

PRAYER – A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO GOD’S PRESENCE

Armand M. Nigro, S.J.

We hear a great deal about Religious crisis, don't we? There are crises of authority and obedience, of Community life, of personal identity, of Religious poverty, etc. I am convinced that at the basis of it all is a crisis of faith. But there is no hope for improvement here unless individual persons begin to respond better to God in prayer. Either we are not praying correctly or we have stopped praying. This is true, I think, both of lay people and of us religious.

The single, most important conviction I want to share with you is that *prayer is a personal response to God's presence*. May I try to explain this?

Either you and I are more important than God or God is more important than we are. The answer is obvious, isn't it? He is more important than we are. Further, if what God wants and does is more important than what we want or do, then more of our attention should be focused on what God is and does. Again, what God wants to say to us is more important for us than anything we may have to say to Him. And God does want to speak and communicate Himself to us.

When prayer becomes too self-centered, even if it is centered upon noble and holy desires, if the focus of our prayer is I, me, or my, we are going to be in difficulty.

Prayer is a personal response to God's presence. This means that God first makes Himself present to us. Prayer is our awareness and acknowledgement of God's presence. It is what God does to us, rather than anything we do. St. John reminds us that genuine love means first of all not that we love God (which may or may not be true), but that God first loves us. His love for us is more important than our love for Him. He wants and appreciates and is grateful for our love; but since His love for us is more important than our love for Him, His love deserves more of our attention.

It seems to me that there are three aspects of genuine prayer that we should keep in mind. First of all, if prayer is a personal response to God's presence, then, the beginning of prayer is to be *aware* of that presence, simply to acknowledge it, to be able to admit: "Yes, God my Father, You do love life into me. Yes, You love life and being into the things around me and into all that comes into my senses. You love talents and these longings into me, etc." The focus is on God and what God does.

I want to make a distinction. I know that the terms meditation and prayer are used interchangeably and that they are used differently by different authors. By religious meditation I mean thinking about God or what God does or about anything good, holy, or pious: but this is not prayer. When I am thinking about you, you are the focal point of my thoughts, but that is not *communication with* you. Prayer is a person-to-person communication with God. If I am thinking about God or the life of Christ and what He has done, that is holy, meritorious, good and helpful for prayer; but it is not essentially prayer.

Prayer is when “He” becomes “You”, when I say, “Yes, God my Father, You love life into me.” When I say to myself, “God loves life into me,” that is a meditation. Do you see how I am using the words? When there is a You-I relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit, I call this response genuine prayer. If there is a consideration of what He is and does, but not a You-I relationship, it may be helpful, good and holy, but it is not essentially prayer.

The basis or first step in prayer is for me to wake up and face reality; to realize that He is present to me, that He loves breath and being a share of His own divine life and all my capacities into me, and to be able to say, “Yes, God my Father, You do love all this into me. Yes, Jesus my Brother, You do. Yes, God my Spirit, you do.” -- That is to pray. If in the few minutes that we have during the times of private prayer, we do nothing else but merely make ourselves aware of the God who is already making Himself present to us, that experience in itself is profound prayer; it is fruitful prayer; it is even the beginning of mystical prayer. This is a genuine opening up to God who communicates Himself to us if we only give him the opportunity.

There is a difference between persons and things. God is present to things; God saturates things with His presence, because He loves life and being into them. But there is no acknowledgement on the part of non-personal things; they are incapable of prayer. You and I, however, because we are persons, can acknowledge that presence; and that is the first step in prayer.

The second step, it seems to me, is that once we realize what God is to us, what He does for us and how much He loves us, the only decent, polite, obvious and spontaneous response is not only to say, “Yes, You do,” but also “Thank You, God my Father, for loving life, being, and a share of your own nature into me. Thank You, Jesus, God the Son and my brother. Thank you God the Holy Spirit, for living on in me.” Gratitude is an obvious, spontaneous outflow of being aware of what God is and is doing for us.

As an analogy, if a person is very good to me and unselfish and financially supports me, but I do not know him or realize this, I cannot respond to his goodness and love. But if I find out that my support is coming from him, that many good things that make my life much better are coming from him, personally, uniquely to me, it’s one thing when I begin to realize and acknowledge it: “Yes, he does. Yes, you do.” And something more when I say: “Thank You.”

