



## Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time August 22, 2010 C

### SPENDING AN HOUR WITH JESUS

In his agony in the garden, Jesus said to his sleeping disciples: “Can you not stay awake one hour with me?”

Some 400 parishioners do spend an hour each week with Jesus in personal prayer in our Adoration Chapel. I am sure some of them, especially those who come in the middle of the night, nod off now and again.

This Sunday at Mass you received an invitation to commit to spending one hour each week with Jesus in our chapel. If you have never done that before, you may wonder how you would utilize the sixty minutes. Many who go to the chapel on a regular basis find that the time goes rather quickly.

In this column, I will offer some suggestions for spending time with Jesus. Of course in the end, you must use the time as you feel led. There is an old prayer axiom which says:

**“Pray as you can, not as you can’t.”**

I will not only offer suggestions on how to spend an hour with Jesus, but will also address other issues which are important when it comes to our prayer life.

- Engaging God
- Distractions
- Danger of being too busy in prayer
- Art of spiritual reading

**Engaging God.** Prayer, among other things, is all about *engaging* God. All of us have had the experience of being with someone for a period of time without really engaging them. We talked but we did not communicate. In a similar way, we could come to the chapel for an hour—read a book, say some prayers— without really *engaging* God in heartfelt prayer. All the Psalms and many of the conversations involving Old Testament figures like Moses, Hannah, Jeremiah and Job, are great examples of people *engaging* God in prayer. Of course prayer, as we shall see, is more than *us talking to God*; it also involves *listening to God*. At times, prayer simply involves being quiet in the presence of Jesus. At the end of any prayer time, a good question to ask is: Do I feel I *engaged* God during this time of prayer, or was I just reading a book in his presence?

***Suggestion #1: Begin with some minutes of quiet in the presence of God.***

If you come to the chapel, you will notice that nearly everyone begins their holy hour or visit by spending sometime kneeling in quiet adoration before the Eucharistic presence of Jesus.

Adoration is a basic and fundamental posture of us creatures before our Creator who made the heavens and the earth, and all that is seen and unseen.

Each adorer spends these initial minutes of prayer as he/she is led. For many, it is a time of quiet presence before our Savior in the Eucharist. Often during those initial minutes of prayer, I thank Jesus for bringing me here. After all, without God’s *drawing grace*, we would never enter into prayer. I also ask him to help me pray well and to free my heart of distractions. Since prayer is both a *gift* and an *art*, we cannot ask God often enough to bless us with the gift of prayer, to grant us whatever we need to pray well.

**Distractions.** If our prayer time is a battle with distractions, we may easily conclude that our efforts to pray are just a waste of valuable time. What can be said about this problem?

When it comes to the issue of distractions, some of the most comforting and helpful words are found in St. Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to a Devout Life*. He writes: “*If the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back quite gently and place it tenderly in God’s presence. And if you do nothing else while at prayer but bring your heart back again and again and place it in God’s presence,...though it went away every time you brought it back, your time of prayer would be very well spent.*”

What wonderful words of encouragement. If we get distracted 20 times during a particular prayer period and return to God 20 times, we have made 20 choices for God, and Francis de Sales tells us that that makes our prayer time pleasing in the eyes of God.

***Suggestion #2: Spend a whole hour in quiet.***

Most people who come to the chapel begin their holy hour by spending a few minutes in quiet prayer, followed by some spiritual reading.

But others spend the whole hour in quiet reflection and contemplation. When it comes to the topic of prayer, one of my favorite sayings is by a medieval mystic:

**“While we rest in him, he works in us.”**

In Psalm 46:10, God says to us:

**“Be still and know that I am God.”**

Of course it takes a lot of faith to trust that while we do in fact rest quietly in God’s presence, he somehow does his transforming work in us.

**A big danger.** If we live busy lifestyles and we are doers by nature, there is a good chance that we bring our doing nature into prayer. We might think that our holy hour was non-productive if we didn’t pray a rosary and read ten pages of a book. Consciously or unconsciously, we may think that our spiritual transformation depends more on *us* doing spiritual exercises than on *God*. This would be a mistake. All spiritual transformation is the work of God. The spiritual exercises we do are a way for us to open our hearts to him.

Needless to say, there is nothing wrong with praying a rosary during our holy hour or engaging in *some* spiritual reading, but if we do not balance such time with periods of quiet, then we have become a Martha in Jesus’ presence rather than a Mary who sat at his feet listening to his every word.

**Suggestion #3: Engage in spiritual reading (*lectio divina*).**

*Lectio divina* (divine/spiritual reading) is an ancient and revered practice in the Christian Tradition. Spiritual masters tell us that engaging in spiritual reading *nourishes, illumines, and gives direction to* our deepest self. 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—which is contrary to the wisdom of the gospels and the spiritual masters.

**Developing the art of spiritual reading.** It is important for us to realize that there is quite a difference between spiritual reading and other kinds of reading. When we are studying a textbook or work papers, reading a novel or the morning newspaper, we use our minds, or what is sometimes called our “computer intelligence,” to gather information or data, analyze it, and categorize it neatly into sections.

