

The practice of prayer Jesus teaches us how to pray

Introduction

Jesus told several stories about God. The best known is also the most moving. It focuses on the image of a father embracing his son, at last returned after having left home. The son has come back empty-handed, but with a lot to be forgiven for. The father's embrace erases with one gesture all of the son's shortcomings. The son, who is returning from far, has recovered his dwelling place.

This story is not about prayer, but it does lay indirectly the foundations for prayer: our true dwelling place, which is God himself. Of course we can live without him; live far from this home, but it is living in exile, cut off from our roots. Prayer, just as the return of the son to his home, unites us with our deepest roots. To remind ourselves of this, is to say that it is everything except foreign to our life as men and women. To pray is to return to what we were created for.

But the story Jesus tells bring in another son. He had wisely remained home, in his father's house. However, behind this honorable front, the relationship is missing, which, we must admit, is the essential. Being in the same house does not necessarily mean being together. A relationship must be constructed, and well-kept. The son who remained at home does not seem to have done this. This experience is sadly common place in human relationships. But it makes us wonder when applied to God. How many of his children would God like to see closer to him, more united with him? Could we be among this number? This question sends us back to prayer, but as an invitation, a welcoming, as in the image of the father addressing his son who remained on the threshold to his love.

« *Lord, teach us how to pray!* » This request put forth by Jesus' disciples has travelled through centuries and generations. It comes to our mind when we take our first steps in prayer. We can make it ours if we have fallen back. We can adopt it as a bouncing board to renewed depths. It reminds us that we are not left on our own to learn.

Jesus called forth disciples who have everything to learn. Come, all those who want to learn how to pray, or to improve their prayer! Come, those who are setting off, or who strive for a new departure! Welcome, to those who suffer hunger or thirst to go further,

to dig deeper. There is room for all.

1. Objectives and the right to learn

Unattainable models

We are easily crushed as soon as we speak of prayer. We think of Jesus who, in spite of his extenuating days, sometimes spent the whole night praying (Lk 6:12; 9:28; Mt 14:23). We think of the “fathers of the desert” who had left everything to embrace a life of contemplation and who spoke so richly of prayer, strong through their real-life experience. We think of those men and women of prayer throughout the history of our churches, those for whom intimacy with God marked their lives. We think of Christian authors who invite us to greater communion with God. There are plenty of elevated models. They sometimes demobilize. And yet, there are only apprentices on the roads of prayer. Those who have gone the furthest are there to tell us so. Only one is the Master: our Lord Jesus.

The increased prestige of spirituality does not help. Every religion highlights its spiritual masters: Islam’s Sufis, the masters of Zen or Tibetan Buddhism, the Hindu Yogis, Jewish or Christian mystics. Spiritual magazines are filled with texts and magnificent photos. All of this contributes to the creation of a mental image: true spirituality is accomplished spirituality.

Apprenticeship

Jesus, however, chose his disciples from where they were. When he climbs the Mountain of Transfiguration, he is the one who prays; the disciples are « *overwhelmed by sleep* » (Lk 9:28, 32). When children are brought to Jesus so that he might pray for them, the disciples are completely off target (Mt 19:13). In Gethsemane, they have a hard time « to watch one hour » with Jesus, who had specifically asked them to do so (Mk 14:37). The Gospels contain many invitations given to the disciples to pray, but tell us little about their own prayer life (Mk 14:26). They are aware of their need to learn, and Jesus takes the time to train them. He composes for them the magnificent “Lord’s prayer”. He prays with and for them (Lk 22:32; Jn 17). He puts them to use, sends them out, trusts them (Lk 9:1-6; 10:1-24). He meets them where they are. He wants to do the same with us, even today.

We must allow ourselves the right to learn, to come back, to make attempts, to progress, which is why I take the liberty to address you. It is preferable for us to set off from where we are, in order to experience it well, and grow, rather than to let us be crushed by ideal high-level models that paralyze.

