

THE YOUNG FRANCISCAN

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Prayer

It was said of St Francis, that towards the end of his life he no longer prayed, but rather, he became all prayer.

For most of us today, we think of prayer as an activity isolated from all our other daily commitments, as a pious task which we attempt to fit in to our already busy schedules. The problem is that, most days many of us cannot find time to schedule in a meal, let alone pray!

For St Francis however, prayer was not an isolated activity far removed from his other daily tasks. He did not need to find time to “do” it. But rather, prayer became so perfectly intertwined into his daily life, that his every thought, word and deed was raised to God in praise, thanksgiving and worship.

The life of St Francis can be understood as a mystical love story. He was head over heels in love with God! St Francis had allowed the love of God to completely infuse his whole being, so much so that he had reached the highest point of intimacy with God that one could possibly arrive to in this life. His whole mind, body and soul was raised to God in such a mystical union that prayer and contemplation was at the centre of who he was and all he did.

Perhaps such a concept of prayer is deeper than most of us today can understand? Even though many of us are far from such a mystical union with God, simply having the desire to pray, and to grow closer to Jesus in our hearts is the first step.

Simply thinking about Jesus brings us to prayer and contemplation. Prayer in its most basic understanding is simply a conversation with God. This can be done anywhere, anytime, and in any situation.

We should try not to let work, activities, and the problems of life act as an excuse for our inability to make time for prayer. Our attitude should not be “I will make time for prayer”, but instead, we should make every attempt to bring prayer and contemplation into the core of our daily lives and the soul of everything we are and do. This should be the guiding force in our lives in which everything else revolves around.

In becoming prayer, we achieve that for which we were created—to know and love God. Our whole lives should be centred around developing an intimate relationship with our Creator, with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our conversation with God should begin from the moment we wake up and continue throughout every moment of every day. He should always be the main thought in our minds. Even during those midnight hours when God wakes us up hoping that we might think of him, we might say to him, “speak Lord, your servant is listening”.

Like any relationship we have with our own family members or friends, the more we speak to them the better we get to know and love them. If we do not have time to talk to God in prayer, then perhaps we are busier than what God wants us to be!

The Contemplation of a Poor Clare

Fifty-one years ago, at the age of only fifteen, Sister Hijacinta Batinić entered the convent of the Poor Clares in Viterbo, Italy. After ten years there she moved to the monastery in Split, Croatia, and then in 1989 she founded a new convent of the Poor Clares in the small village of Brestovsko in central Bosnia. After more than five decades of devoting her life to prayer and contemplation, Sr Hijacinta shares some of her inspirations.

One of the most difficult form of prayer is contemplation. To contemplate means to look at Christ, to share his solitude and silence, and to listen to his words.

The most advantageous way to contemplate is in silence and stillness, away from all the noise and distractions of our lives.

For our foundress, St Clare, contemplation became the “way of life” for their community. St Clare herself spent many hours, throughout the day and night, in worship, and in contemplating the mysteries of God. The sisters noticed that after prayer her face was brighter and more beautiful, and her lips did not want to talk about superfluous and unnecessary things.

Prayer and contemplation became for Clare the transforming force of her existence. She wanted her sisters to follow the path of union with Christ through contemplation.

St Clare’s contemplative experience was born at the moment she discovered in her own life the

unconditional and faithful love of God, embodied in Jesus Christ. In contemplation we focus our eyes on God’s love, so to see life through his eyes. When God shines in our hearts we participate in his vision of all history and all creatures: our eye becomes a contemplative eye, full of love and mercy.

St Clare was known to say to her Sisters,

“ Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation. ”

A misconception of prayer and contemplation is that, to do it well, one needs to go into the desert or enter a monastery. It is thought that contemplation is an extraordinary grace given to only to those who live as enclosed religious.

In fact, one can go to a desert or monastery and be far from true contemplation, and yet, one who lives a busy life, but who seeks and loves God, can enter into

deep contemplation, and will find him in every place and in every activity.

The thirty years of Jesus’ hidden life in Nazareth were years filled with work and prayer, during which Jesus led a simple, everyday life, like ours; divine and at the same time human. Those years show that professional work, dedication to family and social relationships are not an obstacle to a deeply prayerful life, but an opportunity and means for an intense relationship with God.

Ideally, young people should be spending 5, 10 or 15 minutes a day in silent contemplation, reflecting on a mystery of Jesus’ life. Being silent for so long can be an unusual, and often uncomfortable experience. When various thoughts and distractions come, it is important to be persistent and steadfast in prayer. We learn to pray by praying.

The more our being is filled with God, the less room there will be for negative feelings such as sadness, doubt and discouragement.

The Our Father

The following adaptation of the “Our Father”, from “The Secret of the Rosary – the 14th Rose”, by St Louis de Montfort, reflects on the spiritual virtues gained when we pray this prayer devoutly. In the greatest prayer Jesus ever taught his disciples, we find the entire gospel message contained within these few short words, as well as the entire Franciscan charism.

In saying “*Our Father Who art in Heaven*”, we make an act of **faith and humility**. **Faith** in believing in the God whom we cannot see nor even prove his existence; **Humility** in realising that we are his small children. For whenever we think that God is in Heaven—infinately removed from us by the greatness of His majesty—as we place ourselves in His presence we should be filled with an overwhelming reverence. Then the fear of the Lord will chase away all pride and we will bow down before God in our utter nothingness.

