

Prerequisites of a Life of Prayer

Prayer, like any communication, requires certain prerequisites and attitudes if it is to be fruitful and stimulate a deeper sense of presence between God and the one praying. The fundamental prerequisites of a life of prayer are humility, detachment and love of neighbor; the attitudes of prayer are patience, gentleness and perseverance.

To call humility, detachment and love of neighbor prerequisites for a life of prayer almost implies that these virtues be present before one is able to live that kind of life. In reality it is our prayer life that makes us aware of our need to grow in these virtues. In the following scripture passage from St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus assures us that our heavenly Father communicates best with those who are aware of their sinful nature and weaknesses.

Two men went up to the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee with head unbowed prayed in this fashion: 'I give you thanks, O God, that I am not like the rest of men - grasping, crooked, adulterous or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on all I possess.' The other man, however, kept his distance, not even daring to raise his eyes to heaven. All he did was beat his breast and say, 'O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' Believe me, this man went home from the temple justified but the other did not. For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled while he who humbles himself shall be exalted. (Lk. 18:9-14)

Although it may seem at times that our efforts are being directed toward only one of these virtues, humility, detachment, or love of neighbor, growth in one very often means growth in the others as well. In the *Way of Perfection* St. Teresa tells us: "I cannot understand how there could be humility without love or love without humility; nor are these two virtues possible without detachment from all creatures." So although we discuss these virtues individually it is important to remember that they are not acquired in that way.

In the beginning of my prayer life I was unaware of meditation as a form of prayer. I relied on formal prayers, the rosary and similar forms, to communicate with God. It was through spiritual reading, mainly St. Teresa, that I became aware of meditation and the importance of reflecting on my human experiences in the light of Christ's humanity. St. Teresa states that "meditation is the basis for acquiring all the virtues." She even goes so far as to say that "to undertake it is a matter of life and death for all Christians."

Susan Muto in her book *The Journey Homeward* speaks to us in a similar way of meditation:

Seeing simply and hearing attentively are attitudes that ready us as spiritual readers for our homecoming to the Father. To come to a deeper understanding and living of his Divine Word, we need also to develop a third attitude, and that is the capacity to dwell repeatedly on Holy Scripture and the writings of spiritual

masters. The words contained in these texts manifest a mysterious depth dimension due to the fact that they express certain basic themes of spiritual deepening. Such themes as growing in simplicity, listening to the Father's will, self-emptying in humility and detachment - and many more that we could mention -- are key themes in the repertoire of Christian teaching and call for repeated reflection. They are like home ports to which we return after stormy explorations on other seas.

Because of St. Teresa's message that "meditation is the basis for acquiring the virtues," I read over the written reflections and prayers that I have compiled during the years that I have practiced meditation. It is amazing to me how often these meditations centered on the virtues and in particular the virtues we are considering as the fundamental prerequisites for prayer: humility, detachment and love of neighbor. St. Teresa refers to these prerequisites as the foundation for prayer.

Jesus tells us in St. Luke's Gospel that

Any man who desires to come to me will hear my words and put them into practice. I will show you with whom he is to be compared. He may be likened to the man who, in building a house, dug deeply and laid the foundation on a rock. When the floods came the torrent rushed in on that house, but failed to shake it because of its solid foundation. On the other hand, anyone who has heard my words but not put them into practice is like the man who built his house on the ground without any foundation. When the torrent rushed upon it, it immediately fell in and was completely destroyed. (Lk. 6:47-49)

The virtues make up the foundation upon which our prayer life builds and grows, and meditation, especially on the Gospels, continuously strengthens and deepens that foundation.

Several years ago a meditation on this particular scripture passage prompted me to write the following statement that I will share with you now as we begin our discussion of humility. It is humility, our submission to the will of God, that sets the foundation for our faith. The degree to which we are willing to submit to our Father's will for us will determine how solid our foundation will be and just how strong a torrent our faith can withstand.

Jesus withstood the torrent of death itself because out of total love He submitted to the will of His Father. For St. Teresa humility is truth. It is the rock upon which our life of prayer is built. She says "The truly humble person must be content with the path along which God leads him." So in order to acquire humility we must strive constantly to align our wills with God's will for us. As we all know, being content with the path along which God leads us is not always so easy.

To help us understand this concept a little better St. Teresa in the *Way of Perfection* refers to the scripture story of Martha and Mary: She relates:

St. Martha was a saint, even though they do not say she was contemplative.

