

Difficulties in Silent Prayer

We are going to consider the three main difficulties encountered in prayer and what God is trying to teach us through each one of them.

The three characteristic difficulties

So, you've begun the adventure of prayer! Well, you'll quickly discover that though prayer may seem simple it isn't always easy. So right from the beginning we are confronted with difficulties. They are simply a part of this form of prayer. We are going to look at the three characteristic difficulties. Perseverance is the first challenge or how to find the time each day for the Lord; the second are the distractions or how to pray with who and what I am; and finally, the third is the lack of consolations in prayer or how to pray when God hides.

St. Nicholas of Flüe said that: "God knows how to make it seem that going to prayer is like going to a dance and God knows how to make it seem like going to prayer is going to do battle." You can risk getting discouraged and even consider giving up if you feel that you are going to battle more often than going to a dance. Well, the difficulties are pretty much unavoidable but can be real opportunities for growth and grace! At least this is what I hope to help you grasp!

First difficulty: Perseverance

How do you find time daily to be with the Lord in prayer? St. Teresa of Avila warns us that you need to 'have a firm resolve, a determined determination, not to stop before having reached the source of living water no matter what ... (W 21, 2). So right from the start let's assume that we all want to have this 'determined determination' to pray and yet there are days when prayer just doesn't fit. What's going on? There are days when circumstances make prayer impossible. But there are also days when prayer would be possible if you were willing to engage in a sort of combat. In this situation it seems the question is not 'how' but 'why' not 'how to find time to pray' but 'why pray'. The answer is an act of faith.

Do I really believe that God is waiting for me? Do I believe that He wants to give himself to me more than I want to receive Him? If I truly believe this then prayer will become my priority. Beg the Lord, as did the father of the epileptic child of the Gospel, "Lord, I believe, help my disbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2710) says: The choice of the time and duration of prayer arise from a determined will which reveals the secrets of the heart. One does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has time, one makes time for the Lord with a firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dryness one may encounter..."

Let's admit that the challenge of silent prayer is great. It means living in God's presence and uniting with him. It is important to realize that union with God is precisely what we are made for! We can live our whole lives on the surface, very far from the center of our soul where God is found. We can live like this while investing ourselves in good endeavors such as family, work and volunteering. The whole purpose of prayer is to bring us back to the center. It is from this center that we want to live our lives. Our activities don't change but, thanks to prayer, our way of carrying them out does. We now live our lives in God's presence frequently drawing on His love as we return to the center of our soul.

Second difficulty: distractions

Distractions are the second major difficulty. What is a distraction? Father Aurelien-Marie o.c.d., in an article in the magazine, Living Flame, March 2011, said the following: 'A distraction, is simply thinking about something

other than the Lord.” That’s obvious, my dear Watson! It’s normal because we are fragile and complex beings. We bring our lives, worries, health and memories with us to prayer. On top of that, our internal world that operates on two levels- the sensory and the spiritual, is not unified. Fr. Aurelien-Marie goes even further saying that ‘the distraction is a lack of recollection. Yet recollection is a prerequisite of silent prayer.’ Our effort in silent prayer is to learn to recollect ourselves. In other words, to calm our senses down and through repeated acts of faith, orient our intelligence, will and imagination towards silence and a loving attention before Christ. The difficulty is to manage all that opposes recollection. What can we actually do when confronted with distractions? There are two different approaches that work together. The first is to anticipate the distraction and the second is to overcome it.

-Anticipate the distraction

Preventing distractions is a vast project because prayer shapes us but at the same time is shaped by who we are and what we are experiencing in life. Our prayer takes on the color of our life so to speak. That is why to prevent distractions we have to develop good habits that will enhance recollection. Through God’s grace we can create a greater place for silence both in our body and in our senses. We can also keep watch over our thoughts and imagination while going about our daily lives.

The Carmelite Rule says: "Protect your heart with holy thoughts, for holy thought will keep you." But, how do we cover our heart with holy thoughts? Well, here are a few suggestions: through spiritual readings that will nourish our faith and bring our thoughts back to God; through regular reading of Scripture; and, by memorizing verses that speak to us. An effective way to do this is to memorize a verse at night before going to bed, a verse from the psalm for the next day’s Mass, for example, this verse can then be recited upon awakening and savored throughout the day. These good habits will bear fruit not only during prayer but will allow recollection to become the foundation of our lives.

-Remedy the distraction

Despite all our efforts to quiet and recollect ourselves we end up having to admit that we can’t control what happens to us in prayer. We recollect ourselves, invoke the Holy Spirit, read a verse from the Gospel to appreciate Christ in his humanity all the while trying to remain in his presence and then what happens? Well, then we realize that we’re a million miles away! So, what should we do?

St. Teresa of Avila with her usual good sense says: “When we allow ourselves to be distracted the only remedy is to recollect ourselves again.” (IC 2,10) And how do we do this?

We once again move towards Christ present within us. We turn to Him in faith while turning away from all the rest. Let’s not forget that there are always two involved in prayer. The most important of the two is not me. St. Teresa tells us that keeping Christ company is the most important activity in prayer. “Represent the Christ as close to you and see with what love and humility He instructs you.” (W 26,1) It is for Him that we are there. As soon as we realize that our attention has wandered we gently bring it back to Christ and renew our act of faith and love. We turn the eyes of our souls back to Christ and resume our conversation with Him.