Richard Foster writes in this sense: « It was liberating for me when I understood that to pray implies a process of learning. I was free to ask questions, to live experiences, even to fail, because

I knew I was “in training”. »¹

The objective to keep in focus

But to say this must not allow us lose sight of our objectives: in particular, the outcome of a life nourished by prayer. This is where we must return to our Lord Jesus. Nothing is more revealing of the necessity of prayer, than the place it held in his life. He often prayed alone, isolated (Mt 14:23). He did nothing of himself (Jn 5:30), he remained united with the Father, dwelling in his love (Jn 15:10). Every stage of his ministry was prepared in prayer. Jesus was even transfigured while praying: which was not to be a way out, but a preparation for his departure for Jerusalem and the Passion. (Lk 9:28-31). Jesus prayed for his disciples, and told them that, in truth (Lk 22:32). He praised his Father spontaneously (Mt 11:25-26). He also agonized in his prayer preceding his Passion, before rising up, strengthened. At the ultimate hour of the abandonment of the cross, when the heavens are closed to him, he prayed, finding his words in another's prayer: he made his the 22nd Psalm that expresses the pain of abandonment and total trust in God. He was granted an answer in the way of his resurrection (Hb 5). And yet at this very hour, in his glory, he is interceding for us (Rm 8).

Jesus, in his humanity, knew the need for prayer. It accompanied him throughout his life, his ministry. With help of the Word, it nourished and irrigated his life. It is thus that he remained, throughout his life, in the love and complete will of the Father. He invites us to enter into such a communion (Jean 15).

2. The approach of God as a “Father”

« *Lord, teach us how to pray.* » This request, which introduced the “Lord's prayer” in Luke, is not found in Matthew. Matthew places the « Lord's prayer » with Jesus' larger teaching on prayer in general. (Mt 6:5-8). He presents Jesus as training his disciples, whereas Luke underlines the need for this training.

Within the core of this teaching is found the invitation to come close to God as to a « Father ». This is accentuated in particular in Jesus' teaching. It is also how he prayed personally. We find, in several places in the NT, the expression: « *Abba, father* », with the Aramaic word coming first (Mk 14:36; Rm 8:15; Ga 4:6). The repetition is certainly in echo of the language used by Jesus.

I would like to make several remarks about this.

1. My first remark concerns the language used by Jesus. « Abba » is the Aramaic word. In Jesus' time, Jews spoke Aramaic in their daily life, but they prayed in Hebrew. There was a standard prayer, regularly pronounced by the Jews. It began by the confession of

¹ Richard Foster, *Éloge de la Discipline* (Vida, 2001), 63

faith in a unique God (Dt 6:4-5), to be followed by 18 other prayers, all in Hebrew. Many specialists agree that the Lord's prayer that began by « Abba » was probably written completely in Aramaic. Jesus taught his disciples to pray in their every-day language, rather than in classical Hebrew, the language of the sacred books. For Jesus, there was no « sacred language ». ² All nations can address God and read the Bible in their own language. With regards to prayer, this would mean that God wants to meet us where we are. He values a relationship of simplicity, freedom and authenticity. I feel it is useful to reflect on our way of praying: our churches, our public prayers, our pastoral prayers... do they not create models that limit the language? Have we not restored a « sacred language » for prayer? How much room have we left for simplicity, and for authenticity? How much thought have we given? What liberty do we have to use words that are really our own, rather than ready-made phrases? It is wise to distinguish public prayer from personal prayer, but let's not allow the structure of public prayers confine the simplicity of our personal approach to God.

2. My second remark is about the word « *Abba* » and its significance today. It was the word used by young infants when they addressed their father. It is thought therefore that its equivalent today would be « Dad », which is why certain Christians use the term « Dad » when they pray.

However, we must not forget another use of the word « *Abba* ». In Aramaic, as in other languages in the current Middle East, it is often used when addressing someone of respected rank. A pupil, for instance, when speaking to his teacher, would say « *Abba* » out of affection and respect. When Jesus speaks of God as Father, he associates both proximity and supra-eminence. (« Our Father who is in Heaven »). He integrates the idea of holiness (« Hallowed be your name »); of his kingdom. We should find therefore an equivalent that unites harmoniously relationship and freedom on the one hand, and respect and rank on the other.

An additional consideration in the comprehension of «*Abba*» is that it is best to avoid supporting the idea that our faith in God is only the projection of our desire, of our human need or emptiness. This is a psychological critique that we must be told.

