

## Catholicism for Cradle Catholics

October 1, 2008

### Prayer: The One Thing Necessary

“If I could prescribe only one remedy for all of the ills of the modern world, I would prescribe silence. For even if the word of God were spoken in the world, it could not be heard. There is too much noise. Therefore, create silence.” -Søren Kierkegaard

1. A word of introduction
  - a. But not merely because he said we should do this!
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  - c. Other reasons for this series:
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2. God’s search for man:
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3. Our search for God:
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    - ii. “My work is my prayer”?
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    - i. CCC 2581:
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  - a. What makes Christian (and Jewish and Moslem) prayer unique.
  - b. Not a “me and Jesus two-step”!
  
5. Some practicals: start modest...
  - a. First, make a commitment, make time, “waste time”: be realistic
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      - a. Being a witness for Christ!
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v.

- d. ...but don't settle!
- 6. Great resources for prayer
  - a. His Word!
  - b. CCC 2558-2865. Perhaps the richest part of the whole CCC
  - c. *Magnificat*
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- 7. Things to do:
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## **I Thirst**

*A prayer attributed to Mother Theresa*

It is true. I stand at the door of your heart, day and night. Even when you are not listening, even when you doubt it could be Me, I am there. I await even the smallest sign of your response, even the least whispered invitation that will allow Me to enter.

And I want you to know that whenever you invite Me, I do come – always, without fail. Silent and unseen I come, but with infinite power and love, and bringing the many gifts of My Spirit. I come with My mercy, with My desire to forgive and heal you, and with a love for you beyond your comprehension – a love every bit as great as the love I have received from the Father ("As much as the Father has loved me, I have loved you..." (Jn. 15:10) I come - longing to console you and give you strength, to lift you up and bind all your wounds. I bring you My light, to dispel your darkness and all your doubts. I come with My power, that I might carry you and all your burdens; with My grace, to touch your heart and transform your life; and My peace I give to still your soul.

I know you through and through. I know everything about you. The very hairs of your head I have numbered. Nothing in your life is unimportant to Me. I have followed you through the years, and I have always loved you – even in your wanderings. I know every one of your problems. I know your needs and your worries. And yes, I know all your sins. But I tell you again that I love you – not for what you have or haven't done – I love you for you, for the beauty and dignity My Father gave you by creating you in His own image. It is a dignity you have often forgotten, a beauty you have tarnished by sin. But I love you as you are, and I have shed My Blood to win you back. If you only ask Me with faith, My grace will touch all that needs changing in your life, and I will give you the strength to free yourself from sin and all its destructive power.

I know what is in your heart – I know your loneliness and all your hurts – the rejections, the judgments, the humiliations, I carried it all before you. And I carried it all for you, so you might share My strength and victory. I know especially your need for love – how you are thirsting to be loved and cherished. But how often have you thirsted in vain, by seeking that love

selfishly, striving to fill the emptiness inside you with passing pleasures – with the even greater emptiness of sin. Do you thirst for love? "Come to Me all you who thirst..." (Jn. 7: 37). I will satisfy you and fill you. Do you thirst to be cherished? I cherish you more than you can imagine – to the point of dying on a cross for you.

I Thirst for You. Yes, that is the only way to even begin to describe My love for you. I THIRST FOR YOU. I thirst to love you and to be loved by you – that is how precious you are to Me. I THIRST FOR YOU. Come to Me, and I will fill your heart and heal your wounds. I will make you a new creation, and give you peace, even in all your trials I THIRST FOR YOU. You must never doubt My mercy, My acceptance of you, My desire to forgive, My longing to bless you and live My life in you. I THIRST FOR YOU. If you feel unimportant in the eyes of the world, that matters not at all. For Me, there is no one any more important in the entire world than you. I THIRST FOR YOU. Open to Me, come to Me, thirst for Me, give me your life – and I will prove to you how important you are to My Heart.

Don't you realize that My Father already has a perfect plan to transform your life, beginning from this moment? Trust in Me. Ask Me every day to enter and take charge of your life. – and I will. I promise you before My Father in heaven that I will work miracles in your life. Why would I do this? Because I THIRST FOR YOU. All I ask of you is that you entrust yourself to Me completely. I will do all the rest.

