

## Introduction to Personal Prayer

1. **What is “personal prayer”?** There are various **types of prayer** (liturgical, community, interpersonal and personal prayer), and private prayer is only one of these, the most *personal* of them all.

- Diverse degrees of predetermination and formality; diverse subjects who pray (Church, this community, our family / the 2/3/5 of us, myself).
- Different focuses: Church year / mystery of salvation; community events / situation / characteristics; our shared life and concerns; my very personal dates / feelings / concerns / inclinations / hopes / dreams / style... What is legitimate for one ‘level’ (especially ‘lower’ ones) might not always be appropriate for other (especially ‘higher’) ones...

**A regular time and a place for personal prayer:** the validity of personal preferences here, which may change —may *need* to change— with changing circumstances. Find out the best time(s) and place(s) for you, and then commit yourself to them, however remaining flexible when changes are needed.

**A religious should have at least an hour of personal prayer every day:** Christ is our life, the *raison d’être* of our consecrated life!! Pentecostal minister David Wilkerson’s life changed when he gave up TV and dedicated a couple of hours daily to prayer and Biblical study (*The Cross & the Switchblade*); Mother Teresa’s community has 3 hours of adoration daily; Covenant House workers (volunteers who work with drug addicts, street children and victims of sexual abuse in US cities) spend 3 hours a day in prayer. Without the strength that comes from real, *oblative* prayer, they could not continue their work in such harsh circumstances.

2. **The essence of personal prayer: a conversation with God.** Jesus presents prayer in this perspective when he teaches the Our Father, in the parable of the man who pesters his neighbor for something to give his house-guest, and in the recommendation to ask in a straightforward way for what we need (Lk 11:1-13). There’s a beautiful example of such prayer in the friendly conversation of Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:13-32). Many of the saints have described prayer as a dialogue with God:

*It is most useful when one wishes to pray, to put yourself during the entire time of prayer in an attitude of the presence of God, and to speak with him as one would with someone who is present and who sees you.* (Origen, [Treatise on Prayer](#), 8)

St. Gregory Nazianzen defines prayer as a “*conversation with God*”, and later on, St. Dominic, following the monastic tradition of Grandmont, will refer to it simply as “*speaking with God*”

“*Don’t keep quiet, don’t be silent in his presence. Speak to him so that he too may speak to you.*” (St. Bernard of Clairvaux, [Hom. on the Nativity of the BVM](#), 15)

“*You can imagine Christ in front of you, and accustom yourself to falling in love with his Sacred Humanity, and carry him always with you, and speak to him to ask him for your needs, to complain of your labors, to rejoice with him in your joys and never forget him because of them; without using formal prayers, but rather with words that correspond to your own desires and needs. This is an excellent manner of growing spiritually in very short time, and the one who strives to always carry with him this precious company, and thus catches a real love for the Lord to whom we owe so much, him I consider a very advanced soul.*” (St. Teresa of Avila, [Life](#), 12)

“*In prayer, if we can speak to the Lord, let us speak to him, praise him, ask him, listen to him. But if we can’t speak with him... let us at least remain in his presence and do him homage; there he will see us, will thank us for our patience, and recompense our silence. The day in which we find ourselves fainthearted he will give us his hand, converse with us and will take us on a walk round and round the paths of his garden; but until he does so, let us be satisfied that it is our duty to go in search of him, realizing that it is already an extraordinary grace and too high an honor that he suffers us in his presence.*” (St. Francis de Sales, [Correspondence](#), fragment 149, p. 784)

“*Prayer is the elevation of our heart to God, a sweet conversation between the creature and his Creator.*” (St. John Mary Vianney, [Sermon on Prayer](#)).

“*Get into the habit of speaking to him by yourself, familiarly, with trust and love, as you would with a friend of yours, with your dearest friend who loves you more than anyone else.*” (St. Alphonsus M. de Ligorio, [How to speak continually and familiarly with God](#))

“*Prayer is a mysterious but real dialogue with God, a dialogue of trust and love.*”  
(Pope John Paul II, [Allocution](#), 14 / 3 / 1979)

...A conversation is a **dialogue between two friends in which each one shares with the other what is on his heart / in his mind** (his interests, concerns, plans, hopes etc.) **and in which each one is interested in what the other is sharing.** It's not a complicated affair, nor does it demand special techniques or methods (although this doesn't mean that it's always easy or 'simple'; methods can sometimes help, just as techniques of good dialogue that couples teach in Marriage Encounters...).

The conversation which prayer is may indeed be spoken (on our part, very rarely on God's part), but certainly **need not be audible nor even put into words** to be real and effective. Perhaps the majority of the time it occurs at the level of thought and sentiment, without recourse to specific words. Thus Charles de Foucauld referred to prayer as a "thinking of God and loving him". So, under our definition of prayer as a conversation with God, we can also include what has traditionally been called "mental prayer":

*"To think and understand what we're saying and with whom we're speaking, and to realize who we are who dare to talk with such a great Lord: to think these and other similar things concerning the little we have served him and the great deal we are bound to serve him, all this is mental prayer; don't think that it is some other extravagant thing, nor let the name scare you off."* (St. Teresa of Avila, Way of Perfection, 25:3)

*"Mental prayer is the dialogue with God, the heart-to-heart sharing in which one's whole soul takes part: one's intelligence, imagination, memory and will."*

(Bl. José María Escrivà de Balaguer, It is the Lord who is passing by, 119)

Two very important implications of this quite simple understanding of prayer... on *our part*, on *God's part*.

**On our part:** we need to share *our life* with the Lord. It's not enough just to praise him, worship him and thank him; we also need to share our life with him. This tends to be chronologically and pedagogically the *first* moment in prayer. Obviously, it's not that God *needs* us to tell him about ourselves and our concerns, because he knows us through and through, indeed, more fully and more accurately than we know ourselves. It is rather *we* who need to open our hearts and minds, our entire lives to the Lord, so that he can enlighten, order, and sanctify all the parts of our life, since without our explicit permission and opening / turning to him, he will not impose his order or grace on us.

