

## AT THE MEETING

### OPENING PRAYER

We begin, as usual, with a short time of stillness, putting ourselves in the presence of God and asking for grace that everything that happens in our mind, heart and imagination may be directed purely to the praise and service of God. Some communities use the CLC opening prayer, or some other formal prayer, to conclude this brief time of stillness. Others use a minute or two of suitable music.

**GRACE** We ask for the gift to pray as the Holy Spirit calls us to pray.

**SCRIPTURE:** (Ask someone to read this aloud.) Romans 8: 26 - 27

### SILENCE

Ten minutes silent prayer remembering my life and prayer since the last meeting. How have I found the prayer this last fortnight? What events in my life and prayer do I **wish** to share with my community?

### SHARING AND LISTENING

- Remember that this is a listening, not a discussion, group.
- Include a second round if there is time.
- It's good to conclude this time of reflection with a short period of silence, whilst we pray for each other, ending with a formal prayer, such as the Glory Be or the Lord's Prayer.

**INTERCESSORY PRAYER**, if wanted.

### PRACTICALITIES:

This is an opportunity for any reports, eg for questions, news or discussion about work/mission in which members might be involved, if someone has attended some event of concern to others, or for any business the group might need to sort out.

### REVIEW OF THE MEETING

- What was good for me in this meeting?
- What was not so good? What would I have liked to be different?
- What do I want to take away with me?

**CLOSING PRAYER** (Many communities use the CLC closing prayer)



## FOCUS ON



*This leaflet is the fourth of a series of leaflets which re-present articles originally published in FOCUS.*

It is intended to be used for reflection and prayer, either by yourself or as a community. (If you use it for prayer as a community expect to take at least a month over it.)

## PERSONAL PRAYER BEFORE THE MEETING

*Start and finish in your usual way*

**ASKING FOR WHAT I WANT:** I ask for the gift to pray as the Holy Spirit calls me to pray.

**MATERIAL FOR PRAYER:** Read the articles below and bring to the Lord anything that struck, touched, or disturbed you.

- What does prayer mean to me?
- What are my expectations of my prayer?

The following scripture may help your prayer.

- |                     |                        |                        |
|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| * Romans 8: 26 - 27 | * Mark 10: 46 - 52     | * Ephesians 3: 14 - 21 |
| * Luke 10: 38 - 42  | * Philippians 4: 4 - 9 | * Luke 1: 26 - 38      |

## THE PARADOX OF PRAYER

*Tony Horan sj writes from a long experience of giving spiritual direction and guiding retreatants, both in and out of retreat centres.*

One of my joys during the many years I taught in school, was to manage, train and coach a football team. As part of that I used to encourage the players to practise their skills; whether it was the skill of kicking, or heading, trapping or controlling a ball or whatever. I knew that the more they practised, their ease on the ball would increase and the more confident they would become. It is like learning to drive a car: you practise until you can change gear without being aware of it.

Prayer is different. Yes, for a long time after you become a serious regular prayer, your skills will increase and the ease with which you talk familiarly to God will grow. But it will probably not always be like that. There comes a time when far from getting easier, the various 'skills' of praying all seem to desert you and your confidence in being able to pray goes. But don't despair. When someone says, "I no longer seem to be able to pray", I know, or at least have good reason to believe, that real progress has been made.

How can that be? The object of prayer is to unite us to God and there are various stages in that process. At the beginning we often need our image of God changing; we need to understand many things differently; God needs

to increase our trust in him; we need to learn to meet him as a friend.

All this requires quite a lot of activity on our part, but there comes a time when the road to union with God requires much less activity from us. God asks us just to be there with him and wants us to put aside all 'activity' - using a gospel scene, or any scripture, or even any words or ideas; suddenly all these become 'in the way'. We, of course, find this very difficult.

We are used to doing and find just **resting in the Lord** difficult. In fact, a lot of the satisfaction we found in prayer disappears too and we think we have gone right back. The temptation is to give up, to say prayer is obviously not for me. But it is! God is inviting you to a much deeper state of union with him. "Fine", you think, "if I am going to feel that closer union". But no, God is inviting you to the God of consolation, not to the consolations of God. This stage in prayer really discovers who God's friends are and we want to be God's friends and to be patient with him as he leads us deeper into that friendship, leads us into a stage of inactive prayer.

