

How to Have a Better Prayer Life & Greater Intimacy with the Lord

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Hi, my name is Reverend Father Jude-Mary Owoh, OP. I am a Dominican and the Director of Dominican Media. Today for our retreat, we'll be talking about how to develop a better prayer life. A lot of us seem to be stuck when it comes to what our prayer life should be like, how we should develop our prayer life. And that is what we are going to be discussing today. So, I am as excited as I am trying to keep it down so that you would understand what I'm about to share with you. And I pray that you'll find useful nuggets in what I'm about to share with you so that you can develop a better prayer life.

Spiritual Intimacy with Christ

In the Catholic understanding, spiritual intimacy is a powerful awareness of our longing for Christ's presence accompanied by a trustful surrender to Him of our personal needs. So, this is joined a willingness to do His will and a sense of repentance for any previous failure to do so. We must trust Him not only with our present needs, but also with our salvation and also all that we care about. This is in summary what our spiritual life ought to look like. This is what spiritual intimacy entails. And spiritual intimacy is just another word for a prayerful relationship with God. Being aware that you have a relationship with God. We grow through our awareness of Christ's presence and constant love for us. We grow as our trust in Him grows. Remember we spoke about trust some time ago. We grow as our will becomes one with His. This is how growth takes place. We grow as we repent of our many little ruptures in our relationship with Him that our sinfulness has caused. And then spiritual growth becomes spiritual surrender, a surrender to infinite love. We surrender to the one who gave Himself for us out of love and grow closer to Him.

So, what are those elements that I've just mentioned about growing in our spiritual intimacy? Awareness of Christ constant presence, trust in Him, the will to become one with Him, repentance, and then constantly surrendering oneself to God. Christ offers us many parts to meet Him many ways to grow closer to Him. Primary among all of this of course is the gift of faith itself and with faith comes prayer.

How to Pray Properly

So how do we pray? Because prayer seems to be what ties all of those things together. How important is prayer? There was once a young seminarian starting out on his spiritual journey towards a priesthood. He was a bit of a know it all and he wanted to be the best at everything he did. He heard about a very holy monk who was considered a spiritual master with regard to prayer and contemplation. The seminarian sought him out and asked the old monk to tell him all his secrets for prayer. The monk sent him away. The seminarian was stubborn and returned again soon asking again to learn his secrets of prayer. The monk told him to come back in one week.

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When he arrived the next week, the monk took him out behind the monastery to a body of water. He still hadn't said a word.

As they entered into the water up just about past their waist, the seminarian grew impatient with the monk who was still silent. All of a sudden, the monk grabbed the seminarian and held his head under the water. The seminarian struggled and trashed about but with the strength of an ox, the old monk held him under the water. As the monk let go of him, he came out gasping for air, embarrassed, angry, and confused. The monk looked at him and said, "until you pray with the same desperation that you have for air, you have not prayed."

Prayer is as important to our spiritual life as air is to our body. We need prayer to stay connected to the God who created us with a plan in mind. Every moment is an important and opportunity for prayer. How often do we take advantage of these opportunities? Prayer can pervade our lives. It can come in many different and unexpected forms whether it involves the rosary, reading of the scriptures, visits to the blessed sacrament, and it can also or simply spontaneous words of our own as if we're conversing with Christ and which is the case actually and it can draw us closer to God. We cannot fully understand or appreciate intimacy with God if we fail to understand who Jesus is.

Who is Jesus?

So, who is Jesus? When asked the question, who is Jesus Catholics reply, Jesus is the son of God. While such a statement is true as far as it goes, it does not explain fully enough who Jesus really is. The problem is that we are all sons and daughters of God, yet we are not God. So while Jesus is the son of God, He is also God the Son. It is the second part of the statement. God the Son, which gives the real clue to understanding the person of Jesus. The name Jesus means God saves in Hebrew. The name Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, Messiah which means anointed. Saint John tells us that this is the divine name, which alone brings salvation. John 3:5. Kings, priests, and prophets were anointed as a sign of their special calling. Jesus was unique in that he was at one and the same time priests, prophet, and king. Jesus is a member of the Holy Trinity. So, He's truly God.