A very common error even among people of faith is to think that God is only interested in certain "spiritual" or "religious" aspects of our lives (and consequently, that God is uninterested in "secular" or "profane" matters: politics, business, recreation, health, social standing, etc.). In fact, things are quite different: everything which really matters to us, matters to God, although not always in the same way or for the same reasons. And so our prayer ought to embrace our entire life, especially all that is important to us (and even some things which do not seem so 'important' to us, but may be so in God's eyes). What is not offered or lifted up to God in prayer, will not be redeemed, transformed, enlightened. That is why it is so important to offer to the Lord our problems, our affective life, our relationships, our sexuality, our work, our projects and our dreams, our frustrations and difficulties.... For this reason Scripture says, and the saints repeat:

*"Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares for you."* 1 Pet 5:7, citing Ps. 55:22-23.

*"In prayer there is an obstacle that consists in thinking that the Providence of God is not concerned with the things of this world."* St. Thomas Aquinas, Compendium of Theology, II, chap. 6)

It seems that there are **two basic personality types** which each has a different difficulty when it comes to sharing the whole of one's life with the Lord: some people have difficulty in opening the 'negative' things to God: anger, sadness, depression, temptations, failures. Others (most people, perhaps) find God easily in the midst of problems and crises, but when everything is going well, they do not think of sharing with God also their joys, successes and achievements, nor does it occur to them to thank God for all his gifts. Both types of people need to grow in the breadth of their personal prayer until their whole life is 'under' God through a continuous dialogue with their Creator.

Finally, we could say that there is *nothing* which is 'unworthy' of being presented to God in prayer - - if even (the confession of) our sins are an acceptable offering in the sacrament of reconciliation, we should not hesitate to speak about anything with God. There is nothing in our lives which God does not want to bless in some way (by forgiving, correcting, healing, stimulating, strengthening, guiding...).

Then the concept of prayer as a conversation also helps us to understand the mystery of prayer from **God's part**.

In the first place, prayer is not a monologue but a dialogue, and so we must *listen* to God. That is a crucial part of prayer which is often innocently but damagingly left out by many Christians. Many times we act as if prayer were simply an opportunity to 'unload' our problems, concerns and desires upon God, and then feel relieved. It's as if we express what we have 'on our heart' to say, and then finish with "Bye, see you later." Personal prayer *is* an opportunity to 'unload' our burdens upon the Lord, as we have already seen, but it is at the same time *much more* than that. The second, most powerful, most fruitful and important part of prayer is hearing God's word, letting him speak to us in any way he chooses, letting his grace work in the depths of our being with total freedom.

We need *at least* to hear what God may respond to our own petitions, complaints, expressions of love or submission (or rebellions!)... but still better is also to listen to what God may want to say to us about something we have not even mentioned. God, as a totally free subject who loves us and cares for us, may have things he wants to call to our attention, things to question us about, something he wants us to do, or to invite us to share in... and generally these things are much more important, better and life-giving than the things of our own 'harvest'. So a truly authentic Christian prayer not only waits for God's "response" to our half of the conversation, but delights in hearing of God's concerns, seeks to enter into God's mind and heart, the plans of his Kingdom, and to collaborate with them in whatever way God wills.

Some of the greatest saints, especially St. Augustine, have noted the incredible disparity between our laziness in seeking prayer and our urgent need of God's grace:

*"Shame upon human slothfulness! He has more interest in giving than we have in receiving; he is more interested in showing us mercy than we have in seeing ourselves free of our miseries!.."*

(St. Augustine, Sermon 105)

However, there is a problem here which usually confronts every Christian of whatever age and formation: how to listen to God. The question is not an easy one. God can (and does) speak to us in so many ways, that often it is disconcerting to try to listen to him, because we have no idea in what way he will respond to or speak to us. That will be the subject of the next section of this introduction to personal prayer.

### 3. Listening to God

There are many ways of listening to God (*many* things by means of which God can speak to us, or reveal himself to us: Heb 1:1-2). We do not know *how* God will speak to us, nor when... What is needed is a good dose of humility and readiness to accept his manner of speaking to us, and to wait for his chosen time. It is often not easy to listen to God, but it is crucial to do so. Without our listening to God, prayer becomes a monologue, devoid of its most valuable element: God's grace and the revelation of God's will.

Here are some of the principle forms by which God speaks to us (the list is not exhaustive; there can be still other ways, but these are the main ones):

- Through dreams, visions, voices or other extraordinary means  
(Ex 3; 1 Sam 3:1-10; Mt 1-2; Acts 9; 10-11; 16:6-10; Don Bosco...)
- With the voice of our conscience, that interior voice which gently insists, but which it is necessary to listen for in order to discern its message  
(1 Kings 19; the "Quakers", Gandhi...)
- In prayer, when God 'speaks' interiorly, or even (without words) we *feel* that God loves us, gives us peace, courage, etc., or shows us the way to go  
(Dt 30:14; Is 30:19-21; Mother Theresa of Calcutta)
- Through our longings, that is to say, the deepest desires of our hearts (*not* media-fed 'desires' which are really rather superficial and artificial), especially long-term ones  
(Rom 8:26-27; 1 Cor 2:10-16; St. Catherine of Siena)

- By means of the events of our life: happenings, encounters, opportunities which represent God's call and invitation to us, or his response to our prayers (Acts 4-5; 12; 16; 21; 27; St. Vincent de Paul)
- By the mouth of other people:
  - ⇒ Pastors of the Church, the Magisterium (Lk 10:16; 1 Th 5:12; Heb 13:17)
  - ⇒ Spiritual directors/ formators/ counselors/ superiors (1 Sam 3; Gal 6:1-6)
  - ⇒ Peers / friends / parents, siblings and relatives (Jn 1;41-46; Mt 18:15-18)
  - ⇒ The poor / total strangers (Mt 25:37-40; Lk 24:13ff)
- By means of good spiritual reading, and especially by means of the Word of God (the Scriptures), since:

*The Word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart. (Heb 4:12)*

*For in the Sacred Books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the Word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life. (Vatican II, Dei Verbum 21)*

For this reason, when we read the Bible it is a good idea to begin by invoking the Holy Spirit so that he might "open" our mind and heart to hear his voice through it (Lk 24:27.32.45; Eph 1:18). The Psalms, the Prophets and the Gospels are especially apt books in which to hear the Lord speaking to us.