## IN ALL THINGS LOVE AND SERVE

*John Partridge, previously of Oxford CLC, on the Examen of Consciousness*

The link between love and service is well set out by St. John when in his first letter he says; '...our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active.' When Our Lord used the word 'love' he was saying it should be the normal mode of behaviour between all people. The love he was talking about might be defined as; 'Desiring the other's ultimate good'. In Christian eyes the 'ultimate good' is obviously eternal life and that is obviously what God's love is directed towards. However, God channels his love through his people, so when we love we do so with his love. But loving people can be difficult especially if we don't even like them. This is where a definition of love from the realms of Marriage Encounter is useful; 'Love is a Decision' or 'Love is an act of will'. In other words we can decide to perform a loving act or not. We can decide to be unselfish, generous, kind, tolerant, helpful, etc. and if we so decide then we are loving someone. So how does this fit in with Ignatian Spirituality? And how do we know if we're loving and serving as God would wish us to?

First we could try thanking God for his love. His love is given without us even asking for it let alone deserving it. He even offers himself as a role-model so that we can understand what he's talking about; remember the washing of the feet?

We could then pray to the Holy Spirit to enlighten us as to where and when God's love was shown to us, or by us, today. Which people, events, etc. did he use to show us his love or to give us the opportunity to pass on his love to someone else? We can be so blind to his presence we need the Spirit of God to open our eyes for us.

Suppose someone has been following us around all day with a video camera and here we are, at the end of the day, replaying the

video. What do we see ourselves doing? Even more important perhaps, what do we remember ourselves feeling or thinking at some of these moments? Why did we feel that way? By concentrating on the 'whys' we dig deeper into ourselves perhaps to the place where God dwells. It is here that we will meet him and can talk to him about those events when he wanted to be present to us and perhaps we didn't recognise him at the time. Is there a trend in our feelings? Is that trend towards or away from God? Is there an area of our life where God seems to be asking us to make some changes?

When we're talking to God about this 'video' we'll probably want to say sorry for some of the lapses, but we should not forget to say thank you for some of the times we've been loved and have loved and served others. We're able to do these things because he gives us the grace to do so, and because, as St. John tells us in his first letter: '...he loved us first'.

This leads us to the final act of our prayer which is to ask him for the graces we need to make the changes we've been led to see are needed and also for help in coping with tomorrow when that darned camera is going to be following us again.

And when we have done all that well, what do you know? We have done an EXAMEN

..... I think ....

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# WAITING IN HOPE - A LESSON FROM ADVENT

*Some thoughts on prayer from the National Chaplain at the time, Tony Horan sj.*

Advent is the time before the celebration of the birth of Christ our saviour. The gospels of Advent, after reminding us to stay awake, feature John the Baptist, the precursor of Christ, before they remind us of Mary's 'Yes' to God's invitation at the Annunciation. It could not have been an easy 'Yes'. We think of the honour. To a girl of Mary's time, mysterious pregnancies led to dishonour, abandonment and even death. I like to think that Mary was at prayer when she received the invitation to be the mother of the Messiah: a prayer which enabled her to say a courageous "yes" to God. Such courage, which only comes from the sort of trust we have towards a close friend. Mary had that trust. As a result, the Son of God was conceived in her by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our prayer too needs to be a disposing of ourselves, with God's help, to what God wants of us, to receiving what God wants to give us. I remember a Carmelite Prioress being asked "How do you know when you are praying well?" her answer was along these lines, "I know I am praying well, when after my prayer, I notice that I am more patient, more tolerant, more loving; in fact, more Christian." In other words we have prayed well, when afterwards God is more at work in us. So in prayer we need to dispose ourselves, again with God's help, for this action of God within us. This means emptying ourselves of those things which get in God's way - things which make us follow our own agenda rather than God's, like fear, selfishness, laziness, pride, etc.

The temptation is always to think of prayer as our doing something; saying prayers, thinking, talking, imagining. These are all activities with which we tend to occupy ourselves during prayer and which make us think we are praying. But prayer is God's work, as I came to realise long ago. I was just starting the full

Spiritual Exercises in the Tertianship: that year at the end of his training which a Jesuit devotes to spiritual matters. It was the first hour of prayer of the first day and there were to be four more prayer times that day and 29 more days of retreat after that. The prayer was extremely dry and it was difficult to keep on trying to pray. Perhaps I was trying too hard. The thought of 149 more prayer times like this did not help. I remember when I came to realise deep within me, 'I can't pray for thirty seconds, never mind for thirty days.' After that all was well; now that I knew I needed God in order to pray, I was carried by God for the rest of the Long Retreat. It is now deeply ingrained within me that I cannot pray. I can say prayers, but prayer, lifting my heart and mind to God, only God can do in me. Is this surprising? I can't reach God. God has to come to me.

