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Prayer, God's Gift and Initiative in Our Lives

Prayer, as Blessed John Paul II taught us, is the breath of the Holy Spirit. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen used to say that his daily hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament was like “an oxygen tank that revived the breath of the Holy Spirit” (*USCCA* 461). St. Thérèse of Lisieux writes: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy” (*CCC* 2558). At its foundation, however, the desire for God of each one of us, a desire written on the human heart, is expressed and experienced in different ways. And we call it prayer. Moreover, we are challenged by St. Paul to pray constantly, yet so many things come between us and the voice of God. Our God so desires to spend time with us, to speak to us, to listen to us. And he really listens to us.

Prayer is important—indeed essential—to our spiritual lives, to growth in our spiritual lives. Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said: “I think the basis of any Christian spiritual growth is prayer and the Word of God. When these two things are not there, we are not connected to Jesus, and without him we can do nothing.”

We are all on a journey of prayer and, undoubtedly, each of us seeks and desires to grow in prayer, to find a special out-of-the-way place where we regularly meet Jesus, and to make prayer a continual part of our daily lives. But oh, the challenges that we face in our efforts to cultivate a life of prayer! They are not foreign to me. My daily struggle begins as soon as I awake each morning. Do I turn on the computer to check my e-mail or do I open my breviary and dedicate that time in the early hours of the morning—fresh and good time—to God? At the break of dawn, do I pray that beautiful line from Psalm 55: “O God, listen to my prayer, do not hide from my pleading, attend to me and reply”? Or are the headlines of the paper seemingly more important? It is at that very moment that I must make a choice. How I resolve that choice surely affects the rest of my day. Each of us has a similar challenge as we seek to follow and find the Lord Jesus and make him central to our lives.

Christian life, of necessity, is marked by much outward activity and a corresponding need for regular inner retreat. We need a time and a place to wrestle with our own hearts before God. Without this inner retreat, the Christian life runs the risk of being simply a facade. Too much activity without reflection can also lead to burnout. A lack of spiritual nourishment leaves us directionless, helpless, and very vulnerable to the seductions and attacks of the evil one.

It is always difficult to find quiet time for God in prayer. But how rewarding it is once it becomes a part of our daily routine! It has changed my life as a priest. After much struggle and experimentation, I have finally settled on the early hours of the morning as the best

time to pray—before all the normal demands of an active day intrude. What is the best time in your daily schedule for you to pray? It might take some experimentation, but once you have figured it out, your life will never be the same. I can attest to that.

We know from the gospel accounts that even Jesus was challenged to find a place for quiet prayer. He routinely went off to the desert to pray, and especially took time to commune with his Father before every major decision in his life. It was a struggle for him to find this space and time. Jesus' own struggle in this area should instruct each of us, his followers, and encourage us in our efforts.

The Gift of God

Jesus tells us so much about prayer in the gospels. I would like to focus on just one passage that is not often considered as a passage about prayer, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:4–15). Jesus, on a journey passing through Samaria, was tired and sat down by a well, Jacob's well. It was like an oasis in the desert. So often each of us is tired from the deadlines of life, from the pressures of work, and each of us looks for an oasis in our own lives, somewhere to get away to in order to be refreshed, a quiet place. Certainly that was Jesus' intent. But what happens? Almost immediately, Jesus is interrupted. He encounters a woman, an unnamed Samaritan woman.

Jesus is not disturbed by this interruption but sees it as an opportunity to invite this woman to a conversion of heart. And in doing so, he teaches us a lesson on prayer. Jesus speaks first. He initiates the conversation.

Even though she was coming to the well for water herself, he addresses her, saying, "Give me a drink."

The Samaritan woman shows surprise: "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman for a drink?" As a woman, she expected to be ignored. Furthermore, as a Samaritan woman, she could not believe that a Jew would even talk to her. Such an encounter never happened. But from Jesus she received respect and understanding.

Jesus then said to her: "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." For St. John, in whose gospel this dialogue is found, the "gift of God" is the Holy Spirit. Jesus was saying that if she knew that he could give her the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Spirit would be gushing in her like a fountain of water. And that is his gift to her and to each of us.

The Catechism teaches: "Every time we begin to pray to Jesus it is the Holy Spirit who draws us on the way of prayer" (CCC 2670). "The Holy Spirit, whose anointing permeates our whole being, is the interior Master of Christian prayer. He is the artisan of the living tradition of prayer" (CCC 2672). In this sense, prayer is the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

Pointing to the well, Jesus says: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." St. Hippolytus (in a sermon on the Epiphany) describes this water as "the water of the Spirit. . . . It is the water of Christ's baptism; it is our life." Yes, by Baptism, we become temples of the Holy

Spirit. The Holy Spirit is like a fountain of water welling up within us. The woman then said to Jesus: "Sir give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

How does this particular passage, this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, deepen our understanding of prayer? The Catechism gives us a clear answer:

"If you knew the gift of God!" The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him. (CCC 2560)

Yes, prayer is God's gift to us. It is the power of his Holy Spirit gushing like a fountain within us. And he is always taking the initiative. From the Common Preface IV at Mass, we pray: "Father . . . You have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift." In effect, our desire to pray is his gift.

The Initiative of God

So often, we view prayer primarily as our initiative. We think we need to master one of the thousand how-to books on prayer before we can even begin. This erroneous belief may even impede us from prayer.

Prayer often intimidates us. We view it as complicated or confusing, difficult, perplexing, and mysterious.

What the Catechism teaches from the very beginning is quite the opposite. At its basis, prayer is God's initiative in our lives. He comes to us. He comes to everyone as he came to the least likely person, a Samaritan woman. We are no different. That should give us encouragement as we seek to pray in our lives. That should give us a renewed sense of confidence.

Hopefully, that thought is reassuring. When you begin to pray, always remember Jesus—tired from his journey—taking the initiative at the well with a foreign woman, a Samaritan woman. “God thirsts that we may thirst for him” (CCC 2560). That is prayer. Pope Benedict teaches, moreover: “Each one of us can identify ourselves with the Samaritan woman: Jesus awaits us . . . to speak to our hearts, to my heart. Let us pause a moment in silence, in our room, or in a church, or in a place apart. Let us listen to the voice that says: ‘If you knew the gift of God’” (Angelus, March 27, 2011). Listening is prayer.

Each of us, without exception, thirsts for God, for a God who is beyond us and yet near to us. As we travel on our life journeys, often tired from the challenges we face, it is in that very thirst, that desire for an oasis where our thirst can be quenched, that we find him. It is our deepest longing. The surge toward heaven in our hearts is God's action, the action of his Holy Spirit within us. When we yield to God, to God's actions within us, it is then that we pray. The gift of prayer is God's most generous and wonderful gift to us.

I conclude this chapter with the beautiful words of St. John Chrysostom. He writes: