

Class 2: What Is Prayer?

Have you ever noticed that people pick up the speech patterns, ideas, and habits of the people they hang out with? For instance, one day your kid comes home and drops a "colorful" word that you would never use (except at the bowling alley). A parent's immediate response is practically universal: "Where did you learn that?" (We never assume it was from us.) It's natural for people to start to sound like those around them. I spent the first six years of my life in Texas, and whenever I speak at a conference or parish in the South and hear the word "y'all," it's not long before I'm "y ailing" all over the place. It's incredible. In mere moments my mind decides the phrase "all of you" is too tiring and cumbersome and I slip back into my native tongue. (I even start craving grits and fried okra.)

It's the same in our relationship with God. We were born to be part of his family. Sin disrupted our relationship, but the more time we spend together, the more we become like him again. We start to talk like him, think like him, and even act like him. We're getting back to our roots. In fact, the *Catechism* says that "prayer restores man to God's likeness" (2572). It's a divine gift.

Often, we make the mistake of viewing prayer in terms of something we have to do. That's not totally wrong, because we do have to make an act of the will and follow through. But prayer isn't primarily something we do for God. It's something he does for us. It starts with him. It is his thirst for us that drives the relationship. In prayer, God is planting and watering seeds of love in our hearts. Everything he does centers on self-gift, and prayer is no exception. He wants us to pray, to turn toward him, person to person, so he can give himself to us.

And we shouldn't be afraid he won't like what he'll find. God already knows us inside, outside, upside down. (Love that book.) It's not as if after the conversation gets started he's going to suddenly exclaim, "Well, I never knew you did that!" or "I can't believe you think those thoughts!" He made us. He knows us more than we know ourselves.

Rather than revealing us to God, prayer reveals God to us. And the more we see and understand, the more we love. We begin to recognize who he is and to praise him. But in order to understand what prayer is and how it works, we must first understand who we are and what we are created to be - namely, God's children.

Sometimes I cringe when I say "God's children," because the image that comes to mind is one of those kitschy pictures with a kindly Jesus sitting in a nice, grassy space with little kids seated around him. (It's always vexed me that he's invariably in biblical-era robes and the children are dressed in pants, overalls, and dresses.) That image has value for Sunday school and children's Bibles, but I think it has potential to damage a true understanding of our identity as members of God's family. It's a bit banal, not to mention unrealistic (those kids would be climbing all over him). So let's dig into what it means to be a real child of God.

Family First

God is our Father. But he's not just ours. He's also Father in relation to the other members of the Trinity: the Son and the Holy Spirit. His Fatherhood isn't an analogy, either. It's who he is. This fact - one of the deepest truths of our faith - tells us something vitally important - namely, that God is family. He's not like a family, he is family. St. John Paul II said that "God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family because he has within himself Fatherhood, Sonship, and the essence of the family which is love."⁵

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit form the family of God, and you and I are members of this family, created to be part of this family. In other words, salvation history, the story of how we are saved, is family history.

This is evident throughout Scripture. Our first parent, Adam, was created to be a "son of God" (Lk 3:38). God the Father is also the origin of the whole "get out of your parent's house and find a wife" thing - that is, leave and cleave (see Gn 2:24). And it continues from there. The Israelites are God's firstborn son (Ex 4:22); Solomon is God's own son (2 Sm 7:14); honoring father and mother is even part of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:12). And don't even consider forgetting all those "this guy begat that guy" and "that guy begat this guy" stuff, which terrifies countless lecturers.

The reason you see family language in Scripture, indeed the reason human society is based on families, is because God is family. He created us to live this way. St. Paul says, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph 3:14-15).

So the Bible is essentially the story of how God created us to be in his family and how he worked to get humanity back into that family after Adam got us kicked out. That story, of course, culminates in Jesus Christ. And this is where the story changes - a lot.

Adam and Solomon and others might have been called "son of God," but only Jesus is *the* "Son of God" (Lk 1:35, Jn 20:31, Rom 1:4). And his identity as such ushers in a whole new way of praying. Unlike those who preceded him in history, his is true filial prayer - the prayer of Son to Father. It's the prayer of family. It's the kind of prayer "which the Father awaits from his children ... lived out by the only Son in his humanity, with and for men" (CCC 2599). In other words, our prayer is in the Son, Jesus Christ.

As we saw in the first chapter, people have been praying since there have been people. "Prayer is bound up with human history, for it is the relationship with God in historical events," says the *Catechism* (see 2568). All the main characters in Scripture - Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Mary, and so many others (even bad guys) - were praying. But Jesus has a unique identity.

The Second Person of the Trinity became human like the rest of us (except for sin, says Hebrews 4:15) so that he could represent all of humanity back to the Father. He wedded a perfect human nature to his divine nature, joining them forever. Because he is all God and all man at the same time, he can represent both sides of the equation. He's playing both sides, so to speak. He represents God to us and us to God. And this is the key to prayer. We can pray to God *like* Christ because we are *in* Christ.

Starting with our baptism, we are incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ and become "sons in the Son," joined to him in a real way. When we say we're children of God, therefore, we're not simply using a figure of speech. We have been transformed through a divine adoption and gained a new identity. God is our Father, and Jesus is our brother. Through the grace wrought by Christ, we begin a process of becoming more and more like him until we are fully and finally united with him in heaven.

This is big news, because it's a big change.

Before the time of Jesus, people could interact with God on friendly terms, for sure. Exodus 33:11 says Moses used to speak "face to face" with God, "as a man speaks to his friend." They were buddies. But Christ brought the relationship to a whole new level. As the Son of God, he cries out to the Father and actually calls him "Abba, Father" (Mk 14:36). And in him, we can do the same. St. Paul declares that we have received a "spirit of sonship," so that "when we cry Abba! Father! it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15-16). This is our new reality in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

And from the moment of his conception, Christ's life is a perfect prayer, a perfect offering to the Father. Through prayer, through the sacraments he offers and extends this same life to us. The deeper our union with Christ, the more perfect our life of prayer becomes. Christ is our prayer power source.