How do we open ourselves to God's action within us? Most of all, by believing in God and the love shown us by God. We do this by building up our relationship with God and of course our relationship with God is like any other relationship, it needs quality time. To spend quality time with the persons of the Trinity is the most effective way of saying to them, 'You matter to me'. To spend quality time, we need to be ready to pursue the other's agenda as well as our own - God's agenda.

Mary's reply to God's invitation was: "I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me." If we, like her, are to be able to surrender to God in our ordinary life, we too must first surrender our prayer life to God, knowing that we are helpless, entirely in his hands. But that is alright, because we can trust our friend.

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For many, for a time, a mantra such as "Be still and know that I am God" or "Lord Jesus, son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner" may help. But be careful, lest even this be a barrier, preventing me from that intimacy that God desires where I don't have anything, but him.

The test of our prayer is not anything in our prayer; it is whether my prayer helps me to be more Christian outside my prayer: more cheerful, more kind, more giving and less taking. For me the ultimate barometer seems to be my sense of humour. If my prayer is O.K., I am aware of my sense of humour. I have a better sense of proportion about life, I take myself a little less seriously and I am more aware of how much I owe to others, especially God. My prayer itself might seem to be nothing, full of distractions. It might even be painful staying there, but if the above is true, I know God has my prayer in his hands and I can leave it to him. All I can do is to keep wanting, and gently trying, to be there with him; although, where being with him is, I don't know. I am being led towards that cloud of unknowing that an early English spiritual writer portrayed.

Distractions I must just let float by, just not paying them attention. Gradually I come to recognise what to pay attention to amongst the various things that come into my

consciousness. Often what seem to be distractions are things to note and act upon outside my prayer. Sometimes things will float in, which help me to stay with God in prayer. A little discernment, or an attentive listening, needs to go on in my prayer, helping me to distinguish what to pay attention to and what to try to ignore and what to note for future attention.

What else can help? Talking to someone experienced in the ways of prayer; a little spiritual reading outside prayer, of a book that feeds my deepest desires; a few minutes spent preparing my prayer, deciding what I need to bring to my praying, knowing always that I probably will not be able to use any of it in prayer; a few minutes spent reviewing my prayer, looking at what happened in the nothing, which is my instinctive description of my prayer; and the Examen of consciousness allows me to look at my barometer, so that I know that all is in fact well. The important thing is not to be put off when my prayer develops in this way, but trust that through it, God is leading me to him. Certainly it is God who is going to do the work which is prayer, not me. I just try to be with him so that he can work in and for me.

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## WHAT I TRULY DESIRE....

*An extract from a talk by Roswitha Cooper, then World CLC Executive Secretary*

In the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises we are advised to ask for what I want and desire as a prelude to every period of prayer. This is also called *praying the grace*.

For St. Ignatius the preparatory prayer and Preludes are important. He mentions them repeatedly. The final Prelude, *praying the grace*, is mentioned 13 times in the Exercises. This prayer, to ask for what I want, changes with the ongoing process of the Exercises. It

begins with the prayer for grace to 'recall how often one has fallen into the particular sin or fault, in order to correct it in the future' and it ends with the *Contemplation to Attain Love* and 'for interior knowledge of all the great good I have received in order that, stirred to profound gratitude, I become able to love and serve'.

Our capacity to desire, to yearn for, is at the very root of our human existence, and a deep



and basic dynamic of our life. It is important to know our desires, they put us in touch with truth - about us, about creation—and, in the end, with GOD.

At the beginning of all is desire. Without the desire of the Creator for the creation, the universe would not have come into existence. In the beginning was God's love and the desire resulting from this love, to create humankind in God's image. Without the desire of a couple for each other, new human life would not be born. Without the desire of an artist to create, art would not exist. A person without desires cannot hope and cannot live.

We can distinguish three levels of desires, and it is important to accept them for what they are. They are planted in our hearts to make us grow. Just as grain or a tulip bulb will grow towards the light, even if you put them upside-down in the earth, this desire keeps us moving towards the goal. These desires on all levels go with us throughout our life.

- There are the desires on the level of ideas and ideals: things I need, I want, that would be nice to have. Our desires for the fulfilment of our basic human needs - without fulfilment of these we cannot live - belong here. On this level we also talk about wishes. The fulfilment of wishes can make us happy, at least for a while, but they are not enough! Alone, they cannot give us lasting happiness. We also notice that the fulfilment of wishes on this level creates new wishes and desires. These desires are important for our life. They inspire us to inventions, to search, research, explore and discover; in short: they lead us to action. It would be a mistake to look at our desires on this level as something inferior. God speaks to us on this level too. When Jesus fed the five thousand, he was primarily answering their basic need for food. And in his encounter with the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well, the discussion starts with the basic need for water. This episode is exemplary of how a person is led through all levels of her desires towards God.

