



Reflection on Prayer

First Festival Letter of
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BISHOP OF PEORIA

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I am writing this letter to encourage all in the Church of Peoria, not just to know about God, but also to personally know Him. We should not just to speak about the Lord, but also to really talk and listen to Him. I suspect that even among church going Catholics, there are at least some who have never had a personal experience of the living reality behind all the “church-speak” we all so readily use. I am also convinced that in different capacities and in different ways, God calls each and every believer into intimacy with Himself. Grace is a theological term that simply indicates the powerful and effective “presence” of God. This divine “gift of self” is freely offered to all who want to know and love the one, true God, whom we are commanded to serve. I would like to encourage all the Catholics of this Diocese to truly “fall in love” with God, for the first time or in continuing conversion, until at last we see the Lord, face to face. It is the experience of knowing God in love and in prayer that I would like to address in this, my first Festival Letter.

If you like someone as a friend, you enjoy spending quality time with them. If you should become infatuated, you will usually begin to think more and more of the person and long for those moments when you can be together. And finally, if you fall in love and discover your heart’s desire, you can really only be happy and know peace when you live in union with the beloved. The experience of God is something like that and even very much more. God is love itself, and our Christian faith makes no sense without the experience of knowing God’s love and being in love with God. Our faith, first and last, must be grounded in the incomparable love of the living God. Each one of us was created with an infinite capacity that God has designed and endless hunger that God alone can satisfy. Our moral law and Gospel values, the truth of our doctrine, our churches and schools, our hospitals, our missions, our structures of community, our commitment to service, our defense of life, our option for the poor lose their meaning without the continuing experience of knowing the love of the Father, in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the essential reality that Christian prayer embodies and affirms.

Our own Servant of God from the Diocese of Peoria, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, once observed that even among believers there are some folks who only think about prayer the way an aviator might think about a parachute. It’s a good thing to have but only in case of emergency. Certainly prayer in need and all prayers of petition are an important part of every believer’s life. We all have challenges and limitations, and we all are aware of our own sins and personal fears. So surrendering our problems to the absolute power of God is fundamentally an act of faith. The philosophy that I can’t, God can, let God is not just for people in a twelve step program. This kind of prayer is fundamentally realistic and is certainly in accord with the scriptures. Even the Lord’s Prayer contains seven distinct prayers of petition. As Christians, adopted by God through water and the Holy Spirit, we should always approach Our Father with the confidence of little children. God will forgive our sins if we turn to Him, and God’s love will provide for all our needs. Where there is faith, where two or three are gathered together, where believers agree in prayer with one another and the saints in glory, miracles can happen, the sick healed, disasters averted, peace restored, and all our human contingencies abundantly met.

Prayer, however, can become something deeper and even more wonderful than just our asking and God's granting. Certainly people in love willingly share gifts and want only what is good for one another, but the greatest gift they share is the sheer joy of their love. Our God, who is almighty and eternal, perfect truth and absolute beauty, truly does love us and even more surprisingly asks for our love in return. This is Good News and amazing grace. How could we ever receive such a wondrous gift and not respond with our own words of love, praise, thanks, and adoration. Our God is lovable for His own sake, and if we know Him, how could we help but love Him? That kind of tremendous love, that experience beyond words, that wholeness in God is a foretaste of all the endless beatitude and peace of heaven.

So how should we pray? First of all, we should be constantly faithful to the Sacraments and the Sacred Liturgy of the Church. In the Mass, the one perfect prayer and sacrifice of Christ on the cross is renewed and made present in our midst. The endless grace of the Eucharist is the source of all the good we may ever do and celebrates the summit of everything we bring to worship. Our Sunday assembly is also a necessary tithe on our time that we owe to Almighty God and to one another. We should never miss Mass, and we should make the Eucharist, even daily if possible, an absolute priority for ourselves and for our families. What is so freely offered at Mass is riches beyond compare. As an early Christian teacher once urged, we should seek the Lord the way a miser seeks gold.