Even now I behold the place My Father has prepared for you in My Kingdom. Remember that you are a pilgrim in this life, on a journey home. Sin can never satisfy you, or bring the peace you seek. All that you have sought outside of Me has only left you more empty, so do not cling to the things of this life. Above all, do not run from Me when you fall. Come to Me without delay. When you give Me your sins, you gave Me the joy of being your Savior. There is nothing I cannot forgive and heal; so come now, and unburden your soul.

No matter how far you may wander, no matter how often you forget Me, no matter how many crosses you may bear in this life; there is one thing I want you to always remember, one thing that will never change. I THIRST FOR YOU – just as you are. You don't need to change to believe in My love, for it will be your belief in My love that will change you. You forget Me, and yet I

am seeking you every moment of the day – standing at the door of your heart and knocking. Do you find this hard to believe? Then look at the cross, look at My Heart that was pierced for you. Have you not understood My cross? Then listen again to the words I spoke there – for they tell you clearly why I endured all this for you: "I THIRST..."(Jn 19: 28). Yes, I thirst for you – as the rest of the psalm – verse I was praying says of Me: "I looked for love, and I found none..." (Ps. 69: 20). All your life I have been looking for your love – I have never stopped seeking to love you and be loved by you. You have tried many other things in your search for happiness; why not try opening your heart to Me, right now, more than you ever have before.

Whenever you do open the door of your heart, whenever you come close enough, you will hear Me say to you again and again, not in mere human words but in spirit. "No matter what you have done, I love you for your own sake Come to Me with your misery and your sins, with your troubles and needs, and with all your longing to be loved. I stand at the door of your heart and knock. Open to Me, for I THIRST FOR YOU..."

APOSTOLIC LETTER *NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE* OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN  
PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS CLERGY AND LAY FAITHFUL AT THE CLOSE OF THE  
GREAT JUBILEE OF THE YEAR 2000

*Prayer*

32. This training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in *the art of prayer*. The Jubilee Year has been a year of more intense prayer, both personal and communal. But we well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray: as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray!" (*Lk* 11:1). Prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends: "Abide in me and I in you" (*Jn* 15:4). This reciprocity is the very substance and soul of the Christian life, and the condition of all true pastoral life. Wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, this reciprocity opens us, through Christ and in Christ, to contemplation of the Father's face. Learning this Trinitarian shape of Christian prayer and living it fully, above all in the liturgy, the summit and source of the Church's life,<sup>17</sup> but also in personal experience, is the secret of a truly vital Christianity, which has no reason to fear the future, because it returns continually to the sources and finds in them new life.

33. Is it not one of the "signs of the times" that in today's world, despite widespread secularization, there is *a widespread demand for spirituality*, a demand which expresses itself in large part as *a renewed need for prayer*? Other religions, which are now widely present in ancient Christian lands, offer their own responses to this need, and sometimes they do so in appealing ways. But we who have received the grace of believing in Christ, the revealer of the Father and the Saviour of the world, have a duty to show to what depths the relationship with Christ can lead.

The great mystical tradition of the Church of both East and West has much to say in this regard. It shows how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially within the Father's heart. This is the lived experience of Christ's promise: "He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (*Jn* 14:21). It is a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications (the "dark night"). But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by the mystics as "nuptial union". How can we forget here, among the many shining examples, the teachings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila?

Yes, dear brothers and sisters, our Christian communities must become *genuine "schools" of prayer*, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly "falls in love". Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan.<sup>18</sup>

34. Christians who have received the gift of a vocation to the specially consecrated life are of course called to prayer in a particular way: of its nature, their consecration makes them more open to the experience of contemplation, and it is important that they should cultivate it with special care. But it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but "Christians at risk". They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined, and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of "substitutes", accepting alternative religious proposals and even indulging in far-fetched superstitions.

