

PRAYER

Among the many questions we could ask about 'prayer', perhaps the three most important are:-

- 1 What is it?
- 2 Why do we do it?
- 3 What difference does it make?

All three of them are related, of course, and it would take a life time to exhaust all there is to say and to experience about prayer, of course! Still, just because we can't say everything about prayer, doesn't mean we can't say anything about it!

What is it? An old definition from the 'Penny Catechism' that many Catholics learned in their primary school days was 'Prayer is the raising of the heart and mind to God'. Another – from the rather larger (and more expensive!) Catechism of the Catholic Church of 1994 – is 'Prayer is a vital, living and personal relationship with the living and true God, which informs our thoughts, words and actions'. Yet another definition says that 'Prayer is a surge o the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.

All of these definitions are true, and some – like the one from the 'Penny Catechism' and the one about prayer being a 'Surge of the heart', have been prayer as described by the Saints-John of Damascus (around the year 700 AD) and Therese of Lisieux (at the end of the 19th century respectively).

However, rather than giving lots of definitions, it seems to me that we can essentially say 3 things in answer to the question 'What is prayer?'

First: Prayer is a gift of God: St Paul, in chapter 8, v26 of his Letters to the Church of Rome, says explicitly that "we do not know how to pray as we ought". Only when we can humbly acknowledge this do we, so to speak, 'empower' God to give, and ourselves to freely receive, the gift of prayer. It is God who first seeks us out in Christ, and who comes to meet each one of us in Christ. God thirsts for each one of us, to be in relationship with each one of us;_ as St Augustine says " God thirsts that we may thirst for him", and prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours.

Prayer therefore has relationship at its heart, a relationship of love initiated by God Himself; prayer is the response of faith to God's free promise of everlasting life, and also a response of love to the thirst of the Son of God to be in relationship, intimately, with each one of us.

Second: Prayer as Covenant: 'Covenant' is a crucial word in the Bible to describe the native of the relationship that God hopes to enter into with us, the sort of relationship He thirsts for. It is a relationship of the deepest, most profound, most intimate and unconditional love we could possibly imagine. It is a relationship that is radical, involving the whole of God's being, and initiated by God Himself and sealed forever by the Blood of His Beloved Son. My prayer is my part, my free response to that covenant invitation a response I offer in both personal prayer and liturgical prayer (which both nourish each other); it is a response I make from the heart – that is to say, as far as the Biblical writers are concerned, from the very core of my whole being: body and soul [cf ccc 2562]

Thirdly: Prayer is Communion: Prayer is Christian in so far as it is communion with Christ and extends throughout the whole of His Body which is the Church; its dimensions are those of Christ's love – i.e. universal, as the Catechism notes (referring to Ephesians 3¹⁸⁻²¹).

In the New Covenant, which is rooted in the presence and life giving spirit of Christ, and which we re-present each time we offer the Sacrifice of the Mass ["Do this in memory of Me"], prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with the Heavenly Father who is good beyond measure, with His Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Kingdom of God- a kingdom of Truth and Life, holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace- is (in the words of St Gregory of Nazianzus in the 4th century) "the union of the entire holy and royal Trinity... with the whole human spirit". So we arrive at yet another important insight into what (Christian) prayer is, another answer to our first 'what is it?' question: "The life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice – holy God and in communion with Him"; again, notice how the theme of relationship re-occurs.

Why do we do it? Let us move on to the second of our three questions, and consider as well here – briefly! – the question of 'How'.

The 'why we do it' part of the question is actually answered pretty straightforwardly for Christians-in fact, the 'How' part of the question is too, really: we pray because Jesus prayed, and we pray in the way Jesus prayed.

Let me explain! Everything Catholics-as Christians- believe and do in relation to their faith is related to the person of Jesus and who we believe Jesus is. We believe Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God, truly human and divine, who shows us-and all humanity-the way to a unique, new and life-going relationship with God and with each other.

Throughout this life on earth, and especially before particularly decisive moments involving the mission of His apostles [e.g. LK 6:12, 9: 18-20, 22:32]. In these moments, He humbly and trustingly commits Himself to the loving will of His heavenly Father.

It is important to note that these moments are not 'play acting'. Jesus is not pretending to be human or pretending to pray to His heavenly Father, for example in the Garden of Gethsemane when He fought and struggled to know and do His Father's will : both His prayer and His suffering were real [we must not fall into the heresy of Docetism!]

We pray-and must pray – to know God's will for us because Jesus had to do the same! We pray in order to remember God's unconditional covenant relationship of love with us in our lives, because Jesus- being truly human (like us in all things but sin) – had to do the same. This surely highlights the absolute and fundamental importance of prayers in our relationship with God.

The 'How' of our prayer is rooted most significantly in Jesus Himself teaching us how to pray: He teaches that our prayer must be rooted in conversion of heart to do the will of the Father[e.g. Mt 7²¹] : as disciples of Jesus, our prayer must engage this concern for co-operating with the divine plan, also [e.g. Mt 9³⁸; LK 10²; Jn 4³⁴]. It must be confident [Mk 11²⁴] and attentive to the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus [Mk 1¹⁵]; it must, above all, be made in Jesus' Name [Jn 14¹³].

Jesus' 3 Principal Parables on Prayers- in LK 11⁵⁻¹³, 18¹⁻⁸ and 18⁹⁻¹⁴ – could perhaps be said to tell us $\frac{3}{4}$ of what we need to know about prayer in terms of the Christian life ; (a) it must be urgent [the importunate friend] ; it must be patient, persistent and faith filled [the persistent widow], and it must be rooted in humility [the Pharisee and the tax collector].

Finally, in terms of the 'How' of our prayer as Christians, Jesus Himself gives us a perfect model of prayer in the 'Our Father' [LK 11¹], precisely in response to His disciples' request "Lord, teach us to pray".

The 'our Father' or 'Lord's Prayer' has been described as truly the summary of the whole gospel' [Tertullian] and as the 'most perfect of prayers' [Aquinas]; the catechism describes it as "the quintessential prayer of the Church" [2776]; an integral part of the Eucharist, it unites personal and liturgical prayer, hoping for the Lord until He comes.

What difference does it make?

Fundamental difference to our lives as Christians.

Without it, faith grows cold

relationships with God + others die

liturgy becomes hollow ritual

ministry becomes functionary-ism

charity degenerates into mere philanthropy

It enlivens charity towards God and others

It empowers love : it is the very source of Christian Life, because it roots us in the remembrance of the unconditional covenant love of God, and so reminds us that, as God has been merciful and loving to us, so must each of us behave towards each other.

Conclusion

Different schools of prayer, e g Carmelite, Dominican, Jesuit, Benedictine.

Search for one that suits you.

Pray as you can, not as you can't

But pray! The important thing is to actually do it, not just regards it as a conceptual or notional thing!

Root your personal prayer in the liturgy: there is an intimate relationship between them!

Never be afraid to approach the Sacraments (of Reconciliation).

Find out about (and imitate!)[but as you] the prayer relationship that your favourite saint enjoyed with Jesus, e g Theresa, Dominic, Peter Julian Eynard.

Use ccc 2777-2856 on the 'Our Father' as spiritual reading to ground our prayers.

Develop devotion to the Bi Sacrament.

Persevere in going to Mass-even when it is dry and boring! e g St Theresa.