Certain Muslim theological traditions are very strict on this subject; they denounce as idolatrous any term for God invented by man: They refuse, for instance, the use of metaphors (God is a rock, a shepherd, a father), because a metaphor finds its source in a created reality. They only authorize adjectives to describe god (the merciful, the compassionate, and the almighty). ³ This refusal is excessive, of course, and does not take into account the fact that God expressed something of himself in his creation. It is wise to be careful, however, and this element worth being mentioned.

Jesus himself defined what he meant by “Father”: in Luc 15, he describes God as a wonderful, unique Father, unsurpassed in his love. He also spoke of his own relationship with his Father, and not of his personal images, more or less appropriate,

² This point is underlined by Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008), 94-96.

³ In the list of 99 names of God, only three could be classified as a metaphor, all of the others are adjectives.

for not having found better, or through an ideal.

How to conclude? « Father », or « Our Father » combines proximity and respect; « Dad » conjures intimacy, but misses the element of respect (which is the difference, humanly speaking, between « my dad » and « my father »). « Father » includes the expression of distance: you can say harmoniously « *Our Father who is in Heaven* ». « Dad » only expresses proximity: « Our Dad who is in Heaven » seems strange, like some kind of pathological childishness. We must remain sensitive to the customary use of terms as they are employed today.

I am attentive to expressions used by our Christian brothers and sisters who have come from an Islamic background. They have integrated the magnificent message of proximity of God in Christ, all while, influenced by their education, keeping the sense of his greatness. Many are careful to maintain the combination of “Heavenly Father”. Others add the affectionate note of “Dear Heavenly Father”, or “Dear Lord”. It is an astute and sensitive way of expressing the affective proximity of the word « Abba ».

3. When Jesus teaches about our approach to God, our Father, he invites us to a *relationship of freedom and intimacy*, one in which we know we are children of God, loved by him and totally welcome in his presence. The image of a “secret place” where you pray to your Father evokes this intimate familiarity, of sharing where anything can be confided. Jesus highlights this personal tie: it is « *your* » Father who is there. He combines this with a promise: he shall « *give* » you something in return through this meeting. He offers an intimacy that calms; « *our Father knows* » what we need, and can receive all that we confide to him. We can abandon and leave our agitation behind; without attempting to gain his attention or divine favour by way of a multitude of words or religious acts.

To approach God as our Father does not exclude other aspects of this relationship. We are still creatures addressing their Creator (« Our Father, who is in Heaven »). We remain sinners addressing a holy God (« *hallowed be your name* »). We are before him, conscious that “his will” must come before our own, and that he is called to “reign” over our lives. We know we are dependent on him for our « daily bread », that we need his forgiveness, as we are weak when facing evil and temptation.

We must see therefore in the expression « *Our Father* », not as an “abolishment” of this angle, but as God’s additional gift to us, like the fine tip of his love. Our Creator invites us to call him “Father”. The God three times holy gives us this honour in Jesus. The One before whom we should be nothing more than insolvent debtors grants us the statute of sons and daughters. « *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!* » (1 Jn 3:1). Christian prayer will always oscillate between assurance and wonder. « Confidence of the child, humility of the creature: these two sentiments, far from being incompatible, are complementary and mutually enriching. »⁴

⁴ Guy Appéré, *Pour un dialogue avec Dieu* (Mulhouse : Grâce et Vérité, 1974), 9-10.

3. Learning how to pray

How can we enter into, and progress in prayer? What difficulties shall we meet and what help shall we receive to face them?

Choose a place

Jesus begins by inviting to pray in a secluded spot, in secret. He opposes here those who would be tempted to parade their spirituality in religious assemblies, or in the streets, at the hour of prayer. Prayer is not a spectacle where we display our spirituality. This warning is valid for public prayer, but also for the times when, quite alone, we marvel at our implication, or our fine words.