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Here is a brief verbal portrait of a very prayerful person who was characterized by a great expressivity and creativity in his life of prayer: St. Dominic of Guzman. Notice how he alternates between hearing God speak and responding to him.

*The holy father Dominic also had another beautiful way of praying, full of devotion and grace. After the canonical Hours and the grace which is said in common after meals, the father would go off quickly on his own to a cell or somewhere, sober and alert and anointed with a spirit of devotion which he had drawn from the divine words which had been sung in choir or during the meal; there he would sit down to read and pray, recollecting himself in himself and fixing himself in the presence of God. Sitting there quietly he would open some book before him, arming himself first with the sign of the cross, and then he would read. And he would be moved in his mind as delightfully as if he heard the Lord speaking to him. As the Psalm says, "I will hear what the Lord God is saying to me." It was as if he were arguing with a friend; at one moment he would appear to be feeling impatient, nodding his head energetically, then he would seem to be listening quietly, then you would see him disputing and struggling, and laughing and weeping all at once, fixing then lowering his gaze, then again speaking quietly and beating his breast. If anyone was inquisitive enough to want to spy on him secretly, he would find that the holy father Dominic was like Moses, who went into the innermost desert and saw the burning bush and the Lord speaking and calling to him to humble himself. The man of God had a prophetic way of passing quickly from reading to prayer and from meditation to contemplation.*

*When he was reading like this on his own, he used to venerate the book and bow to it and sometimes kiss it, particularly if it was a book of the gospels or if he was reading the words which Christ had spoken with his own lips. And sometimes he used to hide his face and turn it aside, or he would bury his face in his hands and hide it a little in his scapular. And then he would also become anxious and full of yearning, and he would also rise a little, respectfully, and bow as if he were thanking some very special person for favours he has bestowed. Then, quite refreshed and at peace in himself, he would continue reading his book.*

#### 4. Some analytical notions of prayer

Personal prayer is a multi-faceted reality, which can be studied or looked at from different angles. According to the particular perspective from which it is viewed, there may be more or fewer “types” of prayer. It depends on how one “cuts the cake”. The following types of analysis attempt to study the phenomenon of prayer using simple, everyday language and concepts.

##### 1. INTENSITY (DURATION / FREQUENCY)

- intense, pure, or explicit prayer: this refers to prayer times in which one exclusively prays, choosing the most appropriate time and place. This sort of prayer is fundamental in the life of every Christian, but it is not the only type of prayer. A very different sort of prayer is:
- diffuse, virtual or explicit prayer: which is when we pray as we do other daily tasks and perform other activities. This has been taught by many spiritual guides, and called by different names, such as the “practice of the presence of God” (Brother Lawrence) or “the little way” of St. Theresa of Lisieux, or the “Morning Offering” by which we offer to God the activities of our day. These two forms of prayer complement and strengthen each other; both are necessary to a full Christian life.

##### 2. FORM (STRUCTURE)

- structured or formal prayers: these are already formulated prayers, either with a given text (prayers from Scripture, from the liturgy, or of the saints) or structure (the Rosary, for example). These are prayers with considerable theological content, and for this reason they nourish spiritually those who pray them. But there is another, equally valid manner of praying, which is:
- spontaneous or informal prayer: This is the prayer which is born in our heart, which comes from our own experience and feelings naturally, spontaneously. This is talking with God, with the freedom and confidence of his children. This prayer tends to give more life and vitality to our Christian experience, but does not nourish us as much as the structured or formal prayers, so these two forms also complement each other in the Christian life.

##### 3. ELEMENTS (OR MATERIAL: that with which one prays)

The first three elements mentioned here seem to be fundamental in the life of the Christian; the others are rather optional: legitimate resources for Christian prayer, but not obligatory for anyone.

- THE WORD OF GOD
- THE EUCHARIST
- LIFE EVENTS (both personal and social)
- particular mysteries of the lives of Jesus and Mary
- images (pictures, statues, icons...)
- short phrases (devotional invocations or “mantras”)
- nature:
- silence and / or music
- a manual or selection of prayers or book of spirituality

## 5. Attitudes of personal prayer

Five different basic ‘postures’ (attitudes) of personal prayer, each of which can in turn be subdivided into more precise types of prayer with a certain common denominator. Together they constitute a “balanced diet” of Christian nourishment.

