



S S P X

Sursum Corda

Third Order of the Society of Saint Pius X

Number 17 - Summer 2017 ❖❖

On Difficulties in Prayer

On Difficulties in Prayer

Prayer has been defined in various ways, but basically all the definitions agree in emphasizing that prayer is an elevation of the mind to God in order to converse with Him. Theologically, prayer is an act of the virtue of religion, a virtue related to justice; in the higher degrees of prayer, however, as the soul is more and more permeated by the virtue of charity, prayer becomes the language of love. Psychologically, prayer is an operation of the intellect – the practical intellect – under the impetus of the will.

As conversation with God, prayer will admit of as many types or species as there are different needs or sentiments which the human heart can express. Thus, both vocal and mental prayer can be used to ask God to satisfy our needs, to forgive us our sins, to bless those we love, etc., or they can be expressions of our gratitude to God, our love of

God, our sorrow for having offended Him or our reverence and adoration. The classical division of prayer, however, summarizes all prayer under the headings of petition, thanksgiving, contrition, and adoration.

Let us discuss the two main sources of difficulty in the practice of prayer: distractions and dryness. It goes without saying that these difficulties are not restricted to any particular type of prayer. Moreover, most who engage in the various types of prayer will at one point or another encounter these difficulties.

Distractions in Prayer

At this moment, it is good to reflect that prayer is a life work. One should not be impatient with the current status of their prayer life as long as there are solid efforts to develop it. Initially, our prayer may be

Continued on p. 2



Letter from the Chaplain

Dear Tertiaries,

This issue of *Sursum Corda* is dedicated to prayer and specifically the difficulties that we all face in our prayer. The article included within is from *The Theology of Christian Perfection* by Fr. Antonio Marin, O.P. This work is quite dense and much like a reference book. Nonetheless, short extracts are very valuable, not only to learn about prayer itself, but to take action for better efforts and success in our prayer. I have made a short commentary to go along with the text. These sections are indented for your convenience.

I have the joy to announce another pilgrimage to Quito, Ecuador to visit the Diocesan Shrine of Our Lady of Buen Suceso of the Purification. Last year this pilgrimage was a great event and very enjoyable for everyone. The entire trip to Quito is also very affordable. You may find information and also registration for this pilgrimage at <http://sspx.org/en/quitopilgrimage>. Perhaps take the time to re-read the article on Mariana of Jesus and the apparitions of Our Lady of Buen Suceso that are also linked to this site, as well as last year's pilgrimage report and picture gallery.

This pilgrimage to Our Lady of Buen Suceso becomes bigger each year. Certainly, those who attended were very edified with the entire experience. The value of this pilgrimage, however, is not only gauged by the spiritual graces the pilgrims received, but also by the graces they may have caused. We must value this pilgrimage for the good it spreads to others. Each year our presence is noticed; each year our life, energy, and piety is seen. This pilgrimage is a great witness and testimony of Tradition. *I am come to cast fire on the earth; and what will I, but that it be kindled.*

While this pilgrimage has not been announced specifically as a Third Order pilgrimage, I hope and pray that Tertiaries would be the first to sign up and be present. As Tertiaries, it belongs to you to participate in the mission of the Society – the preservation/restoration of Tradition within the Church. We meet with much good will in Quito. This city is a special place, as says our Lady, and today especially, there is much reason for hope and the focus of our energy and attention in Quito.

Please hurry to sign up for this pilgrimage! Last year, with the 14 priests attending, we were almost 100 pilgrims. I would double or triple that this year!

Last year I made an appeal for benefactors to help others to attend the pilgrimage, particularly the priests. A couple big donations totaled \$6000. This amount paid for most of the expenses of the priests attending. I would make the same appeal this year.

As the month of August has come and gone, many priests of the US District have found their way to their new assignments. This also includes myself. This means the address for the Third Order Chaplain is to be updated to Rev. Fr. Adam Purdy, St. Ignatius Retreat House, 209 Tackora Trail, Ridgefield, Connecticut 06877. Just as a reminder as well, the email address for the Third Order is thirdorder@sspx.org. I check this email personally.

