

WHAT IS PRAYER?

BACKGROUND READING



A Samaritan woman goes to the well outside of town to draw water. The noontime sun is so hot that all the other women draw water in the early morning or evening, but the woman goes at noon to avoid the stares. A man is sitting by the well. She can tell that he is a Jew. Despite this, she approaches the well. The man will leave her alone, she thinks. No Jew would ever talk to a Samaritan, as Jews considered Samaritans false worshippers. But this man is different. He says to the woman, “Give me a drink.”

Thus begins the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The woman has been living in sin: she has had five husbands and is currently with a man who is not her husband. But Jesus invites her into a conversation. He tells her that He can give her life-giving water so that she will never thirst again, and she asks to receive that living water. Jesus reveals to the Samaritan woman her heart, and she, in turn, believes Him to be the Messiah. Because of their conversation, the Samaritan woman’s life is transformed.

This conversation illustrates the conversation between God and the soul in the life of prayer. Prayer is a conversation with God. He comes near to us, draws us into

speaking with Him in order to give us life. In the process we are transformed.

Prayer Is a Gift

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines prayer as “Prayer is the raising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God” (CCC 2559). When we pray, we must ask ourselves: Do we raise a proud heart to God, or do we raise to Him a humble one? Do we demand that God do as we ask, or do we pray that God makes us open to His will? The *Catechism* says, “Humility is the foundation of prayer” (2559). Only in humility can we open ourselves to the gift of prayer.

When we say that prayer is a gift from God, we mean that prayer only comes to us as a grace from God: it is not something that we do with our own power: “In prayer, the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response” (CCC 2567). God seeks us out. The *Catechism* describes God’s desire for us as a “thirst,” saying, “God thirsts for us so that we may thirst for him” (2560). This language evokes Jesus’ thirst when He approaches the Samaritan woman at the well. Our prayer is a response to God’s thirst for us. In prayer

it is God who always takes the initiative. We cannot pray on our own.

Prayer Is an Intimate Relationship with God

When Scripture speaks of the heart, it is referring to a person's innermost being. The heart is the place where we are made in the image and likeness of God. It is where we know, we love, and we choose. We often use the word "soul" to describe this hidden center of our being. Even we cannot fully understand our own hearts: "Only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully" (CCC 2563). Prayer is not just thinking about God or speaking words to God. Prayer is when our hearts are united to the heart of God. It is an intimate relationship with God.

We should consider for a moment what it means to be in an intimate relationship with God. If God is our Father, then how should we speak to Him? How would you speak to someone you loved very much? Is talking to that person once a week all you need to grow closer? Or would you want to see that person every day, talk about how things are going, and ask for help and encouragement?

Of course we would want to see the one whom we love very often, and speak to each other many times every day. Nor would we say the same things over and over again, or ask the same questions every time we were together. When we love someone, or when we desire to grow closer to someone, we want to learn more about that person, and to let that person learn more about us. This is the way it is in prayer. God is our Father who loves us, and we must pray in a way that helps us get to know Him better. Prayer is like having a conversation with a good friend. We speak

our hearts and we listen. Even when we use traditional prayers like the Our Father, Hail Mary, and the Sign of the Cross we speak them from our heart.

We should not be discouraged if we do not know the words to express our hearts. Sometimes we might feel that our hearts do not have the right "attitude" of peace and openness to God for our prayers to be heard. But we should remember that we do not always have to express our "attitude of the heart" with the words that we use in our prayer. Sometimes our proper attitude is simply held in the quietness of our hearts. There are times that we may even need to ask God to help us have the proper attitude in order that our prayer might be heard. God honors a heart that desires to be made right before Him, even if one is not able to have that attitude at the moment. We must trust that if we continue to ask God for the right attitude, that He will change our hearts to be one with His.

Prayer as Covenant

When our heart responds to the invitation from the heart of God to enter into a relationship with Him, we have entered into a covenant. A covenant is a sacred and holy agreement that God makes with His people. The *Catechism* says that "Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ" (CCC 2564). When we encounter God in our hearts in prayer, we are living in this covenant relationship that acknowledges that God is our Father and we are His children. We entered into this relationship when we received the Sacrament of Baptism, and we keep it alive through reception of the other Sacraments and a relationship with God in prayer.

We have seen that prayer is always God's initiative, even when it appears to us that it is ours. God thirsts for us, and has put in our hearts a thirst for Him. This covenantal relationship plays itself out in each and every one of our lives. It also plays itself out in the life of our family. As

parents, we have the amazing responsibility of bringing our children and our spouses into closer relationship with God. God has called our family to enter into this life of prayer, and thus to grow in relationship with Him and share in His saving mission in this world.