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Spiritual

Personal Prayer: The Prayer of the Heart

by Reverend Louis J. Cameli, STD

For many years, I taught spirituality in the major seminary in Chicago. A curious phenomenon occasionally occurs with my former students, now ordained priests. A group in their parish will ask one of them to do a talk or workshop on prayer. In a panic, they call me and ask, "What can I do? Can you come out here and do a talk?" I respond, "But you studied this. Besides, you preach every Sunday to your people. You have the resources, most especially your own experience of prayer. I'll help you organize your thoughts."

This strange sort of panic may not be so strange after all. I would guess that most of us are insecure about our prayer lives. With regard to prayer, we feel that we could always be doing better, doing more, have more regular times set aside for it. Our insecurities can easily be exacerbated when we are asked to teach someone else how to pray. And yet, whether as parents, catechists, or other committed Catholics, we may be called upon to help others learn how to pray. It is, of course, much more than teaching formulas for prayer, although the memorized vocal prayers of

our tradition are essential. It has to do with personal prayer, prayer of the heart, encountering God in a dialogue that is heart to heart. All this can present a challenge to us.

I would suggest taking a look at Saint Luke's Gospel. This evangelist highlights the importance of prayer with special emphasis. Read, for example, Luke 11:1–13. It begins: "He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'" Jesus goes on to teach them the Lord's Prayer. He then speaks of a friend knocking on another friend's door at midnight looking for bread for a late-arriving guest. Jesus encourages his disciples to ask, search, and knock. He tells them that if they with their sins know how to give what is good to their children, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

Three aspects of effective prayer are familiarity with God, persistence and confidence.

Reflection

There are probably many elements of your experience of prayer in Jesus' teaching, although you may not always be conscious of them. They are essential elements that you would want to share in any teaching on prayer. The first element is a sense of familiarity with God, literally a sense of family or of belonging to God's household. It is only on the basis of that familiarity that we can and ought to address God "Abba, Father" and be bold, as a child is bold, in bringing our needs, feelings, and aspirations to him.

Another important element of prayer both in the Gospel and in our lives is persistence. We are to keep knocking. Ideally, we "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We do not stop, because we feel that we have not had a hearing. We stay the course when it comes to prayer.

A third element is assurance. We pray with complete confidence that our prayer will be answered, that we are in communion with the living God, that the greatest petitions containing every good thing—thy kingdom come, thy will be done—will surely be answered.

To know prayer this way and to know it in our own experience will give us confidence to share this great blessing with others.

For Reflection

- Do you feel the familiarity with God that is described in this article? Why do you feel the way you do?
- In what ways do you feel that God has truly heard your prayer and responded to you?

Louis J. Cameli is a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago and pastor of Divine Savior Parish in Norridge, Illinois. He completed his theological studies at the Gregorian University in Rome and obtained a doctorate in theology with a specialization in spirituality. He is the former director of ongoing formation of priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago and director of the Cardinal Stritch Retreat House, Mundelein, Illinois. In February, 2002, he received the Pope John XXIII Award from the National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy (NOCERCC) for his contributions to the continuing education and ongoing formation of priests. He has authored numerous books on spirituality and also served as a writer and theological consultant for RCL Benziger's *Faith First* and *Faith First Legacy Edition* K-8 curriculum.

The Magnificat

Mary's Song of Praise

My soul **magnifies** the Lord,
and my spirit **rejoices** in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor
on the lowliness of his **servant**.

Surely, from now on all generations
will call me **blessed**;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me,
and **holy** is his name.

His **mercy** is for those who fear him
from **generation to generation**.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has **scattered the proud**
in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and **lifted up the lowly**;

he has **filled the hungry** with good things,
and **sent the rich away** empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to **the promise** he made
to our **ancestors**,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

LUKE 1:46-55

Overview: Prayer and Spirituality Module

This module explores our relationship with the living God that we call prayer. It places prayer within the context of our spirituality, the name we give to the entire life lived in response to God's call. Prayer and spirituality are our wholehearted "yes" to the mystery of God seeking us. We express this mystery in our creeds, celebrate it in our liturgy, and live it out as we attempt to follow the way of Jesus.

You will engage in a process of faith reflection using three components: a DVD, this companion booklet, and a CD-ROM. See page 5 for an explanation of how these components complement one another. You began the process on pages 6 and 7 with a reflection on personal prayer. On the next page you will engage in a reflection on your experience of prayer up to the present time.

