

The Power of Prayer

Summary: *From Pentecostal utterances to silent monastic contemplation, prayer is central to Christian life. Prayer can be communal or individual; it might consist of well-established texts, like the Lord's Prayer, or spontaneous thoughts. Through varied postures, actions, and settings of prayer, Christians engage with God.*

“Prayer is a conversation with God,” says African American theologian James M. Washington, author of *Conversations with God*, which recounts the traditions of prayer in the Black church. In the vibrant tradition of African American worship, the human side of that conversation takes the many forms that are part of prayer language everywhere. There is the offering of praise, the words “Praise God!” so commonly heard in the call-and-response forms of prayer in the Black worshipping community. And there is the language of thanksgiving, for prayer is what Washington calls “an attempt to count the stars of our souls.” The words “Thank you...Thank you...Thank you” are a way of calling to mind, one after another, the gifts of God, the stars of the soul. With the language of repentance and confession, one turns inward in honesty to humble oneself before God. And with words of petition, one lays before God the longings of the soul.

Whether congregational or individual, prayer is a disposition of the heart, a way of being as much as a ritual act. There is listening and speaking in these conversations with God. And many who pray attest that these words of thanks, of praise, of repentance, and petition take place anywhere and everywhere. For Christians, prayer is not reserved for churches or for Sundays; it is an ongoing, daily attentiveness to God's presence.

The postures of prayer are many: kneeling with eyes closed, standing with arms raised, sitting with head bowed. The places of prayer are many, too. In a recent survey of Episcopalians at prayer, people responded that they pray when they are out running in the morning, when they swim laps at the pool, when they walk on the beach, and when they take a break at the office. Said an Alaska schoolteacher, “I go to my room whenever I need to pray. I lock myself in and kneel down. Other times, I just look up at the sky—I'm thankful for the air we breathe, the wind, the clouds, the earth we walk on.”

Some prayers are very old and those who pray know their words by heart. So it is with the Lord's Prayer, the words of prayer taught to the disciples by Jesus. Many prayers come directly from the words of scripture, especially from the Psalms, making these words one's own and repeating them from the heart. The prayers called "Collects" are also written prayers of the tradition. *The Book of Common Prayer*, used by the Episcopal Church, contains prayers for every week of the year, for every season, for every occasion. Many find the deepest meaning in the words of those prayers that they have prayed many times over. On the first Sunday in Advent, for example, the congregation in every Episcopal church will pray, "Almighty God, Give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light..." The words are so well known that those who pray rest deeply in their meaning, no matter how many times they are said. In this sense, a prayer is like saying, "I love you"; spoken from the heart, the words do not become worn out with repeated use. Indeed, no other words would suffice.

Some Christians, especially in the Reformed, Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, emphasize the spontaneity of prayer. In this sense, homemade prayers, like homemade cakes, are said to be best. Christians meet in prayer groups, either in the church or in homes. In a group like Aglow, small groups meet in person for prayer or online as a part of the Aglow Prayer Net (APN). Individuals may also join specific prayer groups that focus asking for God's guidance in American politics, for peace in Jerusalem, or for other "global prayer targets" that change monthly. In Pentecostal churches, the experience of "speaking in tongues" comes from "baptism by the Holy Spirit" like that of the early apostles at the time of Pentecost. It is an experience in which prayer is vocalized in ecstatic utterances, in language not intelligible even to the speaker, but deeply meaningful.

There are many who find the deepest prayer to be silent, wordless. Prayer is cultivating the "attention of the heart." At an Ash Wednesday retreat at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Indiana, Benedictine sisters lead a group of women, including many Protestants, in "centering prayer," a practice of silent meditation. In this practice, the repetition of a sacred word or phrase leads to deep stillness, a form of spiritual practice common in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions as well.

Contemplative prayer traditions are very old in Christianity and are preserved in the monastic life of both Orthodox and Catholic traditions. Today, however, there is a keen interest in contemplative prayer

even among lay Christians. The writings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton have been widely read for the guidance he offers to those who would take the inner life of prayer seriously. Merton himself was drawn not only to Catholic traditions of prayer, but to the Desert Fathers and the Orthodox “prayer of the heart,” sometimes called “the Jesus prayer.” Thomas Merton also explored Eastern spirituality, especially through his acquaintance with Buddhist monks and their traditions of meditation. In *Contemplative Prayer*, he writes of the value of that “interior silence in which the mystery of God’s love is made clear to us.”