

Wednesday of the 30th Week of Ordinary Time – the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray (mental prayer)

Homily of Bishop Barres

October 27, 2021

In the 8th Chapter of his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul emphasizes how the Holy Spirit teaches us how to pray: “Brothers and sisters: The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the holy ones according to God’s will.”

The Holy Spirit leads us and guides us through the course of our lives to pray more deeply and to persevere in prayer.

Very often we hear in our daily conversations: “I’m a spiritual person but I’m turned off by institutional religion and find it irrelevant.”

As Catholics who believe that Christ founded the Catholic Church which is “the universal sacrament of salvation”, we know that our progress in mental prayer cannot be separated from the objective truths of our Catholic faith. These objective truths guide, lead, direct and motivate our prayer.

They are the objective truths of the Creed, our fidelity to the Sacraments and our Catholic moral teaching, and the unique insights into mental prayer provided by the Sacred Scriptures and the teachings of mystics, martyrs and saints.

Prayer divorced from objective truth is fantasy. As GK Chesterton once wisely observed that when we believe in nothing we’ll believe in anything.

In *He Leadeth Me*, Fr. Walter Ciszek, SJ, makes the connection between deep faith and deep prayer. He says: “We cannot pray as if we were talking to the empty air; so in the very act of praying we unconsciously remind ourselves of the reality and the presence of God, thereby strengthening our belief in him.”

We as Catholics believe with Romans 8 that the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray.

Our daily mental prayer, our daily heart-to-heart conversation with the Trinity dwelling within us, is the way the Holy Spirit expands our capacity to love God with all our hearts, minds and souls and the way the Spirit drives us on mission.

The challenge of mental prayer is that so often we sit down to pray and almost immediately enter a whirlpool of mental preoccupation, anxiety, irritation, obsessive thinking, review of to-do lists, review of relationship conflicts, etc.

Mental prayer is not a circular conversation with ourselves about ourselves.

The Holy Spirit teaches us that our daily mental prayer leads us to praise, adore, thank and love God in a way that breaks us out of the prison of the ego and the prison of obsessive self-concern and self-reference.

The spirit of mental prayer is a Trinitarian spirit of Adoration, Praise, Blessing and giving God Glory.

A few practical tips for us to consider:

It can be very helpful to start a period of mental prayer with a section of the **Gloria** that we pray every Sunday and on Holy Days: “(Father, Son and Holy Spirit), We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you.”

This type of prayer breaks us out of the whirlpools of self-absorption and we are lifted out of ourselves by praising and adoring God.

Another very good password into mental prayer is from the Book of Samuel. In discerning God’s call, Samuel is coached by Eli to say: “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”

So often we come to mental prayer with the opposite attitude: “Listen Lord, your servant is speaking!”

The Book of Samuel reminds us to listen to God first and to allow the Holy Spirit to strengthen our capacity to pray and to listen to God in silence.

Another way to enter into prayer is an act of faith: “My Lord and My God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.”

Similarly, a final prayer concluding the mental prayer is also an act of faith: “I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.”

We listen in prayer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit streaming through and illuminating our souls. In a social media addicted world, we listen deeply to God in silence and listen deeply to others with the Face, Eyes, Ears, Empathy, Concentration and Compassion of Jesus Christ.

Listening daily to God in silence is the best investment in discerning the small details of life as well as the big picture decisions of life.

The Holy Spirit teaches us to believe deeply that Adoration, Praise, Blessing and giving God Glory are the best investment in that complex and perplexing problem, that painful humiliation, that disturbing contradiction that upsets us during our time of prayer.

St. Teresa of Avila, a Mystical Doctor of the Church, once said that her mental prayer was an experience of the wild, unbridled horses of distraction running through her brain. That historical example gives us comfort, understanding and strength.

It came to the world’s attention after her death that St. Teresa of Calcutta, Mother Teresa, felt spiritually dry for a few decades. She was always faithful and persevered through it all.

We need to be humble and patient with ourselves. The Holy Spirit breathes the gift of prayer within us and the Spirit’s Gift of Fortitude gives us the grace to persevere the way the saints did.