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PERSONAL PRAYER

Living in love with God



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Coping with distractions

Sometimes we see distractions as the end of prayer but they can also be the beginning

"I can't pray and keep the children under control": Roger's story

In what he describes as 'doing his Catholic duty', Roger attends the Sunday 10.30am Mass with his two children aged five and three. His wife, Claire, is not a Catholic but is happy to see them out of the house for a couple of hours so that she can enjoy a well deserved break as well as do some housework. Roger's two children are among the 20 or so of the same age-group and the noise in the church seems worse than the bedlam in the local Premier league football ground when the home team supporters think they deserve a penalty! "I wonder why I bother to go to Mass," Roger often says. "There's no way I can pray when I'm trying to keep the children under control. Mass becomes merely an hour of total distraction, with me feeling tempted to murder them!"

"My worries distract me from prayer": Melanie's story

Melanie's situation is very different. Five years ago she was diagnosed with cancer and, after much investigation and treatment, was told the cancer was in 'remission' and she could expect a reasonably normal life though a considerably reduced life-span. In the past few months she's been feeling increasingly tired and worried about her husband and teenage son. For Melanie prayer has always been important but, she says, "I get more and more distracted when I pray - I'm just so worried about the family and myself."

The ‘distractions’ in prayer which Roger and Melanie refer to affect us all. Sometimes these distractions seem very petty. At other times, as for Roger and Melanie, they seem major. The most serious distractions, of course, are those that tempt us to give up prayer altogether.

So how do we deal with these ‘distractions’? Our starting point is to realise that we cannot overcome them. In prayer we bring our whole life to God and the various strands of that life inevitably bubble up. So often, as we try to quieten ourselves for prayer, it’s the deeper issues that surface. And so it’s possible for us to spend an hour every day intending to pray and, at the end of that hour, to realise that we’ve spent the whole time feeling resentment over some ill-treatment that was suffered many years ago.

In other words, the distractions that we face can tell us a great deal about the kind of people we are. This serves as a very good starting point in prayer, for it makes it possible to say to our heavenly Father, ‘this is the kind of person I am...’

Some distractions arise from our anger or resentment. It’s possible that Roger’s feelings at Mass are partly the result of not wanting to be there. The question that Roger can ask himself is whether he prays at all during the week. If the answer to this question is ‘hardly ever’ it’s not surprising that the hour on Sunday isn’t achieving very much.

Melanie’s distractions are the result of worry, perhaps even fear. It’s these worries that she can bring to God. In such an approach our prayer actually begins with the worries – the distractions – but, as we attend to God’s Spirit within us, we’re taken out of ourselves to realise that we’re not alone. Like the terrified disciples who see Jesus walking on the lake, we’re comforted by his words: “Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid.” (*Mark 6:50*)

In short, the distractions that reflect what’s going on deep within us can be our starting point as we come to God. They provide the opportunity to ask questions about ourselves in the light of God’s presence.

Some distractions have other causes. Perhaps we find prayer boring? Most frequently we’re quite simply ‘distracted’ with the details of life as we worry about things such as what food to buy for the evening meal – a distraction shared by Martha in the Gospel.

These kinds of distractions might suggest that we change our way of praying and, in the next chapter we’ll look at different approaches to prayer. For the time being it’s important to remember that we’re human and distractions are part of life. The advice in such circumstances is to laugh at our weaknesses, at least occasionally. Jesus’ rebuke to Martha, “you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one,” was said as a close friend and with a patient smile. (*Luke 10:41*)

Finally, it’s been said that ‘trying to pray is prayer’. In prayer, it’s important to keep trying.

Is prayer pointless?

In any relationship there's little point in trying to change the other person: it's the same in our relationship with God

"Why waste time in prayer...what difference does it make...what's the point of prayer?" These are just some of the questions that many people find themselves asking.

Some people think of prayer as a way of trying to change God – or, at least, as an attempt to try changing God's mind. They say: 'If there's a God why doesn't he stop suffering, why doesn't he make my life easier...?' This isn't a good approach. As Archbishop Anthony Bloom wrote, 'God is not a little kitten.' He isn't someone who is prepared to sit in our lap so that we can feel secure and in control.

Others think of prayer as an exercise in changing oneself – as trying to be a different kind of person. They say: 'If there's a God why doesn't he make me more patient...or more intelligent...?' This, too, is not a good approach.

It may be helpful to compare our relationship with God in prayer with the relationship of a married couple. If we enter marriage with the intention of trying to change our partner we're doomed to failure. A woman who intends to change her husband's habit of talking constantly about himself, or a man who intends to make his wife less quick tempered, will be bitterly disappointed. People don't change their personalities so easily.

But it's obvious that, as the relationship grows and develops, both partners do change. They grow in appreciation and they grow together. Perhaps the wife becomes more patient of her husband's talking; or the husband learns to live with his wife's bad temper. They grow more like each other and to like each other: they grow in love.

A relationship with God in prayer is similar. Unlike marriage, of course, the relationship with God is not between equals. Prayer is much more a relationship of trying to be aware of God's activity in our world and of his dwelling within us in the presence of the Holy Spirit. But we can say, as we draw closer to God in prayer, that both God is changed and we are changed; we become closer to each other, more like each other, sharing an ever deeper love.

