

On Prayer

By Mother Teresa

I don't think there is anyone who needs God's help and grace as much as I do. Sometimes I am so helpless and weak. I think that is why God uses me. Because I cannot depend on my own strength, I rely on Him twenty-four hours a day. If the day had even more hours, then I would need His help and grace during those hours as well. All of us must cling to God through prayer.

My secret is very simple: I pray. Through prayer I become one in love with Christ. I realize that praying to Him is loving Him.

In reality, there is only one true prayer, only one substantial prayer: Christ Himself. There is only one voice that rises above the face of the earth: the voice of Christ. Perfect prayer does not consist in many words, but in the fervor of the desire which raises the heart to Jesus.

Love to pray. Feel the need to pray often during the day. Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of Himself. Ask and seek and your heart will grow big enough to receive Him and keep Him as your own.

We want so much to pray properly and then we fail. We get discouraged and give up. If you want to pray better, you must pray more. God allows the failure but He does not want the discouragement. He wants us to be more childlike, more humble, more grateful in prayer, to remember we all belong to the mystical body of Christ, which is praying always.

We need to help each other in our prayers. Let us free our minds. Let's not pray long, drawn-out prayers, but let's pray short ones full of love. Let us pray on behalf of those who do not pray. Let us remember, if we want to be able to love, we must be able to pray!

Prayer that comes from the mind and heart is called mental prayer. We must never forget that we are bound toward perfection and should aim ceaselessly at it. The practice of daily mental prayer is necessary to reach that goal. Because it is the breath of life to our soul, holiness is impossible without it.

It is only by mental prayer and spiritual reading that we can cultivate the gift of prayer. Mental prayer is greatly fostered by simplicity—that is, forgetfulness of self by transcendence of the body and of our senses, and by frequent aspirations that feed our prayer. "In mental prayer," says Saint John Vianney, "shut your eyes, shut your mouth, and open your heart." In vocal prayer we speak to God; in mental prayer He speaks to us. It is then that God pours Himself into us.

Our prayers should be burning words coming forth from the furnace of hearts filled with love. In your prayers, speak to God with great reverence and confidence. Do not drag behind or run ahead; do not shout or keep silent, but devoutly, with great sweetness, with natural simplicity, without any affectation, offer your praise to God with the whole of your heart and soul.

Just once, let the love of God take entire and absolute possession of your heart; let it become to your heart like a second nature; let your heart suffer nothing contrary to

enter; let it apply itself continually to increase this love of God by seeking to please Him in all things and refusing Him nothing; let it accept as from His hand everything that happens to it; let it have a firm determination never to commit any fault deliberately and knowingly or, if it should fall, to be humbled and to rise up again at once—and such a heart will pray continually.

People are hungry for the Word of God that will give peace, that will give unity, that will give joy. But you cannot give what you don't have. That's why it is necessary to deepen your life of prayer.

Be sincere in your prayers. Sincerity is humility, and you acquire humility only by accepting humiliations. All that has been said about humility is not enough to teach you humility. All that you have read about humility is not enough to teach you humility. You learn humility only by accepting humiliations. And you will meet humiliation all through your life. The greatest humiliation is to know that you are nothing. This you come to know when you face God in prayer.

Often a deep and fervent look at Christ is the best prayer: I look at Him and He looks at me. When you come face to face with God, you cannot but know that you are nothing, that you have nothing.

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It is difficult to pray if you don't know how to pray, but we must help ourselves to pray. The first means to use is silence. We cannot put ourselves directly in the presence of God if we do not practice internal and external silence.

The interior silence is very difficult, but we must make the effort. In silence we will find energy and true unity. The energy of God will be ours to do all things well, and so will the unity of our thoughts With His thoughts, the unity of our prayers with His prayers, the unity of our actions with His actions, of our life with His life. Unity is the fruit of prayer, of humility, of love.

In the silence of the heart God speaks. If you face God in prayer and silence, God will speak to you. Then you will know that you are nothing. It is only when realize your nothingness, your emptiness, that God can fill you with Himself. Souls of prayer are souls of great silence.

Silence gives us a new outlook on everything. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say but what God says to us and through us. In that silence, He will listen to us; there He will speak to our Soul, and there we will hear His voice.

Listen in silence, because if your heart is full of other things you cannot hear the voice of God. But when you have listened to the voice of God in the stillness of your heart, then your heart is filled with God. This will need much sacrifice, but if we really mean to pray and want to pray we must be ready to do it now. These are only the first steps toward prayer but if we never make the first step with a determination, we will not reach the last one: the presence of God.

This is what we have to learn right from the beginning; to listen to the voice of God in our heart, and then in the silence of the heart God speaks. Then from the fullness of our hearts, our mouth will have to speak. That is the connection. In the silence of the heart, God speaks and you have to listen. Then in the fullness of your heart, because it is full of God, full of love, full of compassion, full of faith, your mouth will speak.

Remember, before you speak, it is necessary to listen, and only then, from the fullness of your heart you speak and God listens.

The contemplatives and ascetics of all ages and religions have sought God in the silence and solitude of the desert, forest, and mountain. Jesus Himself spent forty days in the desert and the mountains, communing for long hours with the Father in the silence of the night.

We too are called to withdraw at certain intervals into deeper silence and aloneness with God, together as a community as well as personally. To be alone with Him, not with our books, thoughts, and memories but completely stripped of everything, to dwell lovingly in His presence—silent, expectant, and motionless.

