

Prayer

May 31, 2024



Praying Throughout
the Day

Introduction

This year, one of my second graders said to me, “Sister, sometimes when I get bored, I play rock-paper-scissors with my guardian angel.” Then he proceeded to demonstrate a rock-paper-scissors match between the two of them.

Children have much to teach us about prayer. They can teach us about praying joyfully and spontaneously, and they can teach us about not being caught up in the formalities. As a child growing up in his family’s home in Nazareth, Jesus prayed and was taught to pray by Mary and Joseph.

The School of Nazareth

When Saint Pope Paul VI visited Nazareth in 1964, he said, “Nazareth is a kind of school where we may begin to discover what Christ’s life was like and even to understand His Gospel. Here we can observe and ponder the simple appeal of the way God’s Son came to be known, profound yet full of hidden meaning. And gradually we may learn to imitate Him.”¹

As Catholic Christians, we are called to imitate Christ. Some aspects of His life we are better able to imitate than others, and that is by design. It has been noted before that Jesus spent 3 hours on the cross, he spent 3 years in public ministry, and he spent 30 years living a humble, hidden life of work and prayer. We might not be called to give our life through crucifixion or martyrdom; we might not be called to publicly preach and teach or heal people. But Jesus’ life in Nazareth is something that *all* can imitate, no matter your age, vocation, or work.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “During the greater part of his life Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings: a daily life spent without evident greatness, a life of manual labor...the hidden life at Nazareth allows everyone to enter into fellowship with Jesus by the most ordinary events of daily life.”²

Saint Pope Paul VI mentioned three specific aspects of life in Nazareth that we can learn from. One aspect is what he calls the *silence of Nazareth*. He says, “The silence of Nazareth should teach us how to meditate in peace and quiet, to reflect

¹ Pope Paul VI *Nazareth*

² CCC 531-533

on the deeply spiritual, and to be open to the voice of God's inner wisdom and the counsel of His true teachers. Nazareth can teach us the value...of meditation, of a well-ordered personal spiritual life, and of silent prayer that is known only to God.”³

Whether they realize it or not, many people assume that work and prayer are opposed to one another. During initial formation in religious life, postulants and novices learn to develop the habit of recollection, which is also known as practicing the presence of God—speaking to God, remembering His presence, and praying as you go about your daily duties. This is a beautiful, powerful, and transforming practice—but unfortunately it is unknown to many laypeople. For example, a few years ago during the refreshment break at the novena, my dad was telling me about a spiritual book that he was reading, and he said, “Did you know that monks pray while they work in the garden?” He was very taken with the idea and said that he had started trying to do the same thing.

Inwardness/Recollection

There are many ways to pray throughout the day, and our prayer can fall into two main categories: there are prayers that we stop and pray, such as the rosary, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, *lectio divina*, litanies, novenas, prayers to Mary or other saints, etc. These are known as pious practices or devotions.

Then there is prayer as a constant state of soul. This type of prayer doesn't depend upon the number of prayers we say or the number of hours we spend in formal prayer. Devotions and pious practices are very important, but they are meant to help us in developing a constant, inward state of prayer within our soul.

Fr. Benedict Baur uses the term “inwardness” to describe prayer in this way. He says that true inwardness is not a matter of thought but of will. This means that we can be united with God even if we are not consciously thinking of Him or saying prayers in our mind. Fr. Baur also says that inwardness is not a “succession of acts”—many prayers or actions that we repeat one after the other—but an attitude, a condition, an endless, unchangeable state of love for God, of trust in God, of complete obedience to God's will. Inwardness, or recollection, not depend upon our feelings—whether or not we *feel* God's presence or *feel* God's peace. He says that closely bound up with this inwardness is a “constant alertness for the inner voice of God, which makes itself known to us in countless unmistakable ways: promptings, impulses, reminders, warnings, pricks of conscience.”⁴

Inwardness, a constant state of prayer, does not consist of actions but of a permanent attitude of soul. Fr. Baur offers some consoling thoughts about this prayerful attitude of soul. He says, first of all, that a life of Christian inwardness

³ Pope Paul VI *Nazareth*

⁴ Baur, 152

does not demand an immense prayer output. This means that we can be content with fulfilling our daily prayers to the best of our ability, without feeling guilty for not going above and beyond. Fr. Baur also says that a life of Christian inwardness does not demand many hours of ardent praying, meditation, or reflection on God and His mysteries. Obviously we know that meditation and reflection on God are good things, and they should be done regularly. However, there is a balance in our inward life between times set aside for pious practices or devotion and times when our soul is united with God, even if our mind is legitimately occupied with things other than God.

Saint John Chrysostom says, “It is possible to offer fervent prayer even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop,...while buying or selling...or even while cooking.”⁵ Living in Nazareth, Mary and Joseph were living with God Himself, so even while going about their daily duties—Joseph’s carpentry work, Mary’s housekeeping—they were in God’s presence and had a prayerful attitude. As religious Sisters we are privileged to live in the same house as Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament; our own Nazareth. But as laypeople you too are called in a special way to imitate the Holy Family. Although Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament does not dwell in your home, God *does* dwell with you in other ways; in the souls of all baptized Christians in the state of grace (you and those around you); in his omnipotence (God is everywhere); and as Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.”

