

HOW TO MAKE PERSONAL PRAYER

meaningful

DEAR FATHER KERPER: Through the years I've always struggled with saying my prayers, especially the rosary. I feel very guilty because I promise to make time for my prayers, but I fail to follow through. For example, I find it very difficult to say a whole rosary. When I stop I feel like I've cheated Our Lord and Our Lady by never finishing the prayers I've promised to say. I feel like a hamster running on a wheel without getting anywhere. What am I doing wrong?

Actually you're not doing anything wrong. Rather, you've settled into a frustrating routine of relying on a single form of prayer — "saying my prayers." While many faithful Catholics share your predicament, we can all move beyond the wheel in the cage. Hamsters can't.

Here's the good news. Your long-term attempts to pray indicate good faith. Please remember that the Lord alone knows our hearts; and he alone judges the quality of our prayer. So you have *not* wasted your time "saying prayers" in the wheel. Just as hamsters benefit from endlessly running in their wheels, you too have benefited from trying your best to connect with the Lord.

Your difficulty with praying the rosary exposes a common pitfall: understanding prayer as *primarily*, even exclusively, the repetition of words. This causes us to count prayers, to measure time spent praying, and to fret about "unfinished prayers." The antidote to these habits is simple: unifying *vocal* and *mental* prayer. We see this seamless unity of words and thoughts in the devout and mindful praying of the rosary.

Allow me to share some surprising comments by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI.

In an interview in 2000, the future pope confessed that he rarely prayed all five decades of the rosary at once. He humbly said: "Three (mysteries) are too much for me; I am too much of a restless soul; I would wander too much. I take just one, and then often only two or three mysteries out of the five... A whole (rosary) would be too much for me."

Isn't this a bit scandalous? Was the future pope whittling down the traditional rosary?

Not at all! Instead he fused *vocal* and *mental* prayer together, bringing the two forms into perfect balance.

We also see this in his comment about repetition: "Repetition is a part of prayer, of meditation, a way of settling oneself into the rhythm of tranquility." In effect, then, the recitation of the Our Father and Hail Mary creates a "background," or "setting," for mental prayer directed

toward the mysteries. As such, they differ greatly from the "empty phrases" of the Gentiles so sternly condemned by the Lord (*Mt. 6:7-8*).

Whereas the rosary has a long-established structure, it must give way to the mysterious promptings of the Holy Spirit, who always initiates and guides prayer. By acknowledging his "abridged" rosary, Pope Benedict gently affirmed the necessity of spiritual freedom in personal prayer. After all, which is really better: 50 rushed Hail Marys without meditation or one decade prayerfully focused on, say, the Assumption of Mary? Seen from Pope Benedict's perspective, perhaps we should stop counting and keep praying.

To sum up, Pope Benedict made a single point: Always keep vocal and mental prayer in proper balance. But how do we accomplish that?

Over the centuries, many mystics and theologians have offered advice, but I've always liked the guidance of St. Teresa of Avila, the great Carmelite mystic. She explained these things clearly in *The Way of Perfection*.

By vocal prayer, she simply meant the raw recitation of audible words directed to God, saints and angels. Even parrots can pray this way, but nothing comes of it.

Vocal prayer gradually moves upwards towards mental prayer when a person does three things.

First, he or she must think about and understand the words spoken to God. Here St. Teresa warned: "It is impossible to speak to God and to the world at the same time; yet this is just what we are trying to do when we are saying our prayers and listening to the conversation of others."

To avoid trying to do the impossible in our time, we need to turn off televisions, computers, phones and remove all other possible distractions. Without some degree of silence, thought becomes impossible and we remain locked in parrot-like vocal prayer forever.

Second, a person must constantly remember that he or she is *truly speaking* to God and that God is *truly listening*. On this point St. Teresa gave great advice: "It would be a good idea for us to imagine that He has taught this prayer to each one of us individually, and that He is continually expounding it to us."

Third, St. Teresa insisted that personal prayer must include *conversation* with the Lord.

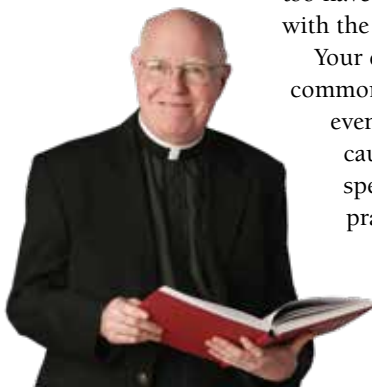
She stressed this often. Here's one striking example:

"For when you never have [conversation] with a person he soon becomes a stranger to you, and you forget how to talk to him; and before long, even if he is a kinsman, you feel as if you do not know him, for both kinship and friendship lose their influence when communication ceases."

Prayer that ignores St. Teresa's three guidelines inevitably becomes cold and boring.

Imagine a married couple who read scripts to one another every day for 15 minutes. Would their marriage survive? Vocal prayer without attention, thought and freedom may grudgingly "fulfill the law," but it will never inflame one's love.

By honestly expressing your discontent with your prayer, you have at least stopped the wheel and maybe hopped off. The cage door is open. Run! ■



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