

"Being a 'Yes' to God"

Difficulties in Silent Prayer

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Because the subject –**difficulties in prayer** – seemed rather **austere** to me, I wanted to give this presentation a more encouraging title; one which directs us towards the **goal** and motivates us to **stand firm in prayer**.

I came across this expression from Father Caffarel: "**Be a 'Yes' to God**". In other words, "**I want what you want**", and this, infinitely. The expression is very complex but is the **path** prayer leads us down and the **full union** God leads us towards with the help of His grace if we remain faithful to prayer.

In the practice of silent prayer, to "**Be a 'Yes' to God**" means to accept what He wants for us during this time of prayer we have allotted Him, no matter what happens during this time:

"Lord, I am here for You. Do with me what You will. Give me what You desire I have."

Little by little, as we continue to practice silent prayer by the grace of God, these "**Yeses**" made during each time of prayer, these repeated agreements with God's will, will tend to become a single agreement to what God desires, in all aspects of our lives.

So, "to be a "**Yes**" to God" will be to be all for Him, all in accordance with what He desires and expects from us. It will mean being able to say at every moment with the Virgin Mary: "**Here is the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.**" So, to "**be a 'Yes' to God**", is the dynamic for our **prayer life** here and now, but especially for our **life with God**, life with a **big L**.

Three Characteristic Difficulties

So, let's get to the heart of the matter and take a look at these infamous difficulties that we tend to encounter in silent prayer. As far as I can see, there are **three** that are really characteristic and that you have probably already experienced yourself in your practice.

The **first** difficulty are the **distractions** or how to pray with who and what I am. The **second** is **dryness**; in other words the **absence of sensory comfort** in prayer which is another way of saying how to pray when God is hiding. And then finally, the **third** difficulty is the challenge of **consistency**, or how to maintain a daily appointment with the Lord.

Although these difficulties are almost unavoidable, they can however be **opportunities** for **growth** and **grace**! Just how though you may ask? Well, prayer is like a program of learning about life with God; the life we were really made for. But when learning is necessary, so too is on-going and routine practice along with the need for instruction.

The difficulties we encounter can be seen as the **teaching tools** God uses to develop in us what's needed for **eternal life**. In fact, He has already deposited the necessary elements in us through the grace of baptism. In other words, the **theological virtues** of faith, hope and charity;

And, prayer is the **training ground** where we **exercise** and **strengthen** our **faith, hope** and **charity** (or love).

First Difficulty: Distractions, or "a Thousand Gifts in 20 minutes"

Let's recall the essence of the previous **three teachings**. **First** of all, know that we were made to pray and meet God, even if sin creates disorder in our inner beings and sometimes exiles us far from our hearts. **Secondly**, by the grace of the Baptism, the Holy Trinity comes to dwell in our souls, so that we may become participants in divine life, allowing us to truly know and love God. And then **finally**, through recollection, we descend within ourselves, to our souls, and remain there in the presence of the living God.

Distractions are simply the normal activity of our minds and senses that draw us away from recollection or being in God's presence. Our effort in prayer will be to recollect ourselves, that is to calm our senses and orient as much as possible the activity our intellect, will and imagination so that we may remain in a **loving attention to Christ**.

Each time we return to Jesus, we make an **act of faith**: "**Lord, I believe you are here.**"

This act of faith both strengthens our **faith** and gives Jesus a gift, maybe as many as "a thousand gifts in 20 minutes"!

So, in preparation for prayer, we can try to **prevent distractions** and if not, we can attempt to **remedy** them. We will now look closer at **both options**.

Prevent Distractions

To prevent distractions, there is nothing like developing habits that promote **prayerful recollection**. If prayer shapes us, it is also shaped by who we are and our life experiences. The Rule of Carmel says: "**Protect your heart with holy thoughts, for holy thoughts will keep you.**" But, how can we fill our hearts with holy thoughts? Well, by reading good spiritual books that nourish our faith and bring our thoughts back to God –so read, read! ; by studying the Word of God; by memorizing Bible verses that speak to us. An effective way to do this, is to memorize a verse of a Psalm before going to bed. Perhaps we can choose the Psalm to be read at Mass the next day, for example; upon awakening, recite this verse, and then enjoy it throughout the day. These habits will bear their fruits not only during prayer, but will make prayerful recollection the fabric of our lives.

Remedy Distractions

Despite our best efforts, we have to admit that we are not in control of what happens to us in prayer. So, what are we supposed to do when faced with distractions? Well, St. Teresa of Avila, with her usual common sense, tells us: "**When we allow ourselves to become distracted, the only remedy is recollect ourselves again**" (*II H, § 10*). Just how do I do this? Well, I simply recollect myself again, turning towards Christ present within me: it is by turning to Him, in **faith**, that I turn away from everything else. Let's not ever forget that it takes two to practice silent prayer, and of the two, the most important one is not me!

Teresa of Avila explains that we come to prayer to keep Christ company : "**I made every effort to constantly consider Jesus Christ, Our Good and our Master, present within me and, this was my way of prayer**" (L 4:7).

