

HOW TO PRAY AND MEDITATE

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The sacraments have been instituted by Jesus Christ for the sanctification of our souls. We know that in certain cases they can give grace without any active co-operation on the part of the recipients, as when an infant is baptised, or an unconscious man receives the sacrament of Last Anointing. But, ordinarily, God's action in our souls presupposes corresponding activity on our part. Our minds and wills must be used in order to excite in us suitable dispositions for the reception of, the sacraments. In practice, therefore, if we are to benefit by the sacraments we must know how to pray, and must try to pray well. Prayer is a necessary preparation for the sacraments, and these in turn, by uniting us with God, dispose us for prayer. Prayer and the sacraments are both sources of grace, and hence are very closely connected.

Prayer, in a narrower sense in which the term is often employed, means asking God for those good things which we need. In this sense, "to pray" is synonymous with "to pray for." Prayer of this kind is of great importance, because it is only from God that we can get the grace and help we need to live good lives. But there is a wider and fuller sense in which the term prayer is used, namely, the raising of the mind to God. In this sense, prayer includes not only petition, but also adoration, praise, thanksgiving, and every act by which we are brought into conscious union with God for His honour and our own good. It is in this wider sense that we will now consider prayer.

THE OBLIGATION OF PRAYER

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of prayer, so much does the success of our spiritual life, and therefore of our life in general, depend upon it. It will help to bring home its importance if we reflect upon these three points: (1) prayer is a duty, (2) it is a necessity, and (3) it is a great source of happiness. Prayer is a duty, and one of our chief duties in life. Whatever we neglect, we must not neglect prayer. We owe our existence to God—we came into existence through His power, and we are kept in existence through the same power. If God ceased to think of us, or to exercise His omnipotence in our regard, for a single instant, we should cease to exist. Our souls and bodies, and their faculties, material good things and natural happiness, grace and the supernatural life,, our faith and the blessings we have in the true Church, eternal life with God and the happiness that will mean—all these we owe to the goodness of God. We are, therefore, under a debt of love and gratitude to God far greater than any debt we could owe to a fellow creature. No tie between parents and children, husband and wife, brothers and sisters, friend and friend, could be 'so close as the tie between each one of us and God. This tie is real, though we may not always be conscious of it. In prayer we give it conscious acknowledgment, we learn to appreciate it better, and we endeavour to meet the obligations which it imposes.

PRAYER IS A NECESSITY

Prayer is not merely a duty which we are bound in conscience to perform; it is, moreover, a necessity of life. St. John Chrysostom says that prayer is to the soul what nerves are to the body, ramparts to a city, arms to a soldier, wings to a bird, breath to a living being. We cannot live without air and food and sleep; it is just as impossible for our supernatural life to continue without prayer. By prayer we become united with God, and obtain the supernatural help without which we cannot long resist the attacks of evil, or accomplish any supernatural good work. Prayer nourishes the supernatural virtues in our souls. Without prayer, faith, hope, and charity, and all the other virtues become weak, just as in time of drought vegetation gradually withers and dies. It is all the more necessary for us to realise the necessity of prayer because we can suffer from spiritual starvation without noticing it. If we neglect to take bodily food we feel hungry, and continued abstinence from food makes us weak and unable to work. But if we abstain from spiritual food, the serious consequences are not brought home to us in the same way, and we may starve ourselves without knowing it. Prayer, therefore, is a necessity for spiritual health and strength; and if we want to grow stronger spiritually, we must nourish ourselves more with prayer and the sacraments. There is no other way.

PRAYER IS A SOURCE OF HAPPINESS

What we recognise as a duty and a necessity we may indeed perform conscientiously, but without much enthusiasm. But prayer is far from being merely a duty and a necessity. It is at the same time a source of genuine happiness. The reason for this is not difficult to understand. Happiness comes from the possession of what is true, good, and beautiful. But in God we have truth itself, goodness itself, and beauty itself. Everything in this world that is good or beautiful is so because it comes from God and bears some traces of its origin. But nothing in this world possesses enough, goodness or beauty to satisfy our hearts completely; only in God shall we find all that for which our hearts crave. Prayer helps us to know God better and love Him more, and thus brings to the human heart what it needs to make it happy. Our life is happy if we have a clear understanding of its meaning and purpose, if we have the courage to endure the painful things it brings, and if we have strength to overcome the difficulties we meet with. In prayer we learn to know the mind of God, and understand His plans in our lives; we find in His love and providence abundant motives for patience and resignation in all that befalls us; and in prayer we receive a divine strength which enables us to fight against all our enemies and pass safely through all dangers. Through intimacy with God we come to see things as He sees them, and our wills are brought into conformity with His. This union of mind and will with God is the goal for which we were created, and the perfection of our human nature. The more we approach it the greater is our sense of well-being, and the greater our happiness. Prayer is often hard, but we can draw courage from the knowledge that perseverance in prayer will lead us along the road to true peace, success, and happiness. It is especially necessary for young people beginning life to realise the importance of prayer. They are full of plans, hopes, and expectations for the future. But no real success can come to them in life unless they have God with them, and His love and His law are guiding them. Familiarity with Him, which can only come through prayer, will be their greatest asset.

HOW AM I TO PRAY?

Let us suppose now that we are convinced of the obligation and necessity of prayer, and the immense benefit it is to us. But the difficulty of prayer is in practice. How are we to pray? One compendious answer is: Pray anyhow, provided you do it. We learn how to pray chiefly by praying, and no amount of talking about prayer will take the place of actual prayer; just as we can never learn to swim, no matter how much instruction we get, unless we go into the water.

