

FIVE FIRST PRINCIPLES OF PRAYER

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Principle 1. There is No Such Thing as Coincidence.

Coincidences don't happen. This is an important article of the Catholic Faith. The entire universe is governed by Divine Providence, which is so complete that it is able even to take human freedom into account and to bring the Divine plan to fruition without violating that freedom. So, the first principle of prayer is that everything depends on God. Everything that exists is held in existence by God's creative power, and every success and failure depends on God's will, either his permissive will or his perfect will. Moreover, everything that happens contributes to the fulfillment of His overarching Providential purpose, a purpose rooted in His very being, which is Love.

One of the mysteries of God's Providence is that He permits our prayers and actions to play a role in the fulfillment of His Plan. Having made us in His image and likeness, He calls us to be cooperators in His great works of both creation and redemption. What we do and how we pray actually make a difference in how God's plan unfolds. But, while our actions proceed largely along natural lines, producing results that are within our power, prayer works by invoking Divine power. It follows that the power of prayer is potentially greater than the power of human action (though the greatest power at any particular moment lies simply in doing whatever we are called by God to do at that time).

Since all things are present to God (Who is outside of time), He sees in one continuous present all those things which to us unfold only over time. This sheds some light on the mystery of Providence and freedom, but we must admit that it remains a mystery. Though it is difficult to fathom, trust in God's Providence involves the recognition that our prayers matter very much indeed, both in the natural and the supernatural orders. Our prayers matter to the overall economy of salvation, to those for whom we pray, to those whom we touch while open to God's action (or not), and to ourselves.

Principle 2. You are You and God is God

Though even an inkling of God's Providence is an inducement to prayer, prayer itself—that is, a real and effective communication of love between ourselves and God—cannot happen until we grasp the fundamental difference between the two parties. This difference is profoundly simple: God is God, and we are not. It is astonishing how confusion on this basic point causes all kinds of difficulties with prayer.

The first difficulty is an unwillingness or refusal to pray simply because we do not wish to be subservient or beholden to a Being we either deny or misunderstand. The simplest recognition that God is all-powerful self-existent Love will dispel all such barriers. A second but similar difficulty arises from all the ways in which, despite a good basic

abstract understanding of the difference between God and ourselves, we continue to puff ourselves up, letting pride interfere with the deep sense of dependence and gratitude that we ought to have with respect to God.

A third difficulty arises from a certain immaturity about how we handle this matter of dependence. We may approach God only when we think we need something (as if we don't continuously need God). Or we may fail to appreciate that God, as our creator, has a perfect right to determine our purpose in life, or that seeking to do His will is not merely the only possible just response to His gift of life but the key to our happiness. Or we might attempt to negotiate with God in prayer, promising all kinds of things if He'll do what we want—ludicrous!

We shouldn't approach God in negotiation mode; it betrays a complete ignorance of our relationship. In fact, we shouldn't even make heartfelt promises while under duress. Instead, we ought to rely on His grace, mercy, and love, which show far greater recognition of Who God is. Then, when we realize that we have something special to thank Him for, we ought to seek to discern in subsequent calm periods of prayer what the appropriate response to God's love should be. (Before making big promises, we ought to consult a spiritual director or confessor. God desires union, not rash vows.)

Principle 3. Feelings Don't Matter

Once we get started on the right track in prayer, our feelings will almost always at some point become an impediment to progress. This is because, in most cases, God grants us consolations when we first commit ourselves to prayer. We feel a peace or a sweetness or a delight of some kind. In group settings, where many more psychological and social factors are at work, we may also feel a certain satisfaction or even an emotional high. This attracts us to prayer, and it is all well and good until God sees that we're ready to move on from loving the consolations to actually loving Him. Oops.

Eventually, He'll withdraw the consolations and leave us (or so it seems) on our own. We'll be plagued by distractions, feel bored or "dry", or experience prayer and meditation as hard work. So the third principle is that feelings don't matter. I do not mean to assert that they are irrelevant; obviously, they're very relevant, or this wouldn't be a problem. But, they are not a guide to progress in prayer, and if they are taken as a guide, they will always be a false guide. Whether positively or negatively, our feelings will always entice or compel us to seek consolations instead of God.

