

Difficulties in Prayer Part 2

The Three Types of Difficulties

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There are **two categories** of people who practice silent prayer. There are **those** who spend the entire prayer time fighting the distractions and are **those** who practice silent prayer despite the distractions. We want to belong to the **latter** group.

Right from the start we need to know that the difficulties should never be an obstacle to prayer. It is always possible to pray once we have understood the true nature of prayer.

There are **three types of difficulties** linked to prayer. We often stop at the distractions and dryness neglecting to mention the other two types of difficulties. The **first** type of difficulty results from the **comprehension or idea** we have of silent prayer. The **second** difficulty results from the **preparation** for prayer and the **third** is related to the **practice or exercise** of prayer which involves the **distractions and dryness**.

1/Comprehension or Idea of Prayer

We tend to develop false ideas of what prayer is. It is not a relaxation exercise to reach a zen-like state. Calm is however a secondary effect of prayer, but it isn't the essence of prayer. Prayer is about a **relationship**.

It is not a technique of self-mastery, of oriental or Buddhist recollection or of full consciousness meditation. No, silent prayer is a **relationship with God**. We enter into a relationship with God. We talk with him. We deepen our relationship with him. Silent prayer is about bringing our growing relationship with him to the level of **pure faith**.

The idea we have of silent prayer will implicate our **poverty of heart, our intellectual and sensory illusions**.

There is no need to break our brains! We don't need to have ideas to pray. No, silent prayer isn't

intellectual. It isn't about having **ideas** or feeling something. We aren't always going to **feel** something in prayer. It isn't self-hypnosis either, it's about **interior silence**.

It isn't charismatic nor is it a special gift. It's not the fruit of a miracle. It is an ever-**increasing practice of faith, hope and charity**.

We make **acts of faith, hope and charity** in prayer, which produce a **purification, a healing** and a **sanctification** of our **soul** and its **faculties**. The process of our growth or transformation is related to the increase of **faith, hope and charity**; this increase reflects the quality of our prayer. So prayer isn't about being 'zen-like' but about making acts of faith, hope and charity.

So, we can see that the **comprehension** (or idea) we have of prayer brings about **3 difficulties**: a lack of **poverty**; a lack of **preparation**; and a lack of **gratitude**.

A **lack of poverty** is about sensory and intellectual illusions. Praying is not about ideas. We don't come to God to present a dissertation, but to **conform** our wills, feelings and projects to his **loving design** for us.

We could say that silent prayer is like going to the **spiritual tanning booth**. We place ourselves in the divine sun and we 'tan' our **souls**. So, it's not about ideas but that doesn't mean not to think. It's about **balance**.

The **idea** we have of prayer can make it impossible to follow the recommendation to **pray without ceasing** because we tell ourselves that it isn't possible to do so. It all depends on the idea we have of prayer. If we think that prayer is self-hypnosis or an exercise of concentration then it's not possible to pray without ceasing.

The **essence of prayer is the presence of God**. Teresa of Lisieux tells us that prayer is nothing more than a look cast towards heaven, a raising up of the soul. It's about living in the presence of God.

The St. Pastor d' Ars asked one of his parishioners what he says to God in prayer. The man answered, 'Nothing, he looks at me and I look at him'.

Prayer is the **language of the heart** which is above all about **faith- the look of faith**. It's an interior attitude. It's about being available to be in God's presence and to welcome his grace. It's about learning to look at him and to allow yourself to be looked at by him. It's about loving him and allowing yourself to be loved by him.

This is the **essence of prayer**.

Meditation, an intellectual and imaginative effort, must always be filled with the desire to meet God and to make his will ours. It is the living God that we are looking for. We place ourselves before God. God is alive. He is not an idea.

We don't go to prayer for intellectual culture but to tell God that we love him and that we know he loves us. We go to prayer to conform ourselves to God. Teresa of Avila tells us that prayer is not about thinking a lot but about loving a lot: 'I absolutely want you to know that to progress on this path in order to reach the house you would like to reach, it's not about thinking a lot but about loving a lot. So, anything that would lead you to love more, do that!'

Besides the **intellectual illusion** there is the **sensory illusion**. There is a great risk to believe that our prayer only has value if it is **felt**. We are **spoiled** by the false state of our souls. We are happy in the sensory projection of ourselves. I feel myself in that exercise or practice. But Christian prayer is not an end in itself. We pray to **give ourselves** to God and to **enter into the Divine design of salvation** which is beyond us. What counts in silent prayer is not the feeling of an interior experience but the One who is the object of this experience. What matters isn't what is felt, but the **gift of self**. We practice prayer not to receive but, to give of ourselves, to lose ourselves.

What do we give God in prayer? We **make ourselves available to his grace**. We give him the chance to **show his goodness**. He wants us to **give him the chance to give himself to us**. **This is what we bring to prayer. We give God the chance to show his goodness. Friendship is the most important aspect of prayer.**

To make ourselves available to his grace, to welcome his presence, this is what is asked of us. We need to pray, **moved by love**, under the influence of love, and not because the contact with God is pleasurable, not because when I pray it's great. We need to be moved by love or else when it's not great, **we give up**. If we come to God solely for his consolations, we will be disappointed. Until we **love for no reason**, we don't really love. In silent prayer, it is important to acquire the attitude of '**no reason**'. If we aren't in the state of **giving freely** we can't grow in prayer or in a life of prayer.