No Catholic is altogether unskilled in the art of prayer. From our earliest years we have been taught to pray, and prayer does occupy a prominent place in the life of every practical Catholic. We have our morning and evening prayers, Sunday Mass, preparation for and thanksgiving after reception of the sacraments, and other prayers from time to time. If we want to learn how to pray better we can begin with the prayer that already forms part of our lives. Morning and evening prayers are important. It is important to be regular at them, and it is even more important to make sure that they are real prayers. One reason why people are, sometimes irregular at their daily prayers is that their prayers are little more than mechanical recitation, so that they find little profit in them. To try to say our prayers well makes them, on the whole, easier to say. Later on some practical advice will be given about how to improve the quality of our prayers. Let us be content here with resolving to say our ordinary prayers regularly, and with as much attention as possible. Short prayers well said are better than long prayers carelessly said.

MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS

Sometimes it happens that people are in such a hurry in the early morning that their prayers almost inevitably suffer. A busy mother of a family, or a man or girl who has to set out for work very early, may not be able to get the time and quiet that are necessary for good morning prayers. Would it not be better, in such a case, for them to reduce their morning prayers to a very small amount—say, the sign of the cross, the Our Father, Hail Mary, and the Morning Offering—but make them real prayer; and then, later in the day, when the housework is done, or a break comes in the day's routine, to give a few minutes to God to make up for the want of time in the morning? A lot of people are suffering spiritually because circumstances make prayer in the early morning very difficult, and it does not occur to them that they can supply for this later in the day. Morning prayers are excellent; it is natural to begin the day with prayer. But it is a great mistake to think that prayers must be said in the morning or not at all. There is no precept of

God or of the Church binding us to pray either in the morning or the evening. But we are bound to pray, and to pray frequently. So we see that the very insistence on the importance of morning and evening prayers may have an opposite effect to that intended, and may lead even to neglect of prayer. If people are going out to an entertainment in the evening, or to a card-party, a dance, or something like that, we can be pretty sure that, if they come home very late, their night prayers are likely to suffer. Why should they not anticipate this, and say their prayers before they go out, and then a very brief prayer will suffice before they go to bed? The time we say our prayers is much less important than the fact of saying them.

PRAYER DURING THE DAY

The true Catholic will try to keep in touch with God by short prayers during the course of the day. The Angelus, I am afraid, is not so well established among us as in other parts of the Catholic world. Even the sound of the church bells ringing the Angelus is not so familiar here. But this old Catholic custom of recalling the great mystery of the Incarnation three times a day, and going through, in dramatic fashion, the Gospel scene, while we repeat the words of the Angel and Our Blessed Lady, is of great value in keeping us in touch with the supernatural, showing us our life in the light of the Incarnation. Then we have grace before and after meals. It can be neglected altogether, it can be said carelessly, without any raising of the mind and heart to God, and it can be a real prayer. Why should we not say grace regularly and prayerfully? It will mean that there is more prayer in our lives with little trouble to ourselves. Even the sign of the cross, made thoughtfully, can help to sanctify our days. We should not be ashamed of the sign of the cross. St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote, in the early centuries of Christianity: "Let not shame prevent us from confessing our allegiance to the Crucified; let the fingers boldly trace upon the forehead the sign of the cross, as a distinguishing mark, and this on all occasions—when we eat and when we drink, on coming in and going out, before we sleep, as we fall asleep, and on rising from sleep, when we walk and when we are at rest." (Cateches. XIII). Nowadays when the enemies of Christ Our Lord are so open in their hostility, it is not right that His followers should be ashamed of His cross, any more than a soldier should be ashamed of his uniform. The world needs true religion; but we are inclined to keep ours too much to ourselves. Would it not be for the honour of God and do immense good if every Catholic were to make the sign of the cross openly and reverently, if unostentatiously, before and after meals, whether .at home, with friends, or in public? We talk of Catholic Action. Here is a small thing, practical for all, that might have a great effect.

We have, therefore, already in our daily lives opportunities for practising the art of prayer. For those who wish to develop the spirit and practice of prayer to a greater degree, and make it play a more important part in their lives, the following different methods are suggested. We learn to pray by praying, so the employment of methods such as these is the way to make ourselves proficient in prayer.

WAYS OF PRAYING

1. *Adoration.* One of our primary duties is to adore God, simply because He is God; because He is the one absolutely perfect Being, without any dependence on anyone or anything, and the source of everything that exists outside Himself. Any beauty or goodness we find in the world has its ultimate source in God's infinite goodness and beauty. Adoration is the act by which we acknowledge God's unique position as Creator and supreme Being, and it is an excellent form of prayer. In it we humble ourselves in our littleness before the infinite greatness of God. We acknowledge that we are nothing of ourselves, because all that we have or are comes from God. We praise and worship the incomprehensible goodness, beauty, wisdom, and power of God. No words are necessary; but a bowing-down of our spirit in the presence of our Creator. "My God and my All." As A Kempis says, that thought is sufficient for one who understands.

One great advantage of this prayer of adoration is that it at once puts us in our proper position as creatures, before God, and fills us with the spirit which it is most necessary for a creature to have. Even in our prayers we are too inclined to think of ourselves, and perhaps to regard God as a Being who exists merely to look after our welfare and comfort. We want more of the spirit of Our Blessed Lady: "My soul magnifies the Lord; it is in God I have rejoiced; holy is His Name."