In contrast, we bring a very different mindset to the practice of *lectio divina*. First of all, we move into the *slow lane* of life. *Lectio divina* is slow and meditative. As verses of Scripture or some parts in a book touch us,

we pause and rest with them. We are not in a hurry to move on and we put aside all intent to cover a certain number of pages of a book. When the Spirit is moving and we are tuned in, we may only read a few verses of Scripture or a page or two of a book during an hour of prayer.

In *lectio divina*, we are on the alert for how God may speak to us. When this happens, we pause, reflect and respond in some way.

**Pausing, reflecting and responding.** Without pausing, reflecting and responding, we could read a book for 30 or 45 minutes and *not* pray. It might be a great read but our reading did not lead us to prayer. Prayer involves *addressing* God in some way.

So when we read the Scriptures or some other sacred text and something strikes us, we should pause and sit with the verse or thought. This is *meditation*—pausing and sitting with a verse of Scripture or some thought from a spiritual book.

After we have pondered the text for a minute or more, we may be led to *address God* in some way. When we address God or speak to him, we have moved from *thinking* about God to *conversing* with him. This is the moment of prayer. Our words to God need not be anything special but they should express in some way our thoughts or feelings about the text we have just read.

You may also find yourself arguing with a text—at least I do. There is nothing wrong with questioning passages of Scripture. As we read the Psalms, we find that their authors were frequently “having it out” with God.

Honest prayer is telling God what is on our mind and in our heart. Learning to speak to God honestly from our heart may take time especially if we have developed the bad habit of hiding from others what we truly feel.

**A suitable spiritual book.** Not every book is suitable for spiritual reading. Generally speaking, a good spiritual book will cause us to pause as we read.

**The New Testament and Psalms.** Spiritual directors would all regard Scripture, especially the New Testament and Psalms, as *primary resources* when it comes to spiritual reading. In reading the New Testament, especially the four gospels, we have a first-hand account of how Jesus related to God and the people, and a first-hand account of his attitudes and values.

**Secondary resources.** In spiritual reading circles, *spiritual classics* would be regarded as secondary resources, e.g., *Introduction to the Devout Life* by

Francis de Sales, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, *Spiritual Exercises* by Ignatius of Loyola, *Story of a Soul* by Thérèse of Lisieux. While the above books are regarded as spiritual classics, many of us *may* find them a difficult read. But we may also love them. It all depends on where we are in our spiritual walk.

**Contemporary books.** We are blessed with many wonderful books suitable for spiritual reading and written in our own time. Three Catholic authors who are very popular among Catholic and Protestant readers today are Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and Ronald Rolheiser. Personally, I have never read a book by Henri Nouwen that I did not enjoy. Henri, a Dutch priest who died a few years ago, taught spirituality courses at Harvard, Princeton, Yale and Notre Dame. His books are very easy to read. He has a wonderful way of getting to the heart of the matter.

**Using other people's prayers.** While it is indeed wonderful to develop the good habit of speaking to God from our own heart, we can use other people's prayers to aid us. The *Psalms*, of course, is a primary example of this. I have also put together the *Book of Prayers* composed by saints and contemporary authors. Many of these prayers are indeed very beautiful. They will be posted on our website soon.

**Suggestion #4: Prayers of petition and intercession.**

*Prayers of petition* are those we pray for our own needs. *Prayers of intercession* are those we pray for others.

Some people have said to me, "I never pray for myself." That, in my opinion, would be a big mistake. Who among us do not need God's help as we struggle to avoid wrong and live according to the Gospel of Christ? Who among us do not need the help of Jesus as we struggle to be faithful to our vocation? Who among us do not need God's help as we struggle with relationships, difficult financial situations, health issues and tough decisions?

In intercessory prayer, we do what Mary did at Cana. We bring the needs of *others* to Jesus and trust that he will do what is best. Our intercessory prayers should include not just family members and other people that we know personally, but also all of the great issues of our time, e.g., abortion, terrorism, world hunger.

Some of you have seen my handout on the *Rosary—a way to pray for personal and global needs*. Examples:

*Fifth Joyful Mystery: Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple.* Pray for all missing children and those forced to work in terrible conditions or into prostitution. Pray for the apprehension and conversion of their oppressors.

*First Sorrowful Mystery: Agony in the Garden.* Pray for all those suffering agony in body, mind and spirit, and for their loved ones. Pray for all involved in research to find cures for diseases that plague humanity.

**Persevering in tough times.** Persevering in prayer in tough times can be a big challenge. Tough times may include sickness, a loss of some kind, spiritual dryness. During these times, we can be sure Satan will be working overtime to discourage us and whisper in our ear, "God doesn't care." During tough times, we have to hang in there just as we do when a relationship gets tough. Also, praying in the way we normally do may not work. Remember the axiom, "*Pray as you can, not as you can't.*" In tough times, our prayer might consist of sitting with a crucifix and looking at the crucified Christ. Our prayer may be as simple as: "Lord, I'm mad. Where are you? Please help."

When prayer is dry, reflecting on the following prayer by Henri Nouwen may help.

*Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand. My mind is not able to concentrate on you, my heart is not able to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone. But in faith I cling to you. I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.*

*Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort. I want to let you know that I love you even though I do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you even though I often experience despair. Let this be a little dying I can do with you and for you as a way of experiencing some solidarity with the millions in this world who suffer far more than I do. Amen.*

Have a prayerful week,

