

RCIA CLASS 25 - 26 - AN INTRODUCTION TO PRAYER LIFE AND CATHOLIC CULTURE

I. Prayer and the worship of God are at the height of human creativity. It is in prayer that the mind rises to the realm of the angels and can converse with God.

A. In Genesis, the seventh day, the day of worship brought the order of creation to its height. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, points out in his book In the Beginning (1995), the worship represented by the seventh day holds everything else in order.

B. St. Benedict, who is generally honored as the father of Western monasticism, calls prayer “the work of God,” the highest effort of the human spirit.

- It is the regular, steady life of prayer that has made the order he and his sister St. Scholastica founded the Benedictine order, which has provided stability in prayer from the 6th century onward, when all other human institutions of the time have faded.

- Jesus said that Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, had chosen “the better part” of spending time with Him amidst the business of the world. See Luke 10:38-42.

C. However, it should be noted that the highest does not stand without the lowest, and prayer life does not advance or even continue to enrich unless connected with the rest of one’s activity in the world. Thus, a solid prayer life must be based upon an attempt to live out the rest of one’s life well and to allow God’s grace to work in all ways. As Russian Orthodox Patriarch Anthony Bloom put it “Unless they (prayers) are lived, unless prayer and life become completely interwoven, prayer becomes a sort of polite madrigal which we offer to God at moments we are giving time to Him.” Likewise, a crucial sign of an authentic prayer life is that it supports one’s vocation in life. As St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) puts it in his classic Introduction to the Devout Life, “Every vocation becomes more agreeable when united with devotion.” Thus, for example, as Saint Pope John Paul II emphasized in Dies Domini, his 1998 apostolic letter on the Sabbath, serving others through works of charity does not diminish, but in fact enhances, the prayerfulness of that day.

II. A good preparation for prayer is very helpful in making this conversation with the divine deeper and more rewarding.

A. Although prayer can be offered anywhere, sacred space is very helpful. For we are influenced by our surroundings, and thus places set aside for God are needed to focus attention on Him. As the Catechism section 2691 says “The choice of a favorable place is not a matter of indifference for true prayer.”

- Thus, Catholic churches in this area are generally open in the daytime and evening hours. Even setting aside a place in one’s home or yard can be helpful.

B. Setting aside definite time for prayer is very important; for we tend to put off things that we can do anytime. Above all, the Sabbath Day has ever been important in both the Jewish and Christian traditions as central to making each week an offering to God. It is also helpful to have specific time each day set aside to consecrate every day. Consistency

of time is often more important, especially at first, than the amount of time.

C. It is also important to remember the effect of posture on prayer. As a 13th century commentator on St. Dominic said in one letter, “The manner of praying stirs up devotion, the soul stirs the body, and the body in turn stirring the soul.” See The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic. Thus, for example, at Mass, we generally stand for prayers that the congregation offers together, such as the opening and concluding prayers, the creed and the intercessions. Generally, people are seated for listening or reading, as with the Scriptural readings and the homily, as well as the transition between the Liturgy of the Word (the first half of Mass) and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, when the focus switches to the altar. People do stand for the Gospel to give those readings, the highest writings in human language, greater respect. And the congregation kneels for the Eucharistic Prayer, showing worship for Jesus who comes to us under the appearance of bread and wine.

D. Trying to be right with God is also important in prayer. As the Psalmist asks, “Who can approach the mountain of the Lord? . . . Only the man with clean hands and a pure heart.” Ps. 24:3-4. That is one reason why we begin Mass with the Penitential Rite.

- However, we need also prayer to make us more worthy to be with God and should not wait until we feel ourselves worthy before beginning to try to pray. As Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), one of the early desert monastic fathers pointed out, in his work Chapters on Prayer, God extends to the unworthy soul the ability to delight in prayer, as He did with Isaiah, see Is. 6, to get the person going. But it is our responsibility to cooperate; if we respond in prayer and repentance God makes us ever more worthy to be in prayer. St. Theresa of Avila said in her autobiography that for awhile, she thought that she was not worthy to engage in deep prayer. But she finally realized if she waited until she was worthy of contemplation of divine things before entering into that effort, she would be waiting until judgment day.

E. Increasing knowledge of God is also important that our souls may in fullness ascend to God. Otherwise, we tend increasingly to be praying to our image of God, without seeking God Himself. Of course, we also understand that there is a mystery of God beyond all human learning. In book IV, chapter 1 of Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis compares the spiritual life to a journey and says that learning and theology are to faith and prayer as a map or knowledge of a land is to travel.

F. The presence of other people help us in prayer, both by praying with us and by combining their efforts with ours. Reading or hearing of other people’s experiences in prayer can also assist our own. And, of course, we invoke the angels and saints to assist us in our prayers.