When adoring God we should, of course, unite ourselves with Christ, our Saviour, in His adoration, and with His

perfect sacrifice, which is continually being offered up all over the world. Any time we give ourselves to prayer we can recall that at that moment, somewhere, the great Sacrifice of the Mass is being offered up as the supreme act of adoration, that it is the offering of the Church, of which God in His goodness has made us members, and that in every Mass we are included when the priest prays “for all faithful Christians.”

2. *Thanksgiving.* Another way in which we can profitably pray is by thanking God for all He is to us and all He has done for us. As a rule, we do not thank God enough. There are many who will pray earnestly enough when they are asking a favour of God, but who are very slow to return thanks. Ten lepers were cured, but only one came back to give thanks (and Our Lord noticed the absence of the other nine). Let us think of all the benefits we have received from God. Have we thanked Him for even one in ten of His gifts? He has created us, He came on earth and redeemed us, He left us the Church, gave us the true faith, the Blessed Eucharist and the other sacraments, and is preparing a place for us in His own home. Then there are so many personal graces and favours bestowed on us in the course of life. Such wonderful gifts should excite our gratitude and make us eager to give thanks as best we can. We can pray, then, in a way that will be very pleasing to God, and very useful to ourselves, by thanking God for some particular grace or mark of His love, or for all the gifts which we have received from Him, not forgetting those which are hidden from us, and those which we sometimes fail to recognise as gifts, such as crosses and sufferings.

3. *Sorrow.* We have all to acknowledge that we are sinners. We have offended God more frequently and grievously than we can well realise. It is, of course, sufficient, in order to obtain forgiveness, that we should be truly sorry for these sins once. But when we remember God's infinite love for us, and our own great ingratitude, it is only right that we, should, again and again, try to renew and to express our sorrow for all our sins. It strengthens our love for God, and makes reparation to Him, while at the same time it helps to make and keep us humble. If we form the habit of frequently renewing our sorrow for sin, there is the further advantage that it is a great protection against future sin. We do not commit sin while there is hatred of sin in our souls. We commit sin because we forget the horrible nature of sin and the injury and insult it is to God. Therefore, by frequently, in time of prayer, renewing our sorrow for all the sin of our lives, we are paying a debt which we owe to God and are at the same time safeguarding ourselves against the greatest evil that could befall us.

4. *Love.* Gratitude and sorrow both prepare the way for love. Sometimes ordinary Catholics are inclined to think that acts of love of God, and prayer devoted to the expression of love, are only for chosen souls. This is not so. We are all children of God; our destiny is to be with God for ever, and to love Him with the whole force of our being. Therefore we can, and should, even in this world, practise what will be our occupation and our happiness throughout eternity. The more we learn to love God here, the more shall we be able to love Him, to our own greater happiness, when we reach home. We should not, therefore, regard the prayer of love as something unpractical and unsuitable for us. How many reasons we have for loving God, apart from the motives for gratitude already enumerated! We cannot help loving what is good and noble and beautiful. But in God we have Beauty itself and Goodness itself—Beauty and Goodness that have no limits.

The love that we are speaking of is not sentiment or feeling. Sometimes, it is true, the love of God will be accompanied by feelings of love; but love does not consist in feelings. It is the esteem of God above all the good things of earth, the readiness to surrender ourselves and all that we have to Him, and the determination not to let anything whatever in this world come between us and God. "O my God, my love, Thou art all mine and I am all Thine." These are the words of A Kempis, and we can use these or any other words in time of prayer to express and nourish our love of God. Or we can raise our hearts to God and love Him without any words at all. And practice will enable us to grow in love, and will make it easier for us to elicit these acts of love. We were created in order to love God, so that we are doing something that is natural to us when we devote some of our time of prayer to this exercise. We have an instinctive love for what is good; and God is good, beyond all our power of comprehension.

5. *Examination.* If we are to make progress spiritually, we must know ourselves. Unless we know our own character and habits, our faults and weaknesses, the virtues that need watching or developing, in any efforts we make we shall be just beating the air. We may examine our conscience sufficiently for the purpose of going to confession; but we may never really discover the roots of our faults, nor the way to eradicate them. We do not know what steps to take to strengthen our character, because we have never really studied it. We know we are wanting in charity or

humility or patience or some other virtue, but we have never taken the trouble to make any practical plan for developing and strengthening that virtue. Here is matter for consideration in the presence of God. We examine ourselves, not simply in order that we may benefit, but that we may serve God better. Examination is, therefore, a suitable subject for the time of prayer. We may examine our life in general, our conduct, our inclinations, our habits; or we may take some particular virtue, and consider how we can grow in it, or some particular fault, and consider the means to be taken in order to overcome it.