At the risk of going beyond the limited purpose of this essay, please note that there can be a number of things that cause prayer time to become less "satisfying" as we pray more, giving us the (probably false) impression that we are regressing. The cause may be an attachment to some fault which needs to be actively purified before progress can be made. Or if the problem is not consistent or steady, it may be caused by other difficulties that are stressing or upsetting us and that we simply have to work through. Eventually, it will be caused by God's invitation to rest in His presence, in support of which He will permit us to experience our own conscientious mental activity (prayers, spiritual readings, and meditations) as dry, hard work. We must be attentive in these

circumstances to avoid, through our own insistence on mental activity, staving off the very invitation to go deeper. Indeed, we all start out like Martha, turning our minds to many worthwhile things even in prayer. We must eventually become like Mary. “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10), says the Psalmist; “Taste and see that the Lord is good!” (Ps 34:8)

Principle 4. Prayer is Not a Political Tool

Insofar as we’re involved in the culture wars (or if we are operating in a culture or subculture in which appearing to be holy carries social weight), we’ll eventually encounter the temptation to use prayer as a sort of socio-political tool. By this I don’t mean that we shouldn’t pray that people will do politics for God’s glory and according to His will. Politics needs to be hallowed just like anything else, and no sphere of human action should be viewed as off limits to grace. What I mean is that the visible fact that we’re praying, or that many others are praying with us, is not to be parleyed into a form of political pressure or social enhancement.

In our present secular culture, many of these temptations are much reduced. Nonetheless, to take but one example, there are dangers in those prayer vigils which are designed in part to be a public demonstration of prayer. We must examine our motives. Is our purpose to apply pressure through the demonstration, relying on strength of numbers to effect change? Or is our purpose to pray for God’s help? This is a fairly subtle distinction; it reminds me of the old joke about two seminarians who enjoyed smoking and praying at the same time. The first seminarian asked his spiritual director if he could smoke while he prayed; he was told no. But the second asked if he could pray while he smoked. The answer was “yes”.

The purpose of gathering together in prayer is to seek God’s help, not to use the external fact of prayer to apply pressure or enhance our reputations. Extraneous calculations, hopefully mostly unconscious, can affect our liturgical choices or our attendance at particular devotions, depending on the circles in which we move. We may be seeking opportunities to gain favor, to project a certain image, or even to appear holier than others.

I do not wish to go too far. There are all kinds of reasons to pray while giving public witness, and there are many good reasons to let someone know we’re praying for them, when this will be an encouraging word. But, an external show of prayer with the goal of enhancing our stature or increasing our influence is simply the politics of the Pharisee. When prayer becomes political in that sense, its spiritual power—no, its very identity as prayer— is lost. “Amen I say to you, they have received their reward” (Mt 6:5).

Principle 5. Group Prayer is Never Enough

The fifth of my first principles of prayer is that we will never develop anything beyond a superficial relationship with God if we participate only in group prayer. Family prayer, participation in prayer groups, major prayer events, even the official liturgy of the Mass

can have only a very limited effect unless we engage in private prayer as well. In fact, if these things are having their intended impact on us, they will lead us to seek time alone with God in prayer.

There is a danger in every group form of prayer, the danger of doing it for some reason other than seeking God's help and entering into loving union with Him. Thus, it is possible for parents to pray regularly with their children because they believe it is good for them, without bothering to deepen their own lives of prayer. It is possible to enjoy a prayer group for the fellowship it provides, or a major prayer "event" because of the "high" that is induced by both the numbers involved and their external enthusiasm. It is possible to attend Mass by way of fulfilling a known obligation, exposing oneself to the flame, as it were, but never catching fire. And, beyond all these dangers, there is a fundamental limitation in group prayer, an emphasis on the activity of the group which necessarily limits the degree to which we can use those occasions to explore—in our own special way—a quiet, personal intimacy with God.

The key to union with God is the determination to respond to His love by spending personal, intimate time alone with Him. No matter how many sacraments we have received, their power will never be unleashed within us unless we commit ourselves to spending time with God one on one. If we are really progressing in prayer and holiness, we will be drawn increasingly to private prayer. We'll be drawn to quiet spiritual reading, silent meditation on Scripture and the mysteries of salvation, time before the Blessed Sacrament, interior conversation with God, listening to Him in our hearts, and resting in His embrace. In so doing, we will grow in the awareness of His Presence, an awareness that—in time—will spill over into all of our activities and everything we do.

Prayer and Perfection

I have said that these five principles are first principles, principles to help get us off on the right foot. When any of these principles is neglected, progress in prayer suffers dramatically. But there is much more that could be said about prayer, about its nature and its stages, and about the deep relationship between prayer and growth in perfection. The two are closely linked. The point of prayer is union with God. This union requires the gradual purging away of anything in us that is not worthy of God—and that is quite a lot.

In the end, perfect prayer is perfect conformity with God's will. At first, these seem like separate issues, but they are not. Perhaps we need a sixth starting principle! In any case, there is no progress in holiness without prayer, and nothing stalls the progress of prayer faster than an inattention to overcoming our habitual faults. The desire to pray is itself a prompting of grace, but we must take advantage of the opportunity, first by beginning to pray, and then by persevering in prayer while striving for perfection. Only through prayer will God fuel and strengthen our desire to be one with Him. Only through prayer can we possess and be possessed by Love.