A.	<p>HUNGER / THIRST FOR GOD / SEEKING GOD’S FACE prayer in the felt absence of God; to thirst for, seek the face of God: to want to see him; prayer in times of aridity / dryness; prayer in the ‘desert’ (Pss 27; 42-43; 62; 63; 84; 123; Is 26:8ff).</p> <p>LAMENT / COMPLAINT: prayer from a situation of sorrow / abandonment / hurt: "¿Why...?" "¿How long...?"; when God seems to "forget"; prayer with tears / complaint, even with anger (accusation) (Pss 10; 13; 22; 74; 77; Hab 1:2-3).</p> <p>SOLIDARITY: to lament others’ pain or suffering, especially that of a whole people, e.g. national tragedies; “What will become of them?” (Pss 44; 74; 80; 83; Jer 14,17ss; Lam).</p>
B.	<p>CONTRITION; ASKING FOR PARDON: recognizing one’s own unworthiness and the corresponding repentance: asking for forgiveness of our sins and inner renewal (cf. the "penitential psalms": Pss 7; 32, esp. 51...) <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>, n. 2631.</p> <p>PETITION: asking for one’s daily needs, both material (health, work, protection) and spiritual (graces, gifts, virtues...); humility and perseverance are the great qualities of this prayer (Mt 7:7-8; Lk 18:1-7.35-43; ir. 35; Rom 8:26-27). <i>Cat. of the Cath. Ch.</i>, nn. 2629-2633.</p> <p>INTERCESSION: petition on behalf of others; the special vocation of certain congregations, groups and individuals (contemplatives) (Gen 18; Ex 32:11ss; Lk 22:32; Eph 6:18-20; Jam 5,16) <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>, nn. 2634-2636.</p>
C.	<p>THANKSGIVING: akin to the liturgical action of blessing and Eucharist: thanking God for his gifts (health, material goods, faith, one’s vocation, etc.) and also for one’s “crosses” and <i>everything</i> that God does for us. (Pss. 103; 116; 138; Lk 10:21f; 17:11-19; Col 3:15-17; 4:2; Phil 4:6; 1 Thes 5:17) Cf. <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> nn. 2637-2638.</p> <p>PRAISE: exalt the greatness of God: the focus is on God <i>himself</i> (his perfections) and not so much on the <i>things</i> he has done; forget oneself in thinking only of God; give glory to God: (Pss 145-150; 8; Dan 3; Te Deum; Magnificat) Cf. <i>Cat. of the Cath. Ch.</i>, nn. 2639-2643.</p> <p>ADORATION: prayer of the creature before his/her Creator, recognizing God as the source of our very being; to feel our nothingness before Him (prostration); to lose oneself in the divine abyss (Ps 8; Dan 3; Is 6:3; 45:18-25; Rev 4-5) <i>Catech. of the Catholic Church</i> n. 2628.</p>
D.	<p>CONFIDENCE, TRUST: entrusting oneself to God, feeling oneself in the company of one’s father and protector; the prayer of <i>quiet</i> and <i>peace</i>; this prayer exults in and savors the relationship of confidence with God (Pss. 16; 23; 27; 40; 91; 121; 131; 139; Rom 8:26-39).</p> <p>OFFERING / OBLATION: to offer to the Lord all that one has for the service of his Kingdom: hands, heart, mind, will, health, time, relationships, etc. (Pss. 25; 86; 143; Rom 12:1-2)</p> <p>ABANDONMENT: prayer of absolute trust and total offering which seeks only that God’s will be accomplished in oneself and others; attitude of placing oneself at God’s disposal, into his hands, trusting in his Providence (Pss. 31:6; 86; 139; Lk 1:38; 23:46; Jam 4:13-15).</p>
E.	<p>REFLECTION / MEDITATION: whether the starting point is the Word of God, nature or life situations, it always <i>seeks to understand</i> the ways and the will of God (Pss. 37; 38; 73; 77; 119; 143; Eph 5:15ff; Lk 2:19.52). <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>. nn. 2705ss.</p> <p>LISTENING: a basically receptive attitude of active listening in prayer, to receive God’s self-revelation; it requires patient waiting (Pss. 81; 85; 95; Is 50:4-5; 1 Sam 3:1-10; Ezech 33:30-33; Jn 8:47). <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>, nn. 2709-2716.</p> <p>CONTEMPLATION: a loving gaze upon our loving God: simply being in his presence; to place oneself under the sunshine of his incredible love and in the light of his face (Pss. 27; 80; 84; 131; Lk 4:21-22; 9:28-36; Eph 1:3ff) <i>Catech. of the Catholic Church</i>, nn. 2709-2716.</p>

## **Methods of Personal Prayer**

6. Some methods of personal prayer: conversational prayer, scripture meditation (esp. of Gospels, Lectio Divina, Rosary), practice of the presence of God, the Jesus prayer / mantras, Eucharistic adoration...
7. Our journey of personal prayer (workshop with individual & group exercises to foster sharing and appreciation of our different but largely parallel paths in prayer)
8. The gifts of the Holy Spirit and prayer; prayer of inner healing. charismatic prayer; daily examen / personal review of life.
9. Seasons in the life of personal prayer: beginnings; honeymoon (time of consolation); desert period (prayer of faith), temptations and trials; deeper prayer but perhaps less felt; initiatives of God's grace...

## 10. DIFFICULTIES IN PERSONAL PRAYER

### 1) Distractions

Description: all kinds of distractions, poor concentration, wandering thoughts; imagination let loose like a wild man; worries & concerns that occupy one's heart and don't allow one to concentrate on praying.

a) Environmental distractions (from one's surroundings, outside of oneself): music, conversations, shouting, arguing, sounds of traffic... things that distract one's sight (and thereby the mind as well): newspapers, photos, things to do, things that are not right or clean; smells (food, bad smells), etc.

Strategies:

- i) change time and/or place of prayer to a setting which has less distractions: especially good times are early morning or at night (fewer distractions)
- ii) provide a better environment for prayer by 'covering up' distracting sounds / sights with music, turning off lights, using a candle and religious image...
- iii) incorporate the source of distractions in your prayer: praying for those whom you hear going by, or thanking God for what you see, hear, smell...

b) Mental distractions: stray thoughts, mind wandering, without any great hold on the mind, but which enter without invitation like little children running in and out of the house, and precisely *distract* us from prayer.

Strategies:

- i) just let them go like garbage floating down a river, or cars passing through an intersection. Don't let yourself get worked up and upset by them: just turn back to God as many times in persistent humility
- ii) use methods of personal prayer which help you to concentrate, e.g. vocal or written prayer, imaginative prayer (Scripture meditation, rosary), use of religious images, spiritual reading.
- iii) follow the third strategy under the previous heading, incorporating into your prayer the people or events which you've been distracted by

c) Psycho-corporal distractions: there are distractions with a powerful impact upon our whole being (anger, sexual attraction, fear) which are not easily dislodged; they usually have a physical component as well (stimulation, tension) which needs to be dealt with as well

Strategies:

- i) first of all one needs to seek calm, allowing the intense emotions and their physical impact to subside: distance oneself from the cause of the impact, try relaxation exercises, pacifying kinds of prayer (among which, the rosary is very recommended).
- ii) Pray for the virtues and gifts necessary to follow God's will in this matter, rather than giving in to your instincts or emotional tendencies.
- iii) For the corporal component in this situation, try corporal prayer (postures of kneeling, prostration; physical movement / expression) which tends to cut the physiological process of the dominant feeling.

d) Emotional distractions: worries, preoccupations, concerns, emotional reactions which are strongly rooted in one's heart and almost impossible to dislodge; some of them are capable of 'taking over' our prayer and turning it into a worry or self-pity session, or an exercise in day-dreaming.

