

## **The Battle of Prayer**

Lord teach us to Pray Series

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### **Introduction**

We are really at the **heart of the matter** when we talk about our **intimate relationship with the Lord**. But when we think about it, it is not easy to enter into this **mystery** which involves our **interior lives**. I can't pretend to be a specialist in prayer, but is there really such a person? I went to the **spiritual masters** to prepare this **series on prayer**, but I also drew from my own humble experience, having preached several retreats on the subject and directed several seekers.

This series is **not** a formal school of prayer but rather a **sharing** with you of what lives in the heart of each one of us. It is my hope that the result of these teachings will **reignite your life of prayer**.

This **first conference** will address the **battle of prayer**. It is important to **name** what is preventing us from advancing and **confront** the **objections** and **obstacles** most Christians state happens to them even those who don't pray regularly.

Saint Teresa of the Little Flower tells that :  
“**For me prayer is a movement of the heart, a simple glance towards heaven, a cry of recognition and of love in the midst of a trial or a joyful experience.**”

### **Making Time to Pray**

People cry out to God in distress but also in thanks. They experience an awareness that

they don't take the time to pray as they should. But, why in our world where only effectiveness matters, do we wonder if we have the right to waste time for God? Is it my vocation? And the nuns? There are monks for that!

One day the Abbott of a large monastery told this **beautiful story** of **practicing lay people** who were saying that they had **no time to pray**. They told their **priests** their dilemma, telling them since they had the time, they should pray in their place. It was like a **rugby ball** thrown to these priests who weren't expecting it and who threw it to the **monks**, the experts in prayer who have nothing better to do. Yet, the monks have a lot of work to do and so they punt to the **cloistered nuns** who sent it directly to heaven to the **Father** who caught the ball but unfortunately it was punctured!

We hand off our responsibilities in prayer being swamped by the emergencies of life. We have the **right to taste** God. We have the **right to do nothing** for God-- **Taste and see how good is the Lord--. Happy is the one who finds his refuge in Him**. Not to **escape** from the world but rather to find a **quiet place** to live a bit more in the **presence of God**.

This refuge could be our bedroom. “**When you pray, close yourself in your room and close the door and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in the secret will repay you.**”

All the saints have told us about the importance of prolonged personal prayer in their lives. “**All the good in my life comes from interior prayer.**” Saint Teresa of Avila.

We will come back to this, but suffice it to say that **silent or secret prayer** is even more important as our daily activities increase. So don't feel guilty if time is given to the Lord in prayer.

Prayer can recharge our spiritual batteries. Don't forget though that it takes time to recharge a battery. But, prayer is not a mission to accomplish, it is not an end in itself. No, it is a **loving meeting**, freely accepted. "**As the Father loved me, I too, love you. Remain in my love.**"

### 1-EXCUSES Not to Pray

#### Business

Too much **Business** is dangerous. We always want to do things. It is very hard for us to simply be. The **quality of a life** comes from the **quality of love** a person transmits. It is better to visit one or two people in a relaxed manner than to line up a succession of appointments hurriedly.

This business is at the origin of all the slogans that detract us from prayer. We all know the classic line: "**I don't have the time.**" But, in truth, we always have the time to do what we want to do. Take a look at your day. Realize all the wasted time and you'll see that there is plenty of time for the Lord.

#### Contemplative Temperament

There are of course other classic excuses such as, "**I don't have a contemplative temperament.**" Yet, from **Baptism**, we are all contemplatives. We are all mystics. Prayer is natural for every soul since we were all created in **God's image**. Don't think for a minute that contemplation is reserved for those who are calm. The Cure d'Ars was a very nervous person. He was

very agitated in his prayer. Apparently it was very tiring to watch him pray.

#### It's too Difficult

Another excuse : "**Well, I tried to pray, but it is just too difficult.**" Prayer, like true love is hard. But we are still in the idea of spiritual efficiency and success because it isn't about succeeding in prayer but about letting ourselves be **invaded by Christ**. It is about **inviting Christ into our hearts**. Who can say that he had a successful time of prayer? He perhaps notices the **fruits of prayer in his life** such as **peace** or **interior joy**.

#### Tomorrow

Another refrain that I often hear is that tomorrow I will start to pray tomorrow! The incessant delays, it's like a diet. This is about a **problem of the will**. St. Augustine spoke of this in his Confessions. He wondered how it was that if he wanted to lift his arm, he did it immediately but if I want to say something nice about those close to me, it's harder. No, we are not like Christ. The secret is very simple, when I want to raise my arm it's almost automatic. It's called a **decision!** Our **will** has been **wounded by sin** and is not able to make a **spiritual decision**. This **lack of commitment** is linked to a **lack of freedom**; surely a deep issue that is worth examining more closely as it **enslaves** us and **paralyzes** our **will** and our **liberty**.

#### Alone in Prayer

**Another excuse** I often hear is that I am all alone with myself in prayer, and yet prayer is a meeting with the Other who lives in my heart. It is however true that my prayer is at

times invaded by a deeper self that suffocates the even-deeper presence of God. It is said that a brother from the Franciscan community was sent to determine how St. Francis prayed. The young brother, perhaps a bit naïve, followed Saint Francis, hid up in a tree and waited a few minutes, watching St. Francis pray, before getting down to rejoin his brothers who were anxiously waiting for an answer to their question. The little brother said that all he heard him say was **you, you, you**. Now, isn't it true that more often than not our prayer consists of **me, me me**?

