

CHAPTER TWO

Five Principles of Prayer

Gabriel the archangel and the Virgin Mary, in stained glass, illumine the Church of the Annunciation in Altamonte Springs, Florida. Etched in glass is Gabriel's greeting to Mary: "The Lord is with you," and, in brilliant color, her response to the invitation to become Jesus' mother: "Be it done unto me according to your word." Above the angel and the virgin shines the cross.

That window tells in a single picture the essence of our Christian life and the meaning of prayer. When all is said and done, prayer always comes back to listening and responding. We are challenged to listen to God's word and to respond affirmatively.

To gaze reverently upon a mystery of faith is itself a prayer. But it is also important to *say* what we see, to wrap words, however inadequately, around the mystery so that we can share our experience of insight and affection with others. In sharing our faith we grow; in finding words to speak about the Word, we discover truth.

The *Catechism* provides us with words and insights and wisdom. This carefully crafted text offers many principles of prayer, general statements and guidelines that help us to understand prayer and put that

understanding into practice. These principles are not abstractions but more like stained-glass windows, inviting a reverent glance, stirring the heart with affection, prodding the will to a greater commitment to God's will. The five principles we will examine are: (1) God takes the initiative in the dance of prayer; (2) prayer is a vital necessity; (3) hearken and do not harden; (4) prayer is both enlightening and empowering; (5) Christian prayer is trinitarian.

God Takes the Initiative

"In prayer, the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response" (#2567).

The phone rings. Someone has taken the initiative to call. You pick up the receiver and the conversation begins. Words are spoken and responses are made. Some phone calls are more important than others: "Will you go to the prom with me?" "Are you willing to serve on the social justice committee?" "Will you be willing to take in a foreign exchange student?" Life is never the same after such calls.

The Virgin Mary received a life-changing call via the archangel Gabriel. God's initiative in her life was sudden, unexpected, transformative. In this great moment of prayer, all history hung in balance. Would Mary say yes or no to God's unique plan to come among us in human form? Mary gave her mystical yes even though she experienced fear and did not know exactly how this plan was to be fulfilled. Mary acted in faith. The Annunciation story is a superb example of

how God leads us in the dance we call prayer.

How does God break into our lives, initiating a relationship that changes the color of our days? Our God is ingenious. Sometimes God comes through the tenderness of a parent, the challenge of a teacher, the pain of a broken relationship. At other times, we experience divine presence in an autumn moon, the taste of pumpkin pie, the song of the lark. Each of these moments is an opportunity for grace. So we give thanks for the health of a newborn, rejoice in the gift of a new friend, praise the Lord for the marvelous mystery of the Eucharist, beg forgiveness for the hurts that diminish our humanity. Mary responded courageously to God's initiative in her life.

The *Catechism* reminds us: "The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink.... Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him [cf. St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octosinta tribus* 64, 4: PL 40, 56]" (#2560).

Every morning we are invited to the well to receive God's word for the day. We might hear words like "Carry one another's burdens" or "Stop by and see Sam at the nursing home" or "Take some time off" (a message I particularly like to hear!).

Every evening we return to give an accounting of our stewardship. "Sorry, Lord, got caught up in my own agenda and never did get to the nursing home." Or, "I did three random acts of kindness today and made some people feel real good." Or, "Lord, tomorrow I

really do intend to listen to your gentle proddings.”

Prayer is a love relationship, a covenant of deep mutuality. It is a dance, but one in which we know who has the lead (at least, theoretically). It is a dance that invites a gracious following. Like Mary, we experience joy and peace when we, too, give a full and unconditional affirmative response.

Prayer Is a Vital Necessity

Some things in life are optional: pierced ears, a color TV, a video game, a soft drink. It is possible to live without them. Other things are vital, absolutely necessary for our humanity. Just to mention a few: eating and breathing—matters of life or death; reading and writing—if mature education is to happen; grace and prayer—vital elements in our spiritual lives. If these ingredients are not present, death occurs.

In the words of the *Catechism*, “*Prayer is a vital necessity*. Proof from the contrary is no less convincing: if we do not allow the Spirit to lead us, we fall back into the slavery of sin [cf. Gal 5:16-25]. How can the Holy Spirit be our life if our heart is far from him?” (#2744).

No prayer, we die spiritually. No communication, relationships diminish, vanish. No discipline, health deteriorates and is lost.