Jesus made a new identity and new mode of prayer available to us, but he practiced the art of prayer as a man of his times, learning all the different forms and types of prayers that the other Jews learned. It's the same with us. Catholic prayer comes in all kinds of shapes and sizes, such as blessing and adoration, prayers of petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise. Each of these puts a little different spin on our interaction with God. For example, the prayer of blessing is in response to God's gifts. In petition, we're making our needs known. Through the prayer of adoration we exalt "the greatness of the Lord" and recognize God's kingship (see CCC 2628).

We'll touch on some of the other forms of prayer mentioned above as we continue to move through our study on prayer. For now, let's talk about the two most basic types of prayer in which all those previous forms of prayer fit. Following the lead of the great spiritual master Archabbot Benedict Baur, we'll call these two types "finite prayer" and "constant prayer."

Finite Prayer

What is it that makes a prayer prayer? Is it thinking really hard about what you're saying? Is it being able to conjure up the right image of Our Lady when you're praying a Rosary? (She looks best in blue, of course.) How about the warm fuzzies - that nice little burst of emotion we sometimes get? Is that prayer? Nope. None of

those things are bad - in fact, they're good - but prayer can exist without any of them.

Quoting St. Therese of Lisieux, the *Catechism* calls prayer a "surge of the heart" (2558). The last Father of the Church, St. John Damascene, says it "is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God" (CCC 2559). Finite prayer is an active form of prayer in which we're consciously making an effort to seek God. We're raising our hearts and minds to God through blessing, adoration, petition, thanksgiving, praise, and so forth. Finite prayer stops and starts as we determine.

In its essence, all prayer is an act of love. That's why God never tires of our prayers, just as your beloved never tires of the sweet nothings you whisper in his or her ear. In prayer we're whispering our love to a God who *is* love (see 1 Jn 4:8). We stop looking inward and turn our gaze toward our true Beloved.

No longer thinking so much about ourselves, we start thinking more about him. In fact, it's not hard to figure out whether or not we're growing in prayer (and it has nothing to do with feelings). If we're not turning more and more away from the world and becoming more and more like Jesus Christ, there's something wrong. Prayer is meant to restore us to the likeness of God and in so doing give him glory.

We begin that process by engaging in particular types of finite, active prayer. But it's only the beginning.

Constant Prayer

Finite, active prayer is meant to lead us to habitual, or constant, prayer. That's the name of the game, the golden goose of the spiritual life. Quoting the ancient monk Evagrius Ponticus, the *Catechism* states, "We have not been commanded to work, to keep watch and to fast constantly, but it has been laid down that we are to pray without ceasing" (2742). Of course, we're all familiar with St. Paul's admonition to "pray constantly." As a kid I remember thinking: "Seriously, Paul? Not only are people going to think I'm nuts as I walk around muttering to myself, but multi-tasking is not natural to my gender." But before we knock Paul off his high horse (again), let's take a moment to see what he means.

Constant prayer is not an act of prayer, so to speak. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to perform our duties in life. (Forget about texting, I've nearly wrecked my car on several occasions while attempting the Rosary on the freeway.) So what is Paul talking about? He's referring to a permanent attitude, one rooted in trustful surrender and merging of our will to God's. It's an inner peace that accepts whatever happens as God's good will for our life. It doesn't mean we just sit back and do nothing, but rather that we have an attitude of cheerful compliance founded on the knowledge that what God wants us to experience is best.

Constant prayer is fed by acts of finite prayer which operate on the "surface" of the soul. We makes acts of the will that move us into closer union with God and cause the embers of love in our hearts to glow more fiercely even when we're not engaged in active, finite prayer.

Of course, the reverse is also true. Constant prayer feeds and fuels our acts of prayer so they become more focused and fruitful. And when we can establish a state of constant prayer, submitting ourselves gladly to God's will, everything we do becomes an act of prayer.

A Little Privacy, Please!

Since we're all members of the same Body of Christ, prayer has both a personal and communal dimension. That being said, it's primarily between you and God. Even when you're praying with a group of people, such as at Mass, prayer has a personal character. You are lifting your voice to God along with others. It's a private conversation between hearts in the context of family worship.

The beauty of communal prayer is that it shows the unity of the body of believers, God's family, something he certainly desires. But let's be honest, not all conversation is meant for public consumption. I don't really care to know the intimate details or secrets of Joe Catholic next to me, nor do I want to share mine with him. Sharing is not always caring.

Prayer is primarily personal because, ultimately, I can't rely upon other people to establish my relationship with God. I can't hide behind the crowd. Each of us is going to stand in front of God at the end of our life, and the depth of our

relationship will be fully exposed at that moment. We won't be thinking about the person in front of or behind us in line. It'll be just each of us and God.

That's why it's so crazy not to pray. Yet even when we know it's good for us, we're good at inventing lame excuses. We're too tired. We've got too much work to do. We need to organize our sock drawer. The list goes on and on and on. Look, I get it. I'm in the same boat. It's not easy. We're dealing with weaknesses that have plagued humanity since Adam and Eve exercised some very poor decision-making skills back in the garden.

Nevertheless, there are no real excuses. God gives us every grace we need to pray. More than that, think about what we're avoiding - life in God! We're actually looking for a way out of the only family on earth that doesn't need counseling. We're shunning the offer of a lifetime. We're trying to get out of eternal bliss! So let's stop the insanity and start to dive even deeper into prayer.