In Christ,

Fr. Adam Purdy

Continued from p. 1

very shallow. This is normal for those who set out on the path of a greater prayer life. There are a couple hurdles in this regard.

- Recognizing the need to grow

Many do not consider the need to grow and are quite content with a superficial sort of prayer. There is a good remark from Fr. L'Hoir in his book *Alter Christus* regarding the spiritual life of the priest which can be applied to any Catholic's prayer life, especially that of a Tertiary: "Probably the more common danger for priests is a habitual mediocrity. They slowly settle down to a life of very

average goodness and rest satisfied with the efforts they make to be more or less faithful, at least materially, to their duties: their faults and shortcomings are not grievous, but neither are their virtues of the heroic type. And thus, they carry on contentedly, with hardly ever any appreciable improvement in their ways – with what loss of merit to themselves, with what diminution of fruit in their ministry!"

- Perseverance in prayer

With a certain kind of inability to measure success and see fruits and development, efforts at greater

depth in the prayer life are often abandoned. Once again, Fr. L'Hoir gives a pertinent remark: "A good priest will never rest satisfied with avoiding grievous lapses, or with the practice of ordinary virtue: he will aim at the downright holiness which alone befits his priesthood, keeping that always as his determined goal, however far he may feel from it in reality, ever trying to go forward in the way of perfection."

As the Faith grows within the soul, one becomes more familiar with the language of prayer. As one continues to make the effort and perseverance in prayer, so also does the depth of prayer continue to develop.

Since prayer is an operation of the practical intellect under the impetus of the will, by its very nature it requires attention, as does any other intellectual operation. St. Gregory says that God does not hear the prayer of those who pay no attention to their prayer. But there are various degrees of attention, and not every type of prayer requires the same degree of attention; indeed, in the higher grades of prayer it would seem that the individual pays no attention at all to the act of prayer as such. With beginners in practice of prayer, on the other hand, there may be a great deal of attention, but the prayer is as yet very imperfect.

In order to understand this apparent paradox it is necessary to consider the kinds of attention which can be used in prayer and the psychology of habit formation.

Kinds of Attention

Since prayer is conversation with God, it involves the use of words, whether one read or speak or merely think them. In the act of praying, one may focus his attention on any one of three elements: the words themselves (e.g., to pronounce them correctly or use them rightly), the meaning of the words and content of the prayer as a whole, or the one to whom the prayer is addressed and the purpose of the prayer.

- In vocal prayer, it is essential that one be attentive to the words which are spoken;
- In meditation, one must give attention to the meaning of the words;
- In any kind of prayer, the most important element is to fix the mind on God by the third kind of attention.

The Formation of Habits

Like any other human activity, the practice of prayer can become habitual, and therefore it falls under the laws of habit formation. Habits are acquired by the repetition of acts, and as a habit becomes more deeply rooted and perfected, the acts which flow from it are more facile, more pleasant and require less actual attention. For that reason, habits are said to be 'second nature.'

In the practice of prayer, a beginner will have to give scrupulous attention to all the details and mechanics of prayer so that he will learn to do things correctly from the start. Thus, a child learning the Rosary will carefully pronounce each word of the vocal prayers, and the beginner in meditation will follow some method. But as one becomes more facile in the practice of prayer, the focal point of attention changes from the words and methods and other mechanical details to the content of the prayer and the purpose of the prayer. Attention is still present – as indeed it must be for all prayer – but it is a different and more excellent type of attention. At this stage, one recites the Rosary with practically no awareness of the words or their meaning but with attention to a given mystery, or one's attention in mental prayer has shifted from methods and devices to the content and purpose of the meditation. At this point the soul is liberated, so to speak, so that it can soar to the higher grades of prayer in which the mind is fixed on God so strongly that it forgets all other things.

It should be clear that the author is referring to a normal development in the prayer life. He is not referring to any mystical experiences or the great heights of prayer which only the contemplative saints possessed.