III. We are meant to be attentive and prepared for prayer, but also be receptive to the inspiration we receive and even at times so open to the greater realm that there can be a certain self-forgetfulness. But we should then also let the life of prayer affect the rest of our lives.

A. As St. Francis de Sales also says, no one would go to a great king without knowing what he is to say. Likewise, we should enter time of prayer with an idea of what we are praying for or about, and some plan for approaching God.

B. However, it is also important to listen to God in prayer and thus to have what is often called “receptive attention.” Sometimes this sort of attention requires more effort than the most intense form of thinking.

- St. Bede (672-735), a great theologian and historian of the English church, once said, “On hearing Christ’s voice, we open the door to receive Him, as it were when we freely assent to His promptings and when we give ourselves over to doing what must be done.”

C. At a higher level, there is even a contemplative self-forgetful attention, being drawn up into a strong sense of God Himself. This level of attention does not primarily involve any emotional feelings, although they may be there, but is rather the closeness of the soul towards God beyond the usual level of thought. This is at the same time the greatest attention, and yet also a certain forgetfulness of oneself and one’s concerns as well. St. John Cassian, a fourth and fifth century desert monk who is often considered the father of Eastern Monasticism, once said, “As long as a monk understands that he is praying he has not yet attained perfect prayer.”

D. Allowing God’s presence to sink into the soul more and more allows there to be a continual spirit of prayer even when one is not directly praying. This continual sense of prayerfulness even in the midst of other activities is one meaning of St. Paul’s admonition, “Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” 1 Thess. 5:17-18.

IV. The different types of prayer are meant to bring us closer to God in a wide range of ways.

A. All liturgies are the prayer of Jesus Christ, offered with His whole Church, in heaven and on earth. See Catechism 1073; Sacrosanctum Concilium 7-8. They have specific rubrics, or rules, so that we know we are joined with all of the Church under Jesus’ own prayers.

1. The Mass and all the sacraments are liturgies, as are such prayers as Eucharistic Adoration and burial rites.

- The Liturgy of the Hours, also called the Divine Office, is also a high liturgy of the Church, required for clergy and consecrated religious and encouraged for all others. This liturgy is meant to consecrate the whole day at different times (with the Office of Readings, Morning Prayer, Daytime Prayer, Evening Prayer and Night Prayer) with prayers that have united the People of God, old and new throughout the centuries.

2. The liturgy, this universal worship of Jesus Christ in the Church, and especially the Eucharist are, as the Vatican II Council calls it, the “source and summit” of our faith. All Catholic prayer should be related to the Eucharist in some way, for in the Eucharist we have Jesus Christ present with us as assuredly as He was when He walked the earth. Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium, (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) (1965) 11; see also Vatican II Council Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on Sacred Liturgy) (1963)10.

B. The words of Sacred Scripture, or other religious works, are an excellent basis for

prayer. The practice of *lectio divina*, that is a prayerful reading of Scripture, has a rich history in the Church. The idea is that one prayerfully prepares to read Scripture (or another spiritual writing), reads over it carefully, prays over it, trying to apply it to one's life, and then reads it again in the context of that prayer. One frequently does so three or four times to combine prayer and learning, hearing the voice of God and the saints attentively. One does not rush through a work, but does try to complete it.

C. In the Church, there are many common devotions, that is, ways of prayer that people have developed over the course of time and space. Unlike the liturgies, there is a certainly flexibility about them, although there are usually also customary ways of praying them. Some of the more popular devotions in the Western world are the rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and the Stations of the Cross. Many devotions, such as the Rosary and the Divine Mercy Chaplet, use repetition to create a background and make prayers more and more a part of the soul. They combine those repetitions with some images to draw one more and more into the mystery of God. They are not premised on the mere idea that repeating prayers make them heard more, see Matt 6:7, but rather are an attempt to draw closer to God by focusing the mind and soul.

D. There is also more informal, or even impromptu, prayer. Such prayers often involve request that God give us benefits and His grace in carrying out good intentions. Thus, for example, it is important to offer to God the concerns of the current moment as well as those of all time, and to make specific resolutions as well as general ones. St Francis de Sales recommends ending daily meditation with a specific resolution that can be carried out within the next day. As the Catechism says in section 2660, "It is right and good to pray so that the coming of the kingdom of justice may influence the march of history, but it is just as important to bring the help of prayer into humble, everyday situations."

V. In a similar way, forms of prayer express the desire to be with God in different ways.

A. Vocal prayer, whether set prayers such as the Our Father or more spontaneous prayers in words, responds to God in human language. Vocal does not necessarily mean out loud, but rather in organized words and sentences; it thus can be external (i.e., out loud) or internal (i.e., silent prayer in sentence form.) It has the limitations of language, but it also can frequently be the best for groups in praying together. It can also be helpful when one has trouble focusing on any one subject for prayer.

