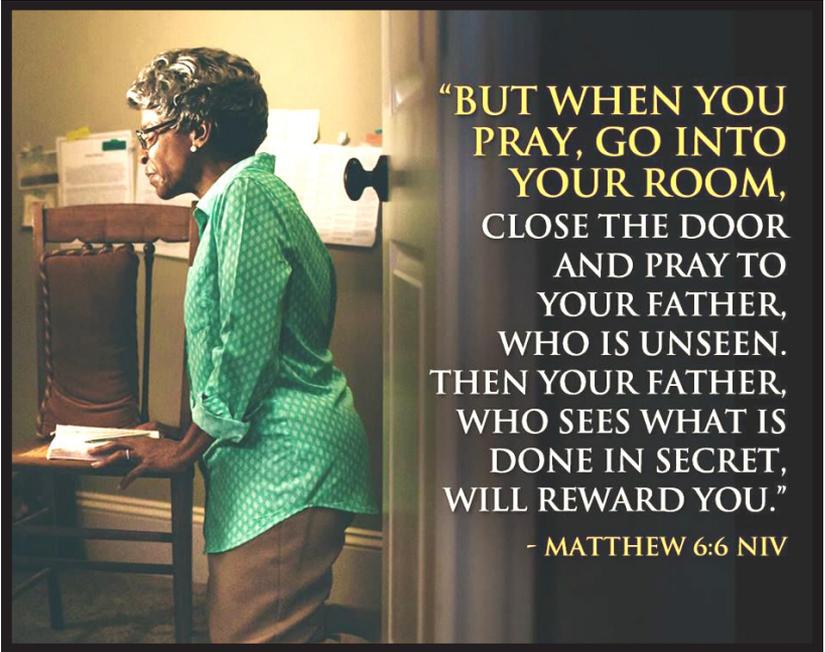


The Gift of Prayer



“BUT WHEN YOU
PRAY, GO INTO
YOUR ROOM,
CLOSE THE DOOR
AND PRAY TO
YOUR FATHER,
WHO IS UNSEEN.
THEN YOUR FATHER,
WHO SEES WHAT IS
DONE IN SECRET,
WILL REWARD YOU.”

- MATTHEW 6:6 NIV

ME
PRAYER CHANGES ~~THINGS~~

Fr. Cedric Pisegna, C.P.

The Gift of Prayer

Growing up I heard a song playing on the radio: *Hungry Heart*. The song, by rocker Bruce Springsteen, was very melodic and popular. Time and time again the refrain “Everybody’s got a hungry heart,” would be sung.

One of the reasons that song was so popular is because it strikes a chord within all of us. We don’t have to look far to know we are all hungry. We were created for more than the ordinary. Instinctively we want something deeper, something to fill us and fulfill us.

While we can try to satisfy this inner craving with shopping, food, entertainment and addictions, the quick thrill soon turns to emptiness once more. What we need is something meaningful and lasting. St. Augustine, who once lived a playboy life said it best when he wrote, “Lord, our hearts were made for you. Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Billy Graham stated that everyone of us has a “cosmic loneliness” for God within.

Israel’s greatest king, David, composed many Psalms. In his writings he wrote about his “longing,” “panting,” and “thirst” for God. God has placed an inner homing device within the heart of each of us. Call it a hunger, thirst, emptiness, loneliness, or restlessness. This feeling is actually an implanted gift summoning us to the more that is God.

I first became aware of this “gift” when I was 18 years old. After a breakup with a girl my freshman year in college, I began to wake up in the morning with many questions swirling around in my thoughts. “What is the meaning of life? Why aren’t I happy? Is there more to life? What am I missing?”

I allowed my questions to motivate a determined quest. I began to search for answers in the Bible. Before long I read something that would change my life: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.” (Mt. 7:7) Was it possible the answers I was seeking could be found through prayer? Although I was a teenager without much religious background, I tried praying to God.

At first, I wondered if what I was doing was absurd. My words seemed to be bouncing off the walls. “There is no one out there,” I thought. I felt ridiculous. Yet, something in me believed. I believed God was there. Somehow, I believed God even heard my prayers. Although I had grown up Catholic, I had fallen away after my confirmation.

