



SESSION 15

Prayer, On Earth as It Is in Heaven



The Sermon on the Mount, Fra Angelico

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To describe what Christian prayer is
- To relate the mystery of prayer to its foundation in Christ and his relationship with the Father
- To identify several biblical bases for understanding prayer
- To affirm the importance of prayer, to examine it, and to consider concrete aids to personal prayer
- To understand the different types of prayer and the role of each type in the Christian life

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

Give me the grace to recollect myself in the little heaven of my soul where You have established Your dwelling. There You let me find You, there I feel that You are closer to me than anywhere else, and there You prepare my soul quickly to enter into intimacy with You ... O Lord of heaven and earth! Is it possible, while we are still in this mortal life, for us to enjoy You with such special friendship? Oh! The joys which You bestow on souls who give themselves entirely to You!

–Saint Teresa of Ávila, *“Prayer of Recollection”* (excerpt)

INTRODUCTION

“If you knew the gift of God!” The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him. (CCC 2560)

In Saint John’s Gospel, Jesus initiates a life-changing encounter with a Samaritan woman. As she approaches the well to draw water, Jesus provokes her to wonder when he says, “If you knew the gift of God” (John 4:10). Do we, any more than she did, truly know the gift of God? Are we aware of the gift he has given of himself—not only when he came into our world to dwell among us, but as he continues to enter our hearts to dwell there and to help us to pray? Do we know what prayer is, or how and why we ought to pray?

This session, devoted to prayer, will answer these questions and more. But first, let’s see how we got to this point.

In our very first session, we talked about how we all seek the face of God, whether we know it or not. We all want to see God, to know him; and when we see him, we grow in love for him. Through several sessions we have examined the Creed, the symbol of faith; and in these sessions we focused primarily on understanding who God is and what he has done for us. These mysteries of salvation are made present and conveyed to us in the sacraments, especially the most holy Eucharist. Encountering these mysteries, we are transformed by them; thus our lives are gradually conformed to Christ. Now we turn to prayer, which builds an intimate relationship with Christ and forms the foundation of the life we live in him.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) summarizes this in a pithy way:

[The mystery of faith] requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer. (2558)

All of us have some experience of relationships with others. But we likely wonder what it means to have a relationship with God in prayer. How do we develop such a relationship? Maybe we don’t know where to start. Maybe we’ve been at it for a while but have hit an impasse or are looking for a fresh start. Once again, we land back at the questions we started with: What exactly is prayer? Why do we pray? How do we pray? These questions are both common and understandable. Like much of what we have learned so far, prayer is a mystery. So let’s shed some light on the wonderful mystery that is prayer.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

Lafayette, Indiana, might best be known for Purdue University and its collegiate sports program. But tucked away here is a beautiful church—Saint Boniface Catholic Church—which has served the Catholic community for more than a hundred years, providing a place of worship, sacraments, and prayer. The seemingly ordinary life of this parish has blossomed into something extraordinary. Here, Blessed Maria Theresia Bonzel experienced the transformative power of daily prayer as she served those in need

while nurturing her young religious community. Prayer, in its many varieties, is a profound and intimate encounter with the Lord, an encounter from which we draw strength to follow his holy will for our lives.

I. God reveals himself to us in prayer, and we respond to him

II. Salvation History: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1)

- A. Seeing Jesus’ own witness of prayer inspired this request
 - 1. Baptism grants us communion with the Father, not just membership in a religious organization
 - 2. Jesus grants us a share in his own prayer as the divine Son of the Father
 - 3. Through Baptism, we are united to Jesus such that we become sons/daughters of God
- B. By the indwelling of the Holy Trinity, we have become heirs of this communion in prayer
 - 1. When the Church prays the liturgies, she prays in the voice of her Lord
 - 2. We should do as Jesus did and seek deserted places to pray
- C. Through union with Christ, we pray with one voice as the Church

III. Pilgrimage: Daily, personal prayer

- A. Blessed Maria Theresia Bonzel is a model of prayer and perseverance
- B. Regular, daily prayer is important
 - 1. We gain experience with God, moving from knowing about him to knowing him
 - 2. With experience, we grow in trust and confidence, which in turn changes our perspective on life; this new perspective empowers us to persevere in life and in prayer
 - 3. Prayer leads us to see that if we have God, we have everything we need

IV. Catechesis: The mystery of prayer

- A. There are different types and degrees of prayer
- B. All prayer begins with humility
- C. Vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation are three types
 - 1. The Our Father contains all three types of prayer perfectly
- D. The teachings on Heaven relate to the teaching on the Last Things

V. *Lectio divina*: Psalm 42

- A. Our souls long for God—he alone can satisfy the heart
- B. Prayer is about multiplying desire and love for God

VI. The key with prayer is simply to start (or continue) doing it

WORD MEANING:

Meditation

A way of praying that engages the mind, imagination, emotion, and desire by reflecting on a mystery of the faith, often beginning with a passage in Scripture.

