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Four principles of prayer Reflection on Prayer Intercessory Prayer for Priests
Saturday, February 12, 2011 Breakfast meeting after 8:15 Mass and Rosary (Our
Spiritual director is the Holy Spirit)

Ladies and gentlemen, it's time for us to have a little reflection on prayer.

The first point I would like to make is that the Holy Spirit is our true spiritual director. **We can have companions in life, but the director of our own personal journey is the Holy Spirit.** And in one way we are all the same, but in another way each of us is unique. So we have to be careful that we don't live somebody else's life or try to live someone else's life. In this regard it is very wholesome to read the lives of the saints and the **advice of the saints and the advice of the various spiritual authors, provided that you make sure that whatever they are talking about relates to you** and not to someone else.

When we talk about prayer one of the issues that always comes up is perseverance. But **what we have to persevere with is the time that we give, not the particular kind of prayer that we do.** That particular kind of prayer may have to change as time goes on. This is frequently a mistake that people make. They believe that when a certain type of prayer is not working for them it's their fault and they have to just work all the harder. "I am going to do the Jesus Prayer every day if it kills me!" Well, in that case, you better prepare for your funeral! **So different prayers are for different purposes and they fit different times and different people.** So what we have to be faithful with is the time we set aside for prayer, but not any particular way of praying. If you find that a daily rosary really helps you grow, then do the daily rosary. But if you find that something else is more helpful, then do something else. And you may find that in your life you need a certain variety. **There are those that claim they need variety; others claim they don't. Well, you have to find out which is the case for yourself.**

Now the Church itself holds up as **preeminent the Liturgy of the Hours and the Liturgy of the Church, the Eucharist.** So we keep those as primary, **but there are many other wonderful forms of prayer.** You have to test the waters. And as St. John says, "Discern every spirit." **Not every spirit is good for every person, so discern what's right for you.**

Of all the authors there are three that really stand out who are helpful to almost everybody, and they are the three Carmelites: **Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Therese of Lisieux.** Those three are so basic in their teachings about prayer than **almost everyone finds them helpful.** So you could really recommend them.

Now some people may have a Benedictine style of spirituality and really be drawn to that type of spirituality. Many others are not. If you think about it, many forms of spirituality arise from a religious life which is communal in nature, and if you are not living in community, that may not fit you. So you have to be discerning about what is what, but those three authors, especially the two women, are so basic that they really are helpful to everybody.

Now there are **four principles of prayer** that you need to remember. **The first is that God is primary.** Now you might think that's rather an oxymoron or maybe too obvious to talk about, but not really. Some people, when they start to pray, really put too much emphasis on themselves, on what they want to get out of it or what they are going to accomplish or something of that type. Well, no, that's wrong. God is really primary. And when Jesus says, "Seek and ye shall find," the saints say that that isn't true literally, because if you took it literally, then it's all about you seeking. But actually what the saints say is that **we have to seek, but we have to seek so that we will be ready when God comes to us.** We won't find God when God comes to us if we are not seeking. But that doesn't mean that finding God is a product of seeking. It is not actually. **Seeking is simply a disposing ourselves to what God does.** So God is primary. Again, this is another example of the Holy Spirit is in charge. **The Holy Spirit will lead and come to us at the right time in the right way.**

There are all kinds of obstacles to God's work in us that we don't even know about. Those obstacles **could be part of our background,** the part of the way we were reared. Many people have very **wrong ideas of God in the first place.** Recently a friend of mine told me that he was teaching over at College of DuPage. He was teaching philosophy. But many of his students were Catholic, although none of them were practicing Catholics. They all had a very low opinion of God because they thought God was waiting to catch them doing something wrong. Well, where did they get that idea? Well, it's not from church because they don't go to church. They got that idea from their parents because their parents used God to prop up their own weak authority. Now that is a terrible thing to do to a child, but these parents probably didn't know that it was wrong. I'm sure parents don't maliciously try to ruin their children, but this actually does ruin them and pushes them away from God. So maybe there is something like that in your background. Well, then **that has to be healed.**

So maybe one of the things you want to do is you want to ask God—because here is another thing, and this is a principle I can't emphasize enough, **God wants to be asked for his help.** God wants to be asked for his help. We have to hear that over and over again. I didn't used to think this. I used to think, well, God knows what I need; I will just be patient. No, that's wrong. God really wants us to ask him because—and St. Augustine explains this, **by asking God we are already moving ourselves to be receptive of whatever God gives us, which may be very different from what we ask for.** But the asking is still important. But it might be **good to ask God to help you understand what you need in terms of growth or healing, especially of anything that is wrong in your background about who God is.**

