

# Prayer in the Christian and Family Life

By Fr. Callistus Isara, MSP

## **Preamble**

I must acknowledge that it is not easy to talk about prayer. The best way to talk about prayer is not through a lengthy talk but to ask ourselves: How do I pray? Why do I pray? What does prayer mean to me? As Christians, we pray every day both individually, collectively, and as a family. Oftentimes, we must ponder and reflect on what motivates us to pray. That will bring a focus to our prayer life. The aim of this talk is to attune us to the relevance of prayer in the Christian and family life.

## **What is Prayer?**

Just as it is difficult to talk about prayer, it is equally difficult to define prayer. The mystery of prayer cannot be encapsulated in a single definition. Instead, I will offer a description of prayer rather than a clear cut definition of prayer. Prayer is a precious moment of encounter whereby one communicates or commune with God. Prayer is being consciously aware of God's presence. God is always close to us but it through prayer that we realize and feel how close God is to us. St. Augustine (354-430) remarks that "God is closer to me than I am to myself." St. John Chrysostom (349-407) describes prayer as "the light of the soul." Through prayer, we strongly discover that God is always there with us even in our difficulties. Through prayer we reaffirm our faith that God is there and that God loves us and me unconditionally. If I may ask you: How would you define prayer?

Dear friends, we should remember that it requires a lot of effort and struggle to pray. This is applicable to individuals and families. The ability to pray as individuals and family does not always come easily. Prayer requires a lot of effort and discipline. The basic way of learning how to pray is simply to begin to pray and to pray consistently. I would like to share some personal experiences with you:

- My initial experience of prayer with my own father.
- My struggle with prayer—my feeling of being called in my prayer life to something more than just fulfilling the official prayers of the Church such as the Divine Office.

## **The Prayer of Jesus**

There is no better way to reflect on prayer other than the example of Jesus. Luke depicts our Lord in prayer. Luke shows how our Lord always prayed before he made important decisions:

- Luke 6:12-16: Our Lord prays before choosing the twelve apostles: "Now it happened in those days that he went onto the mountain to pray; and he spent the whole night in prayer to God" (Lk 6:12).
- Luke 9:18—Our Lord prays alone.

- Luke 9:28—Our Lord prays before his transfiguration.
- Luke 11:1—Our Lord finishes praying before he taught his disciples “The Lord’s Prayer.”
- Luke 21:37: “All day long he would be in the Temple teaching, but would spend the night in the open on the hill called the Mount of Olives.” Our Lord undoubtedly spent those nights on the hill in prayer.
- Luke 22:39-46: Our Lord prays in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- Luke 23:46—Our Lord says his last prayer: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

The prayer of Jesus consists of Adoration, Thanksgiving, Supplication, Blessing, Praise and Offering. Our prayer should model after the prayer of Jesus. Adoration is to acknowledge God as the creator and author of our lives. It is to exalt the greatness and power of God. A prayer of praise “is the form of prayer which recognizes most immediately that God is God. It lauds God for his own sake and gives him glory, quite beyond what he does, but simply because HE IS” (**Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2639**). Thanksgiving is the prayer of the Church especially in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Blessing is an encounter between God and persons whereby persons respond to God’s gifts; one thus blesses God who is the source of every blessing. Essentially, adoration, thanksgiving, blessing and praise all acknowledge God as creator; they also acknowledge God’s goodness and greatness. Christ’s disciples desired to pray after they had observed our Lord in consistent prayer. Hence, they asked our Lord to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). Therefore, **to be a disciple of Christ means to be his disciple in prayer**. Christ has called us to be his disciples and he wants us to be like him. Hence our Lord asks us to persevere in prayer, to pray continually and never lose heart (Lk 11:1; 18:1-8). Following in the footsteps of our Lord, Paul advises the Thessalonians to pray constantly: “Pray constantly; and for all things give thanks; this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Th 5:17-18).