To help us come back we can read from the Gospels or repeat the verse we memorized from the psalm the night before, repeat a word or a short phrase that puts us back in the presence of Christ, repeat the name of Jesus or say the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus, Son of God have pity on me a sinner.” It is also suggested to have a familiar book next to us that promises to offer a passage that will promote recollection. St. Teresa had a book close to her for many years. She said: ‘My book was a companion for me, a shield against my many thoughts. (V 4,9) We can look at a picture or an icon before closing our bodily eyes and opening the eyes of our souls or bring our attention to the breath thinking of it as the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. When it’s really difficult to become recollected we can pray a prayer such as the Our Father or the Hail Mary very slowly. St. Therese of the Child Jesus often used this method.

Let's recap all the different methods available to help promote recollection and keep us in a loving attention before Christ: a Gospel reading, reciting a verse of a psalm, invoking the Holy Spirit, looking at a picture or an icon, following the breath and thinking of it as the Holy Spirit, slowly praying a prayer such as the Our Father. Sometimes though a distraction can become invasive, almost like an obsession. My heart has been taken over. Something in my life is amiss—perhaps a death, a guilty conscience, a worry, a relational problem. The only solution in these cases is to very humbly and prayerfully put the issue in God's hands. If I put my burden at the feet of Jesus as I enter into prayer, my heart will be freed up to look at Him. If my concerns return, I continue to give them to Him over and over again as many times as is necessary and I make it a prayer intention. I admit my powerlessness, my limits and accept reality. This gets me out of myself, makes me poorer and prepares me to receive what God wants to give me.

Third difficulty: Absence of any tangible sign of God's presence

The notion that prayer is usually a succession of meditative moments interspersed with distractions can be easily acknowledged and understood. During these moments of recollection we would hope to perceive a small sign of God's presence. "If I don't feel the presence of God, how can I be sure to recognize Him if I meet Him within?"

Our natural way of knowing is through the senses, but our senses are unable to feel God because God is not a sensory object. He is Spirit. There is only one supernatural means that allows us to know God and it must be God Himself who gives it to us; that means is faith. Here is what Father Pierre-Marie de la Croix o.c.d. wrote to someone who suffered from not tangibly meeting the Lord in prayer (Prayer of the Poor, Ed Carmel, 2003): "When God hides does prayer become useless as you say?" Far from it! First of all, I can assure you that He is always there, near you, whether you feel it or not. Remember that we can only reach God by faith and not by feeling. Prayer is an exchange of friendship with God the one who we know loves us, not the one who we feel loves us. He is not nearer when you feel Him and further away when you don't. His proximity only depends on the degree of charity you have attained. If He hides during your prayer time it is an invitation for you to grow in charity. He is inviting you to seek Him."

Difficulties as God's Teaching Tools

Difficulties can slow us down. Sometimes it can even feel like we aren't making any progress at all. But if God allows us to be tested in this way don't you think that He is doing it for our good? Let me suggest that He's perhaps using our difficulties as pedagogical (teaching) tools to educate and stimulate us just as He has done with His people throughout Holy History. The school of prayer is where God wants to teach us "good lessons". Our daily lives allow us to practice the virtues of love, faith, hope, and humility.

Through the trial of fidelity and perseverance in prayer God invites us to strengthen our love both for Him and for others. When we choose to devote time daily to prayer, we demonstrate to God that we prefer Him to everything else, including ourselves. For love of Him, we make a choice with our will to renounce all the other solicitations. Prayer teaches us to detach from ourselves for God's sake thus making me more available to love my neighbor.

Through the trial of distractions God invites us to strengthen our faith. Whenever distractions lead us astray and we return to the Lord's presence we renew the act of faith that is the foundation of our prayer relationship with Him. St. John of the Cross (AC 2, 2, 1) insists on the unique and irreplaceable role of faith: "Faith is indeed the admirable means that enables us to reach the goal, in other words, God." He also says that faith is "the only proportionate way" (AC 2, 9, 1) to unite with God. We need to believe that our faith enables us to touch God, to give Him to ourselves, mysteriously but truly!

Through the trial of the absence of any tangible consolation in prayer, God invites us to be hopeful in prayer. He hides to increase our desire for Him and therefore to increase our ability to welcome Him. The more He wants to give himself, the more He makes Himself desired. Our hope unfolds with great patience, first towards God, but then also towards ourselves. This is the precious advice that St. Francis de Sales gave to one of his spiritual directees: "I do not know if I've ever told you this, but we have to be patient with everyone but most of all with ourselves. We are harder on ourselves than on anyone else since we know how to discern between the old and the new Adam; between the inner and the outer man "(letter to President Brulart, February-March 1606).

Finally, through all these trials, God invites us to grow in humility as we become aware of our weaknesses, unfaithfulness and great poverty. This is a blessing because according to St. Teresa of Avila, "This edifice (of prayer) is built entirely on humility" (V 12, 4). The difficulties encountered in the practice of prayer teach us, the essential ingredient of prayer, humility, which allows God to act in us.