She had grown under the soft light of the Eucharistic sun. Again and again she went to the hidden God to find light, courage and strength. The Eucharistic Lord must be discovered by us anew and must be proclaimed as an enabler of selfless love.

– From the files of Blessed Maria Theresia Bonzel’s beatification

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) Why is it significant that Jesus himself teaches his followers, and also us, how to pray?

That Jesus teaches his followers to pray hints first at a special relationship, teacher-disciple, a relationship he had with them and also has with us. Even more, Jesus teaches about prayer following his own example of prayer and the great appeal it had for his disciples. They saw the depth and beauty of his relationship with the Father and desired this relationship as well. Finally, in teaching them to say the Our Father, Jesus invites his followers into his own prayer, to share in its depth and to also call God “Father.” This invitation is ours as well.

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- 2) Have you experienced particularly fruitful times of prayer? Imagine that time in some detail. Where were you? What was involved—Scripture, journaling, quiet, being in a church, talking aloud? How can that experience help deepen your life of prayer?

Answers to this question will vary widely. Ideally, the experiences that participants mention will correspond with the practical tips presented in this session. The variety reflects the unique way of prayer each person is called to. Some might speak about a retreat experience. Such experiences have an important role to play in the spiritual life, but they should not be emphasized too much or coveted too intensely. Showing the continuity between the retreat “high” and ordinary prayer—the former should lead into the latter, while the latter prepares one for the former—will help participants establish a faithful, steady practice of prayer.

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- 3) Most of us are familiar with prayers of petition: asking God for things. Have you ever tried mental prayer or meditation? Have you ever simply sat in a quiet place, thinking about God and speaking with him? What fruits did you experience from this? What fruits could you imagine experiencing through the practice of regular meditation?

Again, answers will vary. For those who have not tried mental prayer, the idea of a conversation with a loved one can be a helpful and encouraging example. Questions will often arise as to how God speaks in such a conversation. The saints teach us that God, who is not bound by our limitations, also speaks in ways that surpass ordinary speech; he speaks through Scripture, through his providence (i.e., the events of the day or week), through a homily or a word spoken by a friend or mentor, etc. For those who might have tried forms of Eastern meditation or centering prayer, a key idea to emphasize is that Christian prayer is not about emptying our minds but about filling them up with the mysteries of God. For those who have

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practiced mental prayer, dryness or lack of consolations or delights might come up—these are normal and to be expected since the Lord purifies our hearts to desire him more than the gifts that he might give in prayer.

STEP 4: Conclude

The Samaritan woman at the well did not yet know “the gift of God” (John 4:10); but after Christ revealed it in her, she went off to tell others what she had learned. We also now know God’s gift of prayer better than before. Jesus teaches us to pray and invites us into his own prayer, so we might grow closer to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Committing to daily personal prayer will have transformative effects in our lives. Finally, the different types of prayer are meant to draw us closer to God and to enable us to see his glory, beginning in our lifetimes.

Like the Samaritan woman, we know more than we did before; but also like her, even more than knowing the gift of prayer, we want to learn to accept the gift, to love it, and to enter into it wholeheartedly. As we learn to pray, we will find ourselves living differently and desiring to share the gift of prayer with others as well.

CLOSING PRAYER

Be at peace.

Do not look forward in fear to the changes of life;
rather look to them with full hope as they arise.

God, whose very own you are, will deliver you from out of them.
He has kept you hitherto, and He will lead you safely through
all things;

and when you cannot stand it, God will bury you in his arms.

Do not fear what may happen tomorrow;
the same everlasting Father who cares for you today
will take care of you then and every day.

He will either shield you from suffering, or give you unfailing
strength to bear it.

Be at peace, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imagination.
Amen.

— *Saint Francis de Sales*

MEMORY VERSE

Let us then with
confidence draw
near to the throne
of grace, that we
may receive mercy
and find grace
to help in time
of need.

— **HEBREWS 4:16**

CALL TO CONVERSION

One of the most common reasons for not praying is a lack of time. We have busy lives, and often they are filled with good things. Even those with a lively faith can think that by living full lives, having good intentions, going to Mass on Sundays, and thinking occasionally of God, they are basically fulfilling what Scripture says and “praying at all times” (Eph 6:18). This frame of mind contains much that is good, but the *Catechism* offers some helpful perspective here:

Prayer is the life of the new heart. It ought to animate us at every moment. But we tend to forget him who is our life and our all. ... We cannot pray “at all times” if we do not pray at specific times, consciously willing it. These are the special times of Christian prayer, both in intensity and duration. (CCC 2697)

“We cannot pray ‘at all times’ if we do not pray at specific times”—these are challenging words. They are also hopeful words, because they suggest the key to praying truly at all times. Not only that, but they suggest just how much the Lord has in store for us during those specific, more intentional times of prayer.