6. *Petition.* This is a very important part of prayer. By ourselves we are weak; indeed, we are helpless, for Our Lord tells us: "Without Me you can do nothing." We are, therefore, absolutely dependent upon the grace and help of God; and that grace and help will be ours if we show a readiness and desire to receive them. We do not ask for God's gifts with a view to overcoming any reluctance on the part of God to grant them; He is more willing to give than we could be to receive. But we ask because by so doing we dispose ourselves for His gifts; we thus open the door to God, Who is already waiting and knocking outside. God can do all things, and He loves us with a love which we cannot measure. Why, then, need we complain that we are so poor and helpless? It is better to be poor and helpless in ourselves, with God's power and love at our disposal, than to have some possessions and strength of our own, and have to depend entirely upon ourselves. What a marvellous power prayer gives us! "Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." That is the promise of Our Lord, and we must have complete faith in His word. He may not always grant our prayer in the way we think best (and it is well He does not!); but no prayer, offered in the right spirit, ever goes unheard. St. Monica prayed that her son, Augustine, might not leave her and go to Italy, for she was afraid that she would lose all influence over him; but he went to Italy and there got the grace of conversion, and became a great saint and doctor of the Church. Monica got her wish, the spiritual welfare of her son, but not in the way she had thought best. We often pray for a snake, and God gives a fish instead; we ask for what we think is bread, but is only a stone, and God gives us real bread instead. We should thank God for the prayers He has not answered—that is, has not answered in the way we wanted, for He is much wiser than we are. He knows all things, He can do all things, and He loves us. That is the foundation of our confidence in prayer.

If our prayer is to be pleasing to God and effective, we must have confidence, for want of confidence dishonours God, as it means that we doubt His love or His power; we must have humility, acknowledging our total dependence on God; we must be resigned to God's will, because His will is always best, and if we are asking for something that is contrary to His will we are asking for something that is not good, though we may think it is; we must persevere, thus showing our earnestness, as well as humility and confidence; and we must base all our petitions ultimately on the merits of Jesus Christ. So the Church always offers her prayers to God, "Through Christ Our Lord." "O eternal Father, Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ and my Father, He promised that whatever we should ask in His name Thou wouldst grant us; trusting in this promise, I humbly and earnestly beg this grace of Thee, through the most holy name, of Jesus, Thy dearly-loved Son and Our Lord and Saviour, if it be in accordance with Thy most holy will." If we pray in that way we have God's word for it that we shall be heard.

We can pray for ourselves, or we can pray for others. When we pray for ourselves, it would show very little sense if we prayed for nothing but temporal favours. There are far better gifts than these; and it cannot be very pleasing to God if we are always asking for temporal gifts and neglecting the far more precious spiritual treasures which God is so anxious to bestow upon us. Therefore, we should pray for grace to love God more, to be more humble and charitable, more obedient and zealous, and more inspired to devote ourselves to His service. When we pray for others, in the same way, we should try to obtain for them those spiritual blessings which will mean so much more than any material advantage. When we ask graces for others, we must remember that they are free to reject what God offers them. But still we can confidently ask that God will speak so persuasively to their hearts that they will be ready to accept the graces given. There are souls to be saved, sinners to be converted, non-Catholics waiting for the light of faith, Catholics tempted to abandon Christ, others suffering severe persecution, good works in need of support, evil influences to be overcome, souls in purgatory waiting for relief. How can any Catholic say that there is nothing he can do for the Kingdom of Christ? What wonderful things could be done if Catholics exerted the full power that prayer gives them!

7. *Confidence.* Confidence has already been mentioned as a disposition which we should have when we ask for

God's gifts. But making acts of confidence in God is in itself an excellent way of praying. We can think of God's knowledge, His love, and His power, so far beyond our comprehension, and the ground for confidence which they give us. The more we grow in confidence in God, the stronger we become, and the happier we are, while at the same time our confidence both honours and pleases God. There are some people whose whole lives would be changed if they only acquired true confidence in God. We can acquire this confidence, or an increased measure of it, if we frequently make acts of confidence and frequently dwell on the grounds for it. Without confidence in God, we cannot be a success in life; with deep confidence in Him, we cannot fail. That should urge us to cultivate this virtue.

8. *Talking to God.* Sometimes the most useful form of prayer is just talking to God. We have desires, we have aims, we have perplexities, we have needs; and there is no one to whom we can talk so freely about them as to God. The most understanding friend could not enter into our thoughts and wishes as God can do. The habit of talking to God can be acquired by practice. We need the help of faith. We must try to bring home to ourselves that God is really with us and wishes us to speak to Him. "O my God, I belong entirely to Thee. Thou by Thy power drew me out of nothing, in order that I might share in Thy divine life. I am Thine, and nothing can separate me from Thee. I wish to give myself to Thee, keeping nothing back. Thou art infinitely good; help me to love Thee as Thou shouldst be loved. I do not wish to have any other object in life than to love You and devote myself to Your service. I can do nothing of myself; but I know that Thou lovest me and will never fail me. Take complete possession of me, and live and work in me." In some such way as this we may try to express our desires and aims in the spiritual life, and thus develop a habit of intimacy with God. We may always have the same things to say, but that is rather an advantage than otherwise.

9. *Vocal Prayer.* In vocal prayer we commonly take words and thoughts that have already been prepared by others, and make them our own. It is a very useful and for most people a necessary form of prayer. There are the great prayers of the Church, which are suitable for all—the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and other common prayers, the Psalms, which the Church has made peculiarly her own through their recitation in the Divine Office, and the prayers of the Mass. The more thoughtfully and attentively we can recite our vocal prayers the better. The great danger of vocal prayer is of becoming so used to the form of words employed that we recite them merely mechanically. It is a danger which can only be avoided by care and attention, and a certain amount of routine is almost unavoidable. We must keep in mind that it is having our heart in vocal prayers that really makes them prayers, and that it is much more important to say our prayers well than to say many prayers. Many people would benefit if they said fewer prayers, but said them better. The advantage of this kind of vocal prayer is that it provides us with suitable thoughts and sentiments, without our having to trust to our own initiative. We can choose different prayers to suit different needs or different states of our soul, or merely to provide variety and freshness. It is well to take some trouble to find the kind of prayers that do suit us, because this type of vocal prayer is for most people the easiest form of prayer, and gives valuable training in the art of prayer in general. If used diligently and in a thoughtful manner, it leads people on easily to other, more personal, forms of prayer.

