

**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

PRAYER

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Dedicated to
Adrian van Kaam CSSp

My thanks to
Sr Marie Biddle RSJ and Ms Cathy Holling

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Listen with the ear of the heart

Foreword

There are many stories coming from the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the third and fourth centuries. One of those stories concerns a learned man who came to Anthony, the greatest of the desert dwellers. He asked Anthony how he could endure living in the desert, deprived of the consolation of books. Anthony said: “My book, philosopher, is the nature of created things, and whenever I wish I can read in it the works of God.”¹

Anthony has put his finger on a central fact of Catholic spirituality: in the finite we meet the Infinite, in the human we meet the Divine and in the present we meet the Presence. God is everywhere and wherever God *is*, God *does* and God’s doing is *loving* and God’s loving is *liberating*.

This is for us both gift and task. First of all it is gift. We begin with what God has done, is doing and will continue to do. What is on offer is God’s loving and liberating Presence, all the time, in all things, everywhere. Secondly it is task. We respond. Most fundamentally, this means waking up, becoming aware of what is going on throughout the cosmos, in the very depths of our beings, in each and every moment, in every person, event and thing. In Luke’s Gospel we read:

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. (Lk 12:35-37)

Paradoxically, waking up – and perhaps more importantly, *staying awake* – requires constant and consistent work. It is an ongoing task. That task is by way of facilitation rather than mastery:

Spiritual formation cannot be forced, only prepared for. Hence its means cannot be those of conquest, but only of facilitation and preparation.²

In the middle of the sixth century, the great

monk, St Benedict – founder of the Benedictine orders – gives us some very helpful advice. The first word in his *Rule* is “Listen!” A little further on St Benedict adds: “Listen with the ear of the heart.” Deep listening opens us to the Presence everywhere.

Here we are at the heart of prayer as it is understood within the Catholic Tradition. It is the way we will speak of prayer throughout this book – *being present to the Presence*. Our focus will therefore be primarily on attitudes and dispositions rather than specific acts and rituals. It is the prayerful person we are most interested in, rather than the person who says prayers, the prayerful life rather than the life that contains times of prayer. We must of course pay some attention to specific acts and rituals, prayers and times of prayer. These have a very important place in the Catholic Tradition. They, however, will be discussed as the servants and instruments of the prayerful person and the prayerful life.


The tradition of prayer within the Catholic Church is rich, varied and complex. There are many people, themes, practices and sources that could be usefully studied. We could also address many specific problems that arise. A much larger book would be required to do all that.

As a reader of this book you will hopefully find at least three things:

sufficient substance and clarity in the material presented to enable you to begin to understand something – or deepen your understanding – of the enormous riches and complexity of prayer within the Catholic Tradition

enough practical guidance to enable you to begin – or perhaps simply refine and deepen – your practice of prayer

encouragement to go on exploring the possibilities in prayer for you personally, for your family and friends, and for the wider community.



Let me suggest finally that this book is best read slowly. The act of reading can be a prayerful act and a deepening of your prayerfulness. Together we shall try to go as deep as we possibly can. We cannot do that at speed. Slow down, clear your mind of distractions. Pay close attention to both what the text on the page is saying and what the text in your own heart is saying. Heed the advice of the poet:

He (she) does not always remain bent over his (her) pages; he (she) often leans back and closes his (her) eyes over a line he (she) has been reading again, and its meaning spreads through his (her) blood.³

Michael Whelan SM PhD

Introduction

If we were to gather one hundred Catholics in a room and ask them to write down what they think prayer is, we would no doubt get a variety of responses. And they might all be in some sense “right”. The various responses might emphasise conversation, the heart, petition, praise, contemplation, rituals, grace, God, attentiveness, silence or perhaps a number of the above, or something else.

However, we could expect every response to imply, if not explicitly state, that prayer is fundamentally about *presence* – our presence with God and God’s Presence with us. Before prayer is a method or action or word or ritual, it is a response to the Presence of God.

Presence implies relationship. In fact, being present – *really present* – is simply a way of emphasising that the relationship is more or less focused and attentive. It is possible, for example, to be standing next to someone but not be really present to that person. Similarly, it is possible to be really present to someone on the other side of the world.

Human presence is more about the inner world than the physical or visible world. To speak of presence implies that the relationship has some depth to it, some connection with our inner world and who and what we actually are as human beings.

Being prayerful goes to the heart of what it means to be human. Relationships are the very essence of being human. There is nothing you can say of yourself that does not bear some relationship to someone or something beyond yourself. Our humanity is constituted in and through relationship:

Relationship is, then, written into the very nature of the human person. As the Bible sees human beings, you cannot think about the person without recognizing that he or she is, as it were, made for relationship.⁴

Relationship is fourfold. The first expression of relationship, the one that gives context and meaning to all the others, is the relationship with God, however we name God. The second expression of relationship is with oneself, the third with other people and the fourth with the events and things of our lives. In a healthy life, all four expressions of relationship thrive, more or less.

It is an axiom of the Catholic Tradition that we find ourselves – our *true self* – in God. When that relationship with God is growing alive and active, when we are awakening to the liberating truth of it, all else – our longings, fears, anxieties, hopes, joys, sadnesses, achievements, frustrations – find a relative place there. In the context of that relationship, all else can be faced and experienced as promise rather than as threat.

Disconnected from that transcendent context, things tend to lose their proper perspective. Some things we exaggerate out of proportion; others we diminish or even overlook. Means easily become ends, ends easily become means, the relative things can become absolutised and the Absolute can become relativised or lost sight of altogether. When our particular social environment is suffering from such disconnection, people may look askance at someone who has woken up to what is going on and has begun to live in accord with this awakened state. Again we can turn to the Desert Father St Anthony for practical advice:

A time is coming when people will go mad and when they meet someone who is not mad, they will turn to them and say, “You are out of your mind,” just because they are not like them.⁵

The prayerful person is one who is more or less present to the Presence in each moment, in all people, in all events and things, everywhere. This is enabled and promoted by study and acts and habits that support listening and attentiveness to what is happening – what is *really happening* – in and around us.