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons would say "In the name of Christ is understood he who anoints, he who has been anointed, and the anointing itself by which he has been anointed." He who anoints is the father. He who has been anointed is the son. And he has been anointed in the spirit who is anointed. Because Jesus possesses full in the nature of man, he has a human body and soul. Furthermore, his human soul like us has intellect and will. He is like man in all things, but same. But Jesus has the infinite intellect and will of God as well as the infinite intellect and will of man. He is one divine person having two natures. The human and the divine.

As the fifth century father of the church, Athanasius said in the Athanasius Creed, "He is perfect God, and he's perfect man with irrational soul and human flesh. He is equal to the father in his divinity but he is inferior to the father in his humanity. Although he is God and man, he is not two but one Christ. And he is one, not because his divinity was changing to flesh but because his humanity was assumed into God. He is one not at all because of a mingling of substances but because he is one person."

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When we understand the two natures of Jesus we can come to a deeper personal understanding of him and commitment to him in prayer and sacrifice. We can see how God can truly die for us, the greatest act of self giving any person can make yet we know that God cannot die. That it was only after becoming man that Christ was able to die. In fact, it was in order to die for us that God did become man.

On the other hand, it is as God that Jesus is also the creator of the universe. He is the unique personal union hypothetical union of God and man intimately bound supernaturally and mystically, the perfect man upon whom to base our lives. Yet he is a real person who experiences human life suffering and death and is thus able to share our human pains and worries. This is why we engage in prayerful conversations with Jesus. He understands us and far exceeds our understanding. That is the mystery of the person we're in a relationship with.

Locate Yourself First

So how can I come to know Christ in prayer? The busier we become, the more we are tempted to rush or even decrease our prayer time. This is a very, very important point that we need to be in mind. It's a trap. But whenever we do this, we neglect the real purpose of prayer which is to set aside time and space to connect with or encounter God. Not every prayer experience can leave us feeling like we have had a profound encounter with God the creator of the universe. But when we are patient and persistent, patience, persistence we notice that our prayer involves three movements.

The first locating the self, locating the self-knowing who you are. And then secondly, responding to God because you have to know who you are in order to now know that God is out there. God is present to you and then experiencing the fruit of that encounter entering into relationship with God. So locating the self, responding to God experiencing a divine encounter, a fruitful encounter. What does it mean to locate the self?

Let me take you back to the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 3:9. God asked Adam a question, where are you? Adam had just eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He covered his intimate parts with fig leaves and hid himself behind the tree. You can find the full detail of this in Genesis 3. Adam's response to God and to sin is to eliminate himself from God. God did not need to ask Adam where he was. He does not expect to learn anything new from Adam. God asked Adam this question for Adam's sake to help Adam locate himself and to help him develop the desire to come out of hiding. In an honest encounter with God, you and I need to identify where we are. What's on our mind, what emotions we are experiencing, becoming aware of our exhaustion, our frustration, our joy, our sadness helps us to locate ourselves.

What question is God asking me today? That's what you should be asking yourself. What's God asking you. Is He asking you where you are? What effect, if any does this question have on you. Responding to God which is the second thing. To Adam's credit, Adam responded honestly, he tells God that he was afraid because he was naked. So, he hid. Being naked in front of God when we are aware of ourselves is scary. Of course, the irony of this passage is that Adam has always been naked in front of God. And God didn't seem to mind before and doesn't seem to mind even

now. Adam is the one who is suddenly aware of his nakedness and is bothered by it. And we cannot totally blame him for that.

You Need Humility and Courage

The Psalms remind us how powerful God is. The earth, both trembles and rejoices in God's presence. God is a powerful just judge. God is merciful, but He's also intimidating. Approaching God requires both humility and courage. Humility to take an honest look at ourselves and courage to stand essentially naked before God. Humility asks me to stand essentially naked before God and recognize who I really am. To accept that I am not God, but a creature in need of God's love and mercy.

Courage requires vulnerability. The word vulnerable comes from the Latin word meaning to wound. So, to be vulnerable means courage to be wounded. To be brave requires the possibility of injury. While we do not imagine that being honest before God will result in our physical injury or death, we can certainly experience this sort of death to self. A death to our own will in favor of God's will.

One of the scariest things about approaching God is that we might feel compelled to change but we do the hard things because we have confidence that they will lead to eternal life with God. What resistance... This is a question for you. What resistance, fear or challenges do I face as I think about encountering God. What are you currently challenged by? Do you feel unworthy? Do you feel a sense of fear? Like if God knows where I really am, how would he perceive me? I have stayed so far away from Him. These are questions that feel our minds sometimes.

Encountering God in Your Life

The third part of this prayerful encounter is experiencing the fruits of encounter with God. The fruits of an encounter with God are not always what we would expect and they are not always pleasant or comfortable but they are always for our good. I cannot tell you what the fruits of your encounter with God will be. I would however like to share an image of an encounter with God that captures the experience better than any words could. The images from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* one of C.S Lewis books in the "Chronicle of Narnia Series".

The part of this story I refer is in chapter seven if you would like to read the full version of it for yourself. In this book, Edmond and Lucy have returned to Narnia with their rotten cousin, Eustace. Eustace has no friend and likes bossing and bullying. He is puny, selfish and a generally unpleasant person. During his adventure on dragon island, Eustace finds treasures in a dragon cave fills his pockets and sleeps a gold arm ring into his arm. He wakes up the next day having turned into a dragon. His inner condition is manifested on the outside.

After spending a full day as a dragon, Eustace begins to feel sorry for himself. While worrying about what could become of him, he encounters Aslan, whom you may remember as the lion and Christ figure in Narnia. Aslan leads Eustace to a garden on the top of a mountain. And in the middle of the garden there is a well like a very big round bath with marble steps going down into it.

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Eustace desires to bath in the well but Aslan tells him he must undress before entering the water. Since he is not wearing clothes, Eustace peels off his dragon skin, but just as Eustace is going to step into the water, he notices that his skin has become rough and scaly again. So, he peels off his scales again only to discover that the scales return a second time. After he turn on successful attempt to remove his scaly skin, Aslan reveals that the lion must undress Eustace. Afterwards, the lion took Eustace out of the well and dressed him in new clothes.

An encounter with God invites us to the spirit of transformation. God gives us a new heart, a new spirit. We can hide from this encounter in the business of work and family, but God patiently waits for us to come out of our hiding, to allow him to remove the uncomfortable clothes we have made to cover our nakedness and to let Him transform us.

Questions to Ponder On

A question for you. What do I imagine could be the fruit of an encounter with God? Do you have expectations or are you afraid? An encounter with God is always one that will leave you better than you were. Now, we have to take all of this into prayer. As you consider creating space for your own encounter with God, I invite you to spend time reflecting on the following questions and allowing them to lead you into prayer. The first, what question is God asking me today? What is God asking you to do today? What effect, if any, does this question have on you? What resistance, fears, challenges do I face as I think about encountering God? And then finally, what do I imagine would be the fruit of an encounter with God.

I pray that you would answer these questions honestly for yourself, because it's a personal question. It's a personal encounter that you're about to enter into. And without answering these questions adequately, you'll never really be able to encounter God or have that deep intimacy that you long for with God. But I want to believe, I want to be positive that you will definitely ask yourself these questions and answer them honestly. And I pray that God will lead you into deeper relationship with him through the good times and the bad times, through the ugly and the beautiful aspects of your journey with him.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray. Lord, thank you for revealing yourself to me in the person of Jesus Christ, your son. In Him I see all that I want to be. Help me, help us to create time for prayer and encounter with you just as your son did through the same Christ our Lord. Amen. And the Almighty God bless you. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.