

PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS IN PRAYER FOR THE BEGINNER

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We are all beginners in prayer; that is why I do not intend to discuss prayer in detail. I will only share with you some of what I have learned, sometimes from personal experience, but mostly from the experience of others.

Prayer is a Meeting Between God and the Soul:

Prayer is essentially a meeting between the soul and God, and it is necessary to have two real parties in order to have a real meeting; that is, both have to appear as they really are. In truth, we generally do not appear before God as we really are, just as God also does not truly appear in our relationship with him. We imagine that we are talking to God, whereas we are actually standing before Him with a make believe personality talking to what we believe is God. Each of us is a series of personalities at one and the same time. This is either wonderful wealth or a strange and contradictory mixture. We are different according to the circumstances and the events around us, and those who deal with us notice that we have numerous personalities. There is a Russian proverb, which says: "He is a lion when he meets lambs, but a lamb when he meets lions." This applies to us to a great extent, for we are familiar with the woman who seems gentle and pleasant with others, but is most clamorous in her home.

How Can We Discover Who We Really Are?

The first difficulty we encounter when we begin to pray is which personality, from this strange mixture within us, is the one that will meet God? The cause of the difficulty is we are not used to discovering our real selves quickly. If we give ourselves five minutes everyday to study our activities and relationships, we will quickly and easily make this general discovery. We will discover which person we were when we met with this one or the other, and what kind of person we were when we did this thing or that one. We can subsequently ask ourselves: When was I really my true self? Maybe this did not happen at all or it happened for the fraction of a second, or only under certain circumstances, or on meeting a certain

person. When we can identify for ourselves those moments, and we can all do so, we discover that the times when we are alone are the most important and the profoundest in life! We generally live a reflected life. In the depths of our being, we do not have different personalities in different circumstances, but the life that is in us frequently belongs to others.

Examine yourself and ask yourself: How many times did I act out of the depth of my self? How many times did I express what I really am? You will discover that this happens rarely. We are in the habit of becoming involved with events around us that are peripheral to life such as those to which we are exposed on the radio, on television or in the papers. What we need is a type of concentration during those moments alone which will eliminate all of these extraneous matters.

You will feel the heavy burden that is ourselves, but do not imagine that all that is beautiful in us is gone. In the depths of ourselves we will find the image of God in which we were made. This consolation to the spirit is like the restoration of a beautiful antique painting and the removal of the traces of hands that do not appreciate art and which distort the way it was created by the hand of an inspired artist. The more we strip ourselves, the more many flaws disappear, and so we revert to our first loveliness and discover the real beauty God placed in us. We realize how we have driven ourselves to the misery resulting from the veil that is between God and us. Hence, we discover how much we need God, not to fill emptiness, but to fill us with His presence.

Therefore, let us understand this and repeat this simple prayer every evening during this week:

“Help me Lord to remove anything that is not genuine in me, so that I discover what my true self is.”

How Can You Discover What God is Truly Like?

If we really want to talk with God, we have to find out what He is truly like.

We all know what a “principal” means to students. When they meet with him or interact with him, they think of him in terms of his job, and they remove all human traits from his character, and so it is impossible for them to talk to him on the human level.

Another example is when a young man first gets to know a young woman. He attributes to her all the perfect characteristics although she does not in reality possess any of them. He, therefore, creates qualities that are artificial and imaginary. In this case also, a meeting is

impossible since the young man is talking to a person who does not exist in reality. This is what happens between us and God, for we possess many mental and imaginary images of Him which we have gathered from books, from church, and from what we have heard from religious men when we became adults. Although these pictures have a lot that is true, they often hinder our meeting with our real God. Although we should derive benefit from the knowledge we have acquired personally, or from our reading or listening, there is something even more important.

Our knowledge of God today is the natural result of our experience of Him yesterday. Therefore, we should not restrict ourselves to what we learned about Him before, but we have to look forward to a new knowledge in the present and future. This makes clear the function of theology, for it gives us a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of God than that which is peculiar to us. That is why we have to approach God as though we simultaneously know Him and do not know Him.