### **Unable to Empty Myself**

Finally, **the last objection** to prayer is the complaint that the soul is unable to empty itself. Be careful here! It is not about emptying out but about **filling up** with the Word of God, the love of God and the presence of God.

The Christian is to be listening for God's voice. Many tell me that they hear nothing. Well, we are not Joan of Arc! Our job is only to nourish our prayer with God's word.

## **2-FEARS**

### **Face to Face with God**

The **second point** that I would like to discuss is our **fears**. They are a very **real obstacle** when beginning a life of prayer. If we really believe God is there, then that means we are face to face with Him, our Creator! It's easy to banter ideas over a cup of tea with someone, remake the world, but when it is God, who is across from us, well, that's different. It is source of fear.

### **Self-Knowledge**

**Another cause of fear is self-knowledge.** It is about turning inward to the most part of ourselves. The brilliance of St. Augustine is to have found the path to find God. Why look outside ourselves for Him when He is within? Return to our heart. He offers a simple method that has influenced several spiritual schools of thought. In sum, to find the truth we have to journey through our most intimate self.

This step of going from the world to God will remain one of the characteristics of Augustine's genius.

It is difficult to truly know ourselves though because we have to start by discovering our limits and then accepting them. A desert father said that the reason we don't advance spiritually is because we don't know our **limits**, that we lack perseverance in the work we are doing and **we want to become virtuous without suffering**.

We become **adults** only once we **have named and accepted our limits**. It is here that we begin our spiritual lives. Some want to start right off practicing two hours of silent prayer a day. Well, that is just crazy! It is maybe even an act of spiritual pride. It is much better to start out slowly, a few minutes a day for God, and gradually increase this gradually over time.

### **The Place of the Other**

**Another fear** is the place of the Other. If I am a person of faith, I begin my prayer with an act of faith. There is no doubt, God is there and perhaps even more present than I am. I am not with a buddy, no, I am with God, the God of the Trinity. And me, well, I am just a poor creature.

In other words, in prayer, we depend on God. It is not always easy though to accept

this **dependence** where we need to welcome criticism and allow the light of another into our space. All of this supposes a certain **death to self**.

But let me remind you that God isn't there to **judge** us. No, He is there to **beg us for our meager love and freedom** because without this, He can do nothing.

Sainthood assumes that we have already given a lot but we hold back **two percent** or in other words, **our freedom**. My spiritual director would always say that as long as we have not given all we have given nothing.

### **Silence**

The **last fear** is silence. We gradually come to realize that praying is not only speaking but also a time to **enter into the silence of God**. Our world is so noisy, that when there is complete silence we tend to become anxious.

Let me tell you a little story that is not only true, but happened right here in this cathedral of Notre Dame. A very famous speaker who was leaving the church when a lady stopped him to tell him that she wanted to have a wonderful Lent. She was asking him to advise her how on how to accomplish this. The priest advised her **fifteen minutes of silence daily to allow the Holy Spirit time to talk**. She didn't at all seem convinced that this would satisfy her longing to live out a wonderful Lent.

A few months later, this same priest ran into this same woman who had followed his instructions and told him that she had hardly been able to say a thing during that fifteen minutes because the Holy Spirit had had so much to say.

So you see it is really beneficial to be silent now and then simply to allow the Lord time to speak.

What is it exactly to pray? It is nothing else than to accept to **enter more and more into the silence of God to prove our trust in Him**.

### **3-OBSTACLES**

#### **Distractions**

After **objections** and **fears**, now we turn to the obstacles to prayer. The **main obstacle** is the **distractions**. We are all the same! It is essential to simply let go! This allows the heart to find the **unique thing** that our Lord says is necessary: our intelligence, the truth and our spirit, the spirit of God.

The Catechism talks about **distractions** in prayer and tells us that if we chase them away, we fall into their trap. The right approach is to **turn back to our heart**.

#### **No Results**

The **second obstacle** is to seek what I asked for. I often hear people telling me that they pray, get no results and so wonder if it is really worth it to pray. It is true that our Lord tells us to ask in order to receive. He knows what we need to develop fully spiritually, and yet he allows us the freedom to express our wishes. It is true though, that we are not always able to discern what we need and therefore ask for unnecessary things that we don't receive.

When we ask for something, it is perhaps wise to ask ourselves if this is for our good. Yes, when we ask the Lord, perhaps He does make us wait, but could it not be that he is **purifying our desire**, to welcome the **gift**.

It is sometimes only with hindsight that we see that the Lord really has abundantly blessed us.

### **Feel Nothing**

The **third obstacle** that I often hear is that the soul prays but feels nothing. St. Therese of the Child Jesus never had mystical experiences, nor was she a paragon of piety. When she was in the Carmel, she never sought supernatural experiences, in fact very often when she began to pray, she fell asleep!....

### **Action vs. Contemplation**

The **last obstacle** is the tension between action and contemplation. This is reflected in Luke 10, where Jesus points out to Martha that she is getting upset over nothing while only one thing is necessary; Marie has chosen rightly and will not lose it.

The **goal** is to be **both Martha and Mary!** The Lord was happy to have a nice hot meal prepared for him. Yet, it is important to find a **balance** in our lives. We have been chosen to be in **union with God**. There is **conversion** that needs to take place. This is the priority of prayer.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta would ask her sisters to pray more the days they had a lot of work to do because prayer pacifies the soul and allows one to be much more active. It may seem like a paradox to those who only think of being efficient.

For us, it is an **act of faith**. It is Love that acts within us. We can remain a few extra minutes with Love, can't we?