Jesus suggests his disciples choose « *the most secluded room* » of the house: a room where we can « *close the door* ». This insistence on intimacy illustrates well the profound nature of prayer: face-to-face, personal, between “God and I”. It reminds us also that we live within space and time. Going physically to a place where we shall present ourselves before God « gives shape » to our action. Closing the door implies the choice to preserve ourselves from what could distract us, to devote ourselves to the meeting we have decided to hold. There are gestures and attitudes that we should recover. We live increasingly in permanent dispersion. We can be physically present in one place, and listen and take notes, keep an eye on our electronic mailbox, our texts, and chat simultaneously with several correspondents. Consider a scene where a couple in a restaurant is invaded by a mobile phone that one of them forgot to turn off. We have become incapable of choosing to devote our attention to one person, in one place. We yield to the exhilarating feeling of being everywhere at the same time. We lose the sense of time, and the unique value of a chosen gesture.

Our prayer needs protected time and space. Of course it is good to be able to address God at anytime, anywhere: on the street, in the car, in public transportation, within the midst of our activities. But deepening requires a chosen and protected moment. It is also a simple matter of respect before God. It is worthwhile for us to search for a place that is favorable to our « protected » meeting with God. A place « set apart » at home? or a quiet place outdoors, in the middle of nature? Some might discover it helpful to transform a corner in their room into a « prayer space », adding a few symbols such as a Bible, a verse of scripture, a candle... We mustn't minimize the usefulness of such a place, if we can have one.

A chosen place of the sort is also worthwhile because it encourages us be regular in our « appointment » with God. We find the Lord, meeting after meeting. The place is filled by the enrichment of what we have experienced there. It is with joy that we return. Now this is not sanctification of a place, but of the richness of memory and continuity of lived experience. Other places are memorable and important to us. Why not such a place in memory of what we live with God?

When it is possible for us to truly pray « in secret », our body can participate more freely in the prayer. We can raise our voice, speak clearly, murmur, sing. We discover

gestures that correspond to what we wish to express: raise our hands towards God (Ps 88:10), lift our eyes to the Lord (Ps 123:1), kneel down (Da 6:10; Eph 3:14), express a gesture of shamefulness (Lk 18:13), our opening to God; our waiting upon God. Our body holds and sustains the commitment of our heart and word. Some might feel the need to pray while walking. The « secret place » is inductive to freedom before God, in its complete measure and authenticity.

Set aside real time

How can we speak accurately of the length of prayer time? The biblical examples range from the flash prayer that bursts out of a situation (Neh 2:4), to whole nights (Lk 6:12), or regular periods of prayer for a specific subject (Neh 1:4). Jesus wanted his disciples « *to watch for an hour* » with him (Mk 14:37). Daniel prayed « *three times a day* » (Da 6:10), and we do not know how long lasted his prayers actually were. Others took advantage of « *night watches* » (Ps 63:6). Let us keep this vast range of possibilities open. Our prayer life should remain flexible, all while being regular. Let us avoid legalism, that transforms useful discipline into tyrannical rules, and leaves space for spiritual pride (Lk 18:12). We must remember that a day begun without a time of prayer can still be lived under God's watch, and it can be useful and blessed for the Lord.

However, if prayer is to structure our life, it needs to be given the time to do so. It needs regularity if we wish to « *walk genuinely with God* ». It needs length if it is to have a lasting influence, to shape our lives, and not just be a simple formality that we expedite. Prayer needs, as all meetings do, a protected framework so that it can go on in peace. It deserves to be preserved within our weekly agenda.

To protect prayer is « *devoting* » time to it, choosing a moment just for it. To decide to make such an exclusive choice is worthwhile, even if it is for a limited length of time. We will gain more benefit from 10 minutes authentically put aside, than from a whole hour « *between two other appointments* », between prayer and the exposure to all of the demands that come up.

Furthermore, to protect prayer is setting aside time for it, and giving it priority over other activities. This decision can seem difficult when the activities are numerous and urgent. It isn't an obvious choice when the tasks do not depend on us (e.g. a mother of young children).

