



A Beautiful Bouquet The Catholic Church and the Perennial Need for Prayer

The need to recognize a power greater than oneself is endemic to the human condition. Dating back to the dawn of human antiquity, mainly out of fear and admiration, humans believed there were stronger powers than themselves. Whether it was the violence of their weather, the natural beauty, or their need for wisdom and truth, they felt the incessant need to offer sacrifices, gifts and supplications to their many gods so as to appease and even redirect their might.

Asking for Directions

This constant need of the Ancients to foster recognition of a god can be called *prayer*. With the advent of Christianity and its Trinitarian God, prayer has assumed many different forms and dispositions over the last 2000 years of history. The Church has made great strides in advancing the theology of God and offering Him glory, honor, and adoration.

Prayer often involves asking God for direction and assistance. The New Testament is riven with such references. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus reminds His followers that *everyone who seeks finds* and also that *the door is opened to everyone who knocks*. He also encouraged the faithful to ask God for things. *If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him?* God implores the faithful to ask Him for whatever they need. *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find: knock, and it shall be opened to you.*

Prayer is essential for personal salvation. Without prayer man could not resist temptation, obtain or persevere in God's grace. This is especially important in times of need when people cannot overcome some obstacle or satisfy some obligation, such as the observance of Mass and feast-days.

Different Fragrances

As a methodology, prayer is likened to a *beautiful bouquet* of flowers of different fragrances. Some people pray scripturally by using God's own Biblical words to honor and praise Him. Other use established prayers such as the Our

Father, the Rosary, the Apostles Creed, and the Memorare. The more advanced can tackle St. Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises as part of their daily regimen. Mystics, like St. Teresa of Avila and St. John Chrysostom, took prayer to a whole new dimension.

There are five basic types of prayer. The first is the *praise of God*. This works best when one can divest oneself from any foolish and proud attachments and center on the central goodness of God in all of His revelations. A good example is the Book of Psalms, which are prayers of praise. The second type is the prayer of *thanksgiving*. One simply expresses an appreciation of all of God's gifts, especially the gift of life. The third type is the prayer of confession, or telling God that they are sorry for their sins. Making a sincere act of contrition at bedtime is the best example of this form of prayer.

The fourth type is the prayer of *supplication*, or simply asking God for His help. People beseech God to guide them and protect them in times of great emotional, physical and spiritual need. Mental depression, economic downturns, violent weather or other experiences of deep fear and isolation are occasions for this kind of prayer. The fifth type of prayer is the *intercessory prayer*, where people ask God to care for another person or part of his creation. While attention is essential for effective prayer, those who get easily distracted from reciting rote prayers can let their minds wander and speak to God in an *open conversation* that can resound through the recesses of their own minds and hearts.

Silent Minds

During His time on earth, Christ's disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray. Jesus answered them with the Lord's Prayer, which is arguably the best of all the prayers because it covers so many elements of faith and theology. It is first a prayer of recognition, praise, moral righteousness, hope, Divine Providence, temporal needs, forgiveness, as well as repentance, the dangers of temptation, and every manner of physical or spiritual affliction, all wrapped into one prayer. Besides obtaining the gifts and graces people need for salvation, the very habit of frequent prayer elevates the minds and hearts of

the faithful to a knowledge and love of Divine things. The *habit of prayer* always works to the petitioner's advantage because of the gift of grace that engages the mind and heart with God.

To be efficacious prayer should be humble. The greatest obstacle to this kind of prayerful understanding is the hardening of one's heart through pride and obstinacy. Sincerity is another necessary quality of prayer. To be resigned to God's will does not imply that one should be indifferent whether prayers are answered or not. So numerous and helpful are the effects of prayer that they prepare the petitioner for disappointment when the object of their prayer is not granted.

True resignation to God's will is possible only after the petitioner has earnestly expressed his desire in prayer for the graces to accomplish God's will. For prayer to be truly effective, Christians need to learn how to listen. God often talks to the faithful in the dark recesses of their *silent minds*.

A Crown of Roses

Prayer may be vocal, mental, private or public. Meditation is a form of mental prayer consisting in the application of the faculties of the soul, that is, the memory, imagination, intellect and will, while thinking about some mystery, principle, truth, or fact of the faith. The purpose is to elicit spiritual emotions that will result in a deeper union with God. One of the best forms of this kind of prayer is the *Holy Rosary*.

Some deep human instinct in humanity once linked the rose with inner joy. Pagan cultures crowned their idols with roses as symbols of their inner feelings and beliefs. The early Christians substituted prayers for roses. During the time of persecution of the Christian church as young virgins were about to be martyred for their faith, they clothed themselves in festive robes and wearing on their heads a crown of roses as symbols of their hopes and prayers for eternal life.

Over the subsequent centuries the faithful made crowns of roses to say their prayers, one prayer for each rose. From this custom of offering *spiritual bouquets* arose a series of prayers known as *the Rosary*, which means a *crown of roses*. The Church asked its faithful to recite the 150 Psalms of David. Most people could not memorize all 150 Psalms. Many substituted Hail Marys for the 150 Psalms, dividing them into decades. While saying each decade they meditated on the different aspects of Jesus' life.

The beauty of the Rosary is that it is not only a vocal prayer but also a meditative one as well. While the prayer is being said, the heart is meditating on the Life of Christ, and applying it to their lives. In reciting the Rosary, they not only say the words but thought of Bethlehem, Galilee, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Golgotha, Calvary, Mount of Olive and Heaven.

