

PRAYER – PART EIGHT

In this section I would like to review the positive and negative effects of prayer on our spiritual life. I chose the words on purpose, POSITIVE and NEGATIVE effects of prayer. The POSITIVE effects on prayer I had called FRUITS at the beginning of these articles, especially Part Three. But I also hinted at the *fruits* and the *gifts* of prayer in our lives.

In Part Two, I mentioned that prayer is mainly what sustains our *personal relationship* with God, since it is like eating or breathing that keeps our spiritual life alive! Although not personal, Public Prayer gives corporate witness of God to others, and can be very powerful. And shortly thereafter I pointed out that only Orthodox Jewish men were obligated to pray in the temple at least three times a day. Women had a special place in the temple separate from the men. By our Baptism, all Christian are privileged to pray for ourselves and others to God.

The fruits of Meditation would be a deepening understanding of the mysteries of our faith through the Scriptures and Faith Dogmas of our religion. Affective Prayer deepens our love and affections for God and also gives us an insight to the Gospel passages through participation in them using our feelings. This was touched on in Part Four.

It is through both our head and our heart that we make a serious commitment to the message of Jesus by our wills, which otherwise could not be done with both the head and the heart involved.

It is thought commitment of our wills that our Prayer of Contemplation opens us to not only knowing but doing God's will. As I mentioned in that article, Centering Prayer slowly over time helps us to "let go and let God" work in our lives. Extra fruit of this prayer is the deep and abiding peace we feel even in difficult times. Centering Prayer also changes our perspective on life, looking from the inside out.

Any and all prayer should change us over time as we "submit" to God in our prayer life. It is interesting to know that the word, *Islam*, means submission, but it is a submission that draws us deeper into our relationship with God through love. It is one of the most important *attributes* of God and one that we are called

to *live out* in our lives. In Part Five, I use the example of Bird Watching and how this activity, if taken serious, will change our lives in how we relate to birds.

Part Six mentions how knowing our personalities will guide us in our particular prayer style, then we can address some of the difficulties that we might encounter when we pray, like distractions and dryness, and how we might overcome them. Part Seven particularly mentions using a Prayer Binder.

All the above are aspects of the POSITIVE things that will happen in prayer. The NEGATIVE things that might happen would include stagnation or dryness. Just when our prayer life begins to bring us such joy and even at times ecstasy, we hit the wall! Boom, dryness and aridity overcome us.

Let me now address that Negative aspect of prayer that every lifetime person of prayer will encounter some time or another. I hinted in Part Six of this series.

In the article by James Martin, SJ, ***In My Soul: The Long Dark Night of Mother Teresa***, he talks about the new collection of letters called, ***Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light***, that show her astonishing battle with spiritual darkness for over 50 years! She wrote to a confessor in 1959, “In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing.”

Fr. Martin writes:

The feeling of God’s absence is not uncommon in the lives of saints or in the lives of average believers. The Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross called it the *dark night* and posited it as a necessary stage for the ascent to mystical union with God. St. Ignatius of Loyola termed it *spiritual desolation* in his manual for prayer, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

One is completely listless, tepid and unhappy, he wrote, and feels separated from our Creator and Lord. During her final illness, St. Therese of Lisieux, the French Carmelite nun, experienced a desolation that seemed to reflect doubts over whether or not anything would await her after her death. “If you only knew what darkness I am plunged into!” she once said to the sisters in her convent.

The reason I am addressing this Negative part of prayer, or the more correct term, the Dark Night, is that I have in mind the age of those I am addressing. We have been around a long time now, and hopefully we have all been faithful to our prayer life or you would not have a deep desire to form a Prayer Group.

This short example of the Dark Night can come to anyone who prays over a long period of time, religious or lay, period! One aspect that Fr. Martin pointed out was that the letters makes clear how much someone can suffer without the right spiritual guidance, and how much relief can come with a few words of wise counsel! Another aspect to prayer that he points out is that Mother Teresa suffered her spiritual trials largely alone. Thus the importance of a Spiritual Companion or even Spiritual Group to share our lives with!

Saint Ignatius suggests three possible explanations for spiritual desolation, the first being tepid, lazy or negligent in prayer. The second may be how much we are worth and how far we will extend ourselves in the service and praise of God. Third, it may give us true recognition that consolation is a gift and grace from God our Lord. In other words, it reminds us who is in control.

While every saint has faced spiritual trials, most have felt close to God during their years of active ministry...Some were even granted unique graces...In contrast, Mother Teresa felt nothing for 50 years—except for a brief respite—all the way until her death.

Mother Teresa's life reminds us that *holiness is a goal* for all believers, even those given to doubt. Second, her letters remind us that *dryness, darkness and doubt are natural parts of the spiritual life*, whether ordinary believer or extraordinary saint. Finally, they remind us that ***fidelity does not depend solely on feelings or emotions.***

In the end, God may simply be asking for our love through faithfulness, as God has always been faithful to us in the long run. We can add to the statement above that ***fidelity*** and ***love*** does not depend solely on feelings or emotions.