Do you notice the focus of this response? It is essential for gratitude that there be an awareness of receiving from another. No one opens a door into a strange and dark room where he sees nothing, and begins to converse into the room just in case there might be somebody there. Rather we are first conscious of someone; we look into someone’s eyes; we are assured that if we talk into this microphone, there is a radio audience waiting on our words; or if we look into that camera there is a TV audience present; or if we put our words on tape, somebody will listen to them. We speak and respond only to some kind of personal presence.

Prayer is like that. Sometimes in our good and holy desires to communicate with God we “junk-up” our prayer. We begin immediately to make acts of faith, hope or love, of contrition or sorrow; we ask for things or just say something, because, after all, we can’t just sit there and let nothing happen; so we do something, *we say something!* I call this “junking-up” our prayer. If we do that before we are really conscious of God being present to us, it is like opening up a dark

room and talking because there might be somebody there who might possibly be listening. It is important that we take time peacefully and quietly (even if we have only a few minutes to pray), *first* to make ourselves aware of the loving, creative, sustaining, divinizing presence of God, because prayer is a personal response to God's presence.

The first step then, is to acknowledge God's presence; the second is to thank Him. *The Third* is a loving response. A person responds to love freely given by saying, "I love you, *too*." When we say this to God it implies that we first become aware that He first loves us. To say, "God my Father, Christ my Brother, God my Holy Spirit, I love you, *too*," is our response at its best.

With regard to asking God for favors, I hope we don't misunderstand it as imperfect prayer. When we beg God for sunny weather, or pray that our bursitis will go away, or pray for something more holy or important such as international peace and justice we pay a great compliment to God. This is an expression of "becoming as little children" which Jesus recommended, and honored. A child who comes to his parents and asks for things is paying them a big compliment. What is the child saying but, "You are good and can fill my needs. Please, may I have a candy bar?"

When we approach God with this sense of our absolute, total dependence, and need, we are conscious of being precious and important, but without Him of being nothing, because all that we have is loved into us by God. In this consciousness, we are profoundly acknowledging what He is and what we are. Did not Jesus Himself say: "When you pray, face God and say *Abba*, (Hebrew baby talk for Papa or Daddy) give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our offences, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil." Notice how much of the "Our Father" is petition. Our Lord teaches us to pray this way. If the prayer of petition is made correctly, it says, "God, you are everything; Creator, Sustainer, Divinizer, Forgiver, Merciful Lord of the Universe, Provident God of all, I belong completely to You." When we pray for any favor we mean, of course, "Thy will be done." We are not trying to blackmail or fool God into giving us something by groveling in His presence. No we presuppose, "Thy will be done" – but we still would like to have a sunny day tomorrow, etc.

To return to an earlier point: what God does is more important than what we do. And God longs to communicate Himself to us. The tragedy is that so few of us permit God to communicate Himself to us in prayer. One reason for this failure is faulty teaching or education in prayer. A second is a lack of trust or faith that He really wants to and is going to communicate Himself personally and uniquely to us. Since we feel uncertain about this, we do most or all of the talking or meditating, or we fill-in the time with spiritual reading or something "profitable", but we are reluctant to empty ourselves and abandon ourselves to His presence and movement so that in silence He can communicate Himself to us the way he prefers.

A third reason is that we are afraid of failing, afraid of trying this kind of prayer and finding out that it doesn't work for us. It will always work, if we remove obstacles and give God a chance, because God longs to communicate Himself to each of us personally. He wants to make our prayer more and more mystical. And this is not in any dangerous, quietistic, way-out, extraordinary sense. God wants us to be normal, ordinary, everyday healthy mystics. By mystic, I mean the sort of person who opens up to God's presence, who lets God fill his consciousness

with His personal presence. The older we grow in our prayer life, the more aware, sensitive, attuned, docile, responsive to God's presence we become; because all genuine prayer is a personal response to that presence.

