

Easter Sunday April 20, 2014 A

- *Prayer - without it, we die spiritually*
- *Seven simple suggestions for cultivating a relationship with God*

Whether we believe it or not, we are born for a close relationship with our God. How sad if we go through life with little or no sense of this fact or without heeding this great call to nurture our relationship with our Creator, whom we are destined to spend eternity with. Fostering a loving bond with our invisible God demands faith, focus and strong conviction of its importance in our lives. People who are achievers know they need to focus, give their full attention, and make a determined effort in order to reach their objective. It is no different when it comes to our relationship with God.

Even if you are not a frequent churchgoer, you can utilize all or some of the following suggestions to foster a good relationship with God.

Suggestion#1: Begin the day with a prayer of thanksgiving. Ideally, on waking up, call out to the God who created us and is allowing us to live another day. A fairly common prayer of mine at the beginning of each day is the following:

Thank you, Father, for the gift of life and for my 67 years of existence.

Thank you, Jesus, for paying the ultimate price for our salvation.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for the thousands of ways you have guided me and helped me during my life.

Thank you, Lord, for the material and spiritual blessings in my life. Thank you for my priesthood, my wonderful parish family, and my home.

Two things to note about the above prayer. First, it is *Trinitarian*. I address all three persons of the Blessed Trinity. Second, it is one of *gratitude*. As you may know, an 'attitude of gratitude' is important for both our spiritual and mental well-being.

In a world where millions of people are materially and spiritually deprived, it is important for us to frequently thank God for our material and spiritual blessings. I am deeply grateful to God for my priesthood, unworthy though I am for that blessing. If you are married and your marriage is a blessing in your life, thank God and ask him to help you to always be a good spouse. If you are still working, thank God for your job even if it is not the ideal job. If you have difficult challenges in your work situation, ask God for the strength and wisdom to deal with them.

Suggestion#2: Do a bit of spiritual reading. If we make time for physical exercise, reading the newspaper or a novel, or checking out our friends on Facebook, etc., surely we can make time for some spiritual reading. Concerning this age-old practice, consider the following two quotes:

All scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness. (2Tim 3:16)

It is a good thing to have a spiritual book to feed your prayer. What sort of book? It must be a book which "clicks" with you personally, a book you feel at home with like a wise and trusted friend, a book which speaks to your condition. People are always recommending books to us. "You must read so and so; you must read such and such." By all means have a look at them, have a quick browse through, but unless the recommended book "clicks" with you, forget it. It is not the book for you now. It may be one day, but not now. We are all made differently, we all have different needs and we are all at different stages on the road. Choose your own book and read it slowly, a little at a time, pausing to think about it, to chew it over, to take it in. (Evan Pilkington)

The Church has always considered reflective or spiritual reading to be one of the most fundamental exercises of the spiritual life. In and through this meditative type of reading, especially on the gospels, we come to know the person of Christ and the attitudes and values he embraces. Spiritual reading also nourishes, illumines, and gives direction to our deepest selves, our spirits. Without

regular periods of reflective reading, we run the risk of becoming victims of passing fads and of allowing ourselves to be led by the ‘wisdom’ of the world.

The mindset we bring to spiritual reading is very different from that which we bring to study or other types of reading. In spiritual reading, we are hoping for God to speak to us. We should read slowly and reflectively, always ready to pause when something strikes us. If you need assistance on selecting books for spiritual reading, I would of course be happy to help. But as you probably know, one can find all kinds of daily devotionals on the internet.

Suggestion#3: Use the rosary to pray for your global, local and personal intentions. In recent years, I have found the rosary to be a marvelous way to bring my global, local and personal petitions to God. I pray for several intentions with *each* decade of the rosary. For example, on the First Sorrowful Mystery—*the Agony in the Garden*—I pray for all people in agony and for those who are working hard to help them.

Suggestion#4: Use other people’s prayers. Many people use the Psalms as a form of prayer. If you are drawn to this, a challenge may be to find the Psalm that fits in well with where you are spiritually.

Another resource is a booklet called the *Treasury of Prayers* also available on our parish website. The following are three examples of prayers found in this resource.

Prayer of Trust

O Lord, though I have no feeling of confidence in you, nevertheless, I know that you are my God, that I am all yours, and that I have no hope but in your goodness. So, I abandon myself entirely into your hands. Amen.

St. Francis de Sales

God as My First Love

Lord God, I know that if I do not love you with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul and with all my strength, I shall love something else with all my heart and mind and soul and strength. Grant that, putting you first in all my loving, I may be liberated from all lesser loves and loyalties, and have you as my first love, my chief good and my final joy. Amen

(Adapted from George Appleton)

Prayer for a Giving Heart

I do not know how long I’ll live but while I live, Lord, let me give some comfort to someone in need by smile or nod—kind word or deed. And let me do whatever I can to ease things for my fellow man. I want nothing but to do my part to lift a tired or weary heart, to change folks from frowns to smiles again. Then I will not have lived in vain. And I’ll not care how long I’ll live if I can give—and give—and give.

As you can see, the above prayers are beautiful and they enable us to give expression to sentiments which we may fully agree with but have never said to our God.