B. Meditation seeks to understand more about God and His will for us, especially focusing on some specific subject (e.g., a passage of Scripture, or a theme such as repentance.) It is more general than vocal prayer and can appeal more to the intellect. *Lectio Divina*, or reflections on the lives of saints, are examples of meditation. One should always remember that the purpose is not merely to engage in an academic exercise, but rather to grow in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

C. Contemplation is more simply being with God and trying to go beyond the images and ideas we have, and being infused with grace and holiness by God Himself. It is at the height of prayer, but is often difficult to achieve. Any prayer requires the grace of God, but deep contemplation is especially a gift of God. One can and should make the effort to be available for deeper contemplation, but in the end one cannot achieve it by effort alone, even aided by ordinary graces. God decides when He wants to draw one deeper.

D. Prayer also includes both individual prayers and prayers in common with other people. In common prayer, we must sacrifice some of our own preferences, but the prayer of others strengthens our own, and we are drawn more into a sense of the communion of saints praying together throughout time and space. The Bible emphasizes the importance of praying together, with such events and offerings as the prayers of the people at the Temple, the Psalms, the common prayers of the early Christians in Acts, and the joining of the saints in prayer in the Book of Revelation.

VI. The Church promotes a union of our prayers with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the angels and saints, joining earth and heaven.

A. There is a communion between all of the faithful on earth and all of those who have died in the grace of God. “The venerable faith of our ancestors [believes] in the living a communion that exists between us and our brothers and sisters who are in the glory of heaven or who are yet being purified after their death.” Lumen Gentium 51.

1. Saints in heaven can pray for us and join in our worship of God. “Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven consolidate the holiness of the whole church, add to the nobility of the worship that the church offers to God here on earth, and in many ways help in a greater building up of the church.” Lumen Gentium 49. Scripture has examples of the saints praying with and for God’s people. “Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense which are the prayers of the holy ones.” Rev. 5:8. Judas Maccabeus “cheered them all by relating a dream, a kind of vision, worthy of belief. What he saw was this. Onias, the former high priest, a good and virtuous man . . . was praying with outstretched arms for the whole Jewish community.” 2 Mac. 15:11-12.

2. The Church also venerates saints as models of Christian life. “When we look on the lives of these men and women who have faithfully followed Christ we are inspired anew to seek the city that is to come. . . God speaks to us in them and offers us signs of His kingdom.” Lumen Gentium 50.

3. We can also help the faithful departed who still need to be purified from their earthly attachments before entry into heaven.

a. Those who die in the grace of God, but still partially attached to sins and sinful desires, undergo a state of purification called Purgatory before entering into heaven, a state that involves both the pain of being cleansed and joy in the certainty of approaching heaven. “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.” Catechism 1030. For “who may go up to the mountain of the Lord? Who can stand in his holy place? The clean of hand and pure of heart.” Psalm 24:3. Purgatory makes the departed who wish to be clean of hand and pure of heart attain this state so that they can ascend into greater kingdom.

b. We can help souls who need to undergo this purification do so more easily by praying for them and offering meritorious actions and sufferings

on their behalf. “From the beginning, the church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them. . . . so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.” Catechism 1032. Judas Maccabeus and his soldiers “made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.” 2 Mac. 12:45. Thus, for example, Masses are often offered for the dead.

B. The Catholic Church venerates Mary as the Mother of God and the Queen of the saints and angels because of the grace and favor that God gave her and that she freely accepted. “Mary has by grace been exalted above all angels and humanity to a place after her Son, as the most holy mother of God who was involved in the mysteries of Christ.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 66. For Mary herself said, “From this day forward, all generations will call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is His name.” Luke 1:48-49.

1. The Church also teaches that Mary was without sin, was a virgin her entire life, and, at the end of her earthly life, and was assumed body and soul into heaven. “Finally, the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things.” Pius XII, Munificentissimus Deus (1950).

2. As she does with the saints, but even more so, the Church both looks to Mary, not only as an example of holiness, but also as a powerful intercessor who cares for all of us and each of us as her son or daughter. “By her motherly love she cares for her Son’s brothers and sisters who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties. . . . She shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, a sign of certain hope and comfort to the people of God.” Lumen Gentium 62, 69. Saint John recounts a great vision in the Book of Revelation. “A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. . . She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations. . . . The dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God’s commandment and bear witness to Jesus.” Rev. 12:1, 5, 17.

3. In Treatise on the True Devotion to Mary, St. Louis Marie de Montfort drew a famous analogy for asking for the intercession of Mary, which is also applicable by extension to all of the saints. He compared Mary to a woman who had been taken from a humble farm and made a glorious queen in a kingdom of light and joy. We are like farmers who want to make a gift to the great king, but have only an apple to give. We can turn to the queen, and the queen will put the apple on a gold plate, place around it the finest of foods, and then present it to the king on his behalf. Likewise, we offer our prayers to Mary and the saints to present them in greater perfection to God Himself.