The first segment of the module is a reflection on the meaning of Christian prayer. It is followed by three additional segments, each of which is divided into two parts. Here is an overview of the module topics:

1. What Is Prayer?

2. How Do We Pray?

Part 1: Ways of Prayer

Part 2: Growing in the Spiritual Life

3. The Prayerful Life

Part 1: Christian Spirituality

Part 2: Reflections on the Spiritual Life

4. The Our Father

Part 1: A Summary of the Gospel

Part 2: The Seven Petitions

You will find a booklet process for each segment to help you reflect on the DVD content and choose ways to apply what you have learned to your life. Here is the structure you will find:

1. Introduction: The goal and

objectives for each session, plus an opening reflection question.

2. Looking Ahead—Presentation

A video overview for each of the two parts of the segment, plus a space to write comments and questions.

3. Looking Back—Reflection:

For each part, three questions to check comprehension and invite dialogue.

4. Looking Beyond—Application:

An activity that invites you to imagine a way that you could apply what you have learned to a community experience of prayer.

Following each segment are two features: an enrichment article and space for journaling about prayer.

This module is only a brief introduction to the Christian life of prayer. As you continue to read, study, reflect, and attend classes and workshops, you will grow in knowledge and insight. Formation requires the mutual support of the community. Try to participate in this module process in a group setting. If you must work independently, find at least one other person with whom you can share your reflections.

Edith Prendergast, a Religious Sister of Charity and native of Ireland, has been involved in religious education and spiritual formation in the United States for over thirty years. She has served as Director of the Office of Religious Education for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, a parish director of religious education, a high school teacher, and a youth minister. She served as a collaborator on *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith* developed by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. Sr. Edith has been involved in retreat work and spiritual direction, and offers workshops nationally in the areas of spirituality and spiritual formation. Sister Edith holds a doctorate degree in Ministry from Claremont School of Theology, a master's degree in Theology from Boston College, and a certificate in Spiritual Formation from St. Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri.

How Do We Pray?

Prayer arises from the center of our being and gives expression to all our human experiences. We praise and give thanks, knowing that all our blessings are gifts from God. We give thanks in good times and in bad, because in faith we know that God is with us on our journey. Because God has blessed us, we also bless the One who is the giver of all good things. Prayer is not always easy. Distractions, discouragement, and even laziness can stand in our way. But God is patient and is present to us even when we fail to listen. We know we stand in need. This awareness of our poverty is gift as well, for it acknowledges our dependence on God as we ask for healing and forgiveness for ourselves and for others.

At the heart of prayer is the Eucharist, where we join the community of the Church in listening and responding to God's Word. We listen to God's Word in the Scriptures. We bless and give thanks; we praise God's glory. We ask the Spirit to intercede for us. We offer all that we are and all that we do to God, joined with the Paschal mystery of God's own Son. The Eucharist nourishes us and challenges us to make our entire lives a prayer of blessing.

Goal

To gain a deeper understanding of the importance of prayer and of why we pray

Exercise

Take a few moments to reflect on the following questions. Then discuss them with another person or with your group.

Learning Objectives

- To identify some of the traditional kinds of prayer
- To examine some distractions to prayer
- To appreciate the Eucharist as the prayer of the Church community

Think of a time when you felt God did not respond to your needs. How did you feel? What did you learn about yourself and about God through that experience?

Prayer

Loving God, you bless us with the gift of your presence. Help us be open to all that you wish to tell us, and give us the grace to respond with love. Give us the gift of your Spirit to help us overcome all distractions to hearing your voice clearly. We ask this in the name of your Son, who teaches us how to place you first in our lives. Amen.

FORMS
OF CHRISTIAN
PRAYER

Blessing
and adoration

Praise

Thanksgiving

Petition

Intercession

Watch Segment 2,
Part 1 of the DVD
or CD-ROM now.

Looking Ahead

Part 1: Ways of Prayer

The first part of this segment explores various kinds of prayer. Below you will find an outline of the principal content of the DVD that accompanies part 1 of this segment. You may wish to refer to this outline as you watch the DVD. Below the outline, there is space for you to jot down comments and questions that occur to you during and after the viewing.