With prayer, as with many other things, one of the most important points is simply to commit to doing it. In making such a commitment, we give expression to the order of our priorities, among which prayer should be preeminent. And we remember, as always, that it is the Lord himself who moves us to prayer and to the commitment to pray. He thirsts for us and, as a result, we respond by desiring him and setting aside time for him.

Consider your life, your routines, and your priorities. What moment in your day would be the best for setting aside for prayer? What time might be the “firstfruits” of your day—the time when you are at your best and can give God your best? What time would allow the greatest regularity in prayer? Jot down a simple plan for how you can commit to approaching prayer in the weeks ahead. After a few weeks, revisit your plan and adjust where needed so that you continue to give God your best.



TREASURES FROM TRADITION

The true Life himself taught us to pray for the sake of acquiring this happy life, not in many words, as if we are heard to the extent we are more long-winded when we pray to him who knows, as the Lord says, what we need before we ask him. For this reason it might seem strange that, though he forbade the use of many words, he who knows what we need before we ask him exhorted us to pray in such a way that he said, *It is necessary to pray always and not give up* (Luke 18:1). ...

Why he who knows what we need before we ask him does this can trouble the mind unless we understand that the Lord our God does not want our will, which he cannot fail to know, to become known to him, but our desire, by which we can receive what he prepares to give, to be exercised in prayers. For what he prepares to give is very great, but we are very small and narrow for receiving it. Therefore it is said to us, *Make your heart bigger so that you do not bear that yoke with unbelievers* (2 Cor 6:11). That which is, indeed, very great, which the eye has not seen, because it is not a color, and the ear has not heard, because it is not a sound, nor has it ascended into the heart of a human being (1 Cor 2:9), because the heart of a human being ought to ascend to it, we shall receive with a greater capacity to the extent that we believe it with more fidelity, and hope for it more firmly, and love it more ardently.

We, therefore, always pray with a continuous desire filled with faith, hope, and love. But at certain hours and moments we also pray to God in words so that by those signs of things we may admonish ourselves, realize how much we have advanced in this desire, and arouse ourselves more intensely to increase it.

—Saint Augustine, Letter 130 (To Proba) 8, 15–9, 18



The Evening Prayer, Pierre Edouard Frère

Saint Augustine points out that God knows what we need before we ask, yet this does not make prayer pointless. It does change how we think about the point of prayer: we pray not to change God's mind, but to change our own minds and hearts. In this way, prayer becomes an exercise and deepening of the theological virtues, by which we know God and give our lives over to him more and more completely.

Saint Augustine goes on to talk more specifically about the Our Father, the perfect prayer that Jesus taught us and a summary of the whole Gospel. When you pray the Our Father, what does each line of the prayer mean to you? How can reciting this prayer regularly and giving thought to the words expand your heart in the way Saint Augustine describes?

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MEDITATION

Saint Francis de Sales, a great teacher of the faith and a spiritual master, provides some helpful instruction for meditation or mental prayer. He suggests four basic steps to start down the path of meditation.

First, we prepare ourselves for prayer by placing ourselves in the presence of God and asking his assistance. Placing ourselves in God's presence means becoming aware of the one to whom we are speaking, whether by imagining Jesus at our side, recognizing that God lives within our very souls through grace, etc. Aware of how close he is, we then beg him to come to our assistance in prayer.



Second, we turn our minds to a mystery of the faith, using our imagination to visualize what we can of this mystery. Scripture is a great starting point, and we can choose some biblical scene. But the writings of the saints, a piece of sacred art, and the beauty of creation can also serve as starting points for our reflection. This reflection can also become conversation with God, as we speak to him interiorly about the mystery, its meaning for our lives, and the wonder of his deeds and his love.

Third, these reflections and shared words call forth our love, especially as we consider how God's love for us works in the mystery we are meditating upon. Sometimes our emotions too will be powerfully moved, though certainly not always, nor is it a measure of success in prayer. This response of love should find a concrete expression and commitment in a particular resolution that we make—a commitment to do something or to change something this very day, or over a period of time. A resolution can often be small, such as committing to telling the Lord we love him three times during the day; but it can also be big, such as seeking new employment if an old job brings sinful entanglements.

Finally, we conclude the meditation by praying an act of thanksgiving and by drawing from our meditation a few points to ponder and appreciate throughout the day. These “flowers” form what Saint Francis calls a “spiritual bouquet,” the beauty and fragrance of which accompany us throughout the day.

FOR FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 2558–2643 and 2697–2745

Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K Ryan (New York: Image Books, 2014)

Pope Benedict XVI, *A School of Prayer: The Saints Show Us How to Pray* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013)

Father Thomas Dubay, *Prayer Primer: Igniting a Fire Within* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002)