

Prayer can take on variety of forms

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

(This column is dedicated to the memory of John F. Whealon, Archbishop of Hartford from 1969-91, for reasons which only he and I would know.)

One of the most notable developments in post-conciliar Catholicism is the broadened interest in prayer.

Before the Second Vatican Council, many Catholics regarded prayer as something done primarily by priests, women religious, and a few pious lay people. Today, an increasing number of lay Catholics wants to know how to pray and they seek out those who might help them — either directly or through their books and tapes.

Although a lot more talk occurs these days about prayer, many Catholics still have a vague understanding of its meaning.

Prayer's traditional definition is the raising of the mind and the heart to God. It is the act by which an individual or a community enters into conscious, loving communion with God.

Prayer is differentiated by reason of its purpose. Thus, there is the prayer of adoration, the immediate end to which is the praise and glory of God; the prayer of contrition, which expresses sorrow for sin; the prayer of thanksgiving, which gives gratitude to God for blessings received (the Eucharist is the prayer of thanksgiving par excellence); and the prayer of supplication, or petition, which asks God for blessings upon oneself or others.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Older Catholics will recall the mnemonic which the sisters taught them: A-C-T-S (adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, supplication).

Prayer is also differentiated by reasons of method. Mental prayer may or may not use words, but if it does use words, they do not follow a pre-set formula. Vocal prayer does use a given formula that may be spoken or sung. There is also the prayer of bodily gesture, such as expressed in dance.

Another methodological distinction exists between discursive and affective prayer. In discursive prayer, reason — or thinking — dominates. In affective prayer the feelings dominate (trust, surrender, gratitude, love). The normal development in the life of prayer is from discursive to affective

prayer.

Meditation, which is a form of mental prayer, involves an extended reflection on God's presence and activity. When the awareness of God's presence is not apprehended by thought but by love, it is called contemplation.

Meditation (sometimes called "active meditation" to distinguish it more clearly from contemplation) is generally understood to involve discursive reasoning, while contemplation is affective. It is simple awareness of, and focus upon, God's presence.

It is important to note that contemplation is not a method of prayer to be chosen at will, such as meditation. It is a gift into which one is drawn. The most intense form of contemplation is attained when there is ecstatic union between the one praying and God so that the human senses can no longer communicate with the outside world. This is sometimes known as absorption, or rapture.

Centering prayer is a special method of contemplation in which the person simply attends to the presence of God within, that is, at the center of one's being. A mantra or short phrase is sometimes repeated to keep one's attention centered.

Mystical prayer is also a form of contemplation in which the mind and heart are directly and powerfully influenced by God to operate in a way that is beyond the capacity of human effort, unaided by grace. This method of prayer has many forms

and stages. *Lectio divina* ("divine or holy reading"), originally a monastic term, refers to the prayerful reading of, and meditative reflection upon, Sacred Scripture, the Christian classics, or other types of spiritual writing.

A final, practically important distinction may be made between intensive and extensive prayer. The former occurs at particular periods and is done either communally or privately. The latter permeates one's whole day; indeed, one's whole life.

One lives in God's presence (extensive prayer), but one's direct attention is focused on God only at particular moments and under particular circumstances (intensive).

For most of us, most of the time, our prayer is extensive rather than intensive. And it is utterly crucial to remember that extensive prayer is as much a form of prayer as is intensive prayer. In other words, we don't have to be engaged in formal prayer to be praying at all.

Truly Christian prayer is at once trinitarian, Christological, ecclesial, pneumatological, and eschatological.

In simpler English, this means that Christian prayer seeks union with the triune God, is centered on Jesus Christ, occurs within and by the church, is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and is oriented to final and complete union with God at the end of human history.

As such, it is a vital and indispensable part of the Christian life.

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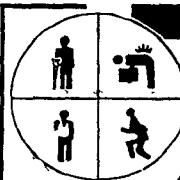
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In conjunction with the diocesan Office of the Synod, the *Catholic Courier* will present two commemorative publications: a special synod/anniversary issue of the *Courier* and a keepsake program for the 125th Anniversary Mass.

The *Catholic Courier's* special edition — to be published September 30, 1993 — will be distributed by mail to nearly 49,000 subscribers and to an additional 1,200 delegates to the General Synod. It will contain articles on various aspects of diocesan history, the agenda for the General Synod, and analyses of the recommendations on which delegates will be asked to vote.

The keepsake booklet will serve as a program for the Anniversary Liturgy, which will be celebrated at the Monroe County War Memorial at the close of the General Synod on Sunday, October 3, 1993, before a gathering of approximately 5,000 members of the diocese and church dignitaries.

Your organization can participate in the festivities — and help support the Diocesan Synod — by placing a congratulatory advertisement in these two special publications (a portion of the proceeds will help underwrite costs of the General Synod).

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