Video Outline

- A description in words and images of the ways that God is present within and around us
- An overview of the principal forms of prayer in the Christian tradition: blessing and adoration, praise, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession
- A reminder that God always speaks first in the dialogue of prayer
- A definition of the three principal expressions of prayer: vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation

Comments and Questions

Use the space below to list comments, questions, feelings, or ideas that occur to you as you view the video.

A large rectangular area with horizontal lines for writing comments and questions. The area is divided into two columns by a vertical line. The left column is wider than the right column. There are two binder holes on the left side of the area.

Looking Back

Part 1: Ways of Prayer

Reflect silently on one or more of the questions below and then jot down your response(s). Then share your thoughts with another person or with a group.

1. Reflecting on your own life of prayer, recall a time when you prayed each of the following kinds of prayer.

Blessing and Adoration

Praise

Thanksgiving

Petition

Intercession

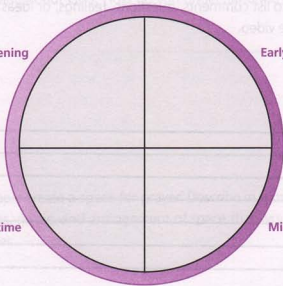
2. Imagine a typical day in your life. What is going on in your life at each of the following times? Write those activities on the diagram below, and describe what your prayer at those times of day might be.

Late evening

Early morning

Dinnertime

Mid-afternoon



3. There are three forms of prayer mentioned on the video: vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation. Which of these forms have you practiced? Describe your experience of them.

Remember . . .

Glimpses of
God's grace are
all around us.

•
God always
speaks first
in prayer.

•
The three main
expressions of
prayer are
vocal prayer,
meditation,
and
contemplation.

Through prayer
we become
aware of the life
of God within us
and it is this
God within us
who allows us
to recognize the
God among us.

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Watch Segment 2,
Part 2 of the DVD
or CD-ROM now.

Looking Ahead

Part 2: Growing in the Spiritual Life

The second part of segment 2 explores the requirements needed to grow in the spiritual life. Below you will find an outline of the principal content of the DVD that accompanies this part. You may wish to refer to this outline as you watch the DVD. Below the outline, there is space for you to jot down comments and questions that occur to you during and after the viewing.

Video Outline

- A description of three requirements needed to grow in the spiritual life: work, effort, and attention
- An explanation of the transformative results of a focused prayer life
- An overview of some obstacles to prayer
- Some suggestions for growing in the life of prayer
- A reminder of the faithfulness of God

Comments and Questions

Use the space below to list comments, questions, feelings, or ideas that occur to you as you view the video.

A large, faint watermark of a circle is centered over the lined writing area.

Looking Back

Part 2: Growing in the Spiritual Life

Reflect silently on one or more of the questions below and then jot down your response(s). Then share your thoughts with another person or with a group.

1. Name three obstacles you have encountered in your prayer life.

What can you do to overcome these obstacles?

2. On the video, Sr. Rosa Maria distinguished between knowing God and knowing about God. How do you understand the difference?

3. Many people create a space for prayer. Describe in words or images the objects, music, and arrangement of space that would enhance your prayer.

Remember . . .

Prayer is a dialogue with God leading to intimacy and transformation.

• **Prayer requires discipline.**

• **Lack of concentration, laziness, and discouragement can impede our prayer.**

• **Reading Sacred Scripture assists the life of prayer.**

• **God is always faithful.**

Looking Beyond

This segment has helped you gain a deeper understanding of prayer and learn ways to grow in the spiritual life. The exercise below will help you apply what you have learned.

**Vocal prayer
is an essential
element of the
Christian life.**

CCC 2701



FOR CATECHISTS
AND PARENTS

When we ourselves are tired or discouraged, it is easy to skip opportunities for prayer with children in our care. This is a good time to teach children that God is willing to hear our laments as well as our joys.

PRAYING WITH OTHERS

Think of some descriptive names for God that would be appropriate when you are

- filled with joy.
- troubled and confused.
- in need of forgiveness.

Use these names for God and combine them with a prayer response of your choosing to create a litany. Pray this litany with your family or with another group of believers.

What Did I Learn?

In this space summarize the most important insights you gained in this segment.

What Will I Change?

In this space write one thing you will do differently as a catechist because of what you learned in this segment.