Let us make an analogy with our knowledge of the Faith. As we come to the age of reason, our knowledge is but minimal. As we prepare for our first communion, we learn the answers in the catechism. As we become adults, this knowledge is supposed to expand. No adult should be content with first communion entry-level knowledge of the Faith. In school, the work of the religion class is to expand and deepen this initial knowledge. With each year, the student continues to study the same topics, but as the faculty to understand increases, so the knowledge becomes deeper; with each year the student grasps a little more the big picture.



The same is true of the prayer life. We begin the prayer life with entry-level ability. As the years pass, this ability to pray is supposed to grow – it must grow!

The Human Condition

But however much one endeavors to keep his attention fixed on one thing, he cannot do so for an extended period of time. Even in the act of concentration the human mind wavers, if only for a second. Fixed attention becomes all the more difficult as the object of one's concentration is loftier or the time spent in concentration is longer. There is, of course, a great discrepancy in the powers of concentration and attention of various individuals, due to temperament and training, but the human mind is also limited by the inherent weaknesses of man's psychosomatic structure.

Our concern with distractions in prayer is not from the viewpoint of their effect on the merit of prayer, but their effect on the practice of prayer as such.



Distractions are a powerful opponent to the perseverance in prayer. As one is distracted in their prayer, they begin to see the exercise as futile and worthless. Surely God would be more pleased with prayers read from a book? It is true, one can take prayers from a book and offer them meaningfully. However, the easiness to fall into that situation is often an excuse for real work at prayer. Moreover, these prayers can be just as distracted as any method of prayer. And lastly, the easiness at memorizing these types of prayers can lead one to reciting them out of habit, without really thinking of what is being said.

Nature of Distraction

Whether voluntary or involuntary, a distraction consists in any alien thought or imagination which prevents the mind from attending to that which it is doing.

- If the distraction affects the external senses or internal senses only, the mind can still give attention to what it is doing, but with difficulty.
- If the distraction consists in an alien thought in the mind itself, attention is completely destroyed, or rather, it is shifted to another object.

We can get this type of distraction from the crying baby in the church, or from the smell of the coffee and breakfast being offered in the church hall after Mass. It can even be the temptation that comes into the mind during the time of prayer. These types should easily be more easily overcome as they do not take over the faculty of the mind, but merely offer an interruption.

This type of distraction is when the one in prayer starts day-dreaming. The mind goes off to another idea, topic, or story. If one starts day-dreaming of all the fun things they have planned for their Sunday afternoon, who wondering how well their favorite football team will perform, this is the destruction of attention on prayer, and the shifting of our faculties to other things.

Divided attention or the complete lack of attention in the performance of actions which involve manual operations or bodily movements (e.g. walking, dancing, eating) does not necessarily affect the perfection of the operation, but when it is a question of the operation of higher faculties, some degree of attention is absolutely necessary. Distractions in prayer, therefore, will render it less perfect or will nullify it completely.

Causes of Distraction

We have stated that distractions in prayer may be voluntary or involuntary. In either case they are obstacles to prayer, and they must be reduced and ultimately eliminated if one is to make progress in this spiritual exercise. To achieve this, it is necessary to examine the following causes from which distractions spring:

- Constitutional factors: nervous or sanguine temperament; vivid and unstable imagination; weak powers of concentration; vehement and uncontrolled passions; sensate nature.
- Physical or mental illness: brain disorders; glandular malfunctions; physical exhaustion; mental fatigue; neurotic traits; psychotic predispositions.
- Character defects: any acquired habit which are inimical to the practice of prayer (lack of recollection; dissipation; lukewarmness; vain curiosity; slothfulness; lust; gluttony; pride)
- Improper spiritual direction: if the spiritual director imposes his own preconceived ideas upon the individual without understanding the needs of the soul, the capacity of the soul, and the movements of grace in the soul (e.g. to force a soul to practice meditation when God moves the soul to a higher degree of prayer).
- The devil: with God's permission, the devil sometimes acts directly on the external and internal senses, or indirectly distracts from prayer by working through any of the other causes enumerated.
- Unsuitable circumstance: uncomfortable posture; improper time; external noises; lack of proximate preparation; excessive heat or cold, etc.