In the Annunciation story, Mary knew what was necessary if she was to be true to herself and to her God: obedience. She must listen to God’s invitation and then respond with all her heart and soul. Her yes was necessary if she was to be true to her unique calling.

Some people say no to God’s invitations. In James

Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, young Stephen Daedalus proclaims a bold "I will not serve" when presented with a harsh, judgmental God. In the Book of Genesis, Cain refused to accept his role in life and killed his brother.

One of the major confusions in our culture regards needs and wants. Birds "know" that they need air, not a fancy birdhouse with 18 rooms; fish "know" that they need water, not an Olympic-size swimming pool with a 20-foot diving board. When *wants* become *needs* we cross over the border into the land of idolatry. When true needs go unmet, we commit spiritual suicide.

Prayer is not a luxury. It is more than a friendly invitation. Prayer is an imperative, a demand, a vital necessity. But our God never imposes a command without giving the necessary resources. Thus we are given the Holy Spirit who prays within us. One of the fundamental teachings of the Church is that we are temples of the Holy Spirit.

Last year I read the autobiography of the great Hindu leader Mohandas K. Gandhi. He was convinced that the Western world is living with the great illusion that we are autonomous. By this he meant that we live with a false self-reliance, unaware that we are connected to our environment, to others, to God, in deep and meaningful ways. This insight struck me deeply. God in fact dwells with us and it is the presence of God's Spirit that empowers us to grow in responsibility and love.

Hearken and Do Not Harden

"We learn to pray at certain moments by hearing the

Word of the Lord and sharing in his Paschal mystery, but his Spirit is offered us at all times, in the events of *each day*, to make prayer spring up from us. Jesus' teaching about praying to our Father is in the same vein as his teaching about providence [cf. Mt 6:11, 34]: time is in the Father's hands; it is in the present that we encounter him, not yesterday nor tomorrow, but today: 'O that *today* you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts' [Psalm 95:7-8]" (#2659).

This principle of prayer has two dimensions—listening to God's voice and not closing our hearts. First, God's voice can be drowned out by the many voices that fill our air waves. Politicians tell us to vote this or that way; TV commercials tell us what to eat, drink and buy; our peers tell us what to wear and how to act. The Church offers moral guidance. God speaks softly.

In our pluralistic society, then, how do we hearken to God's voice, today, here and now? If prayer is an authentic listening, where can we go? Here are four channels that have been major resources for me:

Turn to the Bible. God speaks to us in the Scriptures, revealing the mysteries of creation, redemption, our sanctification. God says that creation is good, that we need to be redeemed from sin, that the Spirit is given for holiness. God says that we are to love one another as he loves us, that we are to forgive seven times seventy times, that we are not to judge and condemn. We must hearken to this voice in a world of contrary voices.

Turn to the teaching of the Church to hear God's voice. We have been blessed in a special way with the marvelous documents of Vatican II, with challenging

social encyclicals, with letters on peace and justice and evangelization. God speaks to us through the magisterium and our two-thousand-year Tradition.

Be attentive to everyday experience. God speaks in a child's smile, a verse from a good poem, in the cry of the poor, in the invitation to tithe, in the challenge to end a relationship that is destructive. If we are attentive to the wonder of breakfast cereal, a teenager's silent request for help, ecological consciousness-raising—if we are attentive, we will hear God calling us.

Listen to God speaking in our hearts. We have been given a conscience, that strange but real inner voice, that registers right and wrong. Though that faculty might grow lax or hardened, it still has the capacity to be an instrument of divine intervention. By hearkening to our conscience and the intuitions of the soul, we might hear today the voice of the Spirit.

Not only must we hearken; we must not harden our hearts. Prayer is a matter of the heart, a matter of love. If the heart is stony, the seeds of God's word will not find receptive soil. We must beg God for a heart of hospitality.

On a retreat with teenagers I asked what a heart of hospitality might look like. The teens drew a large heart on the blackboard and labeled sections of the heart: Open Space, Warm Welcome, Attentive Presence and Generous Service. Being hospitable, they explained, we create a space for others to enter, for God to come into our homes. We take warm delight in the presence of others, and pay close attention to them. I observed that when Mary sat at the feet of Jesus she offered hospitality

at a deeper level than Martha did. Being *with* our guest, God's Word, is one of the deepest forms of prayer. Finally, my young friends observed that when someone comes to visit us, we must be ready and willing to respond to their authentic needs, even to the point of sacrifice. What insight!