Contemplation: Looking at God with Love

by Sr. Edith Prendergast, RSC

Jesus' teaching on prayer in Luke's Gospel begins in the story of Jesus' visit to the two sisters, Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42). When Martha complains that Mary is not doing her share of serving, Jesus responds that Mary "has chosen the better part." Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, gazing at him and listening with love. That is contemplation.

In contemplation the initiative always begins with God, who seeks to be an "insider" in our lives. Through contemplation we are brought into the heart of God, who speaks and invites us to respond. Christian contemplation is an interpersonal relationship with God, present to us here and now in Jesus Christ.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, gives us a way to look at Jesus in the various "mysteries," or events, of his life. Ignatius invites us to read a Scripture passage; imagine the scene; to use our senses to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch the experience being recounted; and to place ourselves in the scene and open our hearts to respond in love, awe, wonder, and gratitude.

Centering prayer is another way of entering into the mystery of God. Repeating a mantra, such as the name of Jesus or a phrase such as "Be still and know that I am God," allows us to center on the person whose name we say, in whom our heart finds rest and solace.

Contemplation calls us to "waste time" with God. Its form can be as simple as reciting the words of a psalm slowly, or taking a mindfulness walk where we tune in to the rhythm of our breathing and become aware of God's presence with us.

Solitude and silence are central to the development of a contemplative stance. The desert fathers and mothers moved away from the busyness of the city to commune with God in the starkness and emptiness of the desert. Most of us are not called to this radical lifestyle, but we are called to be contemplatives in action, which means to find God in all situations, relationships, and experiences of life. To do so, we must intentionally choose to build quiet

*In contemplation
we discover
our utter dependence
on God*

**Contemplation
is a "gaze"
of faith,
fixed on Jesus.
CCC 2715**

Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.

Saint Teresa of Avila

times into our day. Our cars can become hermitages or places of refuge as we travel along the highway. Even our kitchens or offices can become places of contemplation for a few minutes during the day. A person on the street, the sight of a baby, a loving glance—all can provide moments of contemplation.

In contemplation, we discover our utter dependence on God. Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century mystic, was overwhelmed by God's love for us. In one of her revelations she saw a hazelnut lying in her hand and realized that it was God's faithful love that prevented it, and indeed, everything else, from falling into nothingness.

In contemplative prayer, not only is God revealed to us, but we are revealed to ourselves. Knowing God's wondrous love for us makes us aware of our goodness, but also of our need for change and renewal. Such love demands receptivity, openness, and a belief that God is with us on the journey, both challenging and comforting us. We believe that as we stand before our God, we are transformed into God's likeness. From this place of transformation, we go forth to be bearers of good tidings, to image God to others, and to empower them to find God everywhere in life.

For Reflection

What is one practical thing you could do to make more room in your life for a more contemplative style of prayer?

Prayer Journal

What is your mood right now? Place yourself in God's presence and talk with God right now about your feelings. Choose the words of praise, thanksgiving, petition, or lament that best describe your life situation. Then sit in silence for awhile. After a period of time, record what thoughts come to you and offer them to God. You may wish to record your thoughts and your prayer in this way several times during the week.

For the Christian, the spiritual life is the resource of the whole person to God, body and soul. It involves our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions. Jesus said that a door must be opened to each of us, and so that our lives be Christian spirituality could be compared to the three legs of a rickshaw stool. It is first and foremost a relationship with God, nurtured by prayer. Second, it is a relationship with others, characterized by a life of service and ministry. Third, it is a relationship with ourselves, characterized by an asceticism, or discipline, that leads to life and freedom. These three—prayer, service, and asceticism—lay the foundations for the spiritual life.

Prayer reveals God to us and also reveals us to ourselves. In prayer we discover the places in our lives in need of conversion and healing. We are sometimes like captured slaves with no room for God, held captive by people, things, and our need to accumulate. Through asceticism, we learn what we must let go of and what discipline we must practice in order to respond to God's voice. From this stance we can go forth to be a word of God, to do the truth in love, to put on the mind of Jesus, and to live for one another.

Goal

To gain a better understanding of some key aspects of the Christian spiritual life.

Learning Objectives

- To explain why prayer, service, and asceticism are three central aspects of the spiritual life.
- To identify ways in which the spiritual life is both a personal and communal response to God's love.

- To understand more clearly the path of your own spiritual life.

Exercise

Take a few moments to reflect on the following questions. Then discuss them with another person or with your group.

What practices do you have that are related to your prayer life?

