

# *For Better & For Ever*

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## *Chapter 14: Prayer*

**M**ario and Dena were planning a Spring wedding. They were meeting with Father Ed to discuss all that they needed to be doing to prepare for the wedding. They talked about many different topics and issues, such as, what their families were like, their future plans, their ideas about managing their finances, and ideas about parenting. At one point, Father Ed asked them about how they “prayed.” There was a pregnant pause. Both of them had been looking at Father Ed when he asked the question. The question caught them off guard. Neither of them was sure how to respond. Each of them hoped the other one would answer the question, or at least say *something* that would replace the silence that was quickly becoming awkward. Not all couples are like Mario and Dena. Some understand Father Ed’s question about “prayer” as just another topic they expect to be asked about as they prepare for Christian marriage. But the reaction of Mario and Dena is more “typical.”

Why?

“Prayer” ~ like “sex” ~ is a concept about which every adult is *supposed* to “know all about,” and is *supposed to have a positive attitude*. Yet the reality is that most young adults are not so sure they know much about prayer. They feel awkward about sharing their experience of prayer, because they are not sure it is going to be considered “correct.” Whatever kind of prayer that they do is likely to be very “private” (“between me and God”). It is likely they have never shared much about *how* they pray with each other. Father Ed’s question is difficult because he is inviting them to share a part of themselves that neither of them has previously risked sharing. It is therefore an “embarrassing” question, or at least awkward.

Consider the following points.

### **1- Prayer is “real”**

Examining *love* by scientific method is impossible. Yet no wise person would deny the reality of love. *Prayer* is equally difficult to get hold of by any kind of scientific method. Yet, just as love is absolutely real, so also prayer is real. A simple way to put it is to say that *prayer is any way we spend time with God as our Father/Friend/Lover*.

We establish and sustain relationships with other people by various means of communication. We use words, gestures, gifts, *etc*. People of faith also establish and sustain relationship with God; *prayer* is the word that people have traditionally used to refer to their efforts to communicate with and spend time with God.

### **2 -There are many different ways to pray**

As adults we know that we communicate in many different ways, *i.e.*, by words, gestures, or actions which express feelings such as, love, fear, alienation, hope, passion, *etc.* Any kind of communication ~ even negative or violent communication ~ affects our relationships with others. So also, we can relate to God in many different ways, and we can think of all these as *forms of prayer.*

The biggest problem that most of us have with prayer is that we learned to pray and also to play as children. Although we no longer play in the same way we did as children, we tend to think we “ought” to pray as we did as children. We no longer kneel beside the bed and say “night prayers” to our Guardian Angel, and we no longer gather with our brothers and sisters to say the Family Rosary (while squirming around and looking forward to it being over). When asked about our “prayer life,” we feel defensive, because we no longer pray in the same way we did it in childhood.

Our adult minds can understand that the ways of praying as a child were fine for that stage of our development. We also played with dolls and wooden trucks, and that was good too. Yet we have put away the toys of childhood and we are learning to deal with real people and real jobs. So it is with learning to relate to God as an adult. The prayers of childhood no longer suit us (we have put them away). But most of us are not so sure that this is normal and natural. We need to know that it is OK to stop praying like a child, and learn to pray like a grownup!

### **3 - Rated R - For adults only**

Labeling this section “Rated R - For Adults Only” might seem odd, but children will simply not understand this section.

Children are surely “lovable” (able to be loved). We teach children “to love,” and many children can be very “loving” toward others. However, this “love” of childhood is only a stage of getting us ready to grow toward adult “love,” which involves the ability to risk *giving ourselves* to another who has the power to accept/affirm or reject/abandon us. Children are not capable of adult love, because they have not yet developed the ability to be self reflective and understand their inner selves. The continuing question of adolescents is “*Who am I?*” Even most young adults are still trying to answer this question. Until I have an accurate understanding of “*Who am I?*”, I am not capable of sharing my *self* with another person. I am not capable of adult “love.” Children can share “things;” only adults know what it means to share one’s “self.”