From the first point just listed, it is valuable to make remarks concerning the various temperaments. 'Temperament' refers to the various natural tendencies and traits a person possesses. It could be understood as the thread making up our personality. These traits, or temperament, are natural and innate and are inherited. It is according to Divine Providence we are created in this way. It belongs to His Infinite Wisdom that He sees these particulars so finely and has given to each the traits most suited to their salvation.

Each temperament has strengths and weaknesses. Understanding we come into the world with this kind of programming (so to speak), it is easy to

be dismissive of our concrete individual temperament weaknesses. To ignore the weaknesses, to not work to correct them, would, however, be detrimental to our spiritual life. To understand that our temperament refers to our natural disposition and the way we consistently behave and speak, to not correct the weaknesses would mean we consistently let the bad side of our temperament rule the day.

Those who make solid investigation into the roots of their sins and vices, and even imperfections, will eventually get this deep. Then it will be realized, that even though we have a certain temperament, we are to use the strengths of the temperament to prevent the weaknesses, and even overcome those weaknesses.

We can make an application to prayer at this moment. Each temperament will provide soil for temptation, struggle and trials, and yes, even distraction at prayer. As our temperament is largely responsible for our speech and emotional responses, our actions and reactions, we must also see that temperament guides our relationship with God as well.

Permit the insertion of various strengths and weaknesses of the different temperaments. It is good to identify our temperament. Once done, it is necessary to take note of our weaknesses. The list provides also temperament strengths and could be understood as a kind of directive in correcting the weakness.

Strengths/Weaknesses of a Choleric

Practical/Demanding
 Quick thinker/Domineering
 Good trouble shooters/Easily bored
 Enthusiastic/Easily annoyed
 Will not give up/Impatient
 Great ambition/Bossy and arrogant
 Fearless and courageous/Quick tempered
 Passion to win/Can't relax
 Thrilled with opposition/Too impetuous
 Yearns for great things/Inflexible
 Intelligent/Is not complimentary
 Does not complain/Unsympathetic
 Born leader/Dislikes emotions
 Strong willed/Little tolerance for mistakes
 Not easily discouraged/Can be rude or tactless
 Independent/Sarcastic
 Exudes confidence/Critical
 Delegates work well/Must be in control
 Makes the goal/Pride, has inflated ego
 Stimulates others/Holds a grudge
 Excels in emergencies/Revengeful
 Visionary/His plan is always the best



Likes pressure/Tends to use people
 Self-reliant/Decides for others
 Energetic/Can do everything better
 Daring, risk taker/Can't say "I'm sorry"
 Decisive/Too independent
 Determined/Too busy for family
 Doer/May make rash decisions
 Direct/Tends to over dominate
 Wants results/Enjoys controversy, arguments
 Likes to achieve/ "Knows everything"
 Goal-oriented

Strengths/Weaknesses of a Sanguine

Appealing personality/Compulsive talker
 Life of the party/Has loud voice and laugh
 Talkative, storyteller/Too happy for some
 Good sense of humor/Exaggerates, elaborates
 Holds on to listeners/Dwells on trivia
 Emotional and demonstrative/Can't remember names
 Enthusiastic and expressive/Egotistical
 Cheerful and bubbling over/Has restless energy
 Loves people/Naïve, gets taken in
 Good on stage/Gets angry easily
 Sincere heart, wants to give/Controlled by circumstances
 Lives in the present/Seems phony to some
 Motivates others/Very loud, boisterous
 Makes friends easily/Disorganized
 Realist/ Sloppy housekeepers
 Great salespeople/Has trouble listening
 Entertaining/Can't relax, always on go
 Optimistic/Doesn't follow through
 Tender and compassionate/Impulsive
 Energetic/Must be with people
 Likes spontaneous activities/Hates to be alone
 Envied by others/Needs to be center stage
 Apologizes quickly/Gets angry easily
 Doesn't hold grudges/Makes excuses
 Creative and colorful/Fickle and forgetful
 Makes home fun/Undisciplined
 Trusting/Cannot say no
 Likes to play/Weak willed
 Charms others to work/Very insecure – lack of self-esteem
 Thrives on compliments/Interrupts and doesn't listen
 Inspires others to join/Wants to be popular
 Changeable disposition/Dominates conversations
 Turns disaster into humor/Repeats stories
 Volunteers for jobs/Forgets obligations
 Looks great on the surface/Answers for others