Well now, what more do you want than to be able to resemble this blessed woman who merited so often to have Christ our Lord in her home, give Him food, serve Him, and eat at table with Him? If she had been enraptured like the Magdalene there wouldn't have been anyone to give food to the Divine Guest. Well, think of this congregation as the home of St. Martha and that there must be people for every task. Let them recall that it is necessary for someone to prepare His meal and let them consider themselves lucky to serve with Martha. Let them consider how true humility consists very much in great readiness to be content with whatever the Lord may want to do with them and in always finding oneself unworthy to be called His servant. If contemplating, practicing mental and vocal prayer, taking care of the sick, helping with household chores, and working even at the lowliest tasks are all ways of serving the Guest who comes to be with us and eat and recreate, what difference does it make whether we serve in the one way or the other?

Thus as regards humility we must not only seek God's will for us, but to be properly disposed for prayer itself we must be content with the path He has chosen for us. If we approach our prayer in a spirit of humility God is then able to communicate to us the truth of who we are, opening us up to grow more into His image and what we are meant to be.

In the beginning when my prayer began to affect my life, I looked upon detachment solely in relation to persons or things of a material nature. Having a right attitude about the things I have was not too difficult because I knew they were God's gifts to me. In light of God's love for me, somehow, the material things I had did not seem as important as they had been before I began actually living in response to God's love.

Detachment from people and particularly persons close to us, family and friends, is not so easily understood or acquired, especially if many years have been spent building relationships on our own. It takes time with Jesus, time spent in meditation and study, reflection and just being with Him, in His presence often, for our friendship with Him to reach the point of complete abandonment and trust. When this happens a natural response is a rather confused feeling or fear that we have become less loving or sensitive to others in our life.

Knowing our dependence on God lessens our dependence on others and should actually free us to build even deeper, more loving and sensitive relationships. Susan Muto in *The Journey Homeward* expresses what I am trying to say here so much better when she quotes Saint John of the Cross and remarks:

In one of his Sayings of Light and Love, St. John states, 'If you purify your soul of attachment to and desire for things, you will understand them spiritually. If you deny your appetite for them, you will enjoy their truth, understanding what is certain in them.' He seems to say that if we detach ourselves from things for their own sake and from our desire to possess them as sources of ultimate

fulfillment, we will come to understand them spiritually, that is, as manifestations of God's creative Word. The benefit of detachment is better seeing. We become centered in God's truth as Creator instead of losing ourselves in the created. Centered in Him, we sense His presence in all things. The created leads us to Him instead of snatching us from Him.

We might also say that these same insights regarding detachment apply when speaking of things of a spiritual nature, special gifts from God or consolations. These things also are given to us by a God who wishes to draw us to Himself. However, concentration on or attachment to these gifts keep us from being united with Him.

St. John of the Cross in his *Maxims and Counsels* gives us this advice regarding detachment and a life of prayer:

Preserve a loving attentiveness to God with no desire to feel or understand any particular thing concerning him. Be interiorly detached from all things and do not seek pleasure in any temporal thing, and your soul will concentrate on goods you do not know. Love consists not in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved. Detached from the exterior, dispossessed of the interior, disappropriated of the things of God—neither will prosperity detain you nor adversity hinder you. The soul that desires God to surrender Himself to it entirely must surrender itself entirely to Him without keeping anything for itself.

Although acquiring detachment as we have discussed it is a long and sometimes painful process, it is necessary if our love for God and neighbor is to grow. St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians tells us most beautifully about the virtue of love and its importance to living a life of prayer. "Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect." (Col. 3:12-14)

When St. Paul speaks to the Corinthians about love he says: "Now I will show you the way which surpasses all the others. If I speak with human tongues and angelic as well, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and, with full knowledge, comprehend all mysteries; if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give everything I have to feed the poor and hand over my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

Then St. Paul defines love for us. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not jealous, it does not put on airs, it is not snobbish. Love is never rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not prone to anger; neither does it brood over injuries. Love does not rejoice in what is wrong but rejoices with the truth. There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure." (1 Cor.

13:4-7)

Over and over again in the Gospels Jesus tells us of the importance of love of neighbor, be he our enemy or our friend. Not only does He tell us but His entire life becomes the example of how we should love one another, the ultimate example being His death, the total giving of His life out of love for us.