If I have become capable of “adult love,” I know from personal experience that the question ~ “How much do I love another person?” ~ is best answered by measuring the degree to which I have shared my deepest hopes, dreams, fears and anxieties with that person. If I am willing to risk sharing inner realities that cause me to feel vulnerable, I am doing my part to help us establish a truly intimate relationship. *Note:* It is true intimacy when both of us are equally committed to sharing our personal inner world with each other, and learning about the inner world of each other. If only *one* person actually does this, it is not a real relationship! This is why true intimacy is an ongoing challenge: a person can only choose to share his/her *self*, no one can control or force the sharing of another person. It is possible ~ after years of thinking we knew each other ~ to discover that one or both of us did not know how to share this inner world.

If you have read this far, I hope it will make sense to say that “adult prayer” is *whatever I do*

that is an attempt to “*share myself*” with God and *whatever I do* in an effort to “*listen*” to God sharing with me. Let me offer some examples:

“Prayer” might take place in church. Saying the words of the Lord’s Prayer, may “fit” with my desire to express my gratitude for God’s continuing gifts of life and love to me (“give us this day our daily bread...”) or my yearning for forgiveness and healing (“forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...”).

“Prayer” might take place in the car. While sitting in a traffic jam on the way home from a frustrating day at work, nearly in tears, hating the traffic, asking God to “help me not to go crazy today” may be the best way to pray.

“Prayer” might be a sob of fear and anger and frustration. “Oh, God, I hate this!”, as I sit alone in the dark, waiting for my partner, not knowing why he or she has not called to let me know what is going on.

“Prayer” might be a feeling of tremendous joy and satisfaction. “Thank you, Jesus!”, as I listen to my partner share news about a job promotion.

“Prayer” might be a time of anger with God. On hearing about a good friend being killed in a car accident, “having it out” with God for allowing such a tragedy might be most appropriate. Jews and Christians have used the ancient, but ever contemporary, Psalms to articulate a whole range of feelings, for example:

Why, O Lord, do you reject me; / why hide from me your face?  
I am afflicted and in agony...  
Companion and neighbor you / have taken away from me;  
my only friend is darkness. (*Psalm 88:15,19*)

The basic point here is that every “adult prayer” is a way of *being myself* with God, sharing what is happening in my heart.

#### **4 - Learning to “listen” to God**

Besides learning how to share myself with God, the other part of prayer is learning to “hear” what God has to say to me. This is not so easy because most of us will never “hear” a voice or a sound that we can verify by any kind of scientific instrument. In addition, we must be very careful to avoid confusing “God’s voice” with our own ideas. When someone says, “The Lord *told* me to do this or that...,” it is more likely that the person is making the best decision that he or she knows how to make and is hoping that it is what God would want. Most adults discover that God rarely “tells” us anything. God is more likely to so respect our freedom to choose that God hardly ever gives specific directions. God is more likely to respond to our questions for direction by lovingly listening and then speaking a “*word*” of *silence* which asks, “What do you think is the most loving decision you can make?” Or “What would your Brother, Jesus, do in this situation?”

The more mature we become in prayer, the more we are likely to “say” less and “listen” more. In the same way that married couples who have loved each other for many years tend to talk less, and just appreciate being with each other in silence, so also the most mature prayer tends

to be a way of simply “being quiet” with the Lord. Most people have heard the story about the old man who used to come and sit in the church, and much of the time he slept while he sat there. A priest asked him one day, “What do you do all that time you sit there in the church?” The old man said, “Well, I just sit there, and He looks at me.”

## **5 - Sharing prayer with each other**

The idea of “sharing” prayer can be intimidating. Since most people have learned that prayer is very “private and personal,” the idea of “sharing” prayer sounds like something that ought not to be done. However, this is another indication of the fact that we learned about prayer as children, and now we need to “rethink” prayer as an adult.