- Strategies:
- i) Since it is nearly impossible to evict these emotional states from one's heart, we must make them part of our prayer. *[However, there is the danger of making our prayer part of them (prayer being co-opted by our concerns, feelings, etc.). This latter is a sign of emotional bondage for which we may need to repent and seek healing.]*
  - ii) First, try to identify the emotions one is experiencing, and call them by their name: anger, resentment, jealousy, hurt, homesickness, fear, concern for a loved one... Accept them as legitimate feelings, albeit not as reliable guides for our life. (Speaking with a trusted friend may help with this step of recognizing and accepting what we are feeling.)
  - iii) Then, try to present these feelings / concerns to the Lord in prayer. Leave them at his feet if possible, or at least commend you cares to the Lord (1 Peter 5:7). Remember that God is great, and may have solutions to your problems that have not even occurred to you.
  - iv) Try to cultivate the prayer of abandonment, and practice praise and adoration of God (which take the focus off ourselves and put it where it belongs: on God himself).

The spiritual habit which is contrary to distractedness is called “**recollection**”: a serene and continual focus of mind and heart on the things of God. In so doing we will gradually experience the harmony of body, feelings, mind and soul that God intended for the human being. (Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, [Commentary on 2 Cor 6:3](#))

Such a virtue or spiritual habit is not achieved easily nor all at once, but presupposes a continual effort to discipline the senses, to educate the heart and mind, and to reject useless or harmful activities of our inner faculties, such as day-dreaming, fantasizing, or nurturing resentments. It has a lot to do with the “practice of the presence of God” and cultivating the dispersed prayer throughout the day. Community observances such as times and places of silence, periods of study, limitation of over-stimulation through radio, TV, Internet etc. also have their place in forming us in a spirit of recollection.

## 2) Aridity / Dryness

Description: Luke-warmness in prayer, lack of fervor, boredom, routine, not finding any delight or interest in prayer; feeling that one is wasting one's time in praying; feeling oneself to be a dried up stump; “nothing is happening”; my prayer is dead; feeling like one is praying to a brick wall; sleepiness while at prayer...

Note: Aridity can occur for very different, even contrary reasons, which makes it very important to distinguish its causes before attempting to deal with it. In general, one may progress up the list of possible causes, presuming the first ones unless they are ruled out, and only moving to consider the more spiritual causes (c. and d.) if there is no more natural, human explanation.

- a) Physical or psychological fatigue (the incapacity to pray in a felt way due to the inopportune moment chosen for one's prayer time, an exhausting rhythm of life, or one's state of health or old age).

- Strategies:
- i) Change the time of day in which you pray if this is the problem (and it may be late at night, early in the morning or mid afternoon that is problematic, depending on the psychology / lifestyle of the person). Also, try sleeping a bit before praying!
  - ii) Change one's workload or share burdens with others if that is possible, to reduce one's physical & psychological fatigue.

- iii) Adapt one's prayer to one's fatigue: leave aside complicated and strenuous forms of prayer or meditation, and choose simpler ones: vocal prayer or singing, conversational prayer, contemplating a religious image, corporal expressions of prayer (e.g. changing postures, movement), or even sleeping in the Lord's presence!
- b) An excessively constricted, "boxed-in" prayer: lack of 'life', vitality in one's prayer: emotional dryness because of excluding from one's prayer vital elements as supposedly "unrelated" to one's prayer, or unworthy of entering into it. (*Other types of deficiencies such as poor discipline in prayer or lack of a balanced diet will be considered under difficulty # 3, and the dryness of stagnation due to unrepented sin, under difficulty # 6.*)

- Strategies:
- i) Allow the rest of your life, especially the things which most matter to you, to enter into your prayer. Share your feelings and dreams, fears, loves with the Lord, no matter what they are. Try to cultivate spontaneous prayer, i.e. from the heart, without leaving behind the other forms of prayer you normally use.
  - ii) Pray with a close friend concerning the things both of you are facing.
  - iii) Be creative in your prayer, using different postures, movement, symbols, etc.
  - iv) Prepare your daily prayer time with points for meditation, theme, texts, etc. so that your personal prayer is not reduced to whatever occurs to you on the spot...

- c) A stage of spiritual growth which God leads us through (the period of 'weaning' us from attachment to felt experiences of prayer); usually 2-3 years into a serious life of prayer.

- Strategies:
- i) Since this is a normal and God-given period in the Christian life, one should not panic or turn away from God, even though one doesn't *feel* him in the same way as before. On the contrary, one ought to *remain faithful to one's times and practices of prayer*. This is the first and most fundamental counsel to be given to someone in this type of desert or arid period. And this prayer, difficult though it may be, may indeed be more meritorious than the more attractive forms of prayer we used previously
  - ii) Forms of prayer which particularly strengthen our faith are: adoration of the Eucharist and prayerful Scripture reading.
  - iii) Forms of prayer which may ease the difficulty of this period are: vocal or written prayer; the use of religious images in prayer, and *lectio divina* or the rosary. Nevertheless, these forms of prayer should not be used as an escape from the dryness, but as a help to continue in fidelity to prayer while this period lasts.

- d) Spiritual resistance: if all the other causes of dryness are ruled out, and one suffers things unexplainable by physical or psychological causes which block prayer or access to other spiritual helps (the sacraments, Church assemblies, Scripture reading), then there may be a negative spiritual cause (demonic interference) which seeks to impede the action of God's grace. Sometimes experienced as severe headaches or pain whenever one approaches Communion, enters a Church, opens the Bible, or begins to pray...

- Strategies:
- i) Spiritual interference usually requires that one has first to repent of any involvement in such things as witchcraft, spiritism, or any grave sin.
  - ii) It is recommended that a person experiencing this seek the aid of a prudent spiritual director who has experience in the matter of liberation from the influence of evil spirits.

### 3) Lack of faith

Description: Not discovering God in one's prayer nor in one's daily life; just not believing that prayer 'works'... with the resultant slacking off in one's prayer life / lack of interest in praying; having trouble believing in God (or at least not caring at all to pray, even though one knows God exists)

There are also different causes here: the first, due to negligence on the part of the person who prays; the second cause is a deficiency that is normally unconscious, and the third cause is not in the least the responsibility of the person who experiences this obstacle in prayer.

