

12. IF YOU DO NOT KNOW HOW TO PRAY

Just pray

Prayer is an expression of our relationship with God, and it brings us closer to Him. There is no fixed way to pray, and there is no definite content for prayers. We can use fixed formulated prayers such as the Rosary or the chaplet of Divine Mercy or simply our own words to express ourselves. If it comes from our hearts, it will connect us with God.

Some forms of prayer are meaningless. Occasionally, we may receive emails such as the following: “The world is coming to an end. To save the world, please pray punctually at 3 pm every day, light three candles and recite the Lord’s Prayer three times.” With such emails, I will drop them into the trash bin immediately. Sometimes, an email may read: “Please pray for Sister XXX... She needs XXX... Please do not delete because her life depends on your prayer.” This seems to imply that the more prayers gathered, the more effective the prayer would be. It appears to be “gathering signatures” and pressuring God to comply with our wishes. What if this person has few friends? Does that mean her prayer will never gather enough support, and therefore will be ignored by God?

The Right Attitude

To think that I can form a pressure group to force God, or to think that God is obliged to follow my way is absurd. Such a mindset treats prayer as a manipulation to impose one’s will upon God.

Prayers are not granted based on the amount of time spent or the number of people praying. God's grace is gratuitous and unrelated to our efforts. Faith is not the belief that our wishes must be granted. Faith is our trust and confidence in the loving God. True prayer unites our will with God's will; as Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt 26:39).

Prayer is a sincere communication with God, which may include seeking God's help for our daily needs, thanking Him for His blessings, asking for wisdom in moments of difficulties, or pleading for forgiveness when we sin. All these prayers show how we can confide in God trustingly. We now discuss briefly these various contents of prayers.

Praising God

Some of us have the habit of using "praise" and "thanksgiving" interchangeably. In fact, they have different meanings. Praise allows us to focus on who God is – expressing our appreciation of Him and professing our faith and adoration.

When we acknowledge who God is, we say, "God, you are..." For example, "You are our father who loves us deeply," "You are faithful; you never break your promise," "You are all-knowing; everything is clear to you," and "You are our creator, the source of life and love." All these are phrases of praise.

Prayers of praise are expressed in the joys of a living union with God. Our praises strengthen our appreciation for God. God reveals Himself as "I am", meaning that God is all encompassing. He is all that we have and all that we need. He is not limited by anything. In the dimension of

time, He is “in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.” In the dimension of space, He is omnipresent. Words that express our admiration of His goodness are words of praise.

Our praises of God do not mean that God needs us to cheer Him on or to give Him a pat on the shoulder. They are our recognition of who God is. We acknowledge His greatness and sovereignty, and we profess our loyalty and submission to Him.

Listening to God

We need nourishment from the Word of God in our daily lives because “man does not live on bread alone”. The Word of God elevates us to a higher level of existence, allowing us to discover the true meaning of life. Listening to the Word of God allows Him to take the initiative to speak to us. As such, reading precedes listening. By seeing with our eyes, reading with our mouth, and listening with our ears, we use different senses to appreciate God’s words.

As we read the Bible, certain verses may resonate in us and evoke feelings of excitement, consolation, sorrows, or remorse. Touched by the Spirit, we should reread the verses carefully, listen intently, and let God speak to us while we humbly submit to Him.

Reading Bible verses is only one way of listening to God’s voice. When we are not reading the Bible, listening to God’s voice requires silence. A quiet moment will allow us to “hear” God’s inspiration in our hearts.

Repentance

To repent is to recognise the sins of an individual, family, community, country, and the world. Confessing our sins signifies our awareness of the presence of evil and our trust in God's love and mercy. The motivation for repentance comes from the benevolent God. It is because He is full of mercy and forgiveness that we have the courage to plead for His pardon, "God, have pity on us sinners!"

Psalms 51 is a very sincere prayer of repentance. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so, you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely, I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

Petition

To petition God is to confide in Him our needs. We entrust all matters big or small, personal or communal to God. Nothing is considered too trivial. While we pray for our

spiritual needs, we should not be afraid to pray for “worldly” matters. God cares for us in every aspect of life.

St. Paul challenged us in his letters to the Philippians (4:6-7), “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” When we are burdened with worries, we should be quick to cast all our anxieties onto Him. If we rely only on ourselves to resolve problems, we miss out on divine help.

Jesus said, “Your Father knows even before you ask for anything” (Matt 6:8). If that is the case, do I still need to pray? Prayer is not about informing God of our needs; it is expressing our relationship with Him and sharing our experiences with Him. Petition prayer shows the awareness of our limitations. It is appropriate to express our inadequacy and show our trust in God.

We do not seek God’s help only during emergencies or when we are faced with a dead end. Our trusting attitude do not change. Like a branch that cannot bear fruit after breaking off from the tree, we can do nothing if we drift away from God.

Thanksgiving

St. Paul says to “rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (The 5:16-18). We believe that all gifts come from God and thus do not be possessive of them. Thanksgiving expresses the sense of gratitude for the gifts we have received. Not only in good times are we grateful but also in times of troubles, we continue to thank

God for we believe that “in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rm 8:28).

The following narrative provides a glimpse of how we can always be thankful: I prayed for joy, but God did not answer. He said that joy is a by-product of living God's will, gotten through practise. I prayed for patience, but God did not answer. He said that patience is a by-product of coming through ordeals, gotten through training. I prayed for God to take away my pain, but He did not answer. He said that pain gives me perseverance and devotion, allowing me to come closer to Him. I prayed for God to rid me of my bad habits, but He did not answer. He said that bad habits are not for Him to remove but for me to give up. I prayed for my handicapped child to be healthy and whole but God did not answer. He said that my child's everlasting soul is wholesome, but his physical body is only temporary. I prayed for God to bless me with many materials things to enjoy but God did not answer. He said, “I have given you life so you can enjoy everything.” I prayed for God's kingdom and His virtues to help me love others as I love myself. He said, “You have finally understood what I meant.”

Conclusion

To learn to pray is to start to pray. Pray any way you know. You may learn other ways of prayers in the future. Right now, just pray the way you can. If you are not satisfied with the way you pray now, ask God to lead you. Read some spirituality books and humbly ask your friends for guidance. The methods are not important; it is the willingness to pray that counts. If you persevere in prayer,

you will soon find a way that suits you. What is then the best way to pray? It is relating to God with a sincere heart!