Strengths/Weaknesses of a Phlegmatic

Steady, not moved easily/Introvert
 Patient/Watcher, not doer
 Free from stress, tend not to worry/Meets requirements, then stops
 Lives balanced life/Must be re-started after project
 Meek, most gentle people on planet/Unenthusiastic
 In control of themselves/Can be very stubborn
 In control of their environment/Not team players
 Comfortable with themselves/Lazy, gets tired easily
 Stays focused on project, gets it done/Struggles with motivating themselves
 Dry sense of humor/Tormented by fear
 Very witty/Indecisive about the next step
 Dependable/Avoids responsibilities, extra burdens
 Practical and efficient, conserves energy/Hides real feelings, emotions
 Calm, cool, collected/Can be selfish, want their way
 Brings peace to the workplace/Can be too compromising
 Makes a very good parent/Self-righteous, everyone else is wrong
 Takes quality time with their children/May think they don't need God
 Family comes first/Not tidy in their home
 Strong spiritual leaders/Do not discipline well
 Peaceful and agreeable/Not goal oriented
 Good administrative skills/Discourages others
 Good leaders/Stay un-involved
 Good mediators/Must be nudged to participate
 Tough projects do not worry him/Last one to get involved
 Very good under pressure/Hard to get excited
 Self-sufficient/Tendency to judge others
 Has gift of temperance/Teases extroverts - they annoy him
 Gets involved when he feels needed/Resists change
 Has gift of longsuffering/Can be sarcastic
 Easy to get along with/Procrastinates
 Do not offend others/Critical of people who expend energy
 Walks away from arguments/Holds grudges
 Good listeners/Complacent
 Predictable/Possessive

Strengths/Weaknesses of a Melancholic

Deep and thoughtful/Moody and depressed
 Reserved/Candidate for manic depression
 Analytical/Does not forgive easily
 Talented, creative/Enjoys being hurt
 Artistic, musical/Low self-image
 Communes easily with God/Has a false humility
 Prayer warriors/Off in another world
 Perfectionist/Critical of self and others
 Faithful, devoted friend/Self-centered, self-examining
 Appreciates beauty/Very suspicious
 Sensitive/Demands privacy
 Self-sacrificing/Too introspective
 Conscientious/Feelings of persecution
 Idealist/Hypochondriac
 Logical/Lingers on past hurts, seems to enjoy it
 Peaceful/Broods over things
 Agreeable/Absorbed by his thoughts
 Good problem solver/Hard to get along with, turns people off
 Organized/Pessimistic, always remembers negative
 Neat, tidy/Very proud
 Great teacher/Can be impractical
 Encourages others/Slow to make a decision
 Controlled self-discipline/Does not live in the present
 Empathetic to others/Selective hearing

Good listeners and counselors/Resentful when not appreciated
 Inventive/Too meticulous for children
 Have discernment of Spirit/Loses confidence in others
 Happy to be in the background/Exasperated by disorder
 Fruit of longsuffering/Dwells on guilt
 Does not get upset easily/Deep need for approval
 Avoids conflicts/Sets very high, hard standards
 Makes lifelong friends/Hard to please
 Open to receiving wisdom/Hard to meet up to his standards
 Has controlled self-discipline/Believes in "letter of the law"