10. *A Development of Vocal Prayer.* One way in which we can use vocal prayer to help us on towards mental prayer is to take some vocal prayer phrase by phrase and ponder on it as well as we can. For example, we repeat the words, "Our Father," and instead of going on immediately to what follows, we think of what those words mean, and make whatever acts of love or trust or thanksgiving suggest themselves to us. Then, when we feel we have exhausted those words for the time, or find our attention beginning to wander, we go on to the next phrase, and so on during the rest of our time of prayer. We can use such prayers as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Confiteor, the Hail Holy Queen, the hymns to the Holy Spirit, the prayers of the Mass, or any other prayers which appeal to us. Besides the immediate benefit derived from this form of prayer, there is the further advantage that when we have thus gone through such prayers in this thoughtful manner, the prayers themselves, when used afterwards in the ordinary way, mean much more to us and provide much greater nourishment for our souls. If, for instance, we went through the chief prayers of the Mass in this way, a greater unction would cling to these prayers when used during Mass, even though we could not then delay upon them in the same way.

11. *Preparation for Mass and the Sacraments.* It may sometimes happen that people have to go to Mass in a hurry, and come away in a hurry. They have little time to recollect themselves beforehand, or to dwell afterwards on the significance of what they have been doing. The same may be true of Holy Communion. They may feel that they have

not the time they would like to prepare their souls for the coming of Our Lord. We know that when we receive the sacrament of penance, or any other sacrament, the grace we receive is proportionate to our dispositions. But our preparation for confession may sometimes be hurried, and we may lose much grace that we might receive if we made more careful preparation. One remedy for this state of affairs is, not to leave off our preparation till the time immediately before Mass or the reception of the sacraments. We can make it the subject of our prayer at other times. We can, for example, think and talk to Our Lord about the next Mass we are to hear, and try to realise what an important work it is, what a privilege it is to take part in it, and what we have to do as our share. Or we can think of our next Holy Communion, and make those acts of faith, humility, confidence, and desire, which will enable us to receive Our Lord. with so much more fruit. We may even prepare for Last Anointing, and make it a preparation for death.

12. *Contemplation.* One of the greatest needs of a Christian is to know his leader and model, Jesus Christ. We are good Christians in so far as we are like Christ. We are like branches grafted on to Him, the true Vine, and we are expected to bring forth fruit, that is, to practise the virtues that shone forth in Him. It is, therefore, necessary for us to know Him. If we really know Him we shall love Him; and if our love is genuine, we shall become like Him. Now we cannot know Christ unless we know the Gospels. We are well aware of the untruth of the Protestant charge that the Church discourages the reading of the Scriptures. But we must admit that we are not as diligent in reading them as the Church would wish. Nor is it sufficient merely to read the Gospels. We must live in its scenes and spend much time in company with Our Lord. Our object is to form His likeness in our souls. When a photograph is taken, there must be a sensitive film, other light must be excluded apart from that which comes from the object to be photographed, the object must be focussed, an exposure must be made, and afterwards the image must be developed. In the same way must we focus our gaze on Our Lord, exclude the sight of other things from our mind, spend some time in contemplation of Him, and by reflection try to develop His image in our souls.

An old writer (Ludolph of Saxony), whose book played a part in the conversion of St. Ignatius, writes: "Always and everywhere have Him devoutly before the eyes of your mind, in His behaviour and in His ways; as when He is with His disciples and when He is with sinners; when He speaks and when He preaches; when He goes forth and when He sits down; when He sleeps and when He wakes; when He eats and when He serves others; when He heals the sick and when He does His other miracles; setting forth to thyself in thy heart His ways and His doings; how humbly He bore Himself among men, how tenderly among His disciples, how pitiful He was to the poor, to whom He made Himself like in all things, and who seemed to be His own special family; how He despised none nor shrunk from them, not even from the leper; how He paid no court to the rich; how far He was from the cares of the world, and from trouble about the needs of the body; how patient under insult and how gentle in answering, for He sought not to maintain His cause by keen and bitter words, but with gentle and humble answer to cure another's malice; what composure in all His behaviour, what anxiety for the salvation of souls, for the love of whom He also deigned to die; how He offered Himself as the pattern of all that is good; how compassionate He was to the afflicted, how He condescended to the imperfection of the weak, how He despised not sinners; how mercifully He received the penitent, how dutiful He was to His parents, how ready in serving all, according to His own words, "I am among you as one that serveth"; how He shunned all display and show of singularity; how He avoided all occasions of offences; how temperate in eating and drinking, how modest in appearance, how earnest in prayer, how sober in His watching, how patient of toil and want, how peaceful and calm in all things." (Introduction to his Life of Christ.)

We must, therefore, in our prayer go to Bethlehem, and to Nazareth, and to the shores of the Sea of Galilee; to the hillsides where Our Lord prayed, and to the fields where He walked with His disciples; we must be with Him when He is preaching and working miracles, and when He is suffering and dying; we must share with the Apostles in the experiences of the forty days of the Risen Life. Our lives are wasted if we do not know and love Jesus Christ; but we cannot know Him if we do not study Him in the only authentic and inspired records of His earthly life, the Gospels. Here, then, is matter for prayer, to take the scenes in the Gospels one by one and enter into them; watch Our Lord, hear Him speak, note what He does; talk to Him, ask Him questions, and take His lessons to heart. We are already doing this when we say the Rosary or make the Stations of the Cross. We only need to extend the method further.