We have developed or been given two different kinds of capacities or facilities with which to respond or act socially or otherwise. One set of habits we call virtues. These are active capacities; they enable us to do things, and through our activity we perfect these habits. They are acquired by activity; sometimes the beginnings of them are infused, but at least they can be perfected and made stronger by exercise and they render our virtuous activity easier. They are the "can-do" of our operating capacities, and are very important. But there are also capacities loved into us by God which enable us to be receptive. A radio station not only has a transmitter, but it also has a receiver; they are both important. These receptive capacities become more and more important in our prayer life. They are called gifts of the Holy Spirit. They make us aware, and receptive, attuned, sensitive, responsive, docile to God's communicating presence; and He wants us to pray more and more that way.

All growth in prayer, then, is rooted in our conviction that God is present to us, that His presence is personal, loving and provident, uniquely saturating us; that God is and wants more and more to be our Father and that like every good father, God wants to speak and communicate with us. He keeps trying to speak to us through all the experiences of our life, through his Church, through His living work in Holy Scripture, through His Eternal Word Jesus Christ, in whose Holy Spirit we are invited to be sons and daughters. God, I repeat, longs to communicate Himself to us and He invites us to listen and receive. But He will not force this on us.

Now, may I make some practical suggestions? I said that some of us are afraid to give God a chance, because we fear it may not work. But it will work (that's a guarantee) if we give Him a chance. In practice, what can we do in order to enable God to communicate Himself more fully and freely to us?

Try to be faithful to at least 15 to 30 minutes of daily being alone with God. Try to make room for this at a regular time each day. God wants time to be alone with each of us and communicate with us; and what God wants from us God deserves. Can you remember 5 "P's" of prayer?

- (1) *Passage* from Holy Scripture (choose one): Before beginning your prayer period choose a short passage of 5 to 10 verses from the bible. This is very important. Never omit this before your prayer period, either the evening before or the first few minutes before you begin to pray. Choose a passage that you want especially to listen to, to taste and savor and relish. It may be a favorite psalm or parable or miracle story or section of one of Our Lord's sermons. It should fit your mood and your need. Put a marker in the page and keep it ready. You may or may not come back to it before your prayer period ends.
- (2) *Place*: Find a private spot where you can be alone with God. This is important. Sometimes it is good to be in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament but if people are in the chapel with you and you feel like stretching out your arms, if you feel like throwing back your head or looking up, if you feel like sighing or complaining or crying or dancing or singing, you will not do it. But you can do this when you are alone; you should feel free to do this. Otherwise

you are inhibiting yourself. You must not be inhibited when you respond to God's presence. So, pick a quiet place where you are alone and can uninhibitedly speak and react to God's presence without drawing attention from others.

- (3) *Posture*: At the beginning of private prayer, take the time to settle yourself peacefully. You do not pray as an angel or disembodied spirit or as an intellect: but you pray as a man or a woman. Men and women have bodies and bodily posture is important in prayer. Do you pray better when kneeling? Then kneel. Do you feel more receptive and open to God's presence when sitting? Then sit. Our founder, St. Ignatius, was a mystic who seemed to prefer lying down during his prayer and recommends that we try it, too.

Experiment with various postures till you find one most conducive for responding to God's presence. This may vary from day to day and within the same prayer period. Try, for example, lying on the bed or sitting in a comfortable chair with feet propped on a stool and arms resting on arm rests or on your lap with palms up; or sitting in a hardbacked chair with palms facing up or down on your lap, with head back and jaw relaxed; or standing (perhaps leaning against something) with head comfortably back; or sitting at a table or desk with arms resting on it; or kneeling with arms resting on a support or outstretched, etc., etc.. Different postures fit our different moods and needs.

- (4) *Presence of God*: Respond to God's presence. Peacefully remind yourself how present He is to you. Feel, e.g. the cloth of your clothes or the desk in front of you and admit to God, "Yes, You love feeling into me and texture into it. You love sight into me and color into it. You love hearing into me and sound into it. You love life into me. You are in me. Thank you for living in me, for loving goodness and sonship/daughterhood into me." This takes a little time, but it should always be done and never rushed. You should not hurry that part of your prayer, even if it takes up the whole time. You may feel like saying, "Thank You. I love You, too." In these moments God's special communication may come with that deep personal sense of His presence. Sometimes He makes his presence felt (experienced) by us. And when He does, let it continue; let this experience hold or carry you, just as water holds up a floating body. Stay with it until it fades. Do not move away from it or change or rush the experience or overreact with too many or unnecessary words. We tend to "junk-up" our prayer with too many words. Perhaps a simple repetition of "My Lord and My God" or "Abba, Father" will do. If it fades, continue the reminders that you have of His presence.