One way to “rethink” our ideas about prayer is to reflect upon our ideas about sex. When we were children, they taught us that “sex” was something very “private and personal.” They taught us that we were not to expose our bodies to other people and they instructed us to make sure that other people respected the privacy of our bodies. These very strict rules were important for us as children, because we were not mature enough to understand the full meaning of sex. We were not able to understand that sexual intercourse finds its real meaning as an act of giving one’s very self as completely as possible to one’s partner in marriage. Only as adults, therefore, can we understand that in Christian marriage sexual intercourse is not merely “permitted,” we promote it as a *special symbol of marital commitment*.

When people taught us about prayer as children, and told us it was “private and personal,” they were teaching us something important. They were instructing us that ~ even as children ~ we could develop our own very real relationship with God. God wanted to be a “private and personal” friend to each of us. We did not need other people to make God “real” for us.

Unfortunately, as children, we probably got some of these ideas about “private and personal” mixed up. They were not teaching that God was my friend exclusively, *nor* were they teaching that we were not to share our friendship with God with other people. Nevertheless, many people think this way as adults. Many people, who are quite comfortable sharing their bank accounts and sexual intimacy with their partner, think it is *not* appropriate to “share” their relationship with God with their partner. Even if they can “rethink” their ideas and see that including God as a third party to their love relationship is a normal part of Christian marriage, they often have no idea about how to do this.

So...consider these ideas:

### ***Start with simple things.***

Hold hands during the Lord’s Prayer in church on Sunday. This is an easy way to “pray together.” You can think your own private thoughts while doing this, but at the same time you can be aware that you are doing this “together.” The more you think about this, the more you can experience this simple form of “sharing prayer” as a ritual that has real impact on your relationship. The next step is to talk together ~ after worship ~ about what it means to each of you to hold hands and pray together during the Lord’s Prayer in church. This conversation will be another step in learning how to “share” not only *prayer*, but also your *faith*.

***Another simple form of shared prayer is to hold hands and pray together before each meal***

### ***you share.***

Of course, you can pray without holding hands, but holding hands has some real advantages. Try it both ways and see how holding hands adds something to the experience. When you are comfortable doing this as a couple, sharing this way of praying with your children will be easy. Holding hands during meal prayers is great for children. It gives them something to do with their hands and helps teach them that prayer is a way of connecting to others.

### ***What to say?***

They taught us to “say prayers” as children. This was, in fact, the only way we could have learned to pray as small children. Prayer formulas are also useful for adults. We use the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer during Sunday worship because that is best way for large groups of people to profess their Faith and pray together as brothers and sisters. Likewise the use of the Rosary and the repetition of the *Hail Mary* during a wake service is a tradition that may always remain popular. However, praying as an adult, by myself or with the members of my family, usually means letting go of prayer formulas and learning to speak to God “in our own words.” Speaking to God like I would speak to a friend in a letter ~ just saying what is on my mind ~ is an important step in growing to a more mature relationship with God.

Sharing my heart with God does not require any special training or education. It is as simple as trusting that God is my loving Father who is interested in what I am thinking, and willing to listen whatever words I manage to say. Praying “out loud” is not a requirement so God can hear me. But speaking out loud may be a useful step in gaining confidence in my ability to pray!

### ***Turning to God when you are unable to turn to your partner.***

Only the most naive couples believe that they will always be able to “work things out” with each other. Every married couple will experience situations in which one or both of them will find it impossible to deal with the other person. This will happen even in the best marriages, and when it does, it is predictable that one or both of them will turn to someone or something. It might be a friend or family member, or it might be a stranger or bar tender or therapist, or it might be alcohol or drugs or an “affair.”

Talking things out with a friend who cares about both you and your partner, or seeking the help of a clergy person or professional therapist, are likely to be very helpful. But try to remember to also turn to God in time of need, and pray that your partner makes the same decision. Many couples can witness to the fact that God was able and willing to listen, and help them find their way back to each other. Wise Christians avoid either/or thinking. It is not a question of choosing psychological therapy *or* prayer to God; more likely, prayer to God will provide the grace to search out a therapist as well.

