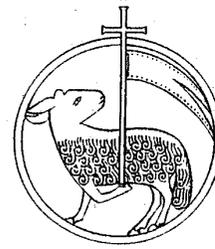


Certainly he counsels us to do *both*, to work *and* to pray, in such a way that our life becomes unified and is offered totally back to God.

The challenge then, to all of us, is both to work at our prayer and pray at our work, now, where we are and with no further ado. It could be that in the end we find prayer coming more ‘naturally’ to us than ever we thought possible, as we are drawn more and more by the Holy Spirit into Christ’s own prayer to the Father, and so to worship and adoration of God the Blessed Trinity. With God, nothing shall be impossible to us and no work too daunting to take up.

‘Now is the accepted time, today is the day of salvation.’



FAITH praying and believing ON THE EARTH

WORKING AT PRAYER

It is a truism to say that people find it difficult to pray. But how true is it really? Put us in a spot where life is at stake, and without a moment’s thought we cry out for God’s help. Let what we scarcely dared to hope for actually begin to come to pass, and there we are thanking God from the bottom of our hearts. When we are suddenly surprised by great beauty or sheer goodness, is it an unprecedented thing to find ourselves praising God? Prayer, after all, comes naturally, providing we have some sort of idea of what we mean by prayer.

Remarkably, Jesus seems to imply that we should be praying all the time. At least Saint Luke says that Jesus told the parable of the importunate widow to show *‘that people ought always to pray and not lose heart’*. (Luke 18:1). That’s quite an injunction. We are so used to thinking of prayer as something we do purposely and dutifully at set times. When the obligation is over, well that is it, until next time. The prospect of trying to *‘pray without ceasing’*, as Saint Paul puts it (1 Thessalonians 5:17), would seem to be the very thing best calculated to *make* us lose heart.

All this, of course, is a fallacy. Prayer is, in the last analysis, not a duty but a joy and privilege. It is an exchange of love, and when we love, it is virtually impossible to forget the beloved one. *Not* praying is what turns out to be the unnatural thing. Our relationship with God, as we know, has been marred through sin. All of us, the whole human race, have in consequence found ourselves out of communion with God. But he has put this right. There is a way of return, and the invitation is

open. Prayer is this journey back, the building up again of the broken relationship, and its final consummation in love. It does not consist in merely asking for things or even of being sorry or saying thank you. It *is* all of these of course but much more as well.

God, then, has taken the initiative. We know and believe in all that he has done for us in his Son, Jesus, by the power and working of the Holy Spirit. If this were not so we could hardly call ourselves Christians. So, if we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died and rose again on our behalf, is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again in glory - if we have received the grace of the Holy Spirit, and all that flows from this - then we are already in the place of prayer, the broken relationship is being healed. We can say with Saint Paul that *'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself'*, and that *'he has entrusted to us the message that they are reconciled'*. (2 *Corinthians 5:18*). We are standing at the point of reconciliation between the human and divine, God and ourselves, God and the whole cosmos, and so are ready to start on the great adventure of growth in love and holiness. We are praying already.

Enthusiasm may well carry us along at first. The snags come later. Though it may be a joy and privilege, prayer, like marriage or anything else, has to be worked at. *"If you love me you will keep my commandments"*, we hear Jesus saying. God doesn't do it all. We have to respond to his grace and play our part; we have to keep Jesus in mind, grow into his likeness in every aspect of our lives, consciously dwell with him and commune with him as we go about our business - recognise the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who is drawing us constantly back, through Jesus, to the Father.

Isn't this a tall order for frantic daily living? It is no more, all the same, than has been asked of every Christian believer through the centuries. There is no strict demarcation line between the sacred and the secular here, no priority of one calling over another in the Church. There can be as much distraction in a hermit's cell or the cloister of a monastery or convent as in the market place. Some of the world's greatest contemplatives have been immersed in affairs of Church and State, of business and commerce and in the demands of family life.

Wherever we are, prayer, though a gift and grace, is also a discipline requiring effort and co-operation. St Paul speaks of a race in which we compete, of wrestling with the powers of evil. For St Benedict, writing for monks, prayer is seen as a labour *The* work of God par excellence.

Fine, we might think, for monks and nuns who have time set aside each day for prayer. But even for them there are many other things to do and hosts of ways of being distracted. Saint Benedict was quite realistic about this; his aim, like our Lord's and Saint Paul's before him, was to make the whole of life a prayer. Because of the way we are made we *do* need set times of concentrated prayer, both corporate and private. But if those times are to be meaningful and our prayer is to grow in depth and intensity, then God must not be forgotten for the rest of the day. Saint Benedict advises his monks always to keep the fear of God before their eyes, avoiding all forgetfulness, to pray for God's help in any undertaking, to see God and to serve him in everybody with whom they have contact.

If we find ourselves excusing ourselves from praying because it is difficult, or because we have too many other things to do, well maybe we could start from where Saint Benedict does. Look at your life just as it is and expect to find God there. Know that he cares about how you live that life, and so, in response, try to live it consciously in his presence always. Nothing is too mundane or trivial to be incorporated into that kind of prayer, and no moment is too short to commune with God.

If we are in earnest about this, then the quality of our life, as well as of our prayer, will be changed. The set times will be less of a burden because the dividing line between ordinary living and setting ourselves to pray will not be quite so sharp. Dissipated and distracted minds and hearts, forgetful of God in daily life, will not suddenly find themselves rapt in prayer (except by God's grace) at the summoning of a bell or the striking of a clock.

Saint Benedict is sometimes claimed to have said that *'to work is to pray'*. There is no written evidence of this, but there is at least some truth in the dictum and it is in keeping with Saint Benedict's teaching.