Jesus is the model of prayer for all of us. If Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, could spend so much time in prayer, it is imperative for all his disciples to follow in his footsteps by doing everything possible to cultivate a life pattern and habit of prayer. We must be ready to leave something behind in order to pray. To pray means to leave everything aside and focus on God. It could mean to leave behind our work, friends, TV, GSM, etc., in order to spend time with God. Undoubtedly, this is not easy but it is the way of discipleship.

### **Praying with the Scriptures**

Just as I began by asking some basic questions on prayer, I would like to pose a few questions on praying with the scriptures: “**How often do I read the Bible? Do I spend time everyday to read and meditate on the scriptures? Has the Word of God found a home in my heart?**” To pray constantly and fervently with the scriptures is one of the profound ways of renewing our love and desire for the Word of God.

The Second Vatican Council’s document on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* exhorts all Christians to constantly read the scriptures (**Dei Verbum 25**). The liturgy is the most sacred and profound point of contact with the Word of God which is proclaimed during the readings and

explained during the homily. However, the proclamation and explanation on the Word of God at the Holy Mass do not exhaust the riches of the Word of God. Thus flowing from the proclamation of the Word in the liturgy is the great need to read the scripture so that it can speak personally to me and I can respond to it through prayer, song, praise, sorrow, joy and even tears. Remember the reaction of the people of Israel when Ezra the priest read the Book of the Law of Moses to them after their return from exile:

- **“His Excellency Nehemiah and the priest-scribe Ezra and the levites who were instructing the people said to all the people, ‘Today is sacred to Yahweh your God. Do not be mournful, do not weep.’ For the people were still in tears as they listened to the words of the Law” (Nehemiah 8:9).**

Thus there is a vital connection and continuity between hearing the Word of God at Mass and the private reading of the sacred text. Undoubtedly, the liturgy has a pride of place in hearing the Word of God. The Second Vatican Council’s document on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, points out that it is Christ himself “who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church” (**Sacrosanctum Concilium 7**). According to Archbishop Mariano Magrassi in his book **Praying the Bible**, “Just as all ecclesial proclamation of the Word is directed towards liturgical proclamation as its final end, so all personal reading of the sacred text finds its center in liturgical hearing—as preparation for it or as a continuation” (**Praying the Bible, p. 4**). If one has cultivated over a period of time, the habit of personal reading of the scriptures, and one has been spiritually enriched by it, one will even be more readily disposed to the Word of God as proclaimed in the liturgical assembly. Private reading of the scriptures complements its public proclamation in the liturgy. *Lectio Divina* is a method that enhances the effective and fruitful effect of reading and praying the scriptures.

A loving, quiet, calm and personal reading of the scripture is indispensable in order for the sacred text to permeate one’s entire being. As Archbishop Mariano Magrassi has noted, “God speaks not only to his people; he also addresses me personally” (**Praying the Bible, p. 7**). He further notes that, “the Church and the individual are not too different realities—not just because the individual is part of the Church but because the entire mystery of the Church is in some way contained in every soul” (**Praying the Bible, p. 9**). Thus the *continuum* between the public liturgical proclamation and the personal reading of the scripture, in the sense that when one is deeply touched by the Word, one ponders, prays, mulls over it, and the desire leads one back again to the fountain of the liturgy to listen even more attentively and ardently to the Word of God.

St. Gregory the Great (540-604) captures quite excellently the impact of private reading of the scriptures:

- **Often, through the grace of the almighty Lord, certain passages in the sacred text are better understood when the divine Word is read privately. The soul, conscious of its faults and recognizing the truth of what it has heard, is struck by the dart of grief and pierced by the sword of compunction, so that it wishes to do nothing but weep and wash away its stains with floods of tears. Meanwhile it is sometimes rapt in the contemplation of higher things and, in its desire for them, tormented by sweet weeping.... And because it still lacks the strength to cling to heavenly things, exhausted, it finds no rest save in tears.**

