games or entertainment aren't the wrong thing... they're the right thing. But if I invite distractions in so that I don't have to think about the present, then I am most likely keeping God out of the moment and out of my life. This step is nothing more than the "living deliberately" of which Thoreau wrote.

Waiting till there are no distractions is a mistake because there will always be distractions. There will never be the perfect time. Setting aside the time to pray should always be a priority. Do you spend fifteen minutes in prayer? Do you spend any time reading the Bible and asking the question what does God want to tell me with that passage? Fr. Barron recommends praying the rosary to overcome distractions as the repetition of the prayers helps to calm our "monkey minds" which normally swing from thought to the next rather quickly. Also realize that God loves you as much as when you sitting around doing nothing as when you are extremely busy. Why not take time to sit down and talk with the person (God) who is your biggest support, cheerleader, coach, etc.?"

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

May 17, 2014

Spiritual Ponderings

Going Deeper in prayer

As we look at how we can grow deeper in our relationship with the Lord, I would like to share with you some quotes from a small book called *A Guide to Christian Meditation*. This book was written by Fr. John Bartunek who is one of the writers behind www.spiritualdirection.com. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

Prayer as its most basic level is conversation with God. This seems obvious, but it harbors an awesome reality. To converse with someone implies that that someone wants to pay attention to you, otherwise you have a monologue, not a conversation. The mere existence of prayer implies that God is paying attention, that he is interested in spending time with you. Christian Prayer is an invitation from God to the one who prays—it starts with God, not with you.

I have a hard time meeting new people because there is a part of me that fears that they will reject me. It is so much easier for me when the other person makes the first move. It shows me that they at least see something in me already that make them want to get to know me better. Realizing that God desires to converse with us, can be a big help in starting a long lasting prayer life. Another way to look at this truth is to compare God to my mother who always wants to hear from her son. I can never inconvenience my mother or God because both desire to hear from me often.

Prayer, then, is more than just a dry religious duty, more than self-centered and self-sufficient self-help techniques; Christian prayer is a friendship with God in Christ

Carl Marx, the philosopher who developed communism, called "religion the opium of the Masses." If pray is truly developing a relationship with God than this is impossible because friendship entails doing stuff with the friend. The more I pray, the more I want to spend time with God, the more I do things with my Friend, and therefore the more service I perform. True religion is not supposed to make us lazy.

Only Christianity is so bold as to claim that in Christ we can become God's friends, because only Christianity offers a God who becomes man, a Good Shepherd who becomes a lamb in order to win the hearts of his sheep: *I shall not call you servants anymore, because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father (Jn. 15:15).*

Do we truly appreciate that the coolest, most beautiful, most magnificent being in the Universe (and beyond) desires to be our friend?

Christian meditation differs essentially from transcendental meditation and other New Age centering techniques. Christian meditation is Christ-centered, a loving dialogue between Christ and the soul that deepens your friendship

with Christ. It starts with the Holy Spirit urging you to pursue a greater knowledge and love of Christ and ends with your renewed commitment to follow and imitate Christ in the unique circumstances of our daily life. Transcendental meditation, on the other hand, is self-centered. Instead of a dialogue with God, an opening of the soul to God, it consists primarily in calming the many passions of the soul, creating a self-induced interior tranquility and focus that overflows in certain types of feelings. The goal of transcendental meditation is to withdraw from the complexities of life in order to experience emotional tranquility the goal of Christian meditation is to know, love, and follow Jesus Christ more completely to discover and embrace God's will for you more and more each day.

Jesus has no desire to take us out of this world, otherwise He would. Instead He desires to have us as His co-workers making the world a better place.

Keep in mind that growth in the spiritual life and in prayer takes time and consistent effort. Sometimes you may feel that you are making great progress, then suddenly you seem to have a relapse. Other times you may feel that you are making no progress at all, and then unexpectedly spring forward.

All friendships have their ups and downs. True friendships grow stronger with each reconciliation.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

May 24, 2014

Spiritual Ponderings

Going Deeper in Prayer

As we look at our prayer life and how we can make it stronger, I would like to continue to share with you some quotes from Fr. Bartunek's book: *A Guide to Christian Meditation*. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

Preparation

- + **Remote Preparation.** You don't meditate in a vacuum. The more you live in God's presence during the rest of day; seeking his will and finding other times here and there to pray (vocal prayers; the Rosary, examination of conscience), the easier it will be for you to turn your heart and soul to God at the start of the meditation. This is your remote preparation.
- + **Proximate Preparation.** You will also avoid a plethora of distractions if you get your meditation materials (the book you will be using, your notebook or journal for writing down thoughts) ready the night before. You can evenly briefly look over the passage you will be mediating on before you go to bed: this too primes the prayer-pump. This is your proximate preparation.