When I prayed, I wasn’t so much praying for “things” as for meaning, understanding, wisdom, and to know God. Prayer, after all, is communication with God. The heart of prayer is trying to establish and develop a relationship with the one who created us. Jesus taught, “If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.” (Lk 11:13) Jesus was teaching that God is generous in prayer and prayer is most of all relational.

Faith

Months passed. My faith in God was tested. Yet, I kept reading the Bible and other spiritual writings. I continued to seek, ask, and knock. Faith comes by hearing and I kept listening and didn’t give up. The greatest test of a person in the beginning, as well as for those who are veterans of prayer, is to doubt God and give up. The heavens seem silent. The desert is dry. That is why Jesus taught many parables about not losing heart and staying determined. Paul the apostle wrote, “persevere in prayer.” (Ro. 12:12) I think about multitudes of people who try prayer and when it doesn’t seem to work, they quit and give up. What separates a person from the Masses is faith.

In order to come into recovery, a person suffering with an addiction must come to faith in God whom many term their higher power. In AA’s Big Book, its founder, Bill Wilson writes that faith begins “as a willingness to believe.” Faith starts as small as a mustard seed, but sprouts and grows. Faith begins by simply believing God is, but grows as we believe God is good and has our best interest in mind. Faith increases as we believe God does hear us and will answer our prayer according to his gracious will. Finally, as we begin to see God’s activity in our lives, faith turns into trust. We begin to depend on the one who

loves us and surrounds us with care. Eventually we begin casting our care on God who cares for us.

It took some months, but as I was praying and reading, my faith in God was growing. Unbeknownst to me, the mustard seed was sprouting. Soon I began to have life changing experiences of God that revolutionized my life. My life will never be the same. My eternal destiny was altered because of prayer! Now instead of praying occasionally, I live a lifestyle of prayer. I am a witness: God does answer prayer. God does hear our prayer. No matter who you are or what your background is, God is your Father and he invites you to more.

How do I pray?

Prayer is not complicated. Actually, it is quite simple. Anyone from eight to eighty-eight can pray. We don't need batteries and we don't have to plug anything in. You don't need a password to connect. You don't have to wait for anything. God is always ready when you are. Prayer doesn't cost money. You don't need to be in a church or travel to a specific locale. You don't have to be a wealthy person or someone of great notoriety. You can pray right where you are just as you are. In fact, Jesus taught that sinners are heard, sometimes more than the religious.

Jesus taught, "When you pray, go into your room and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Mt. 6:6) While prayer can be communitarian, at its heart, prayer is solitary. At its essence, it is simple communication between you and God. Prayer is deeply personal and demands vulnerability and rigorous honesty. Get rid of your masks. Examine your heart. Get in touch with your feelings. Express what you are going through. Don't miss the elephant in the room. Share your heart with God. Don't hide anything.

You don't need to multiply your words. Take as long as you need, but don't drag things out. Don't try to sound holy. Simply be conversational. Don't repeat yourself. God hears you the first time you say it. In fact, God knows what you need even before you ask him! (Mt. 6:7-8)

In order to come into recovery and remain sober, a person in the 12 Step program must pray. The 11th step defines prayer as “conscious contact” with God. While prayer transcends consciousness awareness, in a nutshell, we are trying to connect with and become aware of God.

Be Yourself

We all have our own way and unique personality. Therese of Lisieux (d. 1897) who dedicated her life to prayer and is a canonized Saint in the Catholic Church, talked about having our “own little way.” She found that many envisioned God as harsh and punishing. She knew God as merciful and kind. She related to a good and gracious God. When we approach God in prayer, we need to come to God as a loving father who isn’t against us, but for us. No matter what we have done in the past, God forgives us and doesn’t hold anything against us. Approach God’s throne of grace confidently with the assurance of his mercy.

Be yourself when you pray. Develop your own little way with God given your background and life experiences. Because you are unique and have a distinct personality and journey, you can love God in a way no one else ever has. Certainly, it is good to learn from others, but don’t try to be like anyone else. Develop your own unique way of communicating and expressing yourself to God.

It is important to pray consistently. Prayer shouldn’t be haphazard or just when you are in need. Try to include God in your life more and more. Prayer should become a lifestyle of connecting with God. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. We need his grace and wisdom to live well. Most of all, we need his presence.

