

Praying Is No Easy Matter

From *With Open Hands* by Henri Nouwen
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Praying is no easy matter. It demands a relationship in which you allow the other to enter into the very center of your person, allow the Divine One to speak there, allow yourself to be touched at the most sensitive core of your being, allow yourself to be seen - even those parts you would rather leave in darkness.

And when do you really want to do that? Maybe you'd let the other come across the threshold to say something, to touch something, but to let God into that place where your life gets its form, that is dangerous and, usually, calls for defense.

The resistance to praying is like the resistance of tightly clenched fists. This image shows the tension, the desire to cling tightly to yourself, a greediness which betrays fear. The story about an old woman brought to a psychiatric center exemplifies this attitude. She was wild, swinging at everything in sight, and scaring everyone so much that the doctors had to take everything away from her. But there was one small coin which she gripped in her fist and would not give up. In fact, it took two workers to pry open that squeezed hand. It was as though she would lose her very self along with the coin. If they deprived her of that last possession, she would have nothing more, and be nothing more. That was her fear.

The ones invited to pray are asked to open their tightly clenched fists and to give up their last coin. But who wants to do that? A first prayer, therefore, is often a painful prayer because you discover in it you don't want to let go. You hold fast to what is familiar, even if you aren't proud of it. You find yourself saying, in defense, "That's just how it is with me. I'd like it to be different, but it can't be now. That's just the way it is and that's the way I'll have to leave it."

But when you dare to pray, to face your true self, to surrender one of your many fears, to trust what you hear, and to act as if your life depended on it, your hands will open and your muscles relax and you will be on the road to true bliss. True bliss indeed!

Praying Your Way Through the Fourteen Steps to Just Living

Learning to live more simply, more sustainably,
and more in solidarity with the poor.

Introduction

Prayer is often called a "dialogue"
between God and us.

But, in prayer,
while we usually speak words toward God,
whether oral or silent,
God does not ordinarily speak words back to us.

We don't normally
hear voices in the tabernacle,
visions in the night,
or the skies opening and God speaking.

As we pray about our lives and the way in which we live them,
we may ask for insight and guidance,
for direction, wisdom, and to know God's desires for us.

But do we simply end our prayer
with our words or does God respond to us somehow?

God, we would say,
"speaks" not many words to us,
but rather *a single word*.
The word divinely spoken
is heard in the very depths of our souls.
We hear when we listen to our intuitions,
when we pause to pay attention to insights which are deep within.

For we are aware that God is with us,
continually creating us,
constantly loving us,
and revealing us to ourselves and to one another
at all times.

We are the ones who are spoken in prayer

and to enter into our lives
as divine in their source
and divine in their destiny
is to enter into prayer.

We are bound up with God
in such a dramatic way
that the intricacies of our lives
are filled with divine energy.

So hearing God is hearing our lives

as they are drawn into God
in the everydayness
with which we live.
We aren't waiting for voices from heaven,
or signs in the night.
No, the voice of God
is speaking right now in our midst
when we listen and trust our insights as "enlightened"
by the One who is Light of the World.

We hear God speaking within us and among us:
in the inner voices
which make us sure and insistent.
We hear God in the intuitions,
imaginings,
and ideas which seem to come from nowhere.
We find the Word of God present
and spoken in our inner voices of conscience,
in our inner sense of right,
in our inner place of silence.

But we aren't accustomed to listening
so we often don't hear when God speaks like this.
Are sometimes we are blocked
in our hearing by psychological,
ideological,
sociological,
theological,
political,
or other factors of life.

Anytime we try to see ourselves
apart from God's revelation,
inspiration,
or instigation,
we are mired in a narrow sense of self
and we are not listening in prayer.

And anytime we fail to speak our truths,
whatever they might be,
we are blocked in our ability
to be in touch with the Sacred Energy.

If we withhold
or suppress areas of darkness,
memories or dreams,
hurts, sins, or failures,
desires, urges, or feelings,
we stop short of full Divine Life.