VII. There can be many motives and subjects of prayer. One should be open to all of them, for while such motives as adoration and worship are, in a way, higher, all reasons for prayer are a part of the human life. See Catechism 2626-2643.

A. Blessing and adoration recognize the greatness of God and His favors towards us and

others, acknowledging God's actions in our lives and in all the world.

B. Closely related to blessing and adoration is thanksgiving for specific things God has done for us.

C. Prayers of praise try to rise to a sense of the glory of God in Himself, for who He is, surrounded by holiness and the choirs of angels.

D. Through prayers of petition and intercessions, we make requests of God. In petitions, we ask for things that involve our own lives, while prayers of intercession are more for others. Jesus encourages such prayers, for as long as they are for things that are good, they involve an acknowledgment of God's goodness and power. Those things that are more certainly "in His name" are more likely to be granted. See, e.g., Matt. 18:29-20; John 15:16. 16:23.

E. Related to prayers of petition and intercession (and often springing from adoration and praise) are prayers of repentance, asking God to forgive us, both individually and collectively, and to purify our own lives of those things that are unworthy of Him.

VIII. Maintaining prayerfulness is, as the section 2725 of the Catechism puts it, a continuous battle. God does not tempt us as the world or the devil does; and He sometimes wants us to struggle that our prayer may be all the more valuable. For, as St. Augustine says, when we struggle more, we love more. Sometimes difficulties at prayer can be a result of voluntary laxness, but also sometimes God is calling us through a more difficult time to deepen our prayer life and not rely as much on easier methods. As St. Ignatius, the 16th century founder of the Jesuit order points out in his Spiritual Exercises, when one is feeling no comfort at prayer, it is particularly important to keep up a commitment to prayer, try to purify one's life, and be open to the voice of God.

IX. There should also be an interaction between culture and prayer such that our prayer receives inspiration from culture, and culture is guided by truth.

A. Religion and culture need each other to become fully themselves.

1. T.S. Elliott, the twentieth century British and American poet and literary master, once wrote in Religion without Humanism that, when culture and faith are separated, one ends up "a sentimental tune, an emotional debauch, . . . a soulless political club or a skeleton dance of fleshless dogmas." Culture and the Church, like faith and reason, should enrich each other.

2 Roman Giardini, a leading theologian and liturgist of the twentieth century said in The Spirit of the Liturgy, "Religion needs civilization. . . . Individuals, in a short surge of enthusiasm can often dispense with learning and the arts. But, generally speaking, in the long run, a fairly high degree of learning and culture is needed for the spiritual life. . . . Spiritual life retains its energy, clarity and catholicity."

B. Different sorts of culture enhance the faith and are enhanced by it. See Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) (1965) 60-62; Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Liturgy) (1963) 122-23; Pope John Paul II, Letter to Artists (1999) 12; Catechism 2500. As we are trying to allow

God to speak to us, images from art and literature, music and other means of assistance in prayer help our spirit focus on God. We are meant to rise even further to have a sense of God Himself beyond images, but to do so we usually also need material or sense-based things.

1. Artwork should express and attract people to the greater realms of glory and express truths that are not easily accessible through words. “Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible, attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, or God.” Pope John Paul II, Letter to Artists 12; see Catechism 2501.
2. Music should inspire people, encouraging their better natures. As the Vatican II Council said, “The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other.” Sacrosanctum Concilium 112. The Psalms were a hymnbook of the ancient Jews, and St. Paul encourages music as a way of appealing to nobler sentiments. See Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16.
3. The numerous forms of architecture bring forth settings for the sacred. All architecture should reflect humanity, and in particular, sacred architecture should be “built theology.” See Sacrosanctum Concilium 124-25.
4. Literature likewise, whether nonfiction or fiction, should express the truths of human nature and ennoble it. See Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes 62; Pope John Paul II, Letter to Artists 12.
5. Entertainment in general should appeal to the nobler aspects of humanity. It cannot avoid confronting and describing evil, as the Bible itself does. But the effect should be to leave people better, to help people “understand life better, to see how it should be ordered, to show how man should conduct himself, how he should think and act with more consistency” and thus “to contribute to moral progress.” Pontifical Council on Social Communications, Communio et Progressio (1971) 57.

C. Culture likewise needs the Church and the moral law lest it decay into what is at best a waste of time and effort, and at worst a promotion of immorality or an appeal to the lowest common denominator. “The Church, our Mother, knows that if these media are properly used, they can be of great benefit to mankind. . . . But the Church also knows that man can use them in ways that are contrary to the Creator’s design and damaging to himself. Indeed, she grieves with a mother’s sorrow on the harm all too often inflicted upon society by their misuse.” Vatican II Council, Inter Mirifica (Decree on the Mass Media) (1963) 2; Communio et Progressio 53.