Once again, silent prayer is not a psychological phenomenon. It's not about levitation or inspired words or visions and ecstasy. Both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila experienced these mystical occurrences not because they are at the heart of prayer but rather because they had the **mission to teach the Church**.

Silent prayer doesn't consist of extraordinary events. Don't get the idea that it does. They had that mission and so needed the experience to be able to explain it. **Silent prayer remains the path of humility and faith. Faith is the most perfect way to attain union with God.**

This wraps up the difficulties that we have linked to the comprehension or ideas we have about silent prayer.

II/ Difficulties linked to **Preparation**

Silent prayer is to do for God what we would do in our interactions with creatures. When we have an important meeting or an event we prepare for it. We get ready. We prepare our thoughts and our presentation. We center ourselves to be completely in control of ourselves. All that we would do for a person we have to do for God.

There is nothing miraculous. God is only seeking our attention, he is not asking us to follow a protocol. We are as attentive to God as we would be in any important human encounter. God is inviting us into communion with him in prayer. Christian prudence demands that we offer a preparation worthy of his Highness, his Majesty. We have tendency to behave towards God with an **indecent familiarity**. When we enter a church, we make a rapid genuflection and sign of the cross. There is an indecency to the relationship.

So what preparation should be brought to prayer? Prayer needs to occupy a **choice place** in our schedule. We don't organize prayer based on our activities, but our activities based on prayer. We often do the opposite---It is important that our activities get their source from You and receive their completion in You. Prayer needs to be the **first priority**.

An **Arab proverb** states that it isn't the journey that hurts your foot, but the **pebble** in your shoe.

The **first pebble** for us is our **senses** that from the disorder of sin draws our lives towards the world instead of lifting it up towards God.

The problem is **dissipation** and **distraction** of the **soul internally** and of the **senses externally** with all our activities. It's the passions. If we don't work to reign in our passions, we will have problems in prayer. If we are agitated, filled with anger, hate and desire, we can't peacefully practice prayer.

It's important to control the passions within, to calm down and to work to unify and to simplify ourselves. Passions render our lives complex.

The **second pebble** is our **activities**. The overwhelming amount of work-related and pleasurable activities can contribute to preventing progress in prayer. The ideal is **moderation** but we are a generation of men and women who are worried and involved in abundant activity.

We spend a lot of time thinking about our jobs to meet the needs and security of our families. These concerns are of course necessary and have to be addressed. It's our responsibility to do so, but we experience **guilty excesses** in the management of our occupations. If work and business need to occupy our lives that's one thing, but they don't have the right to **torment** our lives to the point of making us forget the **greatest task** having to do with **God** in the **sanctuary of the soul** and in **our conscience**. It's a question of hygiene or ecology of life. Both the **first and second pebbles** have to do with the **exaggerated place we allow our activities to occupy in our lives**.

The **third pebble** is the lack of spiritual nourishment. We are undernourished. We lack knowledge of God's word and the doctrine of faith. When we say we love someone we don't know there is a risk of remaining at a sensory emotional attachment. When love is spiritual, knowing the other comes before our own emotional satisfaction.

To escape the **tyranny** of our emotional egocentricity, we must cultivate our intelligence. It is important to know the word of God and the doctrine of faith.

We might do a lot of reading. There are people who spend their days devouring detective novels. If you ask them about a passage from the Bible, they aren't able to answer.

We can't examine our desires and our impulses in light of God's word and Catholic doctrine unless we know them. They tell us the desires of both Christ and the Church. To know God's will I have to read Scripture. People often say that they don't know God's will. Fair enough. Read the Scriptures! God speaks to us through his Son and the Gospel is Christ's testimony. God has told us everything. There is a minimum amount of intellectual work to do. The Catechism isn't enough.

We can't progress in our prayer lives if we remain at an **entry level** knowledge of God's

word and Catholic doctrine. The goal is to find a **balance** between **laziness** and **intellectual gluttony**. Reading and meditating on God's word only has value if it leads us into an **exchange with God**.

The **final pebble** is related to our **motives** to pray. Are they selfish? Instead of seeking God first, do we run to God as a **last resort only** after we have tried everything else? The ideal is to turn to him as soon as something happens and share our concerns with him. If God is our last resort, we will have trouble progressing in prayer.

Unless these difficulties are resolved we will continue to focus on the distractions and on the dryness. But we aren't at that level, we are at the starting gate! **Dryness** happens to people who have made progress and who live in God. God is seeking to get them to advance further. We don't want to focus on the dryness. The **immediate need** is the **preparation** for and **comprehension** of silent prayer which merits careful and adequate attention.

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Recommended Reading:
Living Flame, Stanza 3, 28-76

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