Suggestion#5: Practice contemplative prayer. In the Psalms, God says to us: “*Be still and know that I am God.*” Isn’t it great to know that we can actually engage God in prayer without reading anything or saying any words. In fact, it is said that contemplative prayer is the highest form of prayer. It is often called “wordless communion with God”—much like a couple holding hands without uttering a word but just being present to each other.

As you may know, meditation is now common practice among bigwigs (doctors, lawyers, etc.). Why? Because research shows that it is an effective way to deal with stress. In Catholic literature, meditation is often described as *thinking* about God, or chewing on something we have just read. In the secular world, the words meditation and contemplation are used interchangeably. Both involve just being present to the One who holds us in being every moment of the day.

The following are suggestions for getting started with contemplative prayer:

- Sit up straight in a chair, with hands on your knees. Focus on your breathing. Breathing is our life principle (the Hebrew word *ruah* is translated breath or spirit). So for the Christian, focusing on our breathing helps us to connect with our God in whom we “live, move, and have our being” (Acts).
- When you get distracted (and you will off and on), just refocus on your breathing.

- As you breathe in and out, say in your heart: “I breathe *in* God: love, peace and joy. I breathe *out* all that is not of God: negativity, lust, bitterness.

- Begin with five minutes (place a timer nearby). Don’t allow the voice that says: “This is not for me”; “This is a waste of time”; “I’m constantly distracted” to discourage you.

If interested in reading a secular book on meditation, consider checking out *10% Happier—How I Tamed the Voice in my Head, Reduced Stress Without Losing my Edge, and Found Self-Help that Actually Works, A True Story* by Dan Harris, an ABC News anchor. Caution: the author follows Buddhist philosophy. It should be easy enough for Christians to substitute Jesus where he refers to Buddha. Regarding this book, Richard Besser, M.D., writes:

The science supporting the health benefits of meditation continues to grow as does the number of Americans who count themselves as practitioners, but it took reading 10% Happier to make me actually want to give it a try. Dan Harris takes the mystical mantle off meditation and shows how easy it can be to incorporate into your life. Painfully candid, outrageously funny, and definitely enlightening, Harris’s book left me feeling much more than 10% happier.”

If you are interested in a Catholic book on contemplative prayer, I suggest you read *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Abbot Thomas Keating.

Contemplative Prayer Group at Ascension. Every Tuesday evening at 7:00 pm, a small group of Ascension parishioners meet to practice contemplative prayer and to encourage each other in this method.

Suggestion#6: Pray for help to break a bad habit. Our relationship with God and with others can be seriously hurt by bad habits. These can be overcome with God’s grace and our determined effort. Examples of destructive habits are excessive anger, negativity, pornography, low self-esteem. Some couples spend a lot of money on counseling for marital problems caused by destructive behavior, *some* of which can be resolved through spiritual means.

The following three steps, if used consistently, can help us break a habit that is hurting our relationship with God, others and self:

Step 1: Pray. Recognize your need for help and trust that God will help you. Say the following prayer at the beginning of each day (reword it to fit your situation).

Jesus, I recognize my powerlessness when it comes to dealing with (name the bad habit). But I believe that you can and will give me the strength to fight this sin and bad habit today. I only ask that you grant me the grace to resist this destructive behavior today. Thank you, Jesus.

Step 2: Make a determined effort. As you move through the day, be VERY DETERMINED to avoid the bad habit. Your morning prayer must be accompanied by your determined effort. Observe the slogan “*Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you.*” If you fall into your bad habit, say: “Sorry Lord, help me to begin again.”

Step 3: Review the day. At night before you go to bed, review the day. How did you do? For your successes, thank Jesus for his help. For your failures, ask his mercy, then ask for the grace to begin anew tomorrow.

You may be surprised at how this simple three-step approach *will* help you to be successful in overcoming a destructive habit.

Suggestion#7: Pray with others. God created us to live in community. He did not intend for us to be ‘lone rangers’ in the journey of life. We are social beings. Connecting with other friends of God can be a wonderful way to nurture our relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Some final thoughts

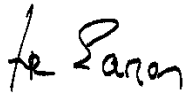
The spiritual life is *all* moments of life and not just those times when we are engaged in prayer. As we go about our day with the dispositions of heart that reflect gospel values—peace, love, joy, forgiveness and compassion—we are living a spiritual life.

The spiritual life is the way we *respond to the presence of God* in nature and in the events and encounters of daily life. We see a beautiful sunrise or sunset and we are moved to praise God. We receive a good result from a medical test and we are moved to praise God. A relationship issue is resolved and we are moved to praise God. We see an ambulance racing down the road and we are moved to prayer.

The spiritual life is the way we *respond* to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit is constantly seeking to get our attention (and so is Satan).

The Holy Spirit is the one who prompts us to let go when we are holding onto a hurt; the one who prompts us to call or visit someone going through a difficult time; the one who prompts us to give a few dollars to someone in need; the one who prompts us to spend time in prayer, to return to church, to go to confession. A big part of the spiritual life is growing in the grace of *recognizing* and *responding* to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives. An excellent one-liner prayer is: *“Holy Spirit, help me to notice and respond with generosity to your promptings in my daily life.”* If we don’t give time to prayer, we will not notice and respond to God’s presence in our world and lives. Without prayer, we will live non-spiritual lives and that would be very sad, for God’s desire is for us to live in close intimacy with him.

Wishing you a blessed Easter Season,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Le Sarah". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.