

We Are Made for Prayer

A Lenten Pastoral Letter from Bishop Brendan Leahy



Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Lent has three pillars – prayer, fasting and almsgiving. I would like to invite you to focus this year in particular on prayer. The coming weeks could be a time to work a little on improving our personal and family prayer as well as prayer at school.

Prayer is so much needed, especially prayer for peace in our world. We think of the continuing wars in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Congo... Recently the head of the United Nations, António Guterres, told diplomats that we have started 2023 “staring down the barrel of a confluence of challenges

unlike any in our lifetimes.” He noted that top scientists and security experts moved the Doomsday Clock to just 90 seconds to midnight last month, the closest it has ever been to signalling the annihilation of humanity. Pope Francis often remarks that the world has actually moved piecemeal into a third World War.

So we need to pray. What I propose for this Lent is that we improve not just saying our prayers but the quality of our prayer. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us in this.

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen summed up a situation that can strike us all when he said, “I want to pray but I also don’t want to miss out on anything – television, movies, socializing with friends, drinking in the world.” And yet, prayer is a statement about who we are. We are made for a relationship with God. Gandhi used to say that prayer is more necessary for our soul than food is for the body. The body can fast. The soul can’t. As human beings, we need to pray. I like something Saint Mother Teresa said about prayer: “I used to believe that prayer changed things, but now I know that prayer changes us, and we change things”.

What is Prayer?

A classic description says prayer is “the raising of our mind and heart to God”. Each person has his or her own experience of prayer. What’s important, however, is that each of us makes time for prayer (be it short or longer) in our daily routine. For Christians, prayer is conversation with God who is our best fan, the God who sees us and is always looking out for us, the God who had come close to us in Jesus Christ, the God who sees us as important for him.

I like the description of prayer as coming “home” to God. We’re forever out and about, doing this and that, but it’s good to come back home spiritually now and then, and talk with God about what’s going on in our lives, our projects, our plans, our hopes, our disappointments, our challenges, and our sufferings.

There’s a story about Saint John Vianney who used to see a farmer coming into the chapel each day and spending time before the Blessed Sacrament. One day, John Vianney asked the farmer how he prays, and his answer amazed him: “I look at him and he looks at me”. Prayer, in other words, doesn’t have to be made up of loads of words. It’s not just “saying prayers”. It’s letting our heart declare its love for God. Saint Teresa of Avila, the great teacher of prayer, wrote that prayer consists “not in thinking a lot, but in loving a lot.”

Prayers During the Day

One of the surprising sayings of Jesus is that we should “Pray always” (Lk 18:1-8; 21:36). But how can we do that? We’ve the family to raise, our work to attend to, meals to prepare, the shopping to arrange, the school runs, the community, sports and recreation activities... What the Church writers in the early church who spoke about this agreed is that we don’t literally have to spend our day on our knees praying. All our activities can become prayer if done in the spirit of Christ. If we try to put love into all our actions during the day, then Christ lives in us and Christ in us is always praying to his Father. However, in order to nurture the spirit of Christ in us we need to have specific moments of prayers and develop little practices that help us bring our mind and heart back to Jesus Christ during the day. Let’s review a few simple ways we can develop habits of prayer.

A first obvious way is to make sure we say, even if briefly, our morning and evening prayers. They might only take a moment but if they become a daily routine then they become part of who we are. These prayers can be the *Our Father*, *Hail Mary* and *Glory be to the Father* well said from our heart.

A simple but effective way to pray during the day is to say “for You” before each action we are doing. As baptised Christians, we all share in the priesthood of Christ. We are all called to transform our world with Christian charity. So in saying “for You” before each action (preparing the breakfast, beginning a task at work, going for a walk, meeting up with friends, helping someone in need), we are doing our part to contribute to God’s continuing work of creating and recreating our world.

Another simple way of prayer is to silently say little sayings (sometimes called aspirations or short prayers) to God. There’s any number of little sayings we can use. The Irish tradition has plenty of “folk prayers”. We can think also of the Russian pilgrim who discovered the prayer of the heart. It consists of faithfully repeating during the day: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner!”. The young woman, Chiara Luce Badano, who was beatified a few years

ago had a saying that she repeated during the day especially in the difficult moments as cancer progressed in her body. It was a declaration to Jesus: “If you want it, I want it”. There is a saying in Ireland, traditionally said after the consecration at Mass, but which can be prayed any time: “My Lord and my God”.

Little Practices

Visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Paying a visit to the chapel was a practice more in the past than today. Perhaps the visit to the Blessed Sacrament is a practice we all could try and renew. Jesus is there in the tabernacle, silently waiting for us. It’s always moving to see a parent bringing a child to light a candle and say a short prayer in the church.

The “two-minutes” night prayer. Pope Francis has recently recommended that we spend two minutes at the end of the day just reviewing how the day has gone. “Before ending your day, stop a bit and ask what has happened (that day) — not in the newspapers,” he said, “but in one’s heart.” It’s a time to count the blessings of the day, note the difficulties, ask God for forgiveness but also try to see where Christ has been present during the day.

Meditation. In an era when there’s much talk of mindfulness (there’s probably a mindful app on all our phones!), some people might find it helpful to dedicate a short time (10 or 20 or 30 minutes) to reflectively reading a text from a spiritual writing or the Gospel (it could be the weekday mass texts available on websites) and simply talking with Jesus about what is going on in the Gospel episode or parable. Gently repeating a phrase of the text that strikes you is a mindful meditation that relaxes and also inspires.

Community Prayer

Today, people like coming together for prayer. It certainly brings joy to God to see us praying together, united as the “two or more” gathered in the name of Jesus (Mt 18:20). There are prayer groups, Scripture sharing groups, Eucharistic Adoration initiatives, Rosary groups, and many others.

Family prayer can be difficult with so much going on. But it’s worth trying to find some moment of prayer together. For instance, praying together before meals or when the Angelus comes on (noon and 6 p.m.) might be a moment to remember to pray for peace in the world, naming the places where there are wars and then also naming the family’s own particular intentions. Likewise, in schools it is good to provide moments of prayer during the school day. It helps children know there is a Higher Power to whom we can appeal for help when we are in need.

We need to keep in mind that prayer is never only personal. Every individual behaviour has an impact on the community. There’s no such thing as purely private acts. An act of love or a prayer can strengthen and sanctify the whole community because we are all members of the

Body of Christ. At each Mass which is, after all, the Church's greatest prayer, the community takes up the prayers of humanity and makes them their own and offers them to God. Our personal prayers are taken up into the great prayer Jesus says and offers at every Mass.

Conclusion

We can be grateful we live in a time when technology provides us with many opportunities to link in with prayer resources all over the world. There are meditation apps, pray as you go apps, and Bible apps. Some provide daily prayer helps or reflections. For instance, the Jesuits run a prayer app called "Sacred Space" (sacredspace.ie). There are music apps with favourite hymns or inspiring songs.

For those who want to go deeper in exploring their spiritual life, they can contact one of the spiritual guides whose contact details are available on our Diocesan website.

I've prepared a short booklet entitled "Reflections on Prayer" that you might find helpful. It's available also on the Diocesan website.

Above all, this Lent, let's remember one another as we journey these weeks spiritually together focusing on improving our prayer life, praying especially for peace in our world.

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