Each day we should also read at least a little portion of the Bible. Every syllable of the scriptures is from God. The Bible proclaims God's own self-revelation, who God is, what God is doing, and what God asks of us. The Bible offers a practical guide for daily living, a map for eternity, and a thesaurus for the awesome mysteries of our faith. In a world full of lies and confusion, we should read the scriptures the way someone desperate and starving might eat and drink. The Holy Spirit who guides and sanctifies the Church will not neglect the opportunity to speak to our hearts and enlighten our minds whenever we study and savor the Word of the Lord.

We should certainly pray in the morning when we get up, and we should also pray again at night before we go to bed. We should pray before and after we eat and before and after we undertake any work or project. We should examine our consciences in the light of God's mercy and regularly approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Such habits of prayer acknowledge no more than the simple truth that we are but stewards of our lives. Even were we to live for a hundred years, this is only a flashing instant out of eternity. Prayer can liberate our lives from the distractions and deceptions of contemporary culture, and enable us to notice and enjoy the things that really matter. Listening and talking to the Lord not only helps us to know God, but in this divine conversation we may also grow in wonder, knowledge and appreciation of creation, of one another, and even of our self.

A valued and venerated prayer in our Catholic tradition is the Rosary. Again, our own Fulton J. Sheen once compared the experience of saying the Rosary to that of making music. Like playing an instrument, praying the Rosary is a tactile experience as we pass the beads through our fingers. Like music, we hear the sound of the words we speak taken almost entirely from the scriptures, and emotionally experience the mysteries these words recall to memory. Our Holy Father, the Pope, has designated this year as a special Year of the Rosary, and he has enriched this prayer with five new mysteries for our reflection and meditation. In the Rosary, Our Lady, the very Mother of God and

the first and greatest of the Lord's disciples, prays with us and for us. The Rosary can make space in our busy day for God to speak to our hearts, even when we are tired and distracted. The words of the Rosary, like the words of love, again and again repeat those truths that give us hope and reassurance.

Finally, I would like to share a few thoughts about quiet prayer and contemplation. Have you ever noticed the way we usually relate quite differently with a stranger than with a close friend or loved one. With a stranger, for the sake of politeness, we must always keep a conversation going. Silence might indicate boredom or disinterest, so we usually chatter on about the weather, politics, or sports. When we are alone with someone we know and love, however, words may become unnecessary. Silently sharing a journey, a work, or just a few precious moments together can become an opportunity for quiet intimacy and communion. Confidence in a relationship, a deep commitment to the other, and the experience of being cherished may signify a growing love that finally is too deep for words. In the same way, one can be completely quiet and yet remain entirely intent upon the Lord. The more we know God when we are alone, silent, and recollected, the more of God we will desire. According to our Catholic tradition, ordinary believers, not just monks, nuns, and mystics, are all called by God in many different ways to share in this awesome spiritual reality. In fact, without tasting the goodness of the Lord, all our religious practice and even all our commitment to service becomes merely an outward show without any inward conviction or reality.

And so let us pray as Mary prayed, when she held in her heart those things she did not understand. Let us pray faithfully like our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane, when in our own lives we know darkness, fear, discouragement, and spiritual dryness. Let us pray like Peter prayed with tears of repentance after he had denied his Lord. Let us also pray in moments of exultation and thanksgiving when God may enkindle our hearts and illuminate our minds with the consolation of His love. Let us pray in the Holy Spirit who pleads on our behalf with words that may not be spoken. Let us pray together when we are assembled in our churches; let us pray before the Most Blessed Sacrament; let us pray in the Liturgy and in our devotions; let us pray with our families and friends; let us pray alone in our inner rooms with the door shut. Let us pray for ourselves, for one another, for our beloved dead and for all the faithful departed, for those who have no one else to pray for them, and even for our enemies. According to the Lord's own example and as He commanded, let us pray always, so that we may know, love, and serve God here on earth, and in eternity enter into that Beatific Vision for which we were all created.

Given at my Chancery on this 5th day of January, 2003, the feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord.

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