Prayer, therefore, is not what we are doing. It is not our thoughts. It is not our desires, nor is it our distractions, nor our sins. This has nothing to do with what God is doing. God can overcome everything. God can overcome our distractions. God can overcome our sins. What really matters is **our willingness to let God be God in our own lives. This begins by our simply placing ourselves in the presence of God.**

Now of course God is all present, but we are not present to God. **So prayer begins by our asking God that we be aware of his presence.** We can **talk** or we can **be silent.** We

can **listen**. We can **sleep**. I think it was St. Therese of Lisieux that talked about how when she prayed she often fell asleep. And of course one of the psalms says that the Lord blesses his beloved in their sleep. So if you need to sleep, maybe that's what you should be doing. But, you know, when you are praying and you are sleeping while at prayer, that is different from sleeping in your bed. It is. You can also **cry**. Crying is prayerful if you are crying in the presence of God and **using this as a communication**.

Everyone goes into **periods of dryness; "aridity,"** it's called. That does not mean God has abandoned you, and that does not mean that you are doing something wrong. They are necessary periods. Many of the saints say that during periods of aridity God is working at a very deep level that we are not aware of; **below the threshold of our own consciousness God is at work**. So if you are arid, that's fine; you are dry, fine. **Still spend the time**. Some people give up Mass, for example, because they say they don't get anything out of it. Well, that could be because they don't put anything into it, or it could be because God is working in them in a deep way that they don't feel or experience. That's no reason to stop prayer or Mass.

The second principle—love about all things. One of the areas in which Christianity is unique is the belief that God, the ground of all being is love. I don't believe other religions know this or believe it. But we believe **God is love, so love is paramount**. Since God is paramount that means love is paramount in our belief. Now here we are getting more specifically Christian. The first point probably most believing people would agree with. Muslims would probably agree God is primary. Hindus and Buddhists—Buddhists probably wouldn't use the word "God," but they will say something like consciousness is primary, which is their word for God.

But here now love. Love is God; God is love. Again St. Therese says, St. Therese of Lisieux, "Love profits from everything, good and evil." That's something to think about too. **"Love profits from everything, good and evil." Nothing is beyond redemption; no one is beyond redemption.** Everything is grist for the mill, the mill, of course, which produces the wheat, which becomes the bread that is our life that is consecrated and becomes Eucharist, food for the world. So that's why **we cannot compartmentalize ourselves**, which is unfortunately a common practice **where we think there is one part of my life that's for God** and, oh, I'll go every Sunday to Mass and then even every day I will pray for ten minutes or a half an hour or whatever, but the rest of the day, well, that's just my worldly life. You know, **actually your worldly life is also for God, and your life in the world is for God's purposes. And love can do anything.**

Now in this regard to love **we have to let God love us**, and that is not always simple. We may think about how we want to love God, but we have to let God love us. 1 John says, "The mystery is not that we love God, but that God loves us." But sometimes we don't want God to love us. There was a woman that came to me once and she had committed an abortion. And she didn't believe that God wanted her to be forgiven—she didn't believe it! I think I convinced her God did want her to be forgiven. But she felt it was so bad, that why would God want to forgive? And if you think about it, that was a problem Jesus had with the Pharisees of his day. It wasn't a question of whether God could, but whether God wanted to forgive. Yes, God wants to and therefore that makes all

the difference in the world. **God wants to forgive and God wants to love us no matter what we have done or not done.** And we have to let God do that and fill us with his love. And that means we also have to be willing to forgive ourselves—**we have to be willing to forgive ourselves because if we don't forgive ourselves, we are not letting God love us.**

And I have found that is very difficult for certain people; it's very difficult for them to forgive themselves. And that is because they are **trapped in a false spirituality called "perfectionism."** Perfectionism has absolutely nothing to do with Christian holiness. When Jesus says, "Be perfect as your Father is perfect," he meant be as perfect as your Father is perfect, but the Father is perfect in a way that is very different from human beings. Human beings think perfection is a matter of doing everything right. That's not how the Father is. You don't even know what the Father does. **The Father's perfection is the Father's utter and totally mercifulness.** So sometimes that's translated as "Be merciful as your Father is merciful." And you have to be merciful toward yourself. **And if you are merciful toward yourself, you cannot be a perfectionist. That is not true spirituality.**

It's really a compulsion, and **we do have all kinds of compulsions.** Some are obvious, like, for example, alcoholism or drug abuse. Everyone says, "Aww, that's terrible; that's a compulsion." But there are others that people don't see as compulsive. Perfection is one. Another is religion addiction. **People are addicted to religion as a series of precepts or prescriptions.** This will not lead to God. This is what St. Paul describes very often in his letters: Romans, Galatians. **You cannot use laws or prescriptions or regulations as a means to God. It's God who comes to you.** And people who do this not only severely harm themselves, but they usually harm others on the way and sometimes drive people away from God. I guess the God they are presenting is not the God of our Holy Scripture; it's something else. And I have seen that in various circumstances how **religious perfectionism can drive people away from God, unbeknownst to the person who is trying to doing this,** mind you. In their own mind they are doing what's right; they think they are absolutely doing what is right. So in one way they are really not guilty of any kind of overt sin. It's just that they are **mixed up and harming people on the way.**

