

A Letter On Prayer

by Rev Bruno Forte

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You ask me: why pray? And I reply: to live.

Yes: really to live, you have to pray. Why? Because to live is to love: a life without love is not a life. It is empty loneliness, a sad prison. Only someone who loves is truly alive: and we only love when we are loved, when we are touched and transformed by love. Like the trees which bear no fruit unless bathed by the rays of the sun, so our human heart will not open itself out to true, full life unless touched by love.

Now, love is born from encounter and it finds life in encountering the love of God, the greatest and truest of all possible loves, the love, indeed, beyond all our definitions and capacities. When we pray, we let God love us, and we are born into love, ever anew. Thus it is that when we pray we live, in time and in eternity.

And when we do not pray? Ah, then we run the risk of dying inside, because sooner or later we will find no air to breathe, no warmth to make us live, no light to see by, no food to help us grow, and no joy to give meaning to our lives.

You object: but I don't know how to pray! You ask: how should I pray? And I reply: start by giving God just a little of your time. At the outset, it won't be so important for this to be a lot of time, but rather that you give it to Him faithfully. Decide upon a time to give the Lord every day, and give it to Him faithfully, every day, whether you feel like it or not.

Look for a quiet place, where - if possible - there is some sign which reminds you of God's presence (a cross, an icon, the Bible, the Tabernacle with His Eucharistic Presence....). Recollect yourself in silence: invoke the Holy Spirit, so that it is He who cries out within you "Abbà, Father!" Bring your heart to God, even if it is in tumult: do not be afraid

of telling Him everything, not only your difficulties and pain, your sin and unbelief, but also your rebellion and your protest, if that's what you are feeling inside.

Put everything in God's hands: remember that God is a loving Father and Mother; that he bears all, forgives all, enlightens all and saves all. Listen to His Silence: don't expect to find answers straightaway. Persevere. Like the prophet Elijah, walk through the desert to the mountain of God: and when you have drawn near Him, do not seek him in the wind, in the earthquake or in the fire, in signs of might and greatness, but in the voice of gentle silence (cf. 1 Kings 19, 12). Don't presume to possess God, but let Him be the One to visit your life and your heart, to touch your soul, and to let you contemplate Him even if only once He has passed by.

Listen to the voice of His Silence. Listen to His Word of life: open the Bible, meditate upon it with love, let Jesus' words speak to the heart of your heart; read the Psalms, where you will find word to say everything you want to express to God; listen to the apostles and prophets; fall in love with the stories of the Patriarchs and of the chosen people and of the early Church, where you will find the experience of lives lived out in God's covenant. And once you have listened to God's Word, walk still further in the paths of silence, and let the Spirit be the One to unite you to Christ, the Father's eternal Word. Let God the Father be the One to mould you with both His hands - the Word and the Holy Spirit.

At the beginning, you may feel that the time for all this is too long, that it drags on: persevere with humility, giving God all the time you can manage, but never less than what you decided to give Him every day. You will begin to see that from day to day your faithfulness will have its reward, and you will become aware that the taste for prayer will grow in you, and what at first seemed unattainable, will become ever easier and more beautiful. Then you will understand that what matters is not getting answers, but placing yourself at God's disposal: and you will see how whatever you bring to prayer will little by little be transfigured.

So it will be that when you go to pray with your heart in tumult, if you persevere, you will realize

that after having prayed at length you will not have found answers to your questions, but the questions themselves will have melted like snow in the sun, and a great peace will enter your heart: the peace of being in God's hands and of letting yourself be led docilely by Him, to wherever He has prepared for you. And so, your heart made new will be able to sing the new song, and the Magnificat of Mary will break out spontaneously on your lips and will be sung by the silent eloquence of your works.

