

Little Weeds

PRAYER

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So much has been written about prayer, so many workshops given, so much said, that if I had any sense, I wouldn't even try to write something about it. But I've never been noted for my sense . . . Besides which, the books, workshops, etc. were/are usually presented by someone with theological/liturgical training, some with college degrees, someone who's a priest or a sister – in short, someone you could look up to. So at least this article will be coming from a different direction!

Some of us can just “rap with God;” we feel quite comfy just talking to Him, telling Him how we feel, what we think, etc. Others of us prefer formula prayer because otherwise we can't seem to find the words. Also, as Franciscans, we say an Office, whether it's the very simple 12s or something more complex. The usual “formula” prayers are very lovely and can be an important part of one's prayer life. However, they can pose problems, too. The same can be said of having a prayer routine – it's an excellent idea, but one that can also prove problematic.

Chances are you learned the usual formula prayers when you were quite young. You were told this is how you pray and the words were repeated for you until you could repeat them yourself. You learned them by rote. And many people never outgrow that – years later, they're still praying by rote, by reflex.

Another problem is that, if you ever did take a close look at formula prayers, you'd notice that they're not exactly couched in contemporary language. I mean, you don't really talk like that, do you? And so, it becomes very easy to just say the words, figuring God knows what you mean. He does. But do you?

Prayer is a conversation, a means of communication. So it stands to reason you must know what you're saying. Perhaps, once you've really taken a good look at the prayer, the words will have new meaning for you and will do the job of expressing your feelings. But if you can't figure out what the words hold for you, it stands to reason it's not a very good prayer for you to say. Better you should simply express your feelings in your own words.

There's also the fact that, if you just mouth the words, not really thinking of what you're saying, the words cease to be a prayer and sink to the level of mere syllables. We all know how we want people to pay attention to us when we talk to them; but isn't it true that we also want them to pay attention to us when they talk to us? If you're just rattling the words off by reflex, you're not exactly paying attention to the person you're talking to, are you?

And the problem of routine – what about that? Well, it's quite simple: you must remember that “routine” and “rut” are not synonymous. Sometimes in practice, however, they might as well be. So it's something you have to watch out for. A good prayer routine enhances your prayer life by organizing it and, to some extent, even guaranteeing that you have a prayer life. Prayer is like anything else: if you let it go 'til you have time, you may never pray. Whereas, if you have a definite time/place allotted to it, there's much more of a chance that you'll not only have time but will actually afford it the attention and concentration it deserves. If it's your special prayer time, you're less likely to plan other things for it.

But, again, routine should not become rut. It shouldn't be, “Oh, oh, noontime! The-angel-of-the-Lord-declared-unto-Mary ...” The purpose of a prayer routine is to allow you to concentrate and attend to prayer properly, not to give you special rattle-off-the-words cues during the day.

Finally, and perhaps the most important thing about prayer: it's got to suit you. You know you best. But whether the prayer is short or complex, said on your knees, your back, or your butt, God will listen. He's like any good parent: He loves to hear from His kids!

Celtic Blessing¹

May the sense of something absent enlarge your soul.
May your soul be as free as the ever-new wave of the sea.
May you succumb to the danger of growth.
May you live in the neighborhood of wonder.
May you belong to love with the wildness of Dance.
May you know that you are ever embraced in
the kind circle of God.

¹ John O'Donohue, Eternal Echoes, A Cliff Street Book, HarperPerennial, 1982, 50