

Be Not Afraid

**Bishop John M. LeVoir's Monthly Column
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Prayer

In Baptism, we receive the virtue of faith. This virtue is: "Both a gift of God and a human act by which the believer gives personal adherence to God who invites his response, and freely assents to the whole truth that God has revealed" (*CCC*, Glossary). Faith is no small gift from God. It is a great gift and is so great that it is called a mystery. Faith is mysterious because we can know some things about it, but not all.

What are we to do with this great gift of faith? The *Catechism* teaches: "Great is the mystery of the faith! This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer" (*CCC*, no. 2558). It is prayer that I would like to comment on.

One of the basic truths of our faith is that God loves us. This will always be God's attitude toward us. It can be nothing else, since God is love (see *1 John* 4:16). This means that God always wants what is best for us and will help us to achieve that which is best for us.

God's love for us calls for a response on our part. A response to love is something that we experience in our daily life. When someone does something good for us, we naturally and without thinking want to do something good for them. This is how it should be between God and us. He has given us our lives and all that follows from the gift of life. God the Son gave Himself to us for our salvation. Our response should be to give ourselves back to God in gratitude and love.

Prayer is a deep expression of our love for God. "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God" (*CCC*, no. 2559). In other words, prayer is the raising of our whole person to God. It is giving of ourselves to God as He has given Himself to us in creating us and in saving us.

Writing or talking about prayer is one thing, but to do it is another. Prayer is difficult. It takes effort. One veteran priest that I know went on a retreat. He came back to the parish and told his parishioners that on retreat he discovered the most important thing about prayer. They were all curious as to what it was. The veteran priest simply responded: "To do it!" Even great saints experienced difficulty in "doing" prayer. When at prayer in the convent chapel, St. Teresa of Avila had to hold tightly onto the pew in order to keep herself from leaving the chapel.

Nevertheless, if we wish to bind ourselves in love to God, prayer is essential. In a certain sense, prayer is more important for us today than it has ever been. At the conclusion of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, Pope John Paul II encouraged us to cast our nets into the deep (see

Luke 5:4). In other words, the Pope called us to go forward from the jubilee and to trust in God and live our faith to the fullest.

John Paul quickly added that this could not be done without prayer. “It is important however that what we propose, with the help of God, should be profoundly rooted in contemplation and prayer. Ours is a time of continual movement which often leads to restlessness, with the risk of ‘doing for the sake of doing.’ We must resist this temptation by trying ‘to be’ before trying ‘to do.’ Trying ‘to be’ means spending time in prayer in order to unite ourselves to God before trying ‘to do’” (*At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, no. 15).

How are we to pray? Any way in which we lift our minds and hearts to God is prayer. Prayer is done with familiar prayers as well as prayer in our own words. Familiar prayers are the “Our Father” and “Hail Mary;” the Rosary; “Morning Prayer” and “Evening Prayer” from the Liturgy of the Hours; and many other familiar prayers that are found in prayer books. Prayers in our own words come from the heart and speak to the heart of God. These prayers are different for each one of us.

Using Scripture for prayer is a most excellent practice. Pope Benedict XVI has declared a year of St. Paul to be celebrated until next June 29. A good idea would be to use the life and writings of St. Paul as material for meditation and prayer. Through his life and writings, we can allow St. Paul to lead us to the heart of God. In addition, using one of the Gospels for meditation would unite us more closely to God. I usually suggest beginning with the Gospel of Matthew.

The highest form of prayer is the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, especially Sunday Mass. It is at Mass that we meet Our Lord in a most personal way. Individually and as a community, we are united to Him in the Mass prayers, the Scripture readings, and the reception of His Body and Blood. This meeting with Christ is made more meaningful for us when we review periodically the Church’s understanding of the Mass. There are many resources for this. One such resource is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In addition, flowing from the Mass is Eucharistic adoration. Adoration has helped many to contemplate more profoundly the mystery of Christ and to cast their nets into the deep.

Just because prayer is difficult, that does not mean that prayer is for only a few. Each of us is called to pray each day. Pope John Paul reminds us: “But it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but ‘Christians at risk.’ They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined, and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of ‘substitutes,’ accepting alternative religious proposals and even indulging in far-fetched superstitions” (*At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, no. 34).

Once united closely to God in love through prayer, we are ready to trust in God and live our faith to the fullest. The fruit of prayer is a life of charity. Again, going to Pope John Paul, we read: “Yes, dear brothers and sisters, our Christian communities must become *genuine ‘schools’ of prayer*, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly

‘falls in love.’ Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan” (*At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, no. 33).