- (5) *Passage from Scripture* (return to it and listen to it): There may be no time left to read the Scripture passage you selected. If so fine. But when you try to respond to God's presence in a grateful, loving and adoring way, if nothing seems to happen, if you feel dry and desolate, do not be discouraged or judge this as a sign of failure. Rather, the dryness may be God inviting you to listen to Him as He speaks to you in Holy Scripture. Always have the Scriptures available when you are at prayer; never be without them. When nothing seems to happen after trying patiently and peacefully to respond to God's presence, when you feel He is not communicating Himself, turn to the place you selected in Scripture and give Him a chance to communicate Himself to you. Listen while He talks, because Scripture is the living Word of the living God; it is living now because God is alive now and He hasn't

changed His mind in what He said through the inspired writers. It is more important to listen this way to God than to speak.

Very slowly with attention whisper or read aloud (not silently) God's words. Pause between the phrases so that the echo and meaning of the words can sink into you slowly like soft rain into thirsty soil. You may want to keep repeating a word or phrase. If you finish the selected passage, go back and slowly repeat it (just as we repeat the chorus of a song).

Why whisper or speak aloud the words of Scripture? Because this engages our attention more fully through eyes, ears and voice. Often when I read something in silence, my eyes focus on the words while my imagination and attention wander far away.

Praying with Scripture this way is an experience of listening to God. Do not try to make applications or search for profound meanings or implications or conclusions or resolutions. These usually "junk-up" our prayer. Be content to listen simply and openly as a child who climbs into its Papa's lap and listens to a story.

When the time is up, thank God for speaking to you. Realize that Father, Son and Spirit live on in you as you move away to continue the rest of your day.

These are my suggestions for permitting God to communicate Himself to us. Even if we have lived long years of half-distracted, half-tepid, half-hearted attempts at praying, it is never too late – even if we are 107 years old. Try it. Taste and see for yourself. I promise that within a very short time, God will make a real mystic out of you if you give Him this opportunity and remain faithful to it. By mystic I mean a very normal, healthy, ordinary, everyday sort of mystic graced with the kind of prayer that God longs to communicate to us.

Perhaps I should clarify the word *mystic*. By mystic I mean any conscious union of God with humans, initiated and sustained by God; it is an experience which we cannot make, earn, or be responsible for. You cannot initiate or sustain it yourself. Sometimes even when we do not put very much effort into prayer, God seems very present. He fills us with His consolation. It's a wonderful experience. We feel loving and more loved ourselves. And the next day we may put in more effort than before, but nothing happens; ashes seem to fill our heart; there is no taste for prayer, even though we hunger for it. God seems a thousand miles away. It may not be that we do anything wrong. Rather, God is teaching us. He is teaching us that we cannot make, earn, deserve, or force this sort of experience. It is freely given: a mystical experience.

There are many words to describe this experience: consolation, peace, joy and a feeling of greater faith and hope, of being loved, of being more loving. It is initiated by God. He is anxious to communicate in this way. Then, why doesn't He do it more often, if He is so anxious? One reason is, God cannot abide with or reward error or falsehood. Before He can console and communicate Himself to us, we have to remove obstacles and make it possible for Him to come into our lives. He will not force His friendship on us. One of the prerequisites is that we be convinced, not merely intellectually, but deep down in our inner selves, that this is something we cannot make, steal, earn, deserve. This is totally and freely given. We can only dispose ourselves to receive it. We can prepare ourselves for it and be deeply grateful when it

comes. When it comes we can humbly say, “Why me? I don’t deserve this; but I am grateful for it.” That is mystical experience. And it is not always as ecstatic as it might sound; most often it is very quiet, peaceful, a simple inward assurance that God is with me and I am loved by Him. It is really not very definable at all.

Mysticism par excellence is the Incarnation, that union of the human and Divine, initiated by the Divine, in Jesus the Man-God. All other mysticism is but a participation more or less in the reality of the Incarnation. It is a sharing in it, and that is what God wants. He became a man in order to share His Divinity with us.

The kind of person God wants you to be, the kind of grace and prayer he is offering to you and desires so much to give you, is to enable you to be a profoundly prayerful person, a genuine contemplative all day long, no less in manual work or in suffering than during the divine Office or at the Sacrifice of the Mass. Private prayer is essential to this. My effort in private prayer does not earn the grace; that is, if I set aside time for it, that isn’t going to guarantee it automatically. We don’t put in a nickel’s worth of human effort and get back a nickel’s worth of mystical experience. But we should faithfully give time every day to private prayer, and this in turn enables us to find God in all other things. It makes our liturgical and community prayer better. It makes our work and social involvements more of an experience with God. Our work, in turn, which is an experience with God, feeds our desire for prayerful union with God and enables us to pray better when we do have ten or fifteen minutes or half an hour of private prayer to spend with Him alone. The two feed on and nourish each other.

All of us can be prayerful in this way. God wants us to be and is longing to make us prayerful. If we respond to Him, each of us will become prayerful in a very unique way. Each of us is unique, our response is unique: God’s love and presence is also unique.

A SUGGESTION FOR FAMILY OR GROUP PRAYER

1. After dinner, before dishes are cleared away (or any preferable time), select a short passage from the bible, e.g. Mark’s gospel, 4:35-40. Usually Dad is reader; others can be.
2. Dad first invites those present to listen carefully to God’s Word and reminds them of Jesus’ assurance: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there, too.” He begins with a short prayer such as “Speak to us, Lord. Help us listen carefully to Your word.”
3. Then he reads the passage aloud very slowly, distinctly, with pauses, so that each phrase can sink into the listeners.
4. After the reading each in turn shares what it said to him personally: “I felt this...” “I heard this...” “This struck me...” “To me it said or meant...” Keep contributions very short, personal (say “I” not “we”), honest, simple, not preachy, not applying lessons to others. Be careful not to make this a discussion. That will kill the prayer experience. Peacefully, humbly, sensitively listen to God’s word and simply share what it said and meant to you personally.

Do not feel uneasy during silent gaps between readings or comments. These silent moments are golden and afford rare opportunities of letting God's message resonate and slowly deepen in us. Relax. Savor His words during the silences.

5. After the first round of sharing, Dad again reads the same passage slowly. It is a richer listening experience this time, because the remarks each one shared have enriched the passage for the others. God speaks to all through each other too.
6. A second round of sharing, usually richer than the first, follows the second reading.
7. The same passage is read slowly a third and last time.
8. After the third reading, only spontaneous prayers are spoken directly to God the Father or to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit or to our Blessed Mother – e.g., “Thank you, Jesus, for speaking to us. Help me be more aware of your presence in me and in others.”
9. After each has spontaneously prayed, a favorite hymn can be sung and the clean-up in the kitchen begins (or whatever else follows).

It is hard to limit it to a half-hour because minutes fly by.

God's presence becomes very real, especially during the prayers. While one prays aloud, the others are not mere listeners, but join in spirit and make that prayer their own.

This group sharing and praying with Scripture is excellent for other groups – clubs, classrooms, Sodality and C.C.D., married couples' groups, ecumenical or other Christian settings. It works best with 10 or less. When more are present, it may be wiser to break into smaller groups. Discuss it afterwards to improve it.

We call this a “Collatio” (pronounced “Coh-lah'-tsee-oh”), a Latin word for a shared meal, to which everyone contributes and in which we all share.

Try it. Treat your family or group to a real prayer experience. I've seen the collation transform the religious life of families and groups, even of Religious communities.

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Armand M. Nigro, S.J.
John F. Christensen, S.J.

GOD SPEAKS TO US FIRST

This fundamental truth makes it possible for us to pray to God. He has been concerned for each of us long before we became concerned for ourselves.

He desires communication with us.

He speaks to us continually, revealing Himself to us by various modes:

- through Jesus Christ, His Word;
- through the Church, the extension of Christ in the world (because we are joined together in Christ, God speaks to us through other people);
- through visible creation around us, which forms the physical context of our lives. (Creation took place in His Son, and it is another form of God's self-revelation);
- through the events of our lives;
- through Holy Scripture, a real form of His presence. This is the mode of communication we are most concerned with in prayer.