Too often our hearts are hardened, lacking hospitality. We are too busy with our own agenda. We are inattentive to the experiences around us because of hurriedness or apathy. We are unwilling to sacrifice our precious and limited time for the needs of others.

Prayer is about hearkening and receptivity. But again, this is not simply our own work. The Spirit will give us a new heart and put a new spirit within us so that today we might hear and do God's word.

Prayer Enlightens and Empowers

After the children are raised, what's next? My job holds no more challenge, should I move on? An injustice has come to light, what should be done? Something stirs within me to reach out to the poor, what does this mean? "By prayer we can discern 'what is the will of God' and obtain the endurance to do it [Rom 12:2; cf. Eph 5:17; cf. Heb 10:36]" (#2826).

C.S. Lewis maintained that in the end there are only two types of people: those who do God's will and those who do their own. Prayer helps us to discern God's will in our life. We ponder the movements in the soul (nudges, whispers, proddings) to see whether or not they come from God or some other source. In our private prayer we enter into silence and solitude seeking

the enlightenment of the Spirit. In public prayer, worship, we join our brothers and sisters in reflecting upon God's words and ways. We ask for the courage and power to do what is asked of us in our unique circumstances.

In the movie *The Mission*, about eighteenth-century Jesuits in South America, the priests had to make a decision: to pick up weapons to defend the people or to take a pacifist stance, refusing to use violence to confront violence. One priest picked up the sword and fought, another carried a monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament through the village. Both priests prayed. Both sought enlightenment and empowerment. Both made decisions that they would have to live with for the rest of their lives.

We, too, need to pray to decide whether or not to ground a teenager for breaking a rule, to leave or stay with a job when being asked to do something that is wrong, to confess or remain silent about one's sins. Decisions have to be made and responsibility assumed. Despite lacking full knowledge, we live on a planet where risk is always part of the human condition. But if we pray, we can be assured of God's gracious assistance.

A favorite passage of mine comes from Robert Coles's *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), in which nine-year-old Mary tells of her desire: "I don't want to waste my time here on this earth. When you're put here, it is for a reason. The Lord wants you to do something. If you don't know what, then you've got to try hard to find out what. It may take time. You may make mistakes. But if you pray, He'll lead you to your direction. He won't hand you a piece of

paper with a map on it, no sir. He'll whisper something, and at first you may not even hear but if you have trust in Him and you keep turning to Him, it will be all right."

Prayer moves beyond enlightenment into the doing. We must act on our own. Little Mary asked for a direction so as not to waste her life. As she grew up I tend to think that she constantly prayed to God to give her the energy to act on the direction given. Authentic prayer can be measured by the life lived.

Christian Prayer Is Trinitarian

Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and humanity. Says the *Catechism*: "It is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man" (#2564).

Two fundamental forms express the dialogue between God and humanity: "[O]ur prayer *ascends* in the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father—we bless him for having blessed us [cf. Eph 1:3-14; 2 Cor 1:3-7; 1 Pt 1:3-9]; it implores the grace of the Holy Spirit that *descends* through Christ from the Father—he blesses us" (#2627).

In the Annunciation stained-glass window in Florida, with Mary, the angel and the cross, there is something that cannot be seen but is present—the mystery of the Trinity. In faith we know that God the Father is there, sending the angel; Jesus is there in the moment of the Incarnation; the Holy Spirit is present in

overshadowing Mary and all of history.

Christian prayer is trinitarian. Every time we gather at Mass we begin by making the Sign of the Cross, which reminds us who we are. When we sign ourselves consciously and reverently, we are a prayerful people. That powerful symbol tells us whose we are and marks us as God's people.

It wasn't until seventh grade that I understood the difference between a principle and the principal. It wasn't until several years after high school that I realized that unless we had a principled principal our school was going nowhere.

So too on our spiritual journey. Christians who have principles know to some degree what direction to take, what paths to avoid. In and of themselves principles do not save but they do lead closer to the Savior. Without these markings we get lost in the forest.

My fifth principle requires your meditation more than my explanation: "Love is the source of prayer" (#2658).

Growing in Faith

- *Is prayer a luxury or necessity in your life?*
- *Why is it difficult to hear God's voice in our world?*
- *What are three of your favorite passages from Scripture, passages in which God speaks to your heart?*
- *Is "dancing" a good analogy for prayer? Why or why not?*