

LESSON 12

SPIRITUAL COMBAT

BACKGROUND READING



The opportunity to pray to God is first and foremost a gift, but it also requires us to do something, to respond to Him. This response is not always easy. In fact, we encounter many obstacles in the life of prayer. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God. We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. The ‘spiritual battle’ of the Christian’s new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer” (CCC 2725).

The battle of prayer, then, is against our own weaknesses, temptations, failures, distractions, and laziness. It is also a battle against the work of the devil himself, who wants nothing more than to pull us away from God. And God wants us to bring this battle directly to Him. To be successful in the battle of prayer, we must humbly recognize that we cannot do it alone. We must trust in God to hear our prayer and we must persevere against all obstacles.

Distraction

Distraction is easily one of the most difficult and common obstacles to prayer. This is also a particular challenge in our present day and age. In the less electronically dominated past, there were natural moments of quiet, and places where someone could retire for stillness. Now the sounds and flashes of technology drown out environments helpful to introspection. Not only that, our minds are no longer trained to remain focused on a single activity for a significant amount of time. We bounce from one thing to the next, check our phones, post on social media, all while in the middle of a conversation, our work, or the other things that ought to require our full attention. These mental habits are counter-productive to the life of prayer, and we should strive to be aware of how much the modern culture of distraction at large gets in the way of our talking to God.

Think of a conversation you’ve had with someone else when you were too distracted to pay attention to what the other person was saying. You noticed something else that was going on in the room, you could not follow the other person’s train of thought, or your mind wandered to your daily to-do

list. Compare this to an intimate conversation you've had when both you and someone else were listening to each other and sharing your thoughts. You were truly learning about each other and strengthening a relationship. Now, if paying attention to someone shows that you value that other person, how much more important is it for us to give God our full attention? When we talk to God, we should make ourselves fully present to Him, showing that we value Him above everything else.

All this is not to say that we should become terribly discouraged when we face distraction. God does understand that prayer is a battle for us. He knows that we are easily influenced by our senses: those things that we can touch, hear, and see. When we are distracted, the most effective way of dealing with our distractions is to offer them up to God, humbly accepting that we cannot pray on our own. However, we should also be forming habits to counteract our distractions. Just as the physical world can seem more real to us than the spiritual world because we encounter reality with our senses, so too do our external surroundings affect our internal disposition. We should ask ourselves: Do we try to still our mind before beginning to pray? Do we enter a quiet room and put away our phones? Are our bodies slouched while praying, or are we kneeling or sitting straight? These physical and external realities influence our prayer lives, as well as cultivate an attitude of reverence when we pray.

Dryness

Another obstacle to prayer is dryness: when we pray and we feel that no one is listening. Sometimes God graces those who pray with the gift of feeling His presence, or feeling

united to Him. It is easy to mistake these feelings as the only sign of the presence of God in our lives. Not only that, we can also fall into the temptation of praying to achieve those feelings, instead of making God the sole reason that we pray. Society today encourages us to evaluate things in light of how they make us feel, so that if we don't receive immediate satisfaction from something, then it is not worthwhile. This can often be an excuse for not attending Mass. Some find Mass too dry or difficult, or feel that they get more out of solitary prayer. But prayer isn't about us or our feelings. It's about working on our relationship with God and giving Him the worship that is His due. In fact, God often removes the feeling of His presence to those who are advanced in prayer to purify their motivation for prayer. If we pray unceasingly when dryness sets in, then this prayer is an act of faith. We know that our prayers are heard even though we feel like there is no response. This dryness will eventually be lifted, and we will be more closely united to God than ever.

Another reason for dryness in prayer, however, is because we lack sufficient faith for God's Word to take root and live in our hearts. If that is the case, what is necessary for a life of prayer is conversion of the heart.

Lack of Faith

Lack of faith is another obstacle in the battle for prayer. Sometimes we don't realize that the way we pray actually stems from a weak faith, for example, if we only pray to God as a last resort, or if we expect Him to answer our petitions when we want and how we want them.

When we turn to the Lord as a last resort in time of trouble, we must ask ourselves: If

God is our last resort, then do we truly believe in His presence? We might also only pray to God to further our desires, and we expect Him to follow our plan instead of submitting our will to His. If we do that, we have to ask ourselves again: Do we really believe in God, if we think that He follows our whims? Other times we feel dispirited or even indignant if we believe that God does not hear our prayer. In that case, we must ask ourselves: Are we praying for the right thing, or are we asking God to give us things that are bad for us? No parent who loves his or her child will indulge that child's wishes if it leads to the child's harm. If a child screamed to cross a busy highway on foot, we would not let them go no matter how much they begged. Nor do we

allow our older children to engage with media or substances that we know will harm them. Instead, we teach our children the danger in the situation. God too will not give us the things that will harm us, because He loves us as His children, and He knows better than we do what hurts us or what fulfills us.

When we encounter any of these obstacles we must persevere firmly in prayer. The *Catechism* reveals the source of constancy in our prayer: "This tireless fervor can come only from love. Against our dullness and laziness, the battle of prayer is that of humble, trusting, and persevering love" (CCC 2742). Our God is a faithful God who loves His children; He will reward those who love Him and faithfully seek a relationship with Him.