13. *Meditation.* We remember Our Lord's parable of the seed that fell on the hard ground and was picked up by the

birds of the air, and the seed that had not the depth of soil necessary in order to push its roots down deep, and so quickly withered when the drought came. There are many truths of faith which we say we believe, but these truths have not entered very deeply into our minds, nor do they influence very strongly our lives. There is a great difference between superficial knowledge and a profound knowledge. Meditation, or reflection, on God's truth is, therefore, of great profit to us. The great truths of our religion have a wonderful power of inflaming our minds and inspiring us to action, provided we can bring them home to ourselves. God and His rights over us, His plan for us in time and eternity, what we owe to Jesus Christ, the closeness of the union between Him and us, our supernatural life, death, the shortness of time, heaven, various points of the teaching of Our Lord—these are examples of subjects which we can take for the kind of prayer which contains a large element of reflection in it. It is not meant to be mere abstract reflection, but such as will inspire us with love of God and desire to do His will, and bring us into closer touch with Him. It will be well to map out our matter and have it in order. This will help to prevent aimless wandering of the mind. Thus, if we want to meditate upon humility, for example, we might divide the matter in this way: (1) what humility is and what it is not; (2) the importance of humility as seen from its own nature and from the teaching of Christ; (3) the application of the virtue in my life. It will probably be helpful to have notes or a book, in order to keep our minds on the subject in hand. We should begin by placing ourselves in the presence of God and asking Him to enlighten us and help us to understand His truth; then, using our imagination as well as our reason, we should try to learn something that will be for our good and enable us to serve God better. Some of the subjects which have been touched in these talks on the sacraments may serve as an introduction to this form of prayer; as for example, the supernatural life, the Mystical Body, the Blessed Trinity, the value of the Blessed Eucharist, the Sacrifice of the Mass, the value of the sacrament of penance, the dualities of true sorrow for sin, death, vocation to the priesthood, the dignity of marriage, mixed marriages, and the importance of prayer as set forth at the beginning of this talk. The truths of faith will influence our lives in the proportion in which we have pondered on them and tried to bring them home to ourselves.

The list of different ways of praying which has been suggested in the preceding pages could, of course, be extended. It makes no reference to higher forms of prayer to which God may lead the soul that is prepared for them. The methods here enumerated are not all separate and distinct methods, and they can be combined or varied in practice as may be found helpful. It must be remembered that the best method of prayer is the method that brings me closest to God, and sends me away more in earnest about loving and serving Him. Each one must, therefore, find out by practice and experience the kind of prayer that is most suitable, and be prepared to use different methods in different circumstances and in different needs of the soul. It is a wise thing to prepare for prayer, and to have some definite plan in mind, as a general rule, but if God takes possession of us during prayer and leads us by a way different from the one we had intended going ourselves, we must follow God's way and abandon our own. If we find that in our prayer we are in touch with God, loving Him, adoring Him, surrendering ourselves to Him, we must not let ourselves be drawn away from Him in order to pursue some line of thought we had prepared, or some subject we had intended to deal with. That can wait for some other time when it is wanted. The object of all our prayer is to lead us to God; when we get there (no matter what road we travel by) let us be content.

SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE

Difficulties will be met with in prayer, but most of them can be overcome through the experience born of continued effort and the help which can be confidently looked for from God. But some elementary advice may be given, which will make the path of the beginner easier.

1. "I cannot pray. Ask me to do anything else, but do not expect me to be a success at prayer." That is a sentiment which is often expressed. We must be quite clear, to begin with, that it is utterly wrong to say that we cannot pray. Prayer is necessary for our spiritual welfare, and is it likely that God will expect us to do what is impossible? We can all pray, because we can all try to pray. If we are making a real effort to pray, and to pray well, that will count for success in God's estimation. Therefore it is that we certainly can pray, because we can try to pray.

2. Persevere. The secret of success in prayer, as in so many other things, is to persevere. To keep on trying, no matter whether we seem to be making progress or not, is what is chiefly necessary. No one expects to be an expert

pianist without years of steady practice. "It is a great art to converse with God," and we must not expect to learn it all at once. Those who are keen on tennis will practise diligently, watch other players, read books on the subject, discuss the method of producing strokes, and perhaps get lessons from a coach. We must be prepared to take pains if we wish to become proficient at prayer. And it is worth the effort.

3. "I get no consolation from prayer. I am always cold and dry." That is another objection that is made. Now, in the first place, what we seek in prayer is spiritual strength rather than spiritual comfort; we pray in order that we may please God, and not that we may please ourselves. We can take consolation from the fact that even very good people often find prayer hard. "Alas, daughter," wrote St. Jane Francis de Chantal once in a letter, "my prayer is ordinarily but distraction and a little suffering." Suffering endured in prayer is often better than pleasure enjoyed in prayer. "In dryness and in barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness, then is thy prayer full pleasing to Me," said Our Lord once to Blessed Juliana of Norwich. When we pray in spite of dryness, we are proving that we are praying for God's sake, and not for our own pleasure. Dryness and coldness keep us humble, purify our love, make us strive more earnestly, increase our sense of dependence on God and bring us greater merit. Consolation, on the other hand, is often dangerous. We can accept consolation, when God gives it, humbly and thankfully, but we must not allow ourselves to become too attached to it. In this life we must be prepared for suffering; in eternity there will be undiluted happiness.