A Way to Pray for Guidance on this Journey

As you make your way through the journey of the Fourteen Steps
take time each day for reflection and prayer.

Listen closely to what you hear in your inner ear,
what intuitions and impulses you experience
as you work through the various exercises.

In this daily prayer time
follow the steps below
to really *listen with all your heart*.

Then share the ideas, insights, and intuitions that come forth.
By sharing them with a trusted friend or small group
the community discerns and tests ideas.

Such testing leads us to a sense of "rightness" about new ideas,
but may also lead us to know something is not right for us.

The Method of Listening Prayer

First, become comfortable and quiet,
whether sitting
walking
driving
or whatever...

This sort of prayer isn't something
that will necessarily occur
in a chapel or at formal prayer.

Often this prayer will come to you in the night,
in those waking moments or hours
when sleep seems distant.

Turn then your mind toward Christ
and allow him to comfort you.

The sense of the Spirit
with which we are blessed in this
Prayer of Listening
isn't very easily scheduled.

Second, pause deeply
and allow yourself to relax and rest:
dropping the shoulders and jaw,
settling your mind,
breathing profoundly.

The idea isn't that we must learn
some complex system of exercises
that will guarantee success here.

It's rather that each one of us
learns to relax as we are able.

This relaxing is more like putting a car on "idle"
than like shifting gears to "park."

Third, bring to mind
that for which you wish to pray:
your own habits of consumption
the things you have or want to have
your knowledge of the world's poor and suffering
the state of the earth itself
your commitments, relationships, and engagements
and other matters like this.

You won't have to work very hard at this
because what we have to pray for
is already there,
waiting in our deep minds
to be awakened by this simple way
of paying attention to it.

Bring to mind gently whatever is there,
let it come slowly,
willingly,
and let it linger in the shadows
of your consciousness,
almost at the back of your mind.

If someone were to ask you,
"What's on your mind these days?"
that would be your "agenda" for prayer.

You may wish to mix this "agenda"
with Scripture
spiritual reading
or a reflection on the mysteries
of our faith.

Fourth, watch and listen
to the scene you see and hear.
Pay attention to your own feelings,
ideas,
and imagination.
Be present to Christ and allow him to be present to you,
the Sacred One.
Let the Spirit lead and guide you,
allowing yourself to accept all thoughts and insights.

If you sense resistance,
check that,
for in it you will find
what blocks you.

If you sense light,
follow it gladly.

Fifth, after a while,
begin to take in what you hear and see:
begin to consolidate your thinking,
begin to mentally record your experience.
Try putting words on it,
letting it gel,
and even writing it down.
Prepare to share your insights with others in the planning group
by repeating them to yourself,
rehearsing the phrases which best describe the insights you felt.

Sixth, become grateful
for the gifts you have received
and know them to have God as Source.

Bask in gratitude for a moment,
not coming away from your prayer
until you are ready.

Let your heart swell
with praise,
the kind of wordless, speechless awe
you feel in the face of beauty,
love,
and generosity.

For you have just seen beauty,
love,
and divine, endless generosity.

Conclusion.

By this method of letting Christ
enter into the "stuff" of our ordinary lives,
we are drawn into God more and more.

We will feel God's acceptance,
God's unconditional forgiveness,
God's urgent call to us to recreate the parish in his Spirit.

And in this, we will be converted into ever-deeper relationship with God,
and this will lead us

to undertake changes in our lives which are profound
helping us be happier as we live more fully
and helping us live simply, sustainably, and in solidarity.

The everyday details of our daily life
are touched by the Spirit and we come to know deeply
how to live together, and what choices to make.

Credits. Karl Rahner wrote about this in *Christian at the Crossroads*. The Second Vatican Council picked up his insights in its work on prayer and liturgy. Brian McDermott SJ has also written about this in his excellent *What Are They Saying About the Grace of Christ?* These notes are © Bill Huebsch, 2008.