There is an enormous temptation to pray only when we have the time to do so. Prayer becomes rather rapidly the poor parent of our life, at the mercy of all other priorities, justified or not. In order to thwart this tendency, we should adopt ways that reverse the perspective: « *The more deadlines and responsibilities I have, the more I must pray,* ». Or: « *Too busy not to pray* ».⁵ If considered only as simple formulas, they can irritate or crush us, giving the impression that prayer is only another obligation in the already long list of constraints. Each of us must discover, in our own life, the profound truth of these formulas. For my part, for instance, I integrate them in my life with regards to my need

⁵ Titre d'un ouvrage honnête et stimulant de Bill Hybels, « *Too busy not to pray* » (IVP : Leicester, 1988, 161 pp.

for God: « I have so much to do, Lord, that I need you even more! » Another idea could be the wish to truly « walk with God »: « Lord, please don't let me leave you on the platform when I get on with my activities ». In concrete terms, we realize that God watches over our busiest days when we take the time to begin them with him. This prevents neither difficulties nor complications; but God's presence provides us with the resources to get over them. Isaac the Syrian (VII^e C.) gave this useful advice: « If, when you celebrate your liturgy, a thought whispers to you to make haste and advance the service so that you'll be free earlier, do not yield to this thought... Kneel down and pray: Lord, I do not wish to measure my words, but reach the summits of your dwelling. »⁶

The discipline of a regular appointment for prayer, at one or two specific times in the day, is the best way to increase the value of prayer in our life. It should be considered as a personal and voluntary decision, and not as an external obligation. We must be expressly against placing prayer in a trailer to be towed behind the remainder of our life, but choose to lodge it as an element that structures us. This decision leaves no room for daily « negotiation » if we should pray or not. It contributes to continuity, deepening and progress. We must be careful that it does not induce feelings of guilt, remaining flexible, setting attainable targets, allowing oneself the possibility to compensate for a missed or shortened time. What is important is not to respect scrupulously « our » discipline, but « *to walk with God* » (Ge 5:22).

Our prayer “plan” must be adapted to the realities of life. If we feel the morning is appropriate to present our day before God, we mustn't make it an absolute rule, because other persons will find it preferable to take time in their daily life routine to enter a church or isolate themselves to pray during their lunch break. We might choose to take advantage of regular commuting, if it is possible of course to concentrate. Others will prefer the calm of the evening for a privileged moment to be spent with God.

Enter into prayer

Once we have adopted a framework for approaching God, how do we enter into prayer? I would suggest here several thoughts on the process, rather than on the content, as content will be the theme of our final study.

1. « *I seek your face!* » (Ps 27:8) Prayer is only genuine if there is a relationship and communion between God and us. We shall focus, therefore, our primary attention on the Lord. We must advance: we are entering « through his gates », into the « vestibule » (Ps 100). But we have in Jesus « free access to his sanctuary » (Hb 10:20).

For this relationship to be made, two conditions of a different nature must be met: on the one hand, God, and on the other, ourselves.

As far as God is concerned, we know that in his grace the Lord desires to meet with us.

⁶ Cité par Daniel Bourguet, *Le soir, le matin et à midi, je loue et je médite* (Lyon : Réveil Publications, 2000), 9-10.

However, « *he resists the proud* », « *to honour the humble* » (Jm 4:6, cf. Lk 18:9-14). Does this signify that prayer should commence by a spirit of contrition and confession of sins? In the Lord's prayer, Jesus formulates a request for forgiveness in the second part only of the prayer. His initial words are those of confidence in God's love (« Our Father »), and recognition of his holiness, his sovereignty and pre-eminence over our lives. Why in this order? Jesus wants us to be founded in the Father's love before we confess our sins. This love is greater than all of our faults. God's accepting us does not depend on the quality of our confession: it is the base on which we can present everything to God. The required foundation to approach God is therefore humility and faith. On this basis, the promise is certain: « *Come near to God and he will come near to you* » (Jm 4:8).

Now, from our point of view, when we turn to the Lord, our starting point is where we stand. The priority will depend on how we are living. We are in harmony with God? Prayer can rise up straight away, in thankfulness for the grace of this relationship. We are aware of a fault or failure that is bothering us? Just as soon as we have called our God « Our Father », we can add a word of contrition and of return to him, so as to grasp forgiveness through Jesus and welcome by the Father. We are worried by a thousand things? Our task will be in priority to put God in the centre, to be present for him.

Freedom, therefore, to enter into prayer. On the other hand, to be founded on the grounds of his grace by faith, the assertions and promises of God's word must be given priority on our sentiments, and control them. This task is also part of how to enter into prayer.