What Happens Next?

It is simple. God is free. He either comes to us and answers our prayers, and draws near to us and makes us feel His presence, or He chooses to do the opposite. God may allow you to feel his absence, and this is as important an experience as feeling His presence. In both cases, you will truly experience the God Who answers and the God Who delays.

Try to discover the truth for yourself and to stand face to face before God as He is after you discard all the imaginings and the idols you have made in your mind of God. In order to reach this result, I suggest that you repeat this prayer: "Help me, Lord, to cast away all the fake pictures I have of you, no matter how much effort it costs me."

The Sincere Conversation:

The first thing we must avoid is lying to God, a thing we do often even though it is apparent to us. Let us talk frankly with God, revealing to Him the kind of people we are, not because He does not know it, but because there is a vast difference between supposing that He Who loves us knows everything about us and the fact that we have the courage and love to be open about the truth about ourselves.

Would that we would declare to Him candidly that we often stand before Him unwillingly, and that we do not meet with Him truly, that we are tired and want to go to bed, but we must not say this in a spirit of pride or negligence, remembering that we are talking to our great

God. After this, we will sit with Him, happy in His presence and enjoying the same feeling we have when we sit with people we love and to whom we feel attached. If we cannot sit silently between His hands, let us have an honest and sincere conversation about all the things we encounter. Let us place all our worries in His hands, and let us not become preoccupied with them again, but let us lose ourselves in His wonderful Person.

Let us learn how to place our worries one by one in His hands after we really have placed ourselves before Him. And let us repeat this simple prayer from time to time: "Help me, Lord, to forget all my problems and to think of You."

We Have to Be Silent in Order to Hear God:

What next? It looks as though we have emptied ourselves of everything, so what shall we do? We cannot remain empty; otherwise, we will be filled with wrong things: feelings, thoughts, reactions, and memories. We have to remember that a conversation cannot be one-sided, with us speaking and not listening to the other party. That is why we have to learn how to be silent so God can speak. This is very important in spite of its great simplicity.

I remember that, at the beginning of my ministry, a lady said to me: "Father, I have been praying without ceasing for 14 years and have never felt the presence of God." I asked her: "Have you given God the chance to speak?" She answered: "No, I was speaking to Him all the time; isn't this prayer?" I said: "I don't think so; I suggest you spend quarter of an hour every day in silence in the presence of God." She followed this advice and came to me saying: "This is amazing. When I was talking to God, I felt nothing; when I became silent before His Blessed Face, I was surrounded by His glorious presence!"

We will not learn how to pray well to God if we do not learn how to be joyfully silent in His presence. Then we shall stand before Him face to face without seeing Him!

The Importance of Written Prayers:

After we finish what we want to tell God, we frequently experience a feeling of emptiness. What should we do?

It is advisable, in this case, to begin repeating some of the written prayers, which we have learned. Some people consider this a simple, unimportant affair, but we do not mean mechanical repetition, which would make these prayers ineffective and useless. What we mean is to meditate on the words of the prayer with a focused mind. Some believe that these

prayers are not useful since their words are not those we wish to say to God; we then resemble a small child who criticizes the paintings of a great artist, or a beginner in music who criticizes the musical compositions of an inspired musician. We need to go to art and music academies to develop an artistic sense and sound understanding and so have the truth revealed to us. In the same way, we say these church prayers to learn what the feelings, thoughts, and ways of expressions are which we must experience in our own prayers as sons of the church. They also help us in the dry periods when we find very little to say.

Therefore, when we strip ourselves of all that is fake and face our real God, we revert to the image of God and we experience repentance and pray sweetly and with sanctity all the prayers of the Church and benefit from them.

Let us sit in silence and stillness for a few minutes each day, ending with this prayer: "Help me, Lord, to see my sins clearly, so that I do not judge my brothers, and may Your Name be glorified every day."