- The next level of our desires is on a deeper level of personal experience.

We not only see our own desires, but those of others become important and challenging. We need relationships. Our desires are oriented towards a 'YOU'. I want to love and to be loved; I need recognition; I want to be a useful

member of the human family. In the fulfilment of my desires on this level I grow into maturity as a man or a woman. The fulfilment of these is necessary for our physical and mental growth and development, beginning at our birth. On this level we want to do things for others. Service is located here. A good example is Peter. The experienced fisherman has been working the whole night without success, then this Nazarene carpenter tells him how to fish: 'Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets'. This action leads him to recognise his sinfulness and is the beginning of a relationship with Jesus that will make an apostle of him. But we know how far Peter had to go before the Lord could tell him: 'Feed my sheep.'

- Our existential desires, our deepest longing, is behind all our desires; even sometimes in trivial seeming wishes, this deepest longing is hidden. Some call it the desire for I do not know what. It is the fire of the Creator's love, burning in our hearts that keeps us alive. Ernesto Cardenal wrote: 'In all human beings is the same spark of unquenchable yearning, the same desire for happiness and for belonging without end.'

It is a graced moment when we begin to understand this, our deepest longing. Poets, artists, philosophers, theologians throughout the centuries have tried to express it.



Throughout Scripture we find it expressed in beautiful language, in symbols and pictures: 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you Lord' (Ps 42.); 'for I know that my Redeemer lives ... and that in my flesh I shall see God' (Job 19, 25 - 27); 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now' (Romans 8:22). It is concisely expressed in the last words of Revelation 'Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus!' Teilhard de Chardin once expressed it as follows: 'We have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity; some day we will harness for God the energies of love, and then for the second time in the history of the world humankind will have discovered fire.' St. Augustine, for whom this yearning for God was daily bread, famously expresses it: 'You have made me for yourself, Lord, and my heart is restless until it rests in you.'

Our desires, all our longing would be a meaningless torture if we did not have the hope and promise of fulfilment. The fulfilment is God himself. Only if we know our desires and bring them into the light of the Lord's loving compassionate regard for us, do we grow towards a personal relationship with God. In a human relationship of trust and love I can express my desires. In my relationship with God I must strive to do the same.

When Ignatius speaks about *indifference*, he does not mean to be free of desires, but to recognise desires, bring them to the Lord's attention and ask Him to redeem us from them or fulfil them. We cannot achieve by ourselves this indifference or spiritual balance or spiritual freedom. It is the Lord's gift of grace. When a person becomes completely imbued with the love of Christ, all desires of the heart, all thoughts and actions, all decisions and the whole affectivity flow together in the one unique desire to love, praise and serve God. Because we are human beings and sinners, we do not possess this Spiritual Freedom once and forever, but once we have tasted it, our desire for it will grow.

Our dilemma is that sometimes we do not know what we want or desire. We are divided in our hearts and understand the apostle Paul: 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do' (Romans 7:19), but he continues: 'Likewise 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' (Romans 8:26).

I think St. Francis once said that the best answers to prayer were when he did not get what he was asking for. I think all of us may have similar experiences. *Praying the grace* regularly helps us to understand the different movements in us, where we are on our journey. We will learn to hear and understand God's voice better.

David Fleming sj, writes: *The primary experience of Ignatius is not his doing great things for God, but God actively entering into his life, 'teaching him like a schoolboy' and setting a new direction for his life.* This is what to ask for in praying the grace: that God may enter our life, showing us where we are and what we are in our life journey. The Lord wants us to express our wishes and desires for our sake. Like the blind Bartimaeus he asks us: 'What do you want me to do for you?' If we receive the grace to ask for the 'right thing' it will be given to us. The Lord himself has promised as much. If we have not faith it is enough to express our desire for faith like the father of the ailing boy in Mark 9:24. After Jesus said to him: 'All things can be done for the one who believes' the man replies: 'I believe, help my unbelief.' I find this very consoling for my own life. Sometimes, when prayer is so dry and I do not even know what to ask for, I formulate this praying the grace somehow like this: 'Lord I cannot feel your presence, I am not even sure if you can hear me. I feel dry and miserable and there is nothing I really want but to feel less miserable and lonely.' Sometimes I have to go on praying for a while, but never have I been without an answer.