2. « *Unify my heart* » (Ps 86:11). We are often disorganized when we enter into a time of prayer. We need to be unified. This is the reason for meditation. The quality of prayer depends on it. « Our heavenly Father is there, in secret »: to calm our hearts in his presence. We must take the time to present ourselves before him, with an internal calm. We must change the pace. We mustn't rush into a flow of words. Speak slowly. Take the time to name God, as Jesus invites us to do in the Lord's Prayer. Allow each name to resound within us, each divine word that we meditate.

Meditation requires energy. We must assemble our scattered thoughts. The Fathers of the desert made their own the meaning of Christ's word: « *There where two are three are gathered, I am with them* » (Mt 18:20). In their moments of solitary prayer, they comprehended this « *two or three* » as being « mouth, soul and spirit »⁷. In order to facilitate this unification of our being, several means are at our disposition. Some might adopt a physical position that appeases them. Others might prefer a time of silence before God. Yet others will discover their internal unity in the words of a Psalm that they will adopt slowly, consciously. Others might find a song useful. Others, the Lord's prayer.

« We must not make haste: God has all of his time and our time belongs to him... Take time to remind ourselves that our whole being is destined to be his temple. Yes, there

⁷ Jean Climaque, cité par Daniel Bourguet, *Le soir, le matin et à midi...*, 12-14. Daniel Bourguet a un développement tout en finesse sur ce qu'il appelle la « syntaxe intérieure ».

where a person is unified in the name of Christ, he is present, and you become holy, a sanctuary. »⁸

3. « *The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak* » (Mt 26:41). When Jesus asked his disciples to pray, they were unable to stay awake. It is often difficult for us as well to maintain the steady line of our good dispositions. All Christians in particular go through the difficult and humiliating experience of distraction: we are speaking to God, and all of a sudden we find ourselves thinking of our car keys, a chore to be done; a finished appointment or one to come. Our prayer is completely scattered. Distraction is our common lot. Christians throughout the centuries have spoken of it.⁹

We may want to focus our mind in one precise direction, but it remains extremely mobile. This is what makes for both its richness and weakness. All sorts of thoughts arrive suddenly and project it elsewhere. The adversary is certainly not inactive in this process, even if we must not accuse him of all wandering of our thoughts. The human mind has been compared to a Director of an Orchestra, who must maintain in harmony multiple thoughts and submit them to the same project.¹⁰ Concentration necessitates effort, in prayer and at other times. To have to make an effort must not discourage us.

Concentration is an essential element in many schools of spirituality. Oriental spirituality has developed it to an extreme. In Hinduism, for instance, one attempts to control the activities of the mind, and suppress all internal movement through yoga positions, which require a long and demanding practice. The aim is to abolish all states of conditioned consciousness in order to participate in the absolute Conscience. In Buddhism, the « perfect concentration » is one of the eight imposed passages towards deliverance. The discipline of the mind is performed by way of successive reductions to go beyond the illusion of self. In these practices, concentration is essential to allow the human mind to go beyond itself. In the Christian faith, it is the relationship with God that is the essence and outcome of prayer. This relationship integrates the totality of our personal resources, what we experience and all that has its place in our life. Concentration does not have, therefore, a role of reduction, but one of unification of our thoughts around a unique aim, and attention to God. The required effort is genuine, even though the resources of the grace and presence of God are accorded to us.

It is often the beginning of the moments of prayer that prove to be difficult. Once we have entered into prayer, that we have fixed our eyes on God, and that we are aware of his presence, then prayer seems to flow out in a continuous movement. This thought encourages us to be perseverant. « Pray until you enter into prayer » is precious advice.¹¹ The idea is not to multiply words to be sure to be heard, but to enter into a spirit of prayer. In other words: the best preparation for prayer is prayer itself!¹² It is experienced reality. It is also, most probably, at God's disposition. : « God grants prayer

⁸ Daniel Bourguet, *ibid*, 15

⁹ Parmi les auteurs contemporains, Donald Carson a la simplicité d'en parler, avec honnêteté, in *La prière renouvelée* (Excelsis, 2005), 20-21. Daniel Bourguet aborde le sujet en profondeur, et cite le témoignage des Pères du désert (*Le soir, le matin et à midi...*, 44-62).