Conclusion

There is no infallible method for ridding oneself of all distractions in prayer because, as we have seen, it is the nature of the human mind to waver in its attention. Nevertheless, this does not excuse us from doing the best we can to pray with full attention and to forestall possible distractions to the best of our ability. To this end, one should approach prayer with a recollected spirit, putting aside all concerns and interests and entering into prayer with the simple and pure motive of addressing God. In particular, one should prevent external distractions by selecting the proper time and place and a reasonably comfortable posture for prayer. When this is not possible, one should make every effort to withdraw oneself mentally from one's surroundings and to enter into the cell of the heart to speak with God. Even more important, one should rid oneself of internal sources of distraction by putting aside all thoughts of one's duties, anxieties, interests, etc., except so far as they may be the subject matter of ones' prayer. In a word, it is necessary to give full attention to the duty of the moment, which in this instance is the practice of prayer. As a remote preparation for prayer the following points are of special importance: a spirit of silence and recollection, avoidance of vain curiosity, custody of the senses, spiritual reading practiced faithfully, and the practice of mortification.



Dryness in Prayer

Aridity or dryness in the practice of prayer consists in a certain inability to produce the necessary intellectual and affective acts, or in an actual distaste for prayer. It is usually encountered in the practice of mental prayer, and it reaches its most painful state in the higher stages of mystical prayer when it seems that God has abandoned the soul completely.

Dryness in prayer may be caused by the individual, by God or by the devil, but those who actually experience dryness should first suspect that they themselves are the cause. Among the internal and involuntary causes of dryness we may list the following: bad health, bodily fatigue, excessive activity or absorbing duties, vehement and prolonged temptations which exhaust one's powers, improper training in the practice of prayer, methods of prayer unsuited to the individual, etc. Sometimes, however, dryness is the natural result of one's own imperfections: lukewarmness in the service of God, infidelity to grace, habitual venial sin, habits of sensuality, vain curiosity, instability and superficiality, excessive activism, etc.

At other times, dryness may be sent by God as a purification or a test. After a soul has become somewhat adept in the practice of prayer, God usually deliberately withdraws all sensible consolation so that the soul will be purified of any excessive attachment to such consolation, will be humbled at seeing how little it can do without God's help, and will thus be disposed for the next grade of prayer. Throughout one's advancement in the life of prayer, this alternation between dryness and consolation is usually



perceptible at regular intervals, and especially when God is preparing the soul for some new advance or some greater grace. If the dryness is prolonged over a long period, in spite of the soul's fidelity to grace and earnest efforts, one may suspect that the soul is entering upon the night of the senses or some other passive purification.

If, however, there is every indication that the dryness is caused by the devil, the soul should strive to be faithful in the practice of prayer, even if this means that it must return from a higher grade of prayer to the simple recitation of vocal prayers. The important thing is that the soul do the best it can and under no pretext give up the practice of prayer, for that is precisely the goal which the devil seeks to achieve.

But since one should always suspect the dryness in prayer is due to his own weakness and imperfection, the best remedy is to correct any defects in the practice of prayer, and especially lukewarmness and negligence in the service of God. If the causes of the dryness are beyond one's control, the best thing to do is to resign oneself to the trial for a long a time as God will, to realize that sensible devotion and consolation are not essential to the true love of God, to humble oneself with a sense of one's unworthiness, and to persevere in prayer at any cost. The period of involuntary dryness can be periods of great merit and purification, especially if one unites himself with the suffering Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Further Pitfalls

Other pitfalls which should be avoided in the practice of prayer are the following:

- Purely mechanical recitation of vocal prayers and lifeless routine in the practice of mental prayer.
- Excessive personal effort, as if one were able to do all by sheer force; or undue passivity and inertia, as if one should leave all to God alone.
- Discouragement at not perceiving the consolations which one expected; or rash optimism that one is farther advance in prayer than one really is.
- Attachment to sensible consolation, which causes the soul a certain spiritual gluttony which impels one to seek the consolation of God rather than the God of consolations.
- Persistence in the use of a particular method, as if that were the only possible method; or premature abandonment of a method