Our love of neighbor seems to grow as our love for God grows. St. Ignatius Loyola points out in the *Spiritual Exercises* that love is shown more in deeds than in words, and that genuine love involves a mutual exchange of gifts. Thus we will know that our prayer life is genuine and fruitful if we find ourselves sharing with others the love God gives to us, for Jesus has told us “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me”; and “this is how all will know you for my disciples: your love for one another.” (Jn. 13:35)

It is certainly not difficult for us to understand that love of neighbor is a necessary virtue for us to have if our prayer is to be fruitful. Hurting relationships not only provide distractions in prayer but disturb the unity and inner peace necessary to pray effectively. St. John of the Cross in his *Sayings of Light and Love* tells us, “At the evening of life, you will be examined in love. Learn to love as God desires to be loved and abandon your own ways of acting.”

Jesus certainly knew that this kind of unconditional love would not be easy for us to acquire. This is why He speaks to us so often of forgiveness and calls us to share His life. And this is why, as was true with humility and detachment, and as St. Teresa has said, time spent with Christ in meditation is the best way of growing in all of these virtues.

In the scripture passage from St. Paul to the Corinthians, we learned that we can do all kinds of things that may be good but if they are done without love they are nothing. Earlier when discussing humility we learned how important it is for us to be content with the path God has chosen for us. Our attitudes about the things we do certainly affect the outcome and this is true when we pray as well. A person who fails to develop the attitudes of patience, gentleness and perseverance in respect to his prayer will not only fail to develop these virtues in other areas of his life but will probably not last long as a person of prayer either.

When most of us first realized the call to a life of prayer, the time spent in prayer itself was probably the high point of our day. Concern about proper attitudes for prayer probably never entered our minds because distractions were few and God's gentle presence made us wonder why some people even talked about having to persevere in prayer. It wasn't long, probably only a matter of months, before we began to realize that prayer, like loving, is not always a matter of good feelings.

When we first experience dryness in prayer our acceptance may not be the greatest. Maybe we're even tempted just to give up. These feelings are normal and admitting that we have them is probably the first step in acquiring the patience we need to go on.

As a piano teacher I experience a very similar pattern in the beginner students that I teach.

During the first few months of lessons the enthusiasm exhibited is terrific. Just being able to put a few notes together is so pleasing that having to encourage the students to practice is simply not necessary. Within a few months the initial enthusiasm begins to wane; maybe they're not progressing as fast as they would like to, or playing baseball takes up their practice time, or it just doesn't seem to be as much fun as it was previously.

So as a teacher I try to explain to them what is happening, I encourage them to practice some each day whether they feel like it or not and assure them that what they are currently experiencing is natural and not to give up.

Actually the role that I play as piano teacher is similar to the role that a spiritual director plays for one who is serious about his prayer. A spiritual director becomes a guide, someone to encourage me, someone to tell me when I'm off key, and this is especially important in the beginning of our prayer life.

Developing patience in prayer takes time and is a virtue not acquired all at once, but is one we grow in as our prayer matures. Some of the things in prayer that test patience are dryness, lack of consolation or feelings, distractions, an inability to meditate and accept just spending time being in God's presence.

These things are not placed in our prayer to hinder our progress but that can happen if we lose patience with ourselves and God when they are present. Once again I find myself thinking about St. Teresa's words that we must be content with the path along which God leads us. Reflecting on God's patience with us as His creation seems to help me at times when I find myself being tempted in this virtue. Also the patience Jesus displayed with the friends He loved so much and the Jewish religious leaders of His time encourages me to reach out to Him when I find my patience wearing thin.

As with the prerequisites for a life of prayer (humility, detachment and love of neighbor) the attitudes for prayer itself (patience, gentleness and perseverance) also affect one another and thus they grow together. For one to acquire patience in prayer a spirit of gentleness must be present. If we are hard on ourselves and make too many demands, expecting perfection before we're ready, we will easily become impatient with ourselves.

A gentle attitude helps us to see our weaknesses and accept them as God does. Anyone who has experienced God as Father in his prayer knows that our God is a gentle God. Although we say He is a God of power and might we also know that He does not rule us with an iron fist and never forces His will upon us. Instead He invites us through our prayer into a loving relationship with Him. The reason most of us have difficulty with acquiring a gentle attitude is that we do not love ourselves enough. We have a difficult time accepting ourselves as we are and this attitude is contrary to gentleness.