It is therefore essential that *education in prayer* should become in some way a key-point of all pastoral planning. I myself have decided to dedicate the forthcoming Wednesday catecheses to *reflection upon the Psalms*, beginning with the Psalms of Morning Prayer with which the public prayer of the Church invites us to consecrate and direct our day. How helpful it would be if not only in religious communities but also in parishes more were done to ensure an all-pervading climate of prayer. With proper discernment, this would require that popular piety be given its proper place, and that people be educated especially in liturgical prayer. Perhaps it is more thinkable than we usually presume for the average day of a Christian community to combine the many forms of pastoral life and witness in the world with the celebration of the Eucharist and even the recitation of Lauds and Vespers. The experience of many committed Christian groups, also those made up largely of lay people, is proof of this.

**A** wise man once wrote, "If I could prescribe one remedy for the illnesses of the world, I would prescribe silence." There, in silence with God, we learn first of all how much He loves us (which goes a long way in eliminating fear and many of the roots of depression). There, too, we hear Him call us to reach out to those around us who are in need in so many ways. In short, and I know I keep saying this often in homilies, talks, and articles, prayer is what makes the difference in our lives – not merely saying prayers but *speaking to and listening* to the God who is love. Because of this, it seems worthwhile to have our first series of "Catholicism for Cradle Catholics" (formerly known as "RCIA for Catholics") address the issue of prayer. We will meet four evenings: October 1, 8, 29 and November 5 from 7:00-8:30 pm in the Social Hall at Church. Perhaps the best "PR" or invite for such a series is a letter I received the other day. May it inspire us all to make the effort to "waste time" each day with the Lord who created and redeemed us.

In His love, Father John

"Though I was raised Catholic, at some point I lost the image of God as a loving Father, and I lost the belief that I was loved by Him. Instead of seeing myself as a valuable child of His, I believed I was completely unlovable, a waste of His time, and worth nothing to Him or anyone else. What led to that self-image isn't important but the implications are: though all appeared to be well on the outside, I wanted desperately to end my life and was engaging in behaviors that would eventually have brought that about. At the end of my proverbial rope and following the recommendation of a friend, I went (internally kicking and screaming) to an appointment with a priest and began meeting regularly with him and one of his assistants, a lay woman.

During my meetings with them, spending time in front of the Blessed Sacrament was often recommended. I'll be the first to admit I was very skeptical and I had a list of excuses for why I couldn't do it: I'm too busy, I work long hours, it's too boring, that's something only people my parents' and grandparents' ages do -- I'm not even thirty! A large part of me was convinced I wouldn't benefit at all. I mean, really – how is sitting in front of a metal object, talking to Someone I can't see, supposed to help me? Sure, the priest says it works. Of course it works for *him*, he's a priest with an incredible faith! My faith is nowhere near as strong. Another part of me was terrified that I *would* get something out of it. If that happened, I'd have to give up a mindset and lifestyle that, as unhealthy and dangerous as I knew it to be, was very familiar and comfortable. In my mind, I was in a lose-lose situation. Either I do this and waste my time, or it helps and I have to drastically change the way I've been living. Neither option appealed to me but I really had no other choice. I wanted to end my life; I had to at least give God a chance to save it.

I'm very blessed to live near a parish that offers adoration twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Very slowly (and with more internal kicking and screaming), I started

spending time in front of the Lord. Sometimes it was just five minutes, sometimes it was closer to an hour. Sometimes I prayed the rosary, sometimes I just talked to Him, sometimes I had to deal with tears that seemed to come out of nowhere. I didn't feel better instantly and as a matter of fact, I spent quite a few sessions calling out to Him in prayer and asking "Where are You? They said this would help! IT'S NOT HELPING!" After sitting with our Lord daily for a few weeks, I realized that God does things His way and in His time, not mine. Once I stopped talking "at" Him and actually started listening to Him, I found what I had been looking for. I didn't hear dramatic choirs of angels, I didn't see God standing in front of me telling me I was cured. What I received was the knowledge that I am totally, profoundly, and eternally loved. And with that knowledge came the peace I had so desperately longed for.

