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Varieties of Prayer

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Varieties of Prayer

Individuals might say of their prayer: "Oh, I had a very good prayer-time yesterday." Or, "I don't know if I was really praying." Or, "Praying is so hard." Our experiences of prayer differ, for any cross-section of people or for any one individual as do our experiences of love. We know what we mean by "love" and by "prayer," but if we talk about what happens inside us regarding either reality, none of us will use the exact same expressions as anyone else.

If prayer were primarily an activity of our own doing, some rules for judging the quality of prayer would follow the kinds of reasoning and evaluation that we use for football or snow-boarding. But prayer, like communication between friends, is more about an experience of mutuality than about individual performances.

We can say of any particular experience of prayer that we found it satisfying or not, just as we can speak of a delightful conversation that we enjoyed with a friend or a painful misunderstanding that took place. Every relationship includes some interactions that are memorable for their positive qualities, and some that were hurtful and best not recalled. But a good relationship continues through moments beautiful and ugly. Love actually grows, for most of us, in facing and seeking to resolve some of the dissonances that occur between persons. In relating with God in prayer, we will sometimes present ourselves with complete trust, and at other times we might be filled with doubts and negative thoughts. We do not enjoy painful moments when they occur, but through them we come to know ourselves as the growing and "incomplete projects" that God loves.

If we appreciate the thoughts and interior movements that take place within us when we pray, we will be inclined to continue in the same manner, just as we consistently use particular modes of expression that we discovered were helpful in our friendships. If we are not satisfied with our prayer, we might find help in recalling that we are attempting to engage in a conversation of two persons, not a monologue. We have many options open to us. We do not have to continue praying in the same manner, just because "we have always done it that way."

In most conversations, one person does more of the listening, and another more of the talking. But a listener often communicates as much or more than a speaker by his or her attitude, eye-contact, gestures, and demeanor. In prayer, God might seem more of a

listener, while we do most of the talking. But if we are not finding satisfaction in prayer, we might need to attend more closely to the very soft-spoken words and especially the non-verbal communication that God sometimes uses. The point of a conversation between friends is as much about conveying trust and affection as in relating facts to each other. In prayer, we will find that honestly expressing what is in our hearts receives encouragement, while focusing on "the right words" while neglecting our feelings of fear, anger, or affection might well receive the equivalent of a friends' look of incomprehension.

When we talk with friends, we do not concern ourselves overmuch with correct grammar and as careful a selection of words as we might when writing a message, because we are familiar with one another's intentions. When we pray, we are in the presence of someone whose concern is us, not the correctness of our language, or even the level of our self-understanding. We can communicate with God in words, in sentiments, and in desires. We can choose to let God see us as we are at any particular moment, and that too will be prayer.

If we choose to use a formal prayer, such as The Lord's Prayer, or some other written prayer, we might find improved communication by paying careful attention to what happens within us as we say the words. Do we feel reverence, peace, or joy? Do the words match our sentiments; do they speak for us? In a similar fashion, we can use the words of a Psalm or another piece of sacred writing, and note the effect upon us. We have more than one way of communicating with friends; we have even more options in relating with God.

We do not see God with our physical eyes, so some practices of prayer that help to bring us into personal contact are a little different than the means we might use in relating with someone we can see. We can write a note to God, in which we express ourselves without concern for literary niceties. After a slight pause, we could write out God's response. Our hands will not be moved by some invisible power, but we can expect that the God of our faith, hope and love will gently inspire our attempts at writing what God might say to us. Our hearts will likely be touched in the process of such writing.

However we pray we are never completely on our own. Every inclination to pray, every mode, manner, and intention that occurs within us has something of God's Spirit already at work in us. Sometimes, the most suitable prayer begins with a quiet request of God: "Please start a prayer in me."