¹⁰ La comparaison est de Daniel Bourguet (*Le soir, le matin et à midi...*, 44-62) auquel je suis redevable de plusieurs réflexions qui suivent.

¹¹ Carson dit : « Priez jusqu'à ce que vous ayez prié », *La prière renouvelée*, 38

¹² Daniel Bourguet, *Le soir, le matin et à midi...*, 17

to he who prays », wrote Evagrius Ponticus.¹³ It is given during a worthwhile encounter, one of perseverance. Nonetheless, it is truly *given*, and it is sustained by his Spirit who comes to assist us in our weakness (Rm 8:26; Jude 20).¹⁴

How do we get beyond the first stage of prayer? Personally, what proves to be of precious aid to me is to adopt prayers found in the Bible, and to let them lead me into the presence of God. If we choose to use the Lord's prayer, incorporating our own words, step after step, it becomes an entrance adapted to any situation, and always an enriching moment. To pray personally the Psalms, with regards to what we are living, is another useful aid, inspired by God himself, and more diversified than the Lord's prayer. Other prayers, composed by Christian authors, can assist us; as can also certain liturgies, or prayer paths. We must not neglect these aids.

Once entered into prayer, we are not out of the danger of being distracted, for the Christian prayer keeps our mind actively awake and open. Certain thoughts lead to God and maintain us in his presence: to think of the person of God and of his sacrifice, the cross, the incarnation, his will, the Sermon on the Mount... Other thoughts withdraw us from God: anger, resentment, self-importance, egocentrism. If such thoughts appear, it is best to confront them, deal with them before God and pursue in prayer. Yet others are simply frivolous, neither good nor unworthy, but make us veer off the course of prayer. These distractions come without warning: we discover them when it's too late. It is only through persistent coming back to the central axe of our prayer that we shall be unified before God. It is preferable to experience each coming back to the centre of prayer as a sign of the help of the Spirit, rather than being sorry that we lost the thread. It is worthwhile to persevere: « God grants prayer to he who prays. »

4. The benefits of prayer

What are the benefits of prayer?

Prayer allows us to taste the presence of God

We are not alone. We are « walking with God ». Sometimes we feel it: the peace, the serenity it gives. Sometimes we know: we have been strengthened through God. Grafted to the vine, we are nourished with the sap of his presence and strength. We find ourselves better equipped to face what we encounter. The difference is authentic, for God communicates through relationship.

Prayer renews and calms our way of thinking.

In general, we come out of prayer with renewed perspectives. Prayer allows us to integrate God into our way of thinking. It is always enriching, broadening, appeasing.

¹³ Cité par Bourguet, *ibid.*

¹⁴ On retiendra ici l'avertissement de Carson : « Si certains doivent apprendre que Dieu ne se laisse pas impressionner par des prières interminables, d'autres seraient avisés de comprendre qu'il ne se laisse pas non plus impressionner par une certaine brièveté qui n'est rien d'autre que de la négligence coupable. » (D. Carson, *La prière renouvelée*, 38)

Prayer allows us to seize God's promises. It is one thing to know them. It is another to seize them, in faith and when facing our particular circumstances. Prayer is the crucible in which the alchemy takes effect. At Gethsemane, Jesus reminds us that it is sometimes at the price of a battle. But the peace of God that surpasses all understanding is at the end of the tunnel (Ph 4:6-7).

Prayer transforms us. This is where is fulfilled « the renewal of our intelligence » (Rm 12:1), and where we receive the « will and the way » (Ph 2:13). When we come into the light, in humility and in truth, the Spirit acts within the depths of our being, convinces, impregnates our heart with the grace of forgiveness, and renews our disposition.

Prayer makes God's fulfillments possible. Praying allows us to discover, through God's answers, how he takes care of us, and his will to intervene in our life. It is also a school for listening, discovering his will, perseverance and confidence. God is pleased to show us that he is present, in both great and in small things.

The man in prayer is as God loves him and meant him to be: « Prayer is man's beauty »¹⁵. Any other attitude is only caricature, and often disfigured beauty. Praying is entering into God's project and being the delight of our creator. It is finding our true roots. « But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him... He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream ... » (Jer 17:7-8)

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¹⁵ D. Bourguet, *Prions les Psaumes* (Réveil Publications), 5-11.