This is clearest, of course, in the birth and life of Jesus. His birth is the ultimate proof of God's willingness to change out of love for us. As St Paul puts it:

*His state was divine,
yet he did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are... (Philippians 2:5-7)*

And the Gospels tell us how, “moved with compassion,” Jesus travelled around the countryside in search of those in need.

The Gospels recall, on the other hand, countless people who changed through meeting Jesus. Many had their eyes opened to new possibilities as they talked with Jesus. The man born blind grew in the courage to speak the truth boldly in the face of those who refused to see who Jesus is (*John 9:30*). The Samaritan woman – the one with five husbands – who came to the well at mid-day to avoid the other women of the village left Jesus to tell these same women that she had found Christ (*John 4:30*). The disciples on the road to Emmaus said to each other: “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road?” (*Luke 24:32*) All these people are changed within themselves and discover new possibilities for themselves as they speak with Jesus.

This appreciation of prayer is vital in understanding some of the most important words of Jesus: “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him.” (*Matthew 7:7*) Many people say that ‘I’ve never been lucky and, for all my asking, God never gives to me.’



The point, of course, is that Jesus comes to those with whom there is some love and mutual understanding. Approaching Jesus demanding what we want is like approaching any relationship, including marriage: ‘Unless he/she changes and gives me what I need, I’ll go’. With such an approach there’s no hope of a relationship, let alone an eternal love.

Is God there?

Trying to pray confronts us with the most important question: is there really a loving God out there?

When we try to pray there are times when God seems very distant. We wonder if he's there at all. Our prayer can be like Christ's prayer on Calvary: "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?"

Of course, these opening words of Psalm 21 take us, in the conclusion of the Psalm, to a very different place. It is clear that, even in his most desolate moment, Jesus does not give up hope:

*O Lord, do not leave me alone,
my strength, make
haste to help me!...
They shall praise the Lord,
those who seek him.
May their hearts live for ever
and ever! (Psalm 21)*

If God is so loving why does he seem so distant? Suffering is at its worst when we feel total isolation. Why does God allow it? Why did even Jesus, his Son, endure such desolation?

The answers to these questions can never be fully resolved in this life. All we know is that all followers of Jesus experience similar desolation, even in their prayer. Spiritual writers over the years have described it as the experience of 'the desert', or 'the dark night'. Jesus himself tells his first disciple Peter that "when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go." (John 21:18) Jesus never promises that the Christian life, or prayer, will be easy.

This is because maturing in the Christian life is, in many ways, similar to how we grow as human beings. Our heavenly Father treats us as a good parent treats his or her child. In infancy a parent teaches the child how to walk. But then the parent must hold back to allow the child to stand on his own two feet. As their children

grow, parents have to allow their young sons and daughters to make their own decisions. The result is always a few falls and the inevitable feeling in the child that their parents have neglected them: sometimes a feeling of desolation that their mother or father doesn't love them. But a good parent has to withdraw to allow their child to grow.

It's the same with God. Love doesn't mean tightly holding on to us all the time; nor can we remain dependent on the consolation of his helping hand. Such dependence would mean that we'd spend our life looking for continual consolation rather than looking to build God's kingdom: and we'd remain the perpetual child, achieving nothing.

The experience of God's closeness in prayer can keep us happy, but it doesn't always help us to grow. Indeed, feeling God close to us can lead us to self-satisfaction and arrogance. We

say to ourselves, 'I'm OK because I know I'm close to God.' The experience of God's distance, on the other hand, forces us to touch God less in our emotions, and more in our faith. We're forced to touch God at the deepest level of our being – a level which we tend to ignore in everyday life.

This 'distance' from God was experienced by Karen. Her sister was terminally ill. "I was torn," she says, "between anger with God and desire for a miracle. I found the balance when I asked for peace. Until then I couldn't see any light and felt there was no hope. When she died it was OK and I felt uplifted because I knew that she was lifted up in a real way."

In prayer we learn that there are times when we can only leave everything in God's hands. Such total trust reflects the final prayer of Jesus: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

On the other hand people often throw petitions in God's direction to ask him to do something about our world. Surely, God's best response is for him to throw our prayer back to us, like a boomerang, and suggest that we do something about answering the prayer. It's been said that 'until you've prayed there's nothing to do; after you've prayed, there's everything to do'. Sometimes, prayer can only be answered by changing or working more effectively in our world.

"In prayer there is a paradox: as we come closer to God it will appear to us that we are further away, for the closer we come to the light the more we become aware of the dust. As we get closer to God in our hearts, the mediocrity of our own lives shows up more and more." John Dalrymple

*"When I feel lost,
I pray even more":*

Pauline's story

"There are definitely times," says Pauline, "when I feel lost and insecure, especially since my husband died. In a strange way my greater need has made me pray more fervently – for God to help me. I find God in my home and in my garden, but above all in a baby. Sometime ago I wrote a poem about this:

*I cannot bow my head
or join my hands
in fashioned style,
but I could hold a
baby just so close
I'd almost touch
the wooden cross.
Then I would say with
honest eye that God
could die for
love of man,
and easy say, 'Amen'."*