- a) luke-warmness (negligence / laziness in utilizing the necessary means to foster our spiritual life; lack of discipline in one's Christian life; "acedia" in the monastic tradition)

Little faith is due to little prayer. The less you pray, the weaker your faith becomes; the more you pray, the stronger your faith becomes. (A well known Spanish spirituality writer, the Franciscan Ignacio Larrañaga, affirms this as a principle of the spiritual life, and compares the weak faith of a person who neglects to pray to an atrophied muscle, which loses its 'tone' due to lack of exercise.) It is difficult to maintain a relationship or friendship with someone whom you've stopped seeing or talking to...

"A certain sadness, by which a person becomes slow to perform spiritual acts, because of the effort they require" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I<sup>a</sup> 63,2 ad 2)

"This sadness is a lack of greatness of soul; it doesn't want to undertake great things proper to the nature of the Christian..."

The 'acedia' is, in the measure in which it passes from the affective terrain to that of a spiritual decision, a conscious aversion, an authentic flight from God. The human being flees from God because he has elevated him to a higher, divine way of being, and he has obliged him, by that very fact, to a higher norm of duty... which means that the human being has the incredibly perverse conviction and express desire that God shouldn't have raised him up but rather "left him in peace".

Laziness as a capital sin is the sad, humorless, and stupidly egotistical renunciation by the human person of the "nobility which obliges" us to be children of God." (J. Pieper, *On Hope*)

- Strategies:
- i) Remedies for lack of faith (in prayer or in God): simply pray more! Strengthen your faith praying. There is a radical choice in the life of faith between a progressive mediocrity and the heroism of a life of holiness. "It makes no sense to love with such luke-warmness a God who has loved us with such ardor." (St. Alphonsus Liguori; *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*, 4) An hour of personal prayer daily for religious men and women...
  - ii) Remedies for luke-warmness: in addition to the discipline already mentioned, meditation on the great truths of our faith (cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II<sup>a</sup>II<sup>ae</sup> 82), reading the lives of the saints, and contact with people that are passionate lovers of God (whose ardor is contagious).

- b) impoverished prayer (spiritual 'malnourishment'; enfeebled prayer): Due to an overly or exclusively spontaneous or subjective prayer, or for lack of a 'balanced diet', our faith can become gradually weaker and weaker – even imperceptibly, and without any intention to weaken our faith on our part. It can reach the extreme of not being able to sustain an attitude of faith in the face of challenges, trials or scandals the life presents us - - and our Christian life comes to ruin.

- Strategies:
- i) One must nourish one's faith and spiritual life with Scripture meditation, spiritual reading, the Rosary and the sacraments (especially the Eucharist).
  - ii) It is also a good idea to use the Liturgy as a source and inspiration for personal prayer, since it is the "principal instrument of the ordinary Magisterium of the Church." (Pius XI)

- c) different sorts of traumas; the shock produced by very great personal suffering, or again, negative things associated with consecrated people, can affect one's prayer life, sapping its vitality and conviction, and leaving just the shell of religious observances. It may be caused by very different sorts of traumas: the death of a loved one (especially after a lengthy agony, even more so if one was "praying with a lot of faith for him/her to be healed); the experience of being physically, sexually or emotionally abused; great and unexplainable sufferings / diseases (which seem "unmerited", a "curse", or simply unjust); scandal given by priests or religious, especially the unworthy celebration of the liturgy or sacraments.

- Strategies:
- i) First, at a physiological level, release the tension through exercises of relaxation, breathing, taking a warm bath, healthy recreation, etc.
  - ii) Then, place yourself under the loving gaze of God (put yourself in the presence of God, and if possible, his eucharistic presence) and just soak in the warmth of his love ("sun-bath"), I recommend prayers of forgiveness (of those who have injured one), and prayer for inner healing.
  - iii) Also, contact with people full of goodness is itself healing. People that have been traumatized have difficulty believing in God's love for them, after having suffered or seen a loved one suffer so much. For this reason it is often helpful for someone who is near to them who has a strong faith in God's tender love, to pray with them. In these cases the "prayer of faith" of that other person can revive the confidence and faith in the love of God in the traumatized person. Something like Elijah did when his prayer caused the life-breath to return to the child (1 Kings 17:21f; cf. James 5:16), or like the heat of a lit candle can sometimes re-light the wick of a recently snuffed out candle by "contagion".
  - iv) Recommended reading: Ps. 103; stories of Joseph (Gen 37-50), Ruth & Tobit; tapes on inner healing, forgiveness and reconciliation.

#### 4) Activism

Description: Too much work, too many activities, with the resultant negligence of prayer; also having a mental "list" of things to do which doesn't allow one to concentrate or pray in peace; "not having time" for prayer.

The causes of this difficulty in personal prayer may be legitimate and inevitable (a), understandable but solvable (b), or very serious and symptomatic of an imbalance which could lead to shipwreck in one's Christian life, especially for a person consecrated to God in religious life. There also exists another form which blocks the very act of praying (d).

- a) legitimate impediments: when it really is not possible to find long spaces of time for prayer, and it seems to be God's will that puts one in this situation (obligations of obedience, emergency situations to which one must respond, duties of one's state in life and the call of charity; a very special and demanding pastoral work...)

- Strategies:
- i) When it is not possible (taking into account other urgent duties) to have long times of prayer, one can practice a diffuse or "virtual" prayer, along with the desire to have the "luxury" of longer times exclusively for prayer. If you really *want* to pray (and are not just trying to justify your spiritual sloth), and learn how to take advantage of any and all opportunities, you will indeed find opportunities to seek the Lord: cancelled meetings, classes or appointments, holidays and breaks, power outages, queuing up to pay bills, times of sickness...
  - ii) It is also recommendable to set aside a time for more intense prayer each week or month (if a daily prayer time is not possible), in order to make of it a sort of mini-retreat, and recover some of the time for the Lord lost in the daily shuffle.