The West's Soft Christ

For Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, a devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was an ever-present grace in his life. As he wrote in his autobiography *Treasure in Clay*, at his Baptism *my mother laid me on the altar of the Blessed Mother in St. Mary's Church, El Paso, Illinois, and consecrated me to her...*

He made regular visits to Our Lady's shrine in Fatima. Unlike Lourdes, where the place of the apparitions of Our Lady was the focus, at Fatima it was Our Lady's message of hope for world peace, and a plan from Heaven on how to obtain it that was stressed. Fatima would inspire Bishop Sheen's prayer life and active Church ministry for the rest of his life.

Thanks to Fatima, Bishop Sheen realized the abject evil of world Communism and its war on the Church. His voice was often the only one to be heard opposing Communism because so many in the West did not take Fatima or Communism seriously. Sheen also saw in Our Lady of Fatima a hope of converting the Muslim people. He underscored the fact that Fatima is the only place in Portugal with a Muslim name. Fatima was named after a Muslim princess who converted to the Catholic faith.

Bishop Sheen perceived the Fatima message as a call to a change of one's life as well as a call to make reparation and intercession for the conversion of sinners. His comparisons of the West with the Communist bloc became the central teaching of his ministry. For him, the West had Christ, but without His Cross, there is no discipline, no self-denial, or mortification. He called this Western conception *a soft, effeminate Christ Who cannot save us!*

Bishop Sheen introduced a special kind of Rosary during his radio broadcast on The Catholic Hour. Each of the five decades represents one of the five continents of the world. Green represents Africa with its green forests and strong Muslim presence. The second decade is red for the Americas, founded by the Red Man. The third decade is white for Europe and its *White Shepherd of the Church*. The fourth decade is blue for Australia and the islands of the Pacific's blue waters. Yellow is the fifth decade because the sun rises on the Asian *cradle of civilization*. In saying a single Rosary one has circumnavigated the globe, in fulfillment of Our Lady's petition for world peace.

A Catholic Hall of Fame

The historic Christian practice of praying to the saints for their intercession is arguably the most controversial aspect of prayer. Though the practice dates to the earliest days of Christianity and is shared by Eastern Orthodox, it has been under constant fire with other Eastern Christians, and some Anglicans, since the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.

Historically its critics have falsely accused the Church of *idol worship* because of its veneration and honoring of its saints. Catholics adore only God but they honor their saints, as they would revere family and friends. They honor them primarily because of their example and the hope and inspiration that their holy but human lives offer the living. It is a human trait to posthumously honor those who have displayed outstanding leadership, bravery, intelligence and other noble qualities. The Catholic practice is not unlike many professional sports, which have *balls of fame* to pay such honor to many deceased athletes among others from their ranks.

The veneration of the saints is not only in full accord with the demands of reason but moreover, the veneration of the memory of the holy patriarchs and prophets is sanctioned in Holy Scripture: *Let us now praise men of renown, and our fathers in their generation* (Ecclesiastics 44:1). The Church teaches that its members should pray, not only directly to God but also to those who are close to God and have the power to intercede upon their behalf. The faithful can also pray on behalf of those souls in purgatory and of those on earth who are in need.

Open Doors of Prayer

One of the proofs of the efficacy of prayer is to elicit the sense of joy in those who regularly pray. Many Christians fail to radiate the joy that their religion should bring them no matter what their circumstances may be.

All setbacks, mistakes, failures and disappointments are opportunity for prayer, meditation and joy. These are not so much doors being shut but new doors or even windows being opened for a new direction in one's life. Habitual prayer is an excellent means to develop and maintain a spirit of joy. The secret is to view an unanswered prayer or a mistake as an opportunity to change what is not right or harmonious in one's life.

An active prayer life is necessary to filter all the information and analysis that comes with these difficulties. By doing so one can alter his or her own will to conform to God's divine plan for each human being. In hearing the prayers of the faithful, God does not change His will or action but simply puts into effect what He had eternally decreed in view of prayers. The only important change will be the internal receptivity to His divine will.

Skeptics and many scientists have tried for a long time to ridicule or disprove the power and efficacy of prayer. When a patient who seems to have no hope recovers, the non-believers' proud and intractable skepticism will seldom, if ever, allow them to attribute it to prayer and miraculous cures. Their *hardness of heart* and lack of the true scientific spirit of curiosity and questioning have caused them to deny anything that was not materially before their eyes.

The Ultimate Lifeline

To develop and maintain a relationship with God, people need to pray often. To maintain an intimate relationship, deep and frequent communication is necessary. It is the Christian's ultimate lifeline. To cut it is to sever one's relationship with God.

The Bible offers no better example of the importance of prayer than Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus is a prime example of a life lived by prayer that provides purpose and direction but most of all, a relationship with the Father. Jesus prayed regularly to the Father for guidance and direction for all of His earthly actions. He offered thanks before feeding the multitude. He thanked the Father for hearing His prayer for Lazarus. He prayed constantly for His disciples and *for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony*. He relentlessly prayed to the Father to determine His will and direction, resist temptation, ask for courage, offer thanksgiving and prayer for others.

While there are many good reasons for prayer, the most vital is that God the Father cares deeply for His creation. Prayer is really a conversation with one's Father. The faithful need to follow the guidance of St. Augustine of Hippo. They must *pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you*. Thus he established an ironic partnership between God and man that encourages man's active participation while leaving himself open to God's healing grace.

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St. Joseph showed Jesus all the natural love, all the affectionate solicitude that a father's heart can know. —Pope John Paul II

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