### ***Sharing prayer with my partner.***

Sharing prayer with one’s partner is difficult for most people. Many couples have never done this before, and do not even know a married couple who does this! It is at least as scary as deciding to climb a mountain if you have never done that before. Fearing the unknown is normal. Still, if you admit this fear to each other, you have already taken the first step in dealing with this fear. Sharing your fear and awkwardness is a good way to start learning how

to do something new together. There are several good books written especially for married couples that will guide you in prayer and into an intimate marital prayer life together.

A deeper difficulty which every couple will encounter ~ even if you are comfortable with the idea of praying ~ is the *vulnerability* you will feel when you risk prayer together regularly. Praying together may seem easier in the “good times,” but will probably become most important in the “bad times.” Learning to ask forgiveness of each other and learning to bring your deepest fears and needs into your efforts to pray together can be challenging. Yet, this is likely to be the most important “marriage insurance policy” you will ever develop. Inviting God your loving Father to help you through your struggles with each other is a kind of prayer that God will surely hear!

My most treasured memory about prayer in marriage came from a conversation with an older man whose wife had died a few years before. He said, “I think I miss her most when I go to bed at night. About 20 years ago we attended a retreat for married couples and learned a simple way to pray together. Each night, when we got in bed, we would hold hands and pray the “Lord’s Prayer” together. At the end of the prayer, I would ask pardon for any hurts I had caused her that day, and she would do the same. For the last 20 years of our marriage we were closer than ever before. I went to sleep each night feeling I was truly forgiven. I really miss this now.”

## **6 - Mental prayer is essential**

“Mental prayer” means to pray by simply *thinking about my self and my relationship with God*. The Catholic Church has so much respect for the ideas of St. Alphonsus Liguori that they have declared him a “Doctor of the Church,” *i.e.*, a trustworthy teacher. Alphonsus said that unless we take time out to reflect upon ourselves, granted the business of our lives and the distractions of the material world, we will not know our real needs and not be aware of where we are in our life journey: “If we do not think frequently about God and ourselves, we soon forget about both.”

An effective way to develop a daily habit of mental prayer is to “build in” a custom of private prayer time into my daily schedule. It might be the solitude of my first cup of coffee in the morning, or the alone time during my drive to work, or my first coffee break during my work day. The goal is to establish a private time of 5 - 15 minutes for private reflection about my life and my relationship with God.

St. Alphonsus often said that *no matter how hopeless a situation might seem, God will always give us the grace to pray, and if we then choose to pray, God will then give us the graces we most need.*

## **Bible Reading and Prayer**

Catholics were once cautioned against private study of the Bible. There was a concern about the danger of misinterpreting the meaning of Bible texts. During the past 40 years, however, the publication of a great number of guide books for understanding the Bible have made private Bible study a practical reality for persons of every age group.

Some people study the Bible so as to have a critical understanding of the Word of God. Most people study the Bible for their own personal spiritual benefit. Their goal is to understand the Word of God and put it to practice in their lives. This kind of Bible study has always been a vital part of Christian tradition.

## Questions for Reflection & Dialogue

1 - When I think of myself praying, my feelings are\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2 - My favorite form of prayer is\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3 - I tend to pray when\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4 - Daily prayer is something that I\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5 - I would say that my style of prayer is: (choose one) similar to / different from the way that I prayed as a child. For example, I\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6 - My biggest difficulty in praying is \_ \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7 - If I were to rate the importance of prayer and Bible study in my life, I would say\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

8 - If I were to give myself a "grade" as a praying person, I think it would be \_\_\_\_\_  
because\_ \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9 - I (choose one) have / have not made efforts to pray with my partner. I would say that our efforts at prayer together have been\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

10 - We have tried the following forms of prayer together:\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

11 - What are my thoughts and feelings about prayer and Bible study in our marriage?\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

12 - What is my understanding of "mental prayer" and how do I see myself doing this?\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_