As soon as we realize that our attention is elsewhere, we gently bring it back to Christ, renewing our act of **faith** in His presence. One more gift for Jesus!

To help us return to Christ: we can read a **Gospel** passage we had already chosen; recite the verse of the **psalm** memorized for that day; repeat an **invocation** that puts us in the presence of Jesus; repeat the **name of Jesus** or the **Jesus Prayer** : "**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**"

We can also have a **book** on hand to bring about recollection by reading a few lines. For a long time, St. Teresa of Avila had a book with her during prayer. She said: "**My book was company for me, a shield that stopped the blows of unwelcome thoughts**" (Life 4:9).

We can also look at a **picture**, an icon or contemplate the beauty of **nature** before returning our gaze back to Jesus present in our soul. It is also possible to simply take a few deep breaths while considering the breath of the Holy Spirit present within.

But, when recollection is really difficult, try saying a **vocal prayer** like the Our Father or the Hail Mary very **slowly**. Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus often resorted to this means.

To summarize, all these options : the Gospel, a psalm, an invocation, a book, a picture, breathing or vocal prayer – They all have one purpose, and that is to keep us in a loving **attention to Christ**.

Sometimes though, a distraction becomes invasive and I fixate on it. My heart is monopolized. There is perhaps something is wrong in my life a death, a troubled conscience, a worry or a relational problem. In this case, the only solution is to put everything back in the hands of God in a very humble prayer of request. If I lay my burden at the feet of Jesus as I enter into prayer, my heart will be freer to only look at Him. If the worries return, I give them to Him as many times as necessary; I make it a prayer intention. I admit my powerlessness, my limits. It is also a gift for Jesus. This action frees me from myself and disposes me to receive from His merciful hand what He wants to give me.

Second Difficulty: Dryness, or the Absence of any tangible Sign of God's Presence

We can surely all understand and admit that prayer is usually a **series of moments of recollection** interspersed with **distractions**. But during these moments of recollection, we would sometimes really like to feel a small tangible sign of **God's presence** to reassure ourselves that He really is there and sees that we are too!

It is here that the Lord is training us in the **virtue of charity**. He does this by **hiding** and **making Himself desired**. This is what a Carmelite friar explained to someone worried that he wasn't feeling the Lord's presence in prayer: "When God hides, does that mean that prayer becomes 'useless', as you say? Far from it! First of all, God is always there, close to you whether you feel His presence or not. Remember, we only reach God **by faith**, not **by feelings**. Prayer is an exchange of friendship with God who we **know** loves us, **not** who we **feel** loves us. When you feel

Him, He is not closer, and when you do not feel Him, He is not further away. His proximity depends only on the **degree of charity** that you have attained. When He hides from you during your time of prayer, it is simply an opportunity to grow in **charity**, since He is inviting you to seek Him." (*Fr. Pierre-Marie de la Croix, ocd, L'oraison du pauvre, Ed. du Carmel, 2003*)

It is true that **dryness in prayer** can come from our physical state – fatigue, illness, laziness-- or from a lack of seriousness in preparation for prayer or during prayer. But dryness is primarily due to the fact that our relationship to God is **wounded by sin** and needs to be cleansed of self-love and self-seeking. God wants us to seek Him for Himself and not for His gifts. He wants us to love Him with the same free, selfless and humble love with which He loves us. Drought leads us to become aware of this, and to embrace the virtue of **charity** received at baptism.

While **distractions** bring about in us a refusal to be led down this path, **dryness**, on the other hand, calls us to **consent to do God's work**. His **plan of benevolent love** is being accomplished. Our "yes" will be made up of patience and surrender to His good pleasure.

Third difficulty: Loyalty to Prayer, or keeping my Baptismal Promises

How do I consistently maintain my daily meeting with the Lord? St. Teresa of Avila warns us that once you begin to practice silent prayer, you need to "**have a firm resolution, an absolute, unwavering determination not to stop until you have reached the source (of living water), whatever happens...**" (Way 21, 2).

So, I am assuming that we all want to have this "**absolute determination**" to pray, and yet despite this intention, we find that there are days when prayer does not seem to fit and sometimes, circumstances simply make prayer impossible. That's a fact! There are also times where we feel that prayer would be possible if we struggled to make a place for it...

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (§ 2710) states: "**The choice of time and the duration of the prayer is a matter of a determined will, revealing the secrets of the heart. We do not pray when we have time: we set aside time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to take back this time from Him along the way, whatever the trials and the dryness of the encounter.**"

Choosing "**whatever happens**" to be faithful to this meeting with the Lord is an **act of hope**. Hope establishes us in a firm trust that God will give us, by the merits of Jesus Christ, His grace in this world and eternal happiness eternal in the next, because He promised it and He still keeps His promises. "Let us continue to affirm our hope, for He is faithful, the one who promised" (Hb 10:23).

In return, we, too, have promises to keep to God: the promises of our baptism. My loyalty to prayer demonstrates my desire to be faithful to my Baptismal promises. I hope with complete trust that my "yes" to this meeting with God today will lead me, over the course of time, by His grace, to a life of communion with Him, given by Baptism, while waiting for the blessed life with Him in heaven.