HE INVITES US TO LISTEN

Our response to God's initial move is to listen to what He is saying. This is the basic attitude of prayer.

HOW TO GO ABOUT LISTENING

What you do immediately before prayer is very important. Normally, it is something you do not rush right into. Spend a few minutes quieting yourself and relaxing, settling yourself into a prayerful and comfortable position.

In listening to anyone, you try to tune out everything except what the person is saying to you.

In prayer this can be done best in *silence* and *solitude*. Select a favorite passage from Holy Scripture, 5 to 10 verses. Put a marker in the page. Try to find a quiet place where you can be alone and uninhibited in your response to God's presence. Try to quiet yourself interiorly. Jesus would often go up to a mountain by Himself to pray with His Father.

In an age of noise, activity, and tensions like our own, it is not always easy or necessary to forget our cares and commitments, the noise and excitement of our environment. Never feel constrained to blot out all distractions. Anxiety in this regard could get between ourselves and God.

Rather, realize that the Word did become flesh – that He speaks to us in the noise and confusion of our day. Sometimes in preparing for prayer, relax and listen to the sounds around you. God’s presence is as real as they are.

Be conscious of your sensations and living experiences of feeling, thinking, hoping, loving, of wondering, desiring, etc. Then, conscious of God’s unselfish, loving presence in you, address Him simply and admit: “Yes, you do love life and feeling into me. You do love a share of your personal life into me. You are present to me. You live in me. Yes You do.”

God is present *as a person*, in you through His Spirit, who speaks to you now in Scripture, and who prays in you and for you.

Ask God the grace to listen to what He says.

Begin reading Scripture slowly and attentively.
Do not hurry to cover much material.

If it recounts an event of Christ’s life, be there in the mystery of it. Share with the persons involved, e.g. a blind man being cured. Share their attitude. Respond to what Jesus is saying.

Some words or phrases carry special meaning for you. Savor those words, turning them over in your heart.

You may want to speak or recite a Psalm or other prayer from Scripture. Really mean what you are saying.

When something strikes you, e.g.,

- You feel a new way of being with Christ. He becomes *for you* in a new way (e.g., you sense what it means to be healed by Christ.)
- you experience God’s love,
- you feel lifted in spirit,
- you are moved to do something good,
- you are peaceful,
- you are happy and content just to be in God’s presence,

This is the time to*pause*.

This is God speaking directly to you in the words of Scripture. Do not hurry to move on. Wait until you are no longer moved by the experience.

Don’t get discouraged if nothing seems to be happening.

Sometimes God lets us feel dry and empty in order to let us realize it is not in our own power to communicate with Him or to experience consolation. God is sometimes very close to us in His seeming absence (Ps. 139:7-8). He is for us entirely in a selfless way. He accepts us as we are, with all our limitations – even with our seeming inability to

pray. A humble attitude of listening is a sign of love for Him, and a real prayer from the heart.

At these times remember the words of Paul:

“The Spirit, too comes to help us in our weakness, for when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words.” (Rom 8:26-27)

Relax in prayer. Remember, God will speak to you in His own way.

“Yes, as the rain and snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.” (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Spend time in your prayer just being conscious of God’s presence in and around you. If you want to, speak with Him about the things you are interested in or wish to thank Him for, your joys, sorrows, aspirations, etc.

Summary. 5 “P’s”

Passage from Scripture. Pick one and have it marked and ready.

Place. Where you are alone and uninhibited in your response to God’s presence.

Posture. Relaxed and peaceful. A harmony of body with spirit.

Presence of God. Be aware of it and acknowledge and respond to it. If nothing happens turn to the

Passage from Scripture. Read it very slowly aloud and listen carefully and peacefully to it.

Read aloud or whisper in a rhythm with your breathing – a phrase at a time – with pauses and repetitions when and where you feel like it.

Don’t be anxious, don’t try to look for implications or lessons or profound thoughts or conclusions or resolutions, etc. Be content to be like a child who climbs into its father’s lap and listens to his words and his story. When you finish, remind yourself that God continues to live in you during the rest of the day.