It's true that I had help with this, and I'm incredibly grateful for that. Through the grace of God and the example of others, I was able to change my image of the Father. I started to see Him as Someone who loves His children beyond all understanding, who loves them when they seem unlovable, and who will never stop trying to reach them, regardless of how far away they run. He will not always like or approve of the way we act, and we are all subject to His judgment, but He will never stop loving us. He may not always give us what we want, but He's very good at providing what we need. Having this new image of God was great but I still had to change my habits and way of thinking. The strength and grace necessary to do that came from spending time in front of the Blessed Sacrament, asking God to break my will and mold it to His. You may not believe it, but there's so much freedom and joy in surrendering yourself to One infinitely bigger, better, and more powerful than you will ever be.

If you're anything like me, you're reading this and thinking, "Well, how nice for *you*. It won't happen for me." Please try it, please give Him the chance to work in your life. He has so much to offer. If you've tried and felt as though you didn't get anything out of it, try again. If there are times when you don't know what to say, just sit with Him. It's like getting a sun tan – you don't necessarily have to *do* anything, you get the tan just by being exposed to the sun. Listen to Him and then respond as He leads you. The responding part may not be easy but it *will* be worth it. So, as one priest says, "Waste some time with Him." It'll be more productive than you could ever imagine. He saved my life and He's waiting – longing, really -- to do the same for you."

## John Paul the Great

Noonan, Peggy. *John Paul the Great - Remembering a Spiritual Father*. Viking Penguin, 2005.

Finding God is not hard, because he wants to be found. But keeping God can be hard. He wants to be kept, of course, but for most of us finding him and keeping him is the difference between falling in love and staying in love. The latter involves a decision that is held to.

Here is a path to finding him and keeping him.

One: Get yourself in trouble. Let life make you miserable. This shouldn't be hard. "A bad night in a bad inn," Teresa of Avila is said to have described our earthly life-, and every smart, happy, well-adjusted adult you know would probably admit that that's just about right. So get low, gnash your teeth, cry aloud, rend your garments, refuse to get out of bed. Be in crisis.

Trouble is good. "Man's extremity is God's opportunity," as American evangelicals say. But before they said it, Henry Vill's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, said it. "None get to God but through trouble." For most of us, the world with all its dazzlement has to turn pretty flat and pretty dry before we want God. But God seems to turn it flat just at the moment when he knows we're ready. So embrace your ill fortune as a blessing. (if you haven't been blessed with a crisis, I'm not sure what to tell you beyond pray for one. You may have to just hang around enjoying the dazzlements until he's ready to lower the boom. But he will, in his time and not yours, if that's the only way he can get your attention. Because not only are you looking for him, but he's been looking for you.)

Two- Once you're so low you're actually on your knees, review the situation. You could start by admitting what you've long sensed and avoided knowing: that many of the joys and delights of the world are fleeting, and some are fraudulent, and that even though those who know you best would ever think this, you happen to have noticed lately that you have a rather black heart. Don't let this be demoralizing- Everyone has a black heart. As a brilliant (and agnostic) publisher recently remarked to me in a conversation about why war occurs, "Because there's something wrong with us." There is. It's inspiring how much good people actually do considering who and what we are.

Three: You're miserable and convicted and still on your knees. Address the God whose existence you doubt. Ask for his help. Ask for his forgiveness. Ask for his mercy. Ask to know him. Or ask a saint to get you to him. (All saints have had dark nights.) Evangelical Protestants sometimes use words like these: "Lord, this hasn't worked with my being in charge, so I give my life to you. I believe in you. Help me to believe in you. I ask you to be in charge of my life." I think these are great words. They are not a prescription for passivity. They are an acknowledgment of reality and a pledge of obedience, which can be quite arduous. Belief ain't for sissies.

One evangelical friend uses the image of a throne. Either God is on the throne of your life or you are. You don't belong on it. He's the king. You're the servant. He's the Father. You're his child. Let him sit there. Every time you, in your pride and stupidity, try to claw your way back into control, remember the throne, and offer the seat to the gentleman who is older and wiser than you.

Four: Pray. A priest to whom I'd gone once for guidance told me that prayer is just conversation with your Father in heaven, and like any good conversation with an intimate, it should be honest, trusting,

uncensored. Tell him anything - what kind of day you had, a triumph, a temptation, something that's nagging at you. Ask for his blessing for an endeavor. Give thanks. Share frustration.