Dom Columba Marmion, a Benedictine Abbot and a spiritual master gave advice to his spiritual directees about inwardness and recollection. To those beginning the spiritual life and trying to acquire the habit of recollection, he says, “At the beginning, this life of recollection requires efforts, but when the habit is taken, it becomes like a second nature. If one has joys or sorrows or difficulties one goes to Him, and then all is well.”⁶

How does someone go about developing this habit of recollection? What concrete steps can someone take?

First, one must have a desire to live in God’s presence. Pray for this desire, ask God to give you this desire. Persevere in this desire, and frequently renew it. Otherwise, we will fill our senses with so many sights and sounds that we will be unable to think of God.

Choose certain parts of your daily routine and plan on thinking of God or remaining in His presence while you do those activities—try to choose activities that you do daily, such as brushing your teeth, making your bed, washing the dishes, going up or down the stairs, or walking to the mailbox. You can also choose

⁵ CCC 2743

⁶ Thibaut, 179

certain sights or sounds around you, such as such as a crucifix or holy images, or sirens, your dog barking, the phone ringing, etc. and use these as a reminder to pray. You can say a short aspiration, such as “Jesus, have mercy on us,” or “Jesus, I love you,” or you can pray any spontaneous prayer of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, or petition.

Dom Columba Marmion gives additional very helpful advice for developing this habit. He recommends that you “make a little sanctuary in your heart where you will always find Our Lord even in the midst of occupations and distractions,”⁷ and to frequently visit that sanctuary within you. He also recommends that you “try to gain the mastery over your thoughts,” because if you let your imagination run wild, it will be “impossible to arrive at contemplation.”⁸ He says that “it is very important, each time one has a few minutes in the day, not to let one’s mind wander, but to direct it toward God” otherwise, “neither recollection nor prayer is possible.”⁹

Part of developing the habit of recollection involves letting go of control. Some people naturally have a quiet, calm interior that more easily adapts to recollection and a life of interior silence. Other people have minds that are constantly working and never seem to slow down or quiet down. For someone with this type of mind, it is easy to use one’s thoughts to constantly plan things out, or to figure out how to get as much done as possible. For this person, being recollected then becomes an act of trust—instead of using my thoughts to worry about every possibility, I can instead work in union with God, and trust that He will help me.

Regarding this point, St. Claude de la Columbiere, spiritual director to St. Margaret Mary, said, “Exterior employment is no obstacle to solitude of heart when the mind is calm and leaves everything in God’s hands.”¹⁰

The idea of recollection can unfortunately seem very abstract or unattainable, and for this reason some people might shy away from trying to practice recollection or worry if they are doing it “right.” I’d like to propose to you a very concrete and helpful example—an allegory, really—for what recollection is.

Imagine a mother who is holding a baby in one arm and is going about doing various chores around the house. The baby is very present to her, even if she is not constantly thinking about the baby. The mom is thinking about the tasks that she is doing, yet at the same time she is very attentive to the baby’s needs and she responds readily to the baby. She may need to set the baby down in order to complete some of the chores, yet she remains near the baby and will immediately

⁷ Thibaut, 180

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Columbiere, 52

pick the baby up again as soon as she is able. Throughout the chores the mother pauses and smiles at the baby or sings and talks to the baby while she works.

When you think about it this way, recollection seems simple—because it is! It is not always easy, but it is very simple and attainable. This is the way that the Holy Family would have lived, from Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, during their time in Egypt, and then for many years in Nazareth.

There are also many spiritual benefits that come from developing a habit of recollection. Dom Columba Marmion, also said that “the habit of recollection” is “particularly valuable” and an “indispensable disposition” for prayer.¹¹ This means that we need recollection in order to help us pray. Without recollection, transitioning from a time of activity to a time of prayer is difficult.

Another reason recollection is so powerful is because by striving to remain in God’s presence in this life, a recollected soul is excellently prepared to live in God’s presence eternally in Heaven. We are not there yet, but we can live in the presence of God, under His gaze, beholding Him with the eyes of our soul until one day we can see Him face to face.

Another reason recollection is so valuable is because it helps other times of prayer bear more fruit. When giving advice to someone, Marmion said,

“Remain recollected, not only during prayer, but throughout the day. I have more than once experienced for myself that if one is faithful to keep near Him during the day, Our Lord reveals Himself, at one moment or another, outside the time of prayer, and then He helps us to make enormous progress.”¹²

As we grow in this practice we will grow in closer union with God, so that we will not only think of Him but *with* Him, and we will grow to love what He loves.¹³

In Nazareth, Mary lived in constant interior prayer and recollection. The Gospel tells us that Mary “pondered in her heart” the mysteries of Christ’s life. Dom Columba Marmion said that, in Nazareth, “The Blessed Virgin did not speak many words: filled with grace and light from on high, inundated with the gifts of the Spirit, [Mary] remained, silent, in the adoration of her Son...and from the sanctuary of her immaculate heart a hymn of praise and thanksgiving rose up unceasingly to God.”¹⁴

In the wisdom of Holy Mother Church, the *Catechism* tells us, “We haven’t been commanded to work constantly or fast constantly, but we have been told to

¹¹ Thibaut, 179

¹² Thibaut, 179

¹³ Healy, 30

¹⁴ Marmion, 363

pray constantly.”¹⁵ May we, like Mary, dwell in the joyful silence and prayer of Nazareth, and learn from this most excellent Holy Family how to better live our own family life.

¹⁵ CCC 2742

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