## **The Prayer of Petition**

“So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Lk 11:9). It is through prayer that we ask God to grant us our needs. A prayer of petition is one aspect of prayer and a very important one for that matter. We have got to know what we want from the Lord and ask Him for it. In the scripture, Jesus would often ask people: “What do you want me to do for you?” For example, our Lord asks the blind man of Jericho Bartimeus: “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mk 10:51). Bartimeus replied to Jesus, “Rabbuni, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has saved you” (Mk 10:52). Asking for forgiveness for one’s sins and the sins of the community is part of the prayer of petition. The prayer of intercession is closely linked to that of petition. The difference is that the prayer of intercession is to ask on behalf of others. It is very important to pray beyond oneself for others. This is aptly illustrated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: ‘In intercession, he who prays looks “not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others,” even to the point of praying for those who do him harm’ (CCC 2635).

We must realize that as important as the prayer of petition is, it is not the only form of prayer. Other forms of prayer include vocal prayer, meditation, contemplation, a prayer of thanksgiving, adoration, praise, etc. Oftentimes, people reduce all prayer to that of petition. There is a lot of *Pentecostal* influence in this regard especially when prayer is reduced to asking for prosperity, wealth and materialism. Prayer consists of adoration, thanksgiving, blessing, praise, offering and of course supplication. While, it is absolutely necessary to pray for our needs, **prayer must not and should not be reduced to only the prayer of petition**. If in a human relationship, you go to your loved one only when you need something, then it is evident that such a relationship is not a healthy one. Similarly, if we come to God only when we need something, then something is not right in our relationship with God. Also, some people pray only when they are in trouble or difficulty and they want God to come to their help here and now. It is good and in fact absolutely necessary to ask God for our needs but it should not be the only time to pray. Thus, praying should be a pattern of life for Christians. The importance of prayer in the spiritual life should be perceived in the same way as the importance of food, water, clothing, shelter, and the air we breathe, for our bodily sustenance.

## **Final Thoughts on Prayer**

We must acknowledge that we do not know how to pray and that oftentimes we do not pray properly as we should. St. Paul makes this point in his Letter to the Romans: “For, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words; and he who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God’s holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God” (Romans 8:26-27). My brothers and sisters, what matters is our eagerness and longing for prayer even if we do not know how to pray very well. Like Christ’s disciples, we should desire and yearn to pray by asking our Lord to teach us how to pray (Lk 11:1).

As Christians, prayer must be a way of life for us; we should cultivate the habit of prayer. Prayer is inseparable from the Christian life. Hence prayer must be promoted in family life. As I pointed out few days ago, it is incumbent on parents that through them their children will not only learn how to pray, but to love to pray, and to develop a pattern of prayer in their lives. Remember what I told you earlier about my father when I was growing up as a little boy. I saw him kneeling down in the early hours of the morning in prayer. The mark on his knees attested to

his long period of kneeling down in prayer. My father believed that my call and ordination to the priesthood was God's way of rewarding him for his fidelity and prayer life. The Christian home must be a home of prayer. Prayer should be accorded the same importance as food, clothing and shelter. While parents admirably work hard and struggle to provide the best for the upbringing of their children by way of education, food, clothing, and shelter, parents must not deprive their children of the spiritual heritage of a Christian life and a healthy life of prayer.

## **Conclusion**

Christ is the perfect model of prayer. It is through prayer that we get closer to God. My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us strive to pray fervently and never lose heart. Admittedly, it is not easy to consistently maintain a regular prayer life; it is a constant struggle to keep up without fail one's prayer life. However, it is not impossible to have a steady and strong prayer life in the family. We have Jesus as our model and the examples of the Saints to emulate. As I pointed out at the beginning of this talk, it is not that easy to talk about prayer. I hope what I have shared with you this evening will stir in your heart the desire to pray and to attune yourself and your family to a regular prayer life. As I wind down this talk, I have a sense that what I have shared with you this evening is merely *the tip of the iceberg* with regard to prayer. Therefore, I pray the good Lord to fill up in your heart whatever is lacking in my presentation so that your prayer life and the prayer life of your family will be effective, fruitful, and rewarded by God who is never outdone in generosity. *Thank you for listening and God bless you.*