



THEOLOGY CORNER

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What are the Different Kinds of Prayer?”

We all know prayer to be an essential part of our Catholic faith. While there are an almost infinite amount of things to say about prayer, let us today focus on three of its aspects: 1) Its elements 2) its expressions, and 3) its definitions.

Elements of Christian Prayer - A.C.T.S.

Christian prayer takes on four main forms. By this, I mean that there are four distinct orderings to our prayer — different purposes, so to speak. These four forms or elements can be best remembered by using ACTS as an acronym. “A” for Adoration, “C” for Contrition, “T” for Thanksgiving, and “S” for Supplication. Knowing these elements of prayer is extremely beneficial because it enables us to be conscious of whether or not our prayer life is balanced. For example, some people have a tendency to focus very heavily on the “**supplication**” element of prayer. Supplication is vital inasmuch as it allows us to form the habit of understanding that God is the one who truly provides for our needs, but if utilized frequently on its own, it can become easy to overlook the “thy will be done” aspect of Christian prayer. In other words, if we spend the vast majority of our time asking God for things, we can lose sight of the fact that prayer is not about changing God’s will, but aligning our own will to his. All prayer should begin with “**adoration**” which broadly means: worship and praise of God our loving and most powerful Creator. This sets us up for an ordered request to supply us with our needs, and to offer him “**thanksgiving**” for our blessings, and of course, to express “**contrition**” or sorrow for our offenses against God and our neighbor. If you regularly incorporate these elements into your daily prayer life, you can be confident that it is balanced and properly ordered. The Lord’s Prayer (i.e., the Our Father) is the greatest example of these elements and is the direct instruction from our Lord with the contents after which our prayer should be modeled.

Expressions of Prayer - (CCC 2700-2719)

Now that we have covered the various *elements* of Christian prayer, we can now turn to the different *expressions* of prayer: **Vocal, Meditative, and Contemplative**. Vocal prayer, as you may have guessed, is prayer that is expressed outwardly with our voice. This expression of prayer is generally more formulaic (e.g., the Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, etc.). Vocal prayer is important because as human beings, we are body and spirit and therefore need to communicate our feelings externally — not to mention that it is essential for any prayers made in a group setting. Meditative prayer is a quest to better understand the Christian life. An example of meditative prayer would be meditating on the Mysteries of Christ in the Holy Rosary, but it can also be done while reading spiritual writings, the Gospels, looking at holy icons, and so on. When we enter into meditative prayer, we engage our thoughts, imagination, emotions, and desires as we seek to gain in our knowledge and love of God. Lastly, contemplative prayer is less active than meditative prayer in that it is a silent gaze of faith, simply seeking to spend time alone with the Lord. St. Teresa of Avila calls it a “close sharing between friends.” This is definitely the most intimate of expressions out of the three, but all three expressions tend to intermix with each other throughout our life of prayer.

The Definition of Prayer

As a final consideration, we should understand the usage of the term “prayer” in everyday parlance. Pulling from St. John Damascene, the Catechism defines prayer as the “raising of one’s heart and mind to God.” (CCC, 2559). But even more generally, St. Thérèse of Lisieux defined it as a “simple look toward heaven...embracing both trial and joy.” (CCC, 2558). Sometimes, there is a misconception of what it means when we say, for example, that we *pray* to Mary and the Saints. The reason for this is because people conflate “prayer” with “worship.” This is not the case in the Catholic manner of speaking since worship is due to God alone. Prayer in this sense, then, refers more closely to St. Thérèse’s “look toward heaven” as we communicate with Mary and the Saints, asking them to pray for us — making the prayer *intercessory*. In other words, prayer is the *means by which* we communicate with those in heaven to intercede on our behalf in a way similar to what we do when we ask a friend to pray for us. The essential difference, of course, being that the Blessed Mother and the Saints are with

God most intimately in heaven and are therefore in a better position to plead on our behalf. Moreover, we have to “pray” to those in heaven because while we can ask a friend to pray for us by simply walking up to them, we must look toward heaven to communicate with those already in the heavenly kingdom. The term “prayer” is used in a secondary sense to signify “an appeal” and it is in this sense that we say we pray to Mary and the Saints. The prayer of adoration is due to God alone and this is the kind of action that we call *Latria* (lah-tree-uh) which is more accurately defined as worship of the Creator. The highest form of respect or veneration that we pay to God’s spotless creature (i.e., Mary) is what we call *hyperdulia* (hyper-doo-liah). The highest form of veneration that we offer to God’s holy, but imperfect creatures is what we call *protodulia* (pro-toh-doo-liah) and this is reserved to St. Joseph due to not only his proximity to Jesus, but also to his role in the early life of Jesus (i.e., as the foster father of our Lord). Finally, the form of respect or veneration that we afford to all of the other saints in heaven is what we call *dulia* (doo-liah).

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