When we are present to the Presence, we are more likely to be truly present to ourselves, others and the events and things of our world. And vice versa, when we are truly present to ourselves, others and the events and things of our world, we are more likely to be present to the Presence.

Culture and society can create a thicket of unreality. Our own anxieties, fears, selfishness and greed can contribute to this thicket of unreality. Perhaps more importantly, our own particular inclinations to self-deception – and we are all geniuses at self-deception – can incline us to sleepwalk through life, never taking stock, never waking up to what is actually happening in and around us.

The prayerful person is the awakened person. The prayerful life is the awakened life. As both

cause and effect of the awakening, we are willing and able to listen and hear and face what is happening.

This is in fact another way of thinking of our deepest possibilities as human beings. It is about turning up for life wide awake.

It is a journey into our own humanity. And the ultimate discovery that awaits us – the ultimate *experience* that awaits us – is that this very journey into our humanity is also a journey into Divinity.

How often can we say we are fully present to God or to ourselves or to others or to any event or thing? And in those rare moments when we are fully

present, are they not also the moments when we glimpse in some small way what it is to be truly alive?

The prayerful person is one who is more or less present to the Presence in each moment, in all people, in all events and things, everywhere.

SAMPLE



1

Mystery

Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.⁶

Problems are challenges to our cleverness, ingenuity, endurance and skills. Problems have solutions, at least in principle. If we are clever enough, work hard enough and have the right tools, problems give way to solutions. Solutions, in turn, bring closure and closure brings a sense of power, and power brings a sense of control. All of which is entirely appropriate if we are dealing with machines or merely functional issues.

Our daily experience, however, reminds us repeatedly that there is no solution to life as such. Life is much more than a problem or even a series of problems. It is that “more than” that calls for serious attention. There is always more to discover, more to deal with, more to enjoy, more to suffer, more to live, and more to wonder about. Every moment contains the rider: “There is more than this!” The “more than” confronts us everywhere, in every moment. In fact, our daily experience brings us face to face with an *inexhaustible intelligibility* in and around us. We can know and understand so much, but not all. The possibilities are inexhaustible. The more we know, the more we know we do not know. Every answer brings with it more questions.

Together with the discovery of the inexhaustible intelligibility in our lives comes the discovery of *ultimate uncontrollability*. Daily living contains constant reminders of our limits. The older we get the more obvious are these reminders. Again, it is inconceivable that the human family would ever reach the stage where everything was literally under control. Life will always be full of surprises, for better or worse. We will never exhaust the intelligibility of the world, nor will we ever be rid of our limits.

We call this ‘mystery’. Yes, life contains a multitude of problems that cry out for solutions. But more importantly, life is a mystery that must be lived. The problem-solving approach is good when we are dealing with problems. A different response – something much deeper – is required when we are dealing with mystery. Mystery calls for an attentive, listening response, and for trust and submission. Mystery – when we respond well – evokes humility and awe, reverence and gratitude, surrender and contemplation.

The more deeply we live our lives, the less helpful and the more destructive, in fact, is the problem-solving approach. For example, consider a work of art or moments of playfulness, a loving relationship, being with someone who is grieving or the moment of simply turning up for a new day with a measure of good will. There will normally be problems attendant upon such things or moments because problems and mystery are intermingled and intertwined in our daily lives. But the heart of such things or moments must not be treated as a problem. Such things and moments usher us into the presence of mystery. How well we respond will have a significant bearing on how well we live as human beings.

When we are faced with a problem the correct question is, “What can/must I *do*?” When we are faced with mystery the correct question is, “What *attitude* must I develop?” Here we are on the human ground of prayerfulness and the prayerful life. Our Catholic Tradition urges us to listen attentively to the promptings of the human heart at this point. Those promptings will point us in the direction of the Great Mystery beyond the ordinary mystery of our days.

For reflection

Take each text on its own and read it slowly and reflectively. Listen with the ear of the heart. Pause from time to time and listen to any movement within, whether it be a movement of resonance or resistance. Let the process lead you to some kind of words with God.

This life is much too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then be asked what you make of it and have to answer, 'Scientific humanism.' That won't do. A poor show. Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic, that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight; i.e. God. In fact, I demand it. I refuse to settle for anything less. I don't see why anyone should settle for anything less than Jacob, who actually grabbed ahold of God and wouldn't let go until God identified himself and blessed him.⁷

Christianity in its true essence is the state of radical openness to the question of the mystery of the Absolute Future which is God. All individual statements in Christianity, in its knowledge and life, can be understood only as a modality of this radical commitment to refuse to call a halt at any point and to seek the fulfillment of its life, its 'salvation,' in something to which no further name can be assigned.¹⁰

The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing; we feel it in many things. I say that the soul naturally loves universal being, and naturally loves itself according as it devotes itself thereto; and it hardens itself against one or the other as it pleases.⁹

Very gradually we learn the crucial lesson of existence, that we do not ask what life has to give to us, but rather respond to what life asks from us. Then the question is no longer what can I get out of life, but rather what can life get out of me.⁸

For practice

Our days are filled with many things we generally do with little or no reflection – opening or closing a door, making a cup of coffee, folding bed sheets, walking along the street, washing our face, ironing, turning a light switch on and so on. This week, make a point of becoming present to yourself as you do these things. Slow down. Become aware rather than deliberate. Listen with the ear of the heart, be attuned to what is happening. You are actually a participant in something bigger than yourself. There is grace in each and every moment, each and every event.