There are **two sides to every action. There is the internal intention, and we believe God judges us by our internal intentions. But then there is also the external consequence, and the consequences of our actions don't cease because we don't intend them.** That's why there are such things as unintended consequences. They are still there. **And they need to be also healed and lifted or corrected.**

So that means that when we do fail, and **we all fail,** we should rejoice. And this is something people find hard to do also. **Rejoice in your failure** so that that is simply another example of how we all need God. So it's another **opportunity for us to rely totally on God and be convinced that God is very happy to be our support.** When we are willing to let God then accept us as we are and to be our strength in the midst of our failures and weaknesses, then he will fill us with his love, and that will **motivate us to do what he wants rather than our agenda of perfection,** and it will be very different. It

may have in general the same goal, but we will go about it very differently if we are motivated by God's love, because actually perfectionism is motivated by anger and resentment at an imperfect world and an imperfect self and an imperfect environment. And anger is no good for that sort of thing at all. Anger has very little good. Anger is only good for resisting certain forms of violence. Other than that, it's pretty useless.

Now another aspect of this is that **we need to be simple**. Now simplicity does not mean simplemindedness. What it means is **freedom from complexity**. Now Jesus said, "Do not rattle on like the pagans, as if the multiplication of words will get a hearing," or as if by praying we are going to convince God of something. **We don't change God at all by prayer; prayer changes us**. When St. Therese of Lisieux was dying—she had tuberculosis—one of her sisters went to her and said, "What are you thinking?" She said, "I'm not thinking anything; I'm suffering too much. I'm only praying." And the sister said, "Well, what are you praying; what are you saying to Jesus?" She said, "I'm not saying anything. I'm just loving him." Now that's a simple soul—"I'm just loving him." **No words, no nothing, but a communication of love.**

Now the purpose of all this, this communication of love, is to actually enable us to give ourselves to God, because **actually God does want something from us. What he wants from us is our hearts**. That may involve action or it may not, but he wants our hearts. He wants us to give our hearts to him, which means we have to give them up, surrender them. **There are two orders of being**, the order of being in which all creation participates. **We only exist because God has created us** and we only exist because God maintains us in being. **But every human being is a special part of creation: the image and likeness of God with the feeling of "I," with the ability to be aware of self**. Now God says, "I want that self. I want your awareness—I want it." **He wants to draw us into the inner life of the Trinity. That is the supernatural life which we are invited into.**

Now sin is saying no to that. **Sin is rejecting the inner life of the Trinity**. It's saying I prefer my own self, my own world, my own values, and I don't care about the bigger picture. I don't care about the purpose for my being. Sadly, this irrational response, which we call "sin," is very prevalent. **What we are asked to do is give in to God and let God have our being.**

This is the purpose of the **Mass**, or one of them, especially the Mass when it's seen as a sacrifice. Mass when it is seen as a sacrifice is **the presentation on earth of Jesus' heavenly intercession, and it is the representation under the order of sign of Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary**, which, of course, is directly linked to his heavenly intercession. He only intercedes because he has given himself totally to God and has poured out his blood in love, and now he takes that blood to the heavenly high place, the mercy seat so to speak. This is a matter of imagery, but he takes his blood to heaven and intercedes as the high priest for all of us. Now when we think of the Mass in this way, **we are invited to give ourselves with him**, and that includes our problems, not just our accomplishments, but our problems.

Now the Protestants during the Reformation did not really believe that this was the purpose of the Mass. They thought this was false. **Now Calvin replaced the idea of offering oneself with the tithe.** That became the sacrifice for which people gathered—to give their tithe. But that isn't really what originally the Catholic Church believed or taught. It's not that tithing isn't very good and noble, please.

Now we have to keep in mind that the humanity of Christ—this is the third point. **The third point is the humanity of Christ is the very means by which we are redeemed and saved.** This is, again, like the second point, this is unique to Christianity and, therefore, **our Christian prayer should be a prayer with Jesus. We do have to get to know Jesus in his humanity.**

Now because the Word of God became flesh, and that was a unique situation, **the life of Jesus has a value that lasts beyond the time in which it was lived.** And that's what all the saints in our Church have come to realize, or at least I would say most of them, that Jesus' life had a value for all time. So that when Jesus was a boy, he was a child, he was living the life of God at that level, of the level of a five-year-old or a seven-year-old or an eight-year-old. So at eight years old then any child should be able to relate to that. That's the idea, **personal relationship with Jesus.**

Now you might say, “Well, I'm over thirty, so how do I relate to Jesus when he died at thirty?” The general answer to that would be in his thirty years or thirty-three or whatever it was, he lived the entire life, so it's all included—don't worry. Now St. Thomas also thinks that in heaven everyone is at the age of Christ. Even if you died as an infant or if you died when you were ninety, you are all the age of Christ. Now I don't know if that's true; he didn't either; that's what he thought. So I like to think that too.

