

Lent VII

Most of the time, when Catholics say that they don't pray well, what they mean is they have a lack of feeling for it, or don't receive an immediate reward. Sometimes this is due to spiritual dryness, or being in a state of desolation. But often it means that they do not know how to pray, or what the basics of prayer are, especially concerning mental prayer, making a meditation. Here are some suggestions for it that you might find helpful.

Meditation is different than contemplation. As St. Francis de Sales put it, "Meditation considers in minute detail and, as it were, item by item, the objects that are suitable to excite our love; but contemplation gazes with simplicity and concentration on the object that it loves." (Treatise on the Love of God, VI, 5.) To consider some aspect of the Faith in minute detail takes preparation, and a good deal of effort. But if the effort is made, then in contemplation we will no longer look at the details, but luxuriate in the beauty of God's love. And this effort is tailor-made for a time in which so many must stay at home.

You should attempt meditation without preparation, and the first task is to choose the subject for the minute consideration. It's best to choose it the day before. If you are going to ask to have an audience with Almighty God, then go to the audience with an idea of what you're going to say. That's better than going in and presenting an awkward silence. The easiest subjects to meditate on are the events in our Lord's life, which are documented in Holy Scripture. The more concrete the subject, the easier it is to consider. Trying to meditate on the goodness of God is exceedingly difficult. But meditating on the Parable of the Prodigal Son is nowhere near as difficult. Whichever subject is chosen, you should not proceed with a vague impression of the subject, or one based on mere feeling, but having the consideration grounded in the teaching of the Church.

Next, choose a place for the meditation. The place is important. It should be quiet, and as much as possible without external distraction (not easy if in a lockdown, especially if the family poodle is becoming batty from lack of walking). Our Lord told us that when we pray, we should to go into a closet, where we can shut the door and pray to our heavenly Father in secret. This might be a church with the Blessed Sacrament. But it could be a room at your house, or walking in a forest, or sitting on the back porch, whatever is most conducive to consideration.

Then choose a body position. It can be kneeling, sitting, walking, prostrate, even lying flat (for the infirm may meditate as well). But whatever position you choose, try to stay with it. As the Psalm says, "Be still and know that I am God." The stillness of the body is essential to the stillness of the mind for the consideration.

And ask for help. Meditation is tough work, like anything worth pursuing. Since the reward is so great, it should not surprise us that it would take some hard work to achieve it. Though the spirit of our times says that you can get something for nothing (the lotto, stock markets, televangelists etc.), that is definitely not true regarding meditation. You can ask for help directly from the Father, Son or Holy Ghost, or all three Persons. But it is wise to ask help from the saints and angels too, the saint of the day, your patron saint, the patron of the place you are in, your favorite saints, your Guardian Angel, the angel Principality.

Then put yourself in the presence of God. This may be the most important part of the meditation, or of any prayer for that matter. If we do not put ourselves in the presence of God before we pray,

then most likely we will just be saying words, or making gestures which have little or no value, and certainly little merit. To do this, stop just a moment before entering the church, and recollect. The ancient prayer that was said before entering the Presence was, "I will enter into thy house O Lord, and I have come to do thy will, in fear of Thee."

Then make a good sign of the cross with Holy Water, to purify yourself from all venial sins. The prayer for Holy Water is, "Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop O Lord, wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow." Perhaps it goes without saying, but it should be a good Sign of the Cross, not made sloppily or as an afterthought. In other words, if you breeze out of the car, turning the radio off as the last thing, then breeze into the church, and distractedly push the Holy Water around you, chances are you will find it very difficult to truly enter into the Presence.

Like Moses, take your shoes off before the Presence in the burning bush. He said then, "Here I am Lord, I have come to do thy will." Shoes represent our attachment to worldly affairs. So, push those affairs away a little while, and try to focus on God. Remember that often the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, but sometimes it's the other way around. If you have no spirit for prayer when you come into church, then slow everything down upon entering it, and make an excellent genuflection, kneel reverently, make a slow and reverent sign of the Cross, fold your hands slowly, close your eyes, and slowly bow the head. Even if you do not feel like praying, then the spirit will likely come along if the body is made reverent.

Allow the prayer to take its course. Don't be in hurry, as if you have to consider every single aspect of the mystery. If the emotions come, and tears result, they are a great gift. If there are no tears or any emotions, don't worry about it. If the first thing you see is fruitful for you, stay there and milk it for all its worth. Take a minute or two to thank Him for the time He so generously gave you. You might think that you are the one being generous, but it's really Him.

Beginners should attempt only about 10 or 20 minute periods of mental prayer, those advanced in meditation can pray for about 30 minutes. And if you must take the entire period to put yourself in His presence, then do so. Do not proceed until that is accomplished. If that is not done, then the time of prayer will become an exercise in selfishness, such a daydreaming, or composing clever arguments in order to debate someone. Being in the Presence is the *sine qua non* of all prayer. If we are not in His presence, then we will only be mouthing words, or making gestures.

Remember!!! God is not concerned with how many prayers we say, but how well we say them. And if terribly distracted, turn the distraction into a prayer, as St. Francis de Sales advises. That is, if you are trying to concentrate on some mystery, and someone or something comes into your mind that you just cannot dismiss, then pray for that person or situation with vocal prayer, and you will not have ceased to pray.