It is very important to make time to worship God for his goodness. Praise God for his mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Then, thank God for his abundant blessings. In your charity pray for others. Hopefully you will progress and pray with others at the Church of your choice. Find a community where you feel comfortable and at home and worship God there.

Listen

When we think about prayer, we immediately picture ourselves talking to God. But a major part of prayer is God talking to us! As you progress in your faith journey you will notice God speaking to you directly. Perhaps you have already had experiences of God speaking to you. You probably won't hear an audible voice, but God's voice can be heard. One major way is God comes to us through our conscience. I gave an example of this earlier when I shared about my inner questionings when I was awakened as a teenager. Let your conscience be your guide. The Catholic Catechism tells us: A person's conscience is our most secret core and our sanctuary. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. (Catechism #1776)

The Scriptures attest to the voice of God also when David wrote, "The heavens tell the Glory of God. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge. No words are "heard" yet their voice goes out through all the earth." (Ps. 19:1-4) In other words, when we notice and marvel at creation, we can hear God even though the voice isn't "audible."

God's voice can be heard in an inspiring book, in drama at the theater or movie, a memorable song, in creative artwork and poetry. We can hear the voice of God in poignant sermons, celebrated sacraments, and innovative television programs. The voice of God can also come through the people in our lives. In an Old Testament story, God spoke to the prophet Balaam through a donkey. (Num. 22:28) If God can speak through such an animal, certainly God can speak through your spouse or even your boss! Isaiah wrote that a little child can lead us. (Is. 11:6) Hearing the voice of God takes time to discern. In time you can become adept at listening.

The Holy Spirit is the major source of God's voice. I like to pray, "Lord, lead me, guide me, control me." The Spirit is dedicated to helping us in our journey.

Surrender

At the heart of any authentic Christian spirituality is surrender. Any attempt to contact God in prayer is a surrender.

In order to pray, we must abandon some time, offer our will, and lose control. Any prayer is an act where we relinquish ourselves to God. As you develop and grow in your prayer life, you will find yourself abandoning yourself to God to a greater degree. After an initial taste of God, you will want more and more of the one who surrounds you with goodness.

I write often about the 12 Step Program because it is a spirituality that brings people into recovery and sobriety. The third step is crucial. In order to recover from an addiction a man or woman must surrender themselves to the care of God as they understand God. Notice, they aren't just relinquishing their will to God, but to God's care. This implies that God isn't just an arbitrary unfeeling higher power out there somewhere. Rather, God, as Jesus taught, is a loving, protective Father who cares for us deeply. As you surrender yourself to his care, you will experience God taking care of you!

The Catholic Church has a rich tradition of believers who have become canonized saints because of their total surrenders to God. We have all heard about Saints Peter and Paul, Saint Francis of Assisi as well as the highly venerated mother of God, Saint Mary. Mary surrendered herself in a profound "Yes" to God and became the mother of Jesus. More recently Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul II, and Oscar Romero have become canonized saints. They all offered a proactive surrender to God. I'd like to share about Ignacio Lopez.

Ignacio grew up in Spain in the 1500s. His goal was to be a military leader. While fighting a battle for the king of Spain, a French cannonball struck his leg and he was badly injured. While in the hospital recuperating, he was given a book about the lives of the saints. (Remember God can speak through books.) As he read, he began to realize that God's will for him was not to be a military leader but a Catholic priest. He surrendered his will and life to the will and care of God. Eventually, through grace, he became a Catholic priest and founded a religious community, the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits have impacted our culture and world. Our Pope Francis is a Jesuit. Eventually Ignacio was canonized a saint. Of course, I am talking about St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Ignatius composed a prayer of Surrender which is named the Suspice (receive) prayer. I invite you to pray this prayer and, in time, create your own prayers of surrender. More than that, develop a lifestyle of giving yourself to the care of God daily. As you continually surrender, you will find yourself growing close to God and deepening your personal relationship with God.

Prayer: Take a deep breath, let it out and relax. Reflect for a moment. Get in touch with your innermost heart. Receive the gift of prayer. God is summoning you. You can pray well. Be simple, honest and express yourself in your own little way. God hears you. Prayer starts as a mustard seed, but sprouts and grows day and night, you know not how. (Mk. 4:27)

Suspice Prayer

Take Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will, all I have and call my own.
You have given all to me. To you Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace, that's enough for me.~

The Sacred Quest:

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