

MAKING TIME FOR PRAYER MATTER

'If you are too busy to pray, you are too busy' (Anon)

In his Gospel, Luke tells us that one day the apostles came to Jesus just after He had been praying all night in solitude. They asked Him to teach them how to pray just as the disciple John had taught his followers. And Jesus then taught them the beautiful prayer – The Our Father.

Reading this Gospel account, it is clear that the apostles were not so much looking for a prayer to be memorized but that they were asking Jesus 'how' to pray. And that is what Jesus did. He gave them a model. He said to them: "Whenever you pray, this is the 'way' you must pray.

I have a dear friend who, at the age of fifty-two, had a massive stroke and now lives in aged accommodation. When I visit her, her face lights up but sadly, she does not remember my name. I talk to her and she tries hard to respond. Then we spend some time in prayer. I pray, she listens. When I begin the Our Father, I just have to open my eyes to experience the joy on her face. Confidently, she begins to pray these beautiful words in her own humble manner.

There is an old proverb which says that prayer should be the key of the day and the lock of the night. Unfortunately, too many people still believe that prayer has to be slotted into a-once-in-the-morning and once-at-night ritual. We fail to remember that prayer is having a conversation with God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. We can pray anytime and as often as we like.

The apostle, Paul, urges us '*to pray without ceasing*'.

Prayer does not have to be formal prayer. Throughout the day, we can share our feelings, our thoughts, seek advice, and say thanks, no matter where we are or what we are doing. We certainly do not have to be down on our knees in order to pray. All we have to do is start talking!

As in any conversation, there are two requirements: talking and listening. If we happen to find ourselves doing all the talking, that simply becomes a monologue. It is so easy to slip into a litany of petitions.

We pray to ask for answers or guidance, to express our thanks, and for blessings on all those who are important to us. It is great to be able to initiate the contact with God by beginning the conversation but unless we are prepared to listen as well, we will never be able to develop an open dialogue.

For many people, prayer is one of life's most puzzling mysteries. They unfortunately perceive God as an omniscient being who is highly judgmental, and ready to bless them when they toe the line but also ready to punish them when they slip off the straight and narrow.

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Their sense of spirituality may have been buried long ago deep beneath layers of hurt, fear, mistrust or lack of love. They believe it would be presumptuous to take up God's time with their problems. How sad and misguided we can be! And then there are those who perhaps do more wishful thinking than praying. We tend to forget that God is not some kind of fairy godmother sent to us solely to grant our every whim. We have to remember that God deals in realities, not wishful thinking.

In life's journey, our growth depends primarily on our mental, physical and spiritual well-being. However, many people appear to concentrate on the physical and mental aspects only and ignore the importance of the spiritual. The result is that when this happens, all three invariably suffer. Keeping busy becomes a priority. The noisiness of life drowns out that little voice within each of us calling us to be still occasionally and give time to God.

Every year, during the season of Lent, the Church urges us to spend some time in the wilderness; to stand apart from our total worldly involvement '*out there*' and take stock of our lives. Maybe we are too afraid to sit in silence, scared of what we might sense, hear or experience. But coming before God, for a few quiet moments during the day really can bring calm, confidence and clarity into our lives. This, of course, takes practice and guidance.

In Karl Rayner's lovely little book on prayer, he says prayer is 'not the speaking of many words, or the hypnotic spell of the recited formula. It is the raising of the mind and heart to God in constantly renewed acts of love.'

There are many times during the course of our busy day when we may feel overwhelmed. We find it hard to know what to pray to God. And that's what makes The Our Father such a gift. Everything we need to pray is contained in these familiar words given to us by Jesus himself.

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