- b) too many things to do: plans, projects or things to do, people to see or call... come to one's mind precisely in moments of prayer; one is tempted to leave on the spot in order not to forget again what one should have done already... Various suggestions, some very practical, others more systematic.

Strategies:

- i) First, keep at your side when you pray a pen & paper (notebook), in order to be able to note down what comes into your head during prayer time, so that you don't have to abandon your prayer nor risk forgetting about what came to mind. When you finish your prayer, you can do whatever things came to mind during prayer.
- ii) Seek an appropriate hour for prayer either *before* or *after* your work day (administrators, syndics, parish priests, teachers), so that you can effectively limit all 'business matters' to your work hours.
- iii) A more radical solution is to elaborate a daily schedule which takes into account your various duties in a more orderly way, without doing violence to your prayer times; do periodic self-evaluations or seek spiritual direction to help you put your life in order.

- c) inversion of one's scale of values: this amounts to overemphasizing pastoral activity and underemphasizing prayer. At the root it's a lack of humility: thinking that we don't really need God so much. Not knowing how to say "no" to invitations and requests for pastoral assistance, we end up saying "no" to prayer.

If the apostolate is seen as an absolute (that is, when its demands are not negotiable nor even debatable: a religious who absolutely "can't participate" in a community retreat because he/she "has" to be in the apostolate), it is ultimately a question of pride and humility: to think that everything depends upon us!

Strategies:

- i) Reflect upon the efficacy of your life and of all that you do without God! Meditate Jn 15:5 and Phil 4:13. Think about your own death; learn to be in silence. Books to be recommended are Carlo Carretto's *Letters from the Desert*, and Dom Chautard's *The Soul of the Apostolate*.
- ii) Observe zealously daily, weekly and monthly prayer times, and make a good annual retreat. Cf. *Cat. Cath. Church*, n. 2732.

- d) too much effort: one can tire oneself out trying to encounter God; running from one method of prayer to another in search of what's best for oneself, and end up jaundiced about them all; to depend too much upon one's own efforts and resources, and not sufficiently upon God's grace and help.

This is activism hidden behind our very prayer, when we attempt to "catch" God based upon our own vehement desires; one may be honestly trying to do one's utmost, with very good intention, but if after a sufficient time one does not see any results, it may lead to resentment and abandonment of the spiritual life.

Strategies:

- i) Try to let God act in your life: wait for him, learn how to read the signs of his action in your life, how to collaborate with his grace in your daily activities.
- ii) Learn how to "do nothing" in prayer; choose less self-directed prayers, in favor of more passive forms of prayer, such as listening to religious music, resting in the Lord, and thanking him for what he has already done for you.

## 5) Confusion

Description: Feeling lost, feeling like you're going in circles in your life of prayer, not sure of whether you are praying well or wasting your time; brusque changes in your form of prayer without much reason for them; being in search of a spirituality which "fits" you; dilettantism. The causes once again can be various.

- a) lack of a spiritual guide: not having a spiritual director or spiritual companion, or at least not having received adequate orientation concerning the ways of prayer; difficulty in distinguishing between God's will and ours when it comes to prayer.

In addition to the search for a method of prayer which helps you and allows you to grow (concerning which many good books may be of help), one normally needs another *person* who can listen to you, understand you and orient you. For lack of an experienced spiritual guide, or at least one who knows the paths of the life of faith and prayer (who is not necessarily a priest or confessor), one can find oneself going in circles, find oneself in a dead end (due to a mistaken concept of prayer), or abandon the more profitable paths of prayer (for example in times of dryness or temptations).

- Strategies:
- i) Seek out and choose very carefully a spiritual director / companion. It should be someone who 1) understands you; 2) with whom you feel enough confidence to open yourself fully to him/her, and 3) someone with whom in fact you experience growth and help.
  - ii) St. Teresa of Avila said that if she had to choose between a holy but ignorant spiritual director and a not-so-holy but learned one, she would choose the second! In this field ignorance (of the one chosen to be spiritual director / companion) can do a great deal of damage, while spiritual knowledge can help a great deal. Cf. *Cat. Cath Ch.*, n. 2690

- b) lack of vocational clarity: many times this is only a "lack" in the sense of not having yet come to a vocational clarity. That is, it's not a sign of anything 'wrong', but is a stage which can bring about a certain confusion in the matter of prayer.

Because of not having yet found one's definitive vocation, one may also not have yet found his/her own spirituality and way of praying. Finding a method, form or 'climate' of prayer which gives you a serene orientation in your spiritual life can be a factor in vocational discernment, or a confirmation of the same. (Think of the difference between the active prayer of a Jesuit and the tranquil prayer of a monk!)

- Strategies:
- i) Try out different forms of prayer and spirituality until you find one that seems well adapted to your personality, with a view to the committing yourself to the Lord in that way of prayer and its demands..
  - ii) If one you don't feel at home with the type of prayer-life of a religious community or movement in which you are engaged in initial formation, it may be a sign that that is not your place, since prayer is a key element in the spirituality of an institute, and were that your vocation, you should feel consoled and challenged at the same time by the forms of prayer characteristic of that institute or movement.
  - iii) Dissatisfaction with the characteristic prayer of an institute after one has made a permanent commitment may be caused by infidelity, tepidity or lack of faith (of oneself, or of one's community), or sign of an inadequate living out of the institute's charism of prayer, or again a sign / question / provocation suggesting a new vocation (not necessarily outside of one's institute, but perhaps a new direction to one's life within the community).

- c) the problem of "scruples": scrupulosity is a deeply ingrained psychological problem which often flows over into the area of conscience and religious practice. It's a matter of agonizing doubts or

accusations which assault one internally –due to an overly strict conscience– which leaves the person perturbed, confused, tormented and full of anxiety.

In addition many other kinds of scruples one can suffer from, here are some that concern the life of prayer: doubts as to whether one has prayed well or not, whether one has fulfilled one's duty to pray, concerning one's real motivation in prayer, feeling that distractions and temptations that came during prayer were one's responsibility and so one is guilty of sin in each case; wondering whether one sins if he does such and such a thing during prayer; if one has a right to... etc.