We cannot find God in noise or agitation. Nature: trees, flowers, and grass grow in silence. The stars, the moon, and the sun move in silence.

What is essential is not what we say but what God tells us and what He tells others through us. In silence He listens to us; in silence He speaks to our souls. In silence we are granted the privilege of listening to His voice.

Silence of our eyes.

Silence of our ears.

Silence of our mouths.

Silence of our minds.

... in the silence of the heart

God will speak.

Silence of the heart is necessary so you can hear God everywhere—in the closing of the door, in the person who needs you, in the birds that sing, in the flowers, in the animals.

If we are careful of silence it will be easy to pray. There is so much talk, so much repetition, so much carrying on of tales in words and in writing. Our prayer life suffers so much because our hearts are not silent.

I shall keep the silence of my heart with greater care, so that in the silence of my heart I hear His words of comfort and from the fullness of my heart I comfort Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor.

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Real prayer is union with God, a union as vital as that of the vine to the branch, which illustration Jesus gives us in the Gospel of John. We need prayer. We need that union to produce good fruit. The fruit is what we produce with our hands, whether it be food, clothing, money, or something else. All of this is the fruit of our oneness with God. We need a life of prayer, of poverty, and of sacrifice to do it with love.

Sacrifice and prayer complement each other. There is no prayer without sacrifice, and there is no sacrifice without prayer. Jesus' life was spent in intimate union with His Father as He passed through this world. We need to do the same. Let's walk by His side. We need to give Christ a chance to make use of us, to be His word and His work, to share His food and His clothing in the world today.

If we do not radiate the light of Christ around us, the sense of the darkness that prevails in the world will increase.

We are called to love the world. And God loved the world so much that He gave Jesus. Today He loves the world so much that He gives you and me to be His love,

His compassion, and His presence, through a life of prayer, of sacrifice, of surrender to God. The response that God asks of you is to be a contemplative.

If we take Jesus at His word, all of us are contemplatives in the heart of the world, for if we have faith, we are continually in His presence. By contemplation the soul draws directly from the heart of God the graces, which the active life must distribute. Our lives must be connected with the living Christ in us. If we do not live in the presence of God we cannot go on.

What is contemplation? To live the life of Jesus. This is what I understand. To love Jesus, to live His life in us, to live our life in His life. That's contemplation. We must have a clean heart to be able to see—no jealousy, anger, contention, and especially no uncharitableness. To me, contemplation is not to be locked in a dark place, but to allow Jesus to live his passion, His love, His humility in us, praying with us, being with us, and sanctifying through us.

Our contemplation is our life. It is not a matter of doing but being. It is the possession of our spirit by the Holy Spirit breathing into us the plenitude of God and sending us forth to the whole creation as His personal message of love.

We shall not waste our time in looking for extraordinary experiences in our life of contemplation but live by pure faith, ever watchful and ready for His coming by doing our day-to-day duties with extraordinary love and devotion.

Our life of contemplation simply put is to realize God's constant presence and His tender love for us in the least little things of life. To be constantly available to Him, loving Him with our whole heart, whole mind, whole soul, and whole strength, no matter in what form He may come to us. Does your mind and your heart go to Jesus as soon as you get up in the morning? This is prayer, that you turn your mind and heart to God.

Prayer is the very life of oneness, of being one with Christ. Therefore, prayer is as necessary as the air, as the blood in our body, as anything, to keep us alive to the grace of God. To pray generously is not enough; we must pray devoutly, with fervor and piety. We must pray perseveringly and with great love. If we don't pray, our presence will have no power, our words will have no power.

We need prayers in order to better carry out the work of God, and so that in every moment we may know how to be completely available to Him.

We should make every effort to walk in the presence of God, to see God in all the persons we meet, to live our prayer throughout the day.

Knowledge of the self puts us on our knees, and it is very necessary for love. For knowledge of God produces love, and knowledge of the self produces humility. Knowledge of the self is a very important thing in our lives. As Saint Augustine says, "Fill yourselves first, and then only will you be able to give to others."

Knowledge of the self is also a safeguard against pride, especially when you are tempted in life. The greatest mistake is to think you are too strong to fall into temptation. Put your finger in the fire and it will burn. So we have to go through the fire. The temptations are allowed by God. The only thing we have to do is to refuse to give in.

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Prayer, to be fruitful, must come from the heart and must be able to touch the heart of God. See how Jesus taught His disciples to pray. I believe each time we say "Our Father," God looks at His hands where He has carved us. ("I have carved you on the

palm of my hand.” Isaiah 49-16.) He looks at His hands, and He sees us there. How wonderful the tenderness and love of God!

If we pray the “Our Father,” and live it, we will be holy. Everything is there: God, myself, my neighbor. If I forgive, then I can be holy and can pray. All this comes from a humble heart, and if we have this we know how to love God, to love self, and to love our neighbor. This is not complicated, and yet we complicate our lives so much, by so many additions. Just one thing counts—to be humble, to pray. The more you pray, the better you will pray.

A child has no difficulty expressing his little mind in simple words that say so much. Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Become as a little child.” If we pray the gospel, we will allow Christ to grow in us. So pray lovingly like children, with an earnest desire to love much and to make loved the one that is not loved.

All our words will be useless unless they come from within. Words that do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness. Today, more than ever, we need to pray for the light to know the will of God, for the love to accept the will of God, for the way to do the will of God.

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Source: Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love* (New World Library, 1997).