Prayer in my experience is hard, easier to think about than do. In one way, I pray a lot, all day, in a continual conversation. But concentrated prayer is hard. People who know tell me to make time in the morning or evening, a half hour or so, to read the Bible and engage in sustained and concentrated prayer. I know they're right. I'll tell you something I started to do a few years ago that is connected to this and has made an enormous difference for me. I started reading the New Testament and asking God that I be allowed to know that what I was reading actually happened, that it was all true. During this time, the Acts of the Apostles came alive for me, and after that everything else did too.

Five: Get yourself some friends who will support you and help you. Go to church and find out if there's someone there - a priest or layperson - who helps converts, for if you're looking for God, you're having a conversion experience. If your local priest is busy, and chances are he is, find out what's available to believers at your church - daily prayer meetings, for instance - and go. And talk to people. Ask about retreats - two or three days away, usually in a religious setting - with people who want to enliven their spiritual life. It's hard to go on a retreat, and yet I've never heard anyone regretting it. I've never heard a person say, "I wish I hadn't gone to that retreat."

Six: See if you can find and get into a Bible study group to learn more about what you believe in, or a prayer group.

Seven: Read - for knowledge and to enliven the spirit. Books that were important to me: Thomas Merton's memoir of his conversion, *The Seven Storey Mountain*; *Saints for Sinners* by Alan Goodier; *To Know Christ Jesus* by Frank Sheed, *My Utmost for His Highest*, the book of daily devotionals by Oswald Chambers that evangelicals read. In fact, just about any born-again Protestant book is good. They are wonderful for their personal sense of redemption and their excitement about Christ. Don't fuss with doctrinal complexities if you're sophisticated enough to see them - I wasn't as a rule as doctrinal disputes are not your problem right now, and anyway, God will heal them all in time. "The issue becomes the icon," the chaplain of the U.S. Senate once told me. He meant: Love Jesus and leave the commentary to others.

Eight: If you never get very excited by your conversation but just plod through, good for you - you'll get your joys. If you start out with excitement and it flattens or lessens - and it probably will - pray for ardor, ask for your old thirst, and keep plugging. It's the most important thing in your life. And remember, every time you fall or fall away, ask for help. You'll get it.

Nine-. Watch John Paul. He seems to say something every day about belief. It's as if he wants to tell us something before he leaves.

## *Desire for the Vision of God*

Insignificant man, escape from your everyday business for a short while, hide for a moment from your restless thoughts. Break off from your cares and troubles and be less concerned about your tasks and labors. Make a little time for God and rest a while in him.

Enter into your mind's inner chamber. Shut out everything but God and whatever helps you to seek him; and when you have shut the door, look for him. Speak now to God and say with your whole heart: *I seek your face; your face, Lord, I desire.*

Lord, my God teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. Lord, if you are not here where shall I look for you in your absence? Yet if you are everywhere, why do I not see you when you are present? But surely you dwell in "light inaccessible." And where is light inaccessible? How shall I approach light inaccessible? Or who will lead me and bring me into it that I may see you there? And then, by what signs and under what forms shall I seek you? I have never seen you, Lord my God; I do not know your face.

Lord most high, what shall this exile do, so far from you? What shall your servant do, tormented by love of you and cast so far from your face? He yearns to see you, and your face is too far from him. He desires to approach you, and your dwelling is unapproachable. He longs to find you, and does not know your dwelling place. He strives to look for you, and does not know your face.

Lord, you are my God and you are my Lord, and I have never seen you. You have made me and remade me, and you have given me all the good things I possess and still I do not know you. I was made in order to see you, and I have not yet done that for which I was made.

Lord, how long will it be? How long, Lord, will you forget us? How long will you turn your face away from us? When will you look upon us and hear us? When will you enlighten our eyes and show us your face? When will you give yourself back to us?

Look upon us, Lord, hear us and enlighten us, show us your very self. Restore yourself to us that it may go well with us whose life is so evil without you. Take pity on our efforts and our striving toward you, for we have no strength apart from you.

Teach me to seek you and. when I seek you show yourself to me; for I cannot seek you unless you teach me, nor can I find you unless you show yourself to me. Let me seek you in desiring you and desire you in seeking you, find you in loving you and love you in finding you.