4. "I cannot keep away distractions." We shall not be blamed for distractions unless they are voluntary. If we fight against distractions, and keep doing our best to prevent our mind wandering, we are pleasing God, because we are taking trouble for His sake. Sometimes we can make the distractions the subject of our prayer. If there is something that is worrying us, for instance, and we cannot keep our mind off it, let us talk to Our Lord about it, and get light and comfort from Him.

5. Begin well. This itself is, to some extent, a protection against distractions. I want to bring my mind with me to prayer. Therefore, at the beginning I should be careful to collect my thoughts and think of what I am going to do. I should remember that I am in the presence of God, and make an act of faith in this. Then I should, very humbly, adore Him. Many people would find their prayer at once improved if they took pains in this way to make a good beginning.

6. I must remember, when I come to pray, that I am not forcing myself on someone who is not interested in me, and does not want to be bothered with me. I am speaking to one who loves me more than I could ever realise, who has given me my life and all I have, who has wonderful plans for me, and is interested in everything that concerns me. Here I must exercise my faith, on which the success of prayer so greatly depends. If I really believe that God loves me, personally, and that He wants me to be with Him and speak to Him, prayer will be easier.

7. The reading of spiritual books prepares the way for prayer, as it makes us interested in spiritual things and provides us with the thoughts that will be useful during prayer. Besides the Gospels and the Imitation of Christ, which every Catholic should have at hand, and sometimes read, there is a host of spiritual books to suit all tastes. Though we should read spiritual books for profit, and not for amusement, the modern spiritual book is anything but dull and unattractive.

8. It has been said that the way to pray well is to pray always: This is only repeating Our Lord's advice, "You must always pray." This does not mean that we must always be consciously directing our minds to God; but that we should form the habit of turning to God frequently, and of doing all our actions for Him. At prayer we do not, so to speak, charge a battery, and then go away and draw on it. It should be rather as if we were constantly linked up with the electricity supply. We are not to come to God occasion-ally and then go away from Him. We should be close to Him always, working with Him and for Him, trying to make our thoughts, words, and actions worthy of Him, ready to turn to Him in case of need, or to renew our offering of ourselves to Him. We can, without great trouble, cultivate the habit of ejaculatory prayer. Then, when we are free to set aside other things in order to pray, we are not coming into a strange atmosphere, nor have we to assume an entirely different spirit.

9. Self-denial is a word that has an unpleasant sound, but we cannot be good Christians without self-denial; nor can we make much advance at prayer without the spirit of self-denial. Those who are in earnest about prayer are seeking to cultivate the love of God and to find their happiness in Him. But this effort is to a large extent nullified if there is too great an attachment to the pleasures of this world. "Whoever will be a friend of this world becomes an enemy of God," says St. James. We cannot have a taste for the things of God while giving ourselves unrestrainedly to

worldly things. It is hard for human nature, but Our Lord's word stands: "Unless you renounce yourself you cannot be My disciple." Here is a mistake which many make. They are always looking for pleasure and amusement and their own satisfaction; and then they wonder why prayer and union with God have no attraction for them. So, if we would be successful at prayer, we must learn to deny ourselves; if we would rise towards God, we must first cut the bonds that bind us to material things.

10. If we are to make progress in prayer, we must do our best when we pray. Practising the piano carelessly does more harm than good. Careless prayer does not make us more spiritual, nor set us on fire with the love of God. Therefore, once again, quality is more important than quantity. When we come to prayer we must try to give ourselves completely to God, and stir up genuine love in our hearts. No amount of cold water will send a heavy train hurtling along the track. It is only when that water is converted into steam that the train glides along like a living thing. When a steep grade is reached, then the stoker must get to work and increase the fire. We have the same task to do in our prayer. But stoking is hard work.

11. Finally, we must ask God to teach us to pray. Sometimes people complain that they find prayer hard, and that, in spite of all their efforts, they do not seem to be making any progress. You inquire whether they ask God for help frequently and earnestly, and they have to admit that they do not. But we cannot hope to succeed without God's help, and He is longing to help us if we only turn to Him. "If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the good spirit to them that ask Him." The spirit of prayer is a "good spirit"; Our Lord tells us where we can obtain it. Sometimes we may feel in ourselves the desire to lead better lives, and to do more in the cause of Christ the King; but we do not know where to begin. It would be safe to begin with prayer. If we introduce more prayer into our lives, and, above all, if we make our prayer better prayer, the results are sure to follow. Just as, when the rains come after drought, the face of the earth is transformed; there is bright green where there was only drab brown, and growth where everything had seemed dead. So may we expect to find, through prayer, a transformation in our souls; new warmth and colour, new light and vigour. The effects are infallible if we persevere in prayer. We become more intimately united with Christ, and the divine life which we derive from Him pulses more strongly in our souls.

With ambition to work for the salvation of souls and the spread of the Kingdom of Christ may go a certain blindness about the necessity of first developing our own spiritual life. The influence of Christ can be spread only by those who are filled with the spirit of Christ. A lamp will give no light till it is lit; a fire will give no heat till it is burning. The further we want a beacon to shine over the countryside the more brightly must it blaze itself. That is why all Catholic Action must begin in the soul. Study, planning, discussion, are all good, but there must be the spiritual change in the soul or the Catholic Actionist will be such only in name. The most elaborate electric fittings will be of no use (except for ornament) unless the electric current is available. The most perfect system of irrigation channels will be of no use to the man on the land unless there is water in the storage reservoirs.

