

“SURGE OF THE HEART”: THE CATHOLIC TRADITION OF PRAYER
SESSION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO PRAYER
CATHOLICISM 101 + 4 SEPTEMBER 2019

“FOR ME, PRAYER IS A SURGE OF THE HEART; IT IS A SIMPLE LOOK TURNED TOWARD HEAVEN, IT IS
A CRY OF RECOGNITION AND OF LOVE, EMBRACING BOTH TRIAL AND JOY.” — ST. THERESE OF
LISIEUX

I. We are made for prayer

- A. Man is made in and for communion with God and neighbor
 - 1. Genesis 2: “It is not good for man to be alone”
 - 2. Aristotle’s *Politics*: Man is by nature a political (social) animal (expounded upon by Aquinas, et al)
- B. Prayer is a means by which our communion is established and deepened
 - 1. With God — through communal and personal prayer
 - 2. Authentic communion with others — *Gaudium et spes* 22: The mystery of man is revealed in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. We learn what it means to be authentically human from Christ.
- C. Our longing for communion, our being created for prayer, is only fully satisfied in Christ
 - 1. Augustine’s *Confessions* (Bk I,I): “You have created us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”
 - 2. Our God-given faculties of reason, free will, and prayer help us to see this longing, this restlessness in our hearts, and also to seek the One who satisfies it

II. Prayer from three perspectives

A. Prayer as *gift*

- 1. Necessity of a disposition of *humility*
 - a) Augustine: “Man is a beggar before God.”
 - b) The disciples of Jesus in Luke 11: “Lord, teach us how to pray.”

- c) Gifts — of life, prayer, etc. — necessarily come from *someone who is not us*
- 2. Man is made for gift
 - a) “The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension.” (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 34)
 - b) Stands in sharp contrast to the cultural notion that man achieves himself, is self-sufficient, is strongest when he depends upon no one — in fact, as people of communion, we are utterly *dependent*
- 3. Spiritual grows on the dynamics at work in the theology of gift
 - a) Augustine: prayer as an *encounter of thirsts*
 - (1) Story of Christ’s encounter with the woman at the well — he first asks for water, while at the same time revealing to the woman an innermost thirst within her she didn’t even know she had!
 - (2) There is in prayer a twofold dynamic: we beg the Lord for what we need (Augustine, John Damascene, et al) and we offer ourselves — lives, hearts — as a gift to the Lord

B. Prayer as *covenant*

- 1. God’s “divine pedagogy”
 - a) Old Testament covenants, beginning with Adam and Eve before the Fall, were occasions by which the Lord was instructing His people in how to be in right relationship with Him — i.e., in prayer
 - b) We see prefigured in the OT various kinds of prayer that are staples of the Christian life — liturgical prayer, contemplative, etc.
 - c) Prayer is a means by which we learn from the Lord how to be most authentically ourselves, how to be persons in communion with Him and with others
- 2. The role of the heart in prayer
 - a) The Scriptures frequently identify the *heart* as the locus of prayer
 - b) Bl. John Henry Card. Newman’s episcopal motto: *Cor ad cor loquitur*, “Heart speaks to heart,” beautifully illustrates the

dynamic of prayer — God's heart encounters ours, our hearts are joined with our brethren (in communion), we offer our hearts to God as a sacrifice pleasing to Him

- c) Examination of conscience: *Where is our heart situated in relationship to Christ's? What grace do we need for it to be drawn more deeply into the mystery of Christ's selfless love?*

C. Prayer as *communion*

1. Prayer as friendship with God

- a) "Prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends. The reciprocity is the very substance and soul of the Christian life, and the condition of all pastoral life." (Pope St. John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 32)
 - (1) Reciprocity — a dimension of gift (cf. John Damascene)
 - (2) "Soul of the Christian life" — foundational to our being (cf. Genesis 2)
- b) Something to pray about: *How would I describe my friendship with Jesus? How am I being called to grow more deeply in this friendship?*

2. Ecclesial dimension of prayer

- a) There is undoubtedly a private dimension of prayer, and importantly so, but we can never conceive of prayer as purely private or isolated — to do so could open ourselves up to the dangers of self-deception
- b) Prayer is a participation in the life of the Holy Trinity, communal by its very nature, and possible by virtue of our baptism

III. How we pray

A. Vocal prayer

- 1. Defined: "Outward manifestation of our inward state of self-offering to God." (Fr. Thomas Joseph White, OP, *The Light of Christ*)
 - a) Connection to the theology of gift: we make an offering of self
 - b) Covenantal dimension: we make an offering (recall the temple)

- c) Communal dimension: prayers of the Mass, Liturgy of the Hours, etc., are joining our inward prayer in an outward, public way
- d) Sacramental in nature: outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible reality
- 2. Deeply rooted in our anthropology — the whole of the person is involved, body and soul
 - a) Von Balthasar: Vocal prayer is the most communal form of prayer
 - b) Harkens back to our social nature, our longing for communion

B. Meditation

- 1. The mind at prayer, seeking to understand God and to remain in His presence
 - a) Anselm: *Fides quaerens intellectum* (“Faith seeking understanding”)
- 2. Though this is a response to God’s initial activity (as prayer always is), it’s more *active* in nature
 - a) Devotions (e.g., the Rosary), *Lectio Divina* examples of means by which we meditate
 - b) Seeking the presence of God through our innate desire to know (cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Bk I)
- 3. Contrast with popular conception of “meditation”
 - a) Colloquially, meditation is often portrayed as an attempt to “lose oneself” in relation with the cosmos, the transcendent, etc.
 - b) In fact, meditation is the means by which we grow in authentic knowledge of ourselves and *actively live more authentically* (recall *Gaudium et spes*)

C. Contemplation

- 1. “In the Christian life the believer is never more an individual than in contemplative prayer” (Von Balthasar, *Prayer*)
 - a) “The Christian is simply an open ear to the ever-new word of God.” (Ibid.)
 - b) God initiates this activity within us
- 2. Contrast with meditation

- a) While meditation is often more active (as in praying the Rosary, for example) contemplation is more passive in nature
 - b) Relies upon a radical availability (consider the example of our Blessed Mother, the model of prayer)
3. Work of the Holy Spirit
- a) Contemplation requires the fire of the Spirit burning brightly within us
 - b) This light, the warmth of God's love, can reveal imperfections, deficiencies, weaknesses, and the like in the deepest recesses of our being — all done in love, for our purification, strengthening, and growth as God's people

IV. The universal call to prayer

A. We are all *seekers*

1. Our nature is to seek knowledge, to reach for something that is beyond ourselves
2. As we seek God in prayer, we need to empty ourselves so as to be filled with a superabundance that can in turn be shared
3. Our common, innate sense of seeking is fertile ground as we strive to evangelize in word and deed

B. We as Christians have an answer

1. Our call, rooted in and nourished by our prayer, is to give by virtue of our lives an answer to those who are seeking truth, goodness, and beauty
2. 1 Peter 3:15 — be ready always to offer an account for the hope that is within you!