So our words and our ideas and our images are very important, especially as they are focused on the person of Jesus.

Now **St. Ignatius teaches the art of contemplation.** What he meant by that was that **we take a story from the life of Jesus and we put ourselves into it.** We ask ourselves a question. **We let the Spirit prompt questions.** Sometimes this happens in preaching. You might think of a question to ask people, and then you think to yourself, well, maybe I should ask that of myself. **So Jesus is a companion in our journey, and we need to use our imagination and our emotions in contacting him in prayer and in developing this sort of personal relationship.** This is a great benefit and privilege in being a Christian, and it would be a shame if we were to live a Christian life without really utilizing it.

St. Teresa of Avila talks about **just sitting with Jesus and talking as if you were talking to another person.** But then you also have to remember to listen to what he says. Now oddly enough, **when you listen to the Lord you might actually be surprised at the answer;** as a matter of fact you should probably be surprised because I used to think, oh, come on, I'll just think what I want to hear and that's what I'll hear. But I don't; I really don't.

So Jesus says, “Come to me all you who are burdened and find life difficult; I will refresh you.” So we have to keep in mind that **Jesus really wants us to come to him, and he really wants us to share our burdens.** “My yoke is easy, my burden light.” Now “my yoke”—this idea is an instrument that used to join man and ox together. That’s how it was in the ancient world, not four or five oxen. They didn’t have that. They had one ox, a poor man had one ox, and then he had to help the ox. Well, Jesus is saying, well, I’ll help you—“my yoke”—see—**“My yoke is easy.” I’ll do all the pulling.**

This also can be used—this whole sense of **the life of Jesus is really the basis of the rosary and the mysteries of the rosary.** Why do we go through the Joyful Mysteries? Because they are alive. The Sorrowful Mysteries are alive. They are for us now. And Jesus at the end of his life said, “I call you no longer servants; I call you friends.” We have to realize **Jesus is really calling us to a friendship, but that requires our response. We have to be a friend to him, as he has been a friend to us.** And this becomes paramount in the **Eucharist** itself, where **we are brought into the community of Christ and fed with his own body and blood. He is our companion. He eats with us. He is present among us.**

Finally, **the fourth principle** is that we believe that God is present in the world, and that’s not too hard. And we believe God is present in the word of God—we do, because the Bible is the inspired word of God. And we believe in the Eucharist. But **God is also present in our hearts,** and this is also a teaching. This has nothing to do with our feelings. This is something we have to realize, that God is **as present in our hearts as in the word or in the sacrament.** And God is always present in our hearts. God does not abandon us, and even if we try to abandon him, God is still with us. So that is actually something we really have to believe. **God has come to us and remains with us.**

And I have a quotation. There are two quotations I would like to conclude with. The first one is on page 69, and it is from St. Teresa of Avila. **“St. Teresa of Avila tells us that understanding this truth”—the Holy Spirit is with us, always with us in our hearts—“was a light that profoundly transformed her prayer life.”**¹ This is a quotation:

“I think that if I had understood then, as I do now, how such a great king really dwells within this little palace of my soul, I would not have left him alone so often, but would have stayed with him and never have allowed his dwelling place to get so dirty. How wonderful it is to think that the One whose greatness could fill a thousand worlds, and very many more, confines himself within so small a space, just as he was pleased to dwell within the womb of his most holy Mother! Being the Lord, he has, of course, perfect freedom, and as he loves us, he fashions himself to our measure.”

I think that is a profound thought.

And then as a conclusion this is from Jacques Philippe; this is his concluding piece. He is speaking of the very thing I am speaking of now: God within us.

“When we do not know how to pray, it is very simple to proceed in this way: let us recollect ourselves. Let us be silent and enter our hearts, descend into our interior selves, reunite ourselves with that presence of Jesus who lives in us and remain peacefully with him. Let us not leave him alone, let us keep him company in the best way we can. If we persevere in this exercise, then we shall not delay in discovering the reality of what the Eastern Christians call “the place of the heart” or the “inner cell.” This inner space of communion with God exists. It has been granted to us, but many men and women do not arrive at or even suspect its existence because they have never entered into this garden to gather its fruits. **Happy are those who have discovered the Kingdom of God within them, for their life will change.”**²

¹ St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, chap 28.

² Philippe, Jacques. *Time for God A Guide to Prayer*. (Boston, 1992), p. 71.