Know, though, that there will be no lack of difficulties in all this: at times, you will not be able to quieten the din within and around you; at times you will feel tired or even nauseated by the idea of praying; at times, your feelings will be in agitation, and anything will seem preferable to remaining in prayer before God, "wasting" your time. Finally, you will experience the temptations of the Evil One, who will do everything possible to separate you from the Lord by taking you from prayer. Fear not: these same trials which you now bear were borne by the saints before you, and often theirs were much heavier than yours. Just go on having faith. Persevere, resist, and remember that the only thing that we can really give God is the proof of our fidelity. With perseverance you will save your prayer, and your life.

The "dark night" will come, when everything about the things of God will seem arid and even absurd to you: fear not. That is the hour when the one struggling with you is God Himself: remove every fault from you with the humble and sincere confession of your sins and sacramental forgiveness; give God even more of your time; and allow the night of the senses and of the spirit to become for you the hour of your sharing in the passion of the Lord. At this point, it will be Jesus Himself who carries your cross and leads you with Him towards the joy of Easter. Do not wonder, then, that you may even find this night loveable, because you will find it transformed for you into a night of love, flooded with the joy of the presence of the Beloved, full of the sweet perfume of Christ, bright with the light of Easter.

So do not be afraid, then, of trials and difficulties in prayer: only remember that God is faithful and that He will never send you a trial without providing you with the way through it, and He will never

expose you to a temptation without giving you the strength to bear and conquer it.

Let God love you: like a drop of water that evaporates under the rays of the sun and rises skyward and returns to the earth as fruitful rain and soothing dew, so let your whole being be worked by God, moulded by the love of the Three, absorbed into Them and given back to history as a fruitful gift. Let prayer make you grow in freedom from all fear, in the courage and audacity of love, in fidelity to the persons God has entrusted to you and to the situations in which he has placed you, without seeking escapes or cheap consolations. Learn by praying to live with the patience of waiting on the times of God, which are not our times, and to follow the ways of God, which so often are not our ways.

A special gift which faithfulness to prayer will give you is the love for others and the sense of the Church: the more you pray, the more you will feel mercy for all, the more you will want to help the suffering, the more you will hunger and thirst for justice for all, especially for the poorest and weakest, the more you will accept to bear the sins of others to complete in yourself what is lacking in the passion of Christ, for the benefit of His body, the Church.

As you pray you will sense how beautiful it is to be in Peter's boat, in solidarity with all, docile to the guidance of the pastors, sustained by the prayers of all, ready to serve others with generosity, asking nothing in return. As you pray you will sense how there grows in you the passion for the unity of the body of Christ and of the whole human family. Prayer is the school of love, because it is in prayer that you can discover how you are infinitely loved and be born ever anew in the generosity which takes the initiative of forgiving and of giving without calculation, beyond every measure of tiredness.

By praying we learn to pray and we taste the fruits of the Spirit which make life true and beautiful: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5,22). By praying we become love, and life takes on the meaning and beauty for which God intended it. When we pray we become ever more aware of the urgent need to bring the Gospel to all, to the furthest ends of the world. When we pray we discover the infinite gifts of the Beloved and we learn ever anew

to give Him thanks in all things. When we pray, we live. When we pray, we love. When we pray, we praise. And praise is the greatest joy and peace of our restless hearts, in time and for eternity.

So if I were to wish you the most beautiful of all gifts, if I were to ask God to grant it to you, I would not hesitate to ask Him to give you the gift of prayer. Indeed, I do ask Him: and you too, do not hesitate to ask God to give it to me, and to you. The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you. And may you also be in Them: because when you pray you will enter the heart of God, hidden with Christ in Him, enfolded for eternity in the faithful, ever new love of the Three.

For now you know: those who pray with Jesus and in Him, who pray to Jesus or to the Father of Jesus or invoke His Spirit, do not pray to a distant, vague God, but pray in God, pray in the Spirit, through the Son to the Father. And from the Father, through Jesus, in the divine breath of the Spirit, they will receive every perfect gift, conformable to them and prepared and desired for them from eternity. This is the gift that awaits us. And it awaits you.