To save the world we must bring Christ into it. It is our vocation, as Catholics, to do that. The way to begin is to be more earnest and diligent in the use of the two great means of grace, prayer and the sacraments.

SUMMARY

1. The meaning of Prayer.
2. The importance of prayer as (a) a duty, (b) a necessity, and (c) a source of happiness.
3. Morning and evening prayers.
4. Prayer during the day.
5. Some ways of learning to pray.
6. Some difficulties and some roads to success.
7. The one thing necessary.

EXAMPLE OF DEVELOPMENT OF VOCAL PRAYER

THE OUR FATHER

Father:

A perfect Father, who says He will have mercy "more than a mother"; it is Our Lord Himself who taught me to call Him Father; He has truly a father's love and care for me; to Him I owe all the love and respect I can give.

Our:

He is my Father, but Father of all as well; therefore they are my brothers and sisters; I cannot call Him Father if I am not also acknowledging their relationship to me; we are all one family of God.

Who art in heaven:

Heaven, where there is no unhappiness, no shadow of evil, but all that is good. Heaven is my Father's home, and therefore my home, too. I am certain of reaching it if I am faithful to my sonship.

Hallowed be Thy name:

May God be blessed! Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit! May God be blessed in Himself and in all His works: whatever may befall me, I will always try to say, "Blessed be God."

Thy kingdom come:

That God may rule over all; for that I must pray and for that I must work. It was the object of Christ's work on earth, the establishment of the Kingdom of God. How happy would the world be if God's kingship were universally acknowledged.

Thy will be done:

May that holy will be done in my regard and in regard to all things. God's will is always best, even when it means suffering for me. I can choose nothing higher or holier than the will of God; I can make no better use of my will than to bend it into conformity with God's will.

On earth as it is in heaven:

That is the ideal we must aim at, that God's name may be blessed, and His kingship be established, and His will be done, to the same extent on earth as in heaven. Thus will earth become more like heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread:

Provide what we need for our bodily welfare, so that we may be able to serve You. Give the nourishment which our souls need; light to understand the truth, wisdom to see things as they really are, strength to cling to what is good and resist the fascination of evil.

This day: I do not ask to be made rich and independent of God, which is impossible; I am content to depend on him from day to day, knowing He will never fail me.

Forgive us our trespasses:

One of our greatest needs is for mercy and forgiveness, and God is an ocean of mercy. We ask, not because of merits of our own, but because God is good.

As we forgive them that trespass against us:

We ask for mercy because we give it. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." If, therefore, we want God to be quick and generous in forgiving us our great offences, we must be quick and generous in forgiving the much smaller offences committed against us. "Forgive and you shall be forgiven."

And lead us not into temptation:

Do not allow us, O Father, to be overcome by the temptations which we must meet with. Be with us always, and keep firm hold of us, that we be not carried away from You by the waters of temptation. Whatever the temptation, we can always trust to receive the help we need.

But deliver us from evil:

Evil is the only thing we need fear; nothing else can harm us. Evil always threatens while we are in this world; but God is strong; he can and will deliver us if we are earnest in prayer. "For those who love God all things work together for good."

Amen:

So may it be. I pray the prayer Jesus Christ, Your Son, taught us; may all its petitions be granted through His merits. Amen, amen.

POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION OR DISCUSSION

1. What connection has prayer with the sacraments?
2. Why is prayer a duty, and a primary duty?
3. Does my practice show that I am convinced that my success in life depends on prayer?
4. Where do I chiefly seek to satisfy my instinctive craving for happiness, in God or outside Him?
5. Is there anything which prevents my morning and evening prayers being well said? Have I any plan for meeting the difficulty?
6. Outside fixed times for prayer do I ever raise my mind to God?
7. Is it a good thing to keep my religion entirely to myself as a personal thing?
8. People may be offended if I make the sign of the cross in public. What do I think of that objection?
9. Is there real reverence and a spirit of adoration in my prayer?
10. What is the proportion of acts of thanksgiving to acts of petition in my prayer?
11. Do I ever make acts of sorrow except when I am preparing for confession?
12. Should true love for God be considered beyond the capacity of ordinary Catholics?
13. Do I know myself and my faults sufficiently? Have I definite plans for bringing about improvement? Do I ever seriously examine myself?
14. "Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." Do I really believe in that promise?
15. God is more than any friend to me. Do I converse with Him as I like to converse with real friends?
16. Is there any book written which is more important for a Christian than the Gospels? Can I say that my knowledge of them corresponds with their importance?
17. Am I satisfied with just assenting to the truths of faith, or do I try seriously to understand and appreciate them by making them the subject of prayer?
18. "I cannot pray." Can that statement be made truthfully by anyone?
19. Is it a safe conclusion that my prayer cannot be good, or beneficial to myself, because I find it dull and hard?
20. Am I in the habit of thinking seriously of what I am going to do before I begin to pray? Do I always try to make a good beginning?
21. "You must always pray." Have I paid any attention to this advice of Our Lord's? Am I trying to carry it out?
22. Do I realise that there is a connection between prayer and self-denial? Am I making the mistake of trying to separate them?
23. The Apostles said to Our Lord, "Teach us to pray." Are we trying to succeed without the same teacher?
24. The foliage, flowers, and fruit of the tree depend on something hidden from the eye. Am I looking for outward results in my life without the corresponding hidden thing in my soul?
25. Would it be hard to use other vocal prayers in the way suggested above for the Our Father?