My house growing up was crazy after school because there were six of us and we all had different amounts of homework. There were times, where I sat at the kitchen table "trying to study" but found myself willingly distracted by the television that my brothers and sisters had on because they either had finished their homework first or had none. As I grew older, I realize that for me to study, it was important for me to go to a quiet place and so when it was time for me to study, I would put up a card table in my bedroom or other quiet spot. It was amazing how my grades improved. In the same way when we take time to prepare properly and to remove distractions our prayer life will get better also.

Sometimes you never seem to find the highlights at all. In these cases too, God is at work. Never doubt his active presence. When the material you have set aside for consideration doesn't yield any insights worth savoring, you can feel free to turn to your favorite biblical images, your favorite vocal prayer or your favorite verses—go back to the waters and pastures that have nourished you in the past.

We do not always have to talk about new things when we pray. Sometime God likes hearing about the things of the past just like my grandmother liked to hear about my favorite memories of our time together. One of the great things about being a friend is that you can both be in a room and not feel the need to speak and the silence does not get awkward.

Towards the end of your meditation, it will be time for you to draw this heart-to-heart conversation to a close. There is a need to bring all the sentiments together, to wrap things up. Before you step back into life's hectic activity, you need to renew your commitment to the mission God has given you. In your prayer, he has renewed his call and now you renew your answer, accepting once again the life-project that gives meaning to your existence—that of following him, of imitating Christ by your fidelity to God's will in the big things as well as the small.

All blessings from God lead us to action. Blessed Virgin Mary upon hearing that she would be the mother of God goes forth to serve Elizabeth her cousin. Peter upon being blest with the boat load of fish is made a fisher of men. Peter upon receiving the Lord's forgiveness is made the head of the Church. When we receive the Eucharist at Mass we are sent out to "glorify the Lord with our lives." So prayer should lead to action.

If you can link this recommitment to the concrete tasks of your day, all the better.

One of the problems with religion is that it can remain too theoretical. We need to make it concrete. "Love our neighbor" has too become a concrete action like "I will hold the door open for a stranger," or "I will donate to my local St. Vincent DePaul society."

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

May 31, 2014

Spiritual Ponderings

Going Deeper in Prayer

As we look at our prayer life and how we can make it stronger, I would like to continue to share with you some quotes from Fr. Bartunek's book: *A Guide to Christian Meditation*. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

You will always face difficulties in prayer. Just accept it. The saints all experienced it, the Catechism teaches it, and theology confirms it.

We should never give up because we find prayer to be difficult. St. Ignatius in fact challenges us to devote even more time to prayer.

1. First, this friendship is mediated by faith. You can't just call Jesus on the phone, as you can with your other friends. He is always with you, but your awareness of and access to his presence passes through faith. Faith is a virtue, which means that it can be more or less developed. The less developed it is, the more effort it takes to activate your awareness of God's presence. Many modern Christians have an underdeveloped faith. They have been unwittingly contaminated by the consumer culture's veneration for quantifiable evidence (I won't believe it unless a scientific study proves it) and its elevation of feelings over reason (I don't feel in love anymore, so why should I stay married?)—both of which weaken faith.

A scrawny faith often makes Jesus look fuzzy and seem distant, just as the sun seems weak and irrelevant when you're wearing dark glasses. Your ability to pray will suffer the consequence.

Pray in good time and in bad. Rubenstein, the great musician, once said, "If I omit practice one day, I notice it; if two days, my friends notice it; if three days, the public notice it." It is the old doctrine, "Practice makes perfect." We must continue believing, continue praying, continue doing His will. Suppose along any line of art, one should cease practicing, we know what the result will be. If we would only use the same quality of common sense in our religion that we use in our everyday life, we should go on to perfection.

2. Your friendship with Christ is unique, not only by its meditation through faith, but also because the two friends are not equals. Christ is not just your friend; he is also your Creator, your Redeemer, and your Lord; he is all-wise and all-loving and he's trying to lead you along the steep and narrow path of Christian maturity. So, on our part,

your relationship with him requires docility. But docility demands self-denial, which rubs your concupiscence the wrong way.

Can you let God be God? Realizing that most of our troubles occur when we start pretending to be God, it is best to simply pray "God come to my assistance!"

Sloth is spiritual laziness, distaste, and sluggishness in cultivating your relationship with God: *I can't pray before I go to work, because I need the extra few minutes of sleep; I can't go on a retreat since the playoffs start this weekend and I really want to watch them; I know I committed to begin praying the rosary again, but I just don't feel like it, I have so much else to do....* Anything but spend time attending to the most important thing: your "vital and personal relationship with the living and true God," i.e. your life of prayer. That's sloth.

If the devil does not want me to do something that should be all the more reason to do it. God is never outdone in generosity.

The best defense against sloth and distraction is a good offense. Following a sound and simple meditation method like the one outlined above both flushes these temptations out of hiding—since you know clearly what you should be doing during your meditation, you catch yourself more easily as soon as you stop doing that—and also give you a rudder and lighthouse to navigate through their ambushes. But the methods won't resolve the difficulties all by itself. You still have to steer the rudder and look to the lighthouse.