When we ask that *His name to be hallowed* and glorified, we burn with zeal for reverence of God’s holy name. We are never farther from blaspheming than when we pray that the *Holy Name of God may be glorified*. We make an act of **adoration and praise** when we raise our minds and hearts to God’s great glory.

When we ask that His “Kingdom come”, we make an act of **hope**. If we really look upon the Kingdom of God as our heritage we cannot possibly be attached to the things of this world.

By desiring that *God’s “Will*

be done on earth as it is in Heaven”, we make an act of **perfect obedience and trust**. We give ourselves openly to accepting God’s divine plan for our lives and for the world.

In asking God for “our daily bread”, we practice **poverty of spirit**. In asking for the most basic need known to mankind—bread/food—we understand that all gifts come from God. We also practice **detachment from the world** through our understanding that there is only one thing we truly need—our daily bread. And who is that daily bread that we need? Jesus. Without our Lord Jesus we are truly the poorest of the poor.

When we beg Him to “*forgive us our sins*” we make an act of **sorrow** for having ever offended God. Through perfect contrition we strive for holiness and a full conversion of heart.

“As we forgive *those who trespass against us*” we give proof of the virtue of **mercy in its highest degree**. In doing so we become non-judgemental, but rather, transformed more like Jesus, who on the Cross forgave those who crucified him. While sincerely asking

God to *forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us*, we no longer give way to anger and thoughts of getting even, but learn to love our enemies.

In asking God to “*lead us not into temptation*”, we make acts of **humility, prudence and fortitude**. **Humility** in acknowledging our weakness and inclination towards sin; **Prudence** in allowing the Holy Spirit to help us distinguish between good and evil; And **fortitude** to remain courageous through all our spiritual battles. If we sincerely ask God that our neighbour may have the very same blessings that we ourselves stand in need of, it goes without saying that we will give up all hatred, quarrelling and jealousy. In asking God to *save us from falling into sin* when we are tempted, is to give proof that we are fighting laziness and genuinely seeking to work towards our salvation.

While asking for all these things—not for ourselves alone but also for our neighbour we are keeping the **Commandment of love of neighbour**.

As we wait for God to “*deliver us from evil*”, we exercise the virtue of **patience**.

Amen.

Secular Franciscan Saints



Bl Jane of Signa

1244-1307

Jane was born near Signa, Italy, to poor, yet devout parents. Still as a child, Jane became a shepherd girl and tended to her father's sheep. Jane found much peace and quiet in the meadow, and enjoyed spending the long hours in prayer. If ever in the company of other shepherds, she would invite them to pray with her, while also instructing the shepherds on how to serve God and avoid sin. God granted Jane with a unique grace, as whenever it rained, she would seek protection under the tree where she prayed, and not a drop of water touched her or her sheep. Seeing this peculiar wonder, the other shepherds joined Jane when a storm arose, and each time received the same protection from the weather. Having had received some unwanted fame in response to the miracle, Jane retreated to a Franciscan convent where she joined the Third Order. At the age of twenty-three, Jane voluntarily entered into a small cell and had the door bricked up behind her. She remained locked up there for the remaining forty years of her life in deep prayer.

Bl Robert Malatesta

1411-1432

Within a short-lived life, this devout and powerful Italian prince lived a life devoted to serving God. At an early age Robert gave up unnecessary pleasures and offered up many penances, such as eating only the less appetising portions of his meal so as to save the better parts for the poor whom he fed. Robert was so devoted to prayer that even while asleep he was found with his arms crossed and uttering words with his lips as if in prayer. When, as a little child, he was asked what he would like to be, he answered, "I wish to be a poor man like Jesus." Robert married the Princess Margaret of Este, who together lived a very pious marriage. As a prince, he dressed accordingly to his rank, although always wore the cord and scapular of the Franciscan Third Order of which he was a member. He became a father to the poor, and often visited the sick in hospital, serving them personally. On one occasion St Francis appeared to Robert and showed him the five wounds of the stigmata, which Robert himself experiences in full pain.

Bl Novellon of Faenza

d. 1280

A shoemaker by trade, Novellon was born in Faenza to deeply devout parents. In his youth, however, he did not resemble his parent's piety, and his bad conduct caused his mother much grief. He married at a young age, and it was hoped that this may have caused him to develop in maturity. However, Novellon continued in his bad habits, which caused even more grief to everyone near him. Yet, his mother never ceased to pray for her wayward son, and it seemed that God answered her prayers by allowing Novellon to become seriously ill. After a near death experience, Novellon reflected on his sinful life, and with bitter tears he vowed that if he were to recover, he would turn his life around. After only a few days Novellon miraculously recovered. He kept to his word, and began his new life with a pilgrimage to the tombs of St Peter and Paul in Rome, and St James at Compostela in Spain. For the remainder of his life, prayer and work were his daily occupation. He only kept enough wages as necessary to support his family, and the rest he divided among the poor.

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'Secular Franciscan Saints' are adapted from the Franciscan Book of Saints, by Marion A. Habig OFM