



St. Julie Billiart on “Prayer in Action”

FOUNDER OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME DE NAMUR AND SAINT FOR OUR TIMES

Prayer in Action

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You shall enjoy peace if you are full of charity and if you are faithful to your prayer.

- St. Julie Billiart

Even though it would be unfair to isolate one Scriptural passage as the essence or epitome of prayer, there are a few biblical verses that are solid foundation upon which to build a life of prayer. The following passages speak to believers across cultural, denominational, historical and racial boundaries.

Be still and know that I am God. - Psalm 46:10

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. - Psalm 51:10-11

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. - Romans 8:26-27

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. - Matthew 6:5-6

I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless God's holy name forever and ever. - Psalm 145:1; 21

As you can see, even this sampling from the wealth of references to prayer in Holy Scripture, represents a variety of approaches to and expressions of prayer. No one holds a corner on “the one and only right way to pray!” However, those who teach and practice prayer are concerned about “right attitude and disposition”

Prayer becomes a way of life...in whatever way God chooses to break into our awareness.

all along the way. When the disciples of Jesus addressed him with the question, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples,” Jesus answered with the words, “When you pray, say, “Father, hallowed be your name. . .” The full formula of words in the “Our Father” captures an important attitude: prayer acknowledges and responds to God, the Creator, Life-force and Source of all that exists. Prayer is response because God always takes the initiative. God is always moving toward us, calling, drawing, inviting, luring us into communion and a relationship of love. Whatever expression of prayer we choose is our response to God’s initiative. Whatever the expression, our disposition will include respect and reverence, openness and trust.

Some people respond best by joyful, exclamatory testimony in response to the presence and goodness of God in their lives. Reverend John T. Judie, priest from the Archdiocese of Louisville, preached the African American Catholic Revival in Cincinnati in the month of September, 2004. Fr. Judie opened one sermon with the “testimony” of sister Mandy. Mandy had the habit of freely praising God joyously and audibly within Sunday worship in her local church. Her form and style of prayer was not accepted by all of the membership. Some of those who were disturbed by Mandy’s prayer longed for the right moment to speak to her and tell her that she was a disturbance to others. The moment arrived one day when two of the women

saw Mandy coming out of a grocery store. The women seized the opportunity, approached her and voiced their concern. Mandy responded with a brief history about the death of her husband, leaving her with full responsibility for their five little children. Mandy went on to relate how she had found several jobs to secure enough income to keep the family together. God had given her the strength to endure great hardships while she struggled to feed, clothe, educate and rear her children. As Mandy poured out her story, she began to feel gratitude welling up in her. So she handed the bags of groceries to the women, and began to praise God with hands and voice raised in the same way she would testify in church. Mandy began to pray right there on the sidewalk, thanking God for the way her children had grown and developed. She told God how grateful she was that one of them had opened a shelter and soup kitchen to help others in need. Another child was a Senator; one was a surgeon, another, a lawyer; and the fifth child was about to be ordained in the Episcopalian Church. Conscious of the women, but more attuned to God, Mandy began to sing, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord, Thank you, Lord. I just want to thank you, Lord!" When Mandy finished her prayer she received her groceries from the two women who had only one response. Moved by the entire testimony, they reverently prayed, "Thank you, Lord; we just want to thank you, Lord."

A similar set of blessings in a different grateful person would draw that individual into silence and stillness, poetry, song or dance. The abundance of God would be equally generous; the response would be different. Prayer begins in the conscious awareness of the reality and presence of God. We know God best by what God does in our history and the scope of world events. However, there is always more to God than what we are ever able to receive or hold in our personal experiences.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how

*inscrutable his ways!
'For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?
Or who has given a gift to God,
to receive a gift in return?'
From God and through God and to God are all things.
To God be the glory forever. Amen. - Romans 1:33-36*

God IS! Faith accepts and grasps this mystery. Because God is Mystery, no one is ever going to reach a point of satisfaction in knowing or grasping the full, inexhaustible reality of God. Contemplative prayer is the silent and still acceptance of the reality of God. Even when there are no sense-perceptible revelations, when there are no unusual visitations of the Almighty, contemplative prayer rests in the assurance that God IS! God is real; God is present; God is good all the time!

Prayer becomes a way of life, concomitant with the slow and persistent growth in receiving the revelation of God in whatever way God chooses to break into our awareness. Sometimes the revelation can be described and shared; (remember sister Mandy) sometimes neither words nor images could ever relate the pervasive presence of God. The praying person is simply confident that God Is at all times. With every breath, God gives and bestows abundant blessing! For this goodness and grace, what response is appropriate? Thank you, Lord! The way in which each person returns thanks varies with circumstance, personality, culture, history and tradition.

For two hundred years the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur have grown in communal and personal prayer, shaped by their awareness of the goodness of God. With confidence and trust, faithfully the Sisters have lifted their voices, swayed in dance and song, crafted liturgies or bonded in silence and stillness in response to the Goodness of God.

Oh! How Good is the Good God!