- Strategies:
- i) The most sure remedy recommended by moralists in this case is to place oneself under the direction of a wise, experienced and kindly confessor, and then to rule oneself by what he says (and not by one's own doubts, anxieties, etc.). It's matter of liberating these tormented people of the burden of false guilt which they are bearing (*false* guilt, because of their erroneous conscience).
  - ii) Anyone else in contact with people suffering from scruples should limit themselves to recommending to them the above solution. To give counsels or advice to such a person may end up only burdening him/her more with exaggerated doubts and guilt.

## 6) Stagnation

Description: There's no progress or advance in one's prayer nor in the life of grace, despite a certain fidelity to the forms and external demands of prayer and of one's state in life. Lack of spiritual vitality: to feel that one has hit a "plateau" in one's relationship with God; not to have any recent experiences of God's grace (one's testimony of God's action in one's life is all about things from years ago).

If it is true stagnation, it will be due to something in the life of the person experiencing it, but it may be more or less conscious / culpable. At any rate, taking stock of one's situation and taking the necessary steps to remedy it may be the privileged opportunity of experiencing some new twists in one's journey, and even a new vocation.

- a) unrepented sin: it may be a serious sin –a particular sin never repented of nor confessed– or it may be a habit of sin which one has never had the courage to break with (alcoholism, masturbation, homosexuality, pornography, marital infidelity, compulsive lying, graft...). Even guilt (including imagined guilt which may not in fact exist) can block one's relationship with God in prayer.

Such a stable, "protected" presence of evil (sin) in the life of a believer can suction off his spiritual vitality, block the action of God in certain areas of his/her life, or even totally dry up the source of grace in one's life, leaving only an outward appearance of Christian life (like cut flowers which only last a few days before they begin to wither and stink). And all of this can happen despite an apparent "fidelity" to prayer –at least in the external requirements of prayer, since it would be hard to open oneself sincerely to the Lord in prayer and at the same time maintain hidden a sinful practice in one's life.

- Strategies:
- i) Truly repent of the area of sin in your life, confess your sin and desire to do God's will, rejecting everything that is incoherent with the Christian faith or your state of life. These are the inescapable requirements of any authentic prayer life. Ps. 31 and 51.
  - ii) Meditate on the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11ff), and realize that so much depends upon your initiative to get up and take the road back to your merciful Father...
  - iii) Break with your unrepented or habitual sin and the respective "occasions of sin" (situations leading you to fall anew); confronting this key sin in your life and lead to a time of *much* grace in your prayer-life.

iv) If the blockage in your life is a “guilt-complex” (an exaggerated and oppressive weight of guilt), it is good to go to confession and ask for inner healing, until one finds oneself free of this burden by discovering that God rather welcomes you with all his love. Only then will one be able to resume the journey of prayer...

b) not taking the step: it may not be anything sinful at all, but just a matter of a major step in one’s life that out of cowardice or unwillingness to change, one has not (yet) taken.

By resisting the call of God (although it may not be strictly speaking a matter of sin: God leaves us free in responding to him), by deciding not to take a step in faith, we are sometimes responsible for the stagnation of our spiritual lives. We reject the very thing which would be the key and catalyzer of our next stage of growth (e.g. a vocational decision, a new responsibility, a change of apostolate or community, the missionary call). God continues to wait for us, inviting us to take the step, to assume the risk.

Strategies:

- i) Gather up one’s courage and take the risk! Throw oneself into what you feel God has been inviting you to for some time now.
- ii) If you have any uncanny feeling that there is “something” you’re not doing which you should, but you don’t know what it is, try to do a systematic examination of conscience or discernment (perhaps helped by your spiritual director) to see in what area you have been frustrating God’s grace. James 1:5.

c) attachment to the past / hankering after past experiences of God: an over-attachment to *past* beautiful forms and experiences of prayer can compromise us in our present life of prayer and block our response to what the Lord wants of us / wants to do in us *today*.

Strategies:

- i) In these cases it is helpful to do an exercise of explicitly “letting go of” (thanking God for, but ‘closing’ upon) the endearing experiences of the past, and of opening oneself to what God wants today.
- ii) Try out new forms of prayer, new ways of relating to God, and try to leave aside your expectations based on past experiences of prayer (e.g. that you’ll feel peace and joy, or receive a “word” from the Lord, or that you will “see” Jesus or Mary...). Accept with humility and availability what God disposes for you now. Be creative, and allow God to do new things in you, or to guide you along new paths.

Fr. Kevin Kraft O.P.

(Drawn up in Spanish about the year 2000;  
translated into English in 2009.)

## **Select bibliography on personal prayer**

### *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*

All of Part IV, but especially its first section, is a beautiful and inspiring summary of Catholic teaching on personal prayer and different spiritualities present in the Church. The entire section is well worth reading and meditating.

(According to the Library of Congress classification [used by Tangaza Library])

### **BV 210.2 Introductions to Prayer**

A. Bloom:	<i>Beginning to Pray, and Courage to Pray</i>
L. Evelyn	<i>Teach Us to Pray</i>
E. Farrell	<i>Prayer is a Hunger</i>
F. Giardini	<i>Prayerfulness</i>
P. Hocken	<i>Prayer: A Gift of Life</i>
G. Lefebvre	<i>Simplicity: the heart of prayer</i>
G. Maloney	<i>Inward Stillness</i>
V. McNabb	<i>The Craft of Prayer</i>
T. Merton	<i>Contemplative Prayer</i>
H. Nouwen	<i>With Open Hands</i>
K. Rahner	<i>On Prayer</i>

### **BV 215 Learning to Pray**

B. Bro	<i>Learning to Pray</i>
S. Parmisano	<i>Come to the Mountain</i>
S. Tugwell	1. <i>Living with God;</i> 2. <i>Prayer in Practice</i>

### **BV 228 The Prayer of Jesus**

G. Martin	<i>Praying with Jesus</i>
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### **BV 245 Collections or spiritualities of prayer**

[diverse authors]	“ <i>Praying with (the saints)</i> ” series (tend to be rather theoretical)
H. Oosterhuis	<i>Your Word is Near</i>
M. Quoist	<i>Prayers</i>