How did Jesus handle the people in His life who were uncomfortable with themselves: Mary Magdalene, who wept at His feet, the woman at the well, or Peter who denied knowing Him three times? Jesus' acceptance of these people as they were and the gentle way He entered

their lives changed each one of them. He does the same for each one of us every time we come to Him in prayer just as we are.

Lord,
You want me to learn from you
Gentleness of heart.
No matter how I fail you,
Your gentleness never fails me.
You are slow to anger;
Your kindness is without limit.
You tell me not to be distressed,
To make your gentleness my own
So that my soul may find rest.
Give me the wisdom to make time in my day
For a gentle nursing of my soul.
Free me from arrogance,
From goals too sublime for me.
Still and quiet my soul
As a mother quiets the little ones on her lap.
Free me from the need for achievement.
Make my life less forceful, more gentle,
Centered in you alone.
Let the splendor of your presence
Light up my everydayness.
Make me a smooth channel for the outflow
Of your Divine Will in this world.

In this prayer by Adrian Van Kaam in *Spirituality and the Gentle Life* we pray “Make our lives less forceful, more gentle, centered in you alone.” Forcefulness is another attitude that is destructive of gentleness. Sometimes as parents we have to decide whether we want our children to do a certain thing because it is what we want or because it is the right thing for them to do. In prayer if we force our way of praying on God, always telling Him this and asking for that, we fail to listen to what He has to say. A gentle presence in prayer is a listening presence that opens us to the revealing truth of God’s will for us.

If our prayer is sincere and a gentle spirit is acquired, the fruits of this transformation evidence themselves in our relationships with others. Acceptance of oneself and one’s weaknesses leads to this kind of attitude with others and thus we find ourselves loving people more for what they are instead of for what we would like for them to be, and learning how to love unconditionally begins to take root in us.

A year ago I attended a workshop entitled “Sacraments for Little People.” Those present spent the better part of an afternoon experiencing ways of making the sacraments more meaningful. At one point we were asked to write on a piece of paper one word that would describe a way in which we would like to change. The papers were collected and redistributed. We were asked to keep the paper we were given and pray for the person whose paper we had. For a long time I prayed for someone to grow in humility. On my paper I wrote “gentleness.” At the time I was not aware of all I was asking for. A year has passed and the Lord continues to show me ways to grow in this virtue.

Perseverance in prayer is certainly closely related to patience, for if we are lacking in patience we set limits on our perseverance. All of us experience, at some time or other in our life of prayer, the temptation to stop praying. Long periods of spiritual dryness, too much concentration on how we’re progressing or failing in a virtue we thought we had acquired, all lead to disappointment that if not channeled properly into a humble acceptance of our weaknesses can lead to a desire to give up our prayer.

Although all of us would like to attain the perfection the Little Flower did in just a few short years, for most of us a lifetime is needed for the transformation we seek. Jesus was thirty years old before He began His public life. I’m convinced He spent those years maturing in His spiritual life in much the same way we mature through our prayer. Time spent with the Father led Him to the knowledge of who He was. If this is true Jesus becomes the greatest witness to what real perseverance is. To live out His life in union with His Father’s will meant going contrary to the religious leadership of His day. Although he must have persevered in His prayer during those years in Nazareth, during His public life complete trust was certainly the fiber of His perseverance.

Both in the life of Jesus and His Mother, we know there were times when they didn’t understand all that was happening to them. Had they not trusted they would never have persevered, and it was their prayer that ingrained this trust. When we have reached the point in our spiritual life of experiencing dryness or other things we cannot fully understand, then we know we have begun to grow. God permits us to stand on our own two feet for a while, supported only by the faith that He has rooted so deeply within us. Actually what God is saying to us is that our love for one another has matured and grown enough to blossom forth in trust.

In order then to persevere in prayer we must accept all things that God sends our way in the same spirit of thankfulness and trust.

In conclusion I have only one suggestion -- that we continue to do everything in our power to build our friendship with the person of Jesus. Reading and reflecting on scripture and the spiritual masters, frequent reception of the sacraments, and building Christ-centered relationships are all ways to keep Him alive and growing in each one of us. If we concentrate on building our friendship with Jesus, I’m sure our heavenly Father will grant to us all the things we need to make that friendship perfect.

By Marilyn Zwick