

Lay Dominican Formation Program Province of Saint Joseph

Novitiate-Session 6 LITURGICAL AND PERSONAL PRAYER

Objectives/Goals

1. To consider prayer, both liturgical and personal, as a response to the Gospel mandate to pray always -- to pray without ceasing.
2. To consider liturgical and personal prayer as reflected upon in the documents of Vatican II.
3. To touch upon personal prayer, which should flow from our liturgical prayer.
4. To look at the Liturgy of the Hours and its importance in Dominican life.
5. To discover the place of prayer in our own individual lives.

Prayer is a very personal thing, which most of us find hard to talk about and to share with others. I hope that this talk will help to overcome this reluctance.

In the talk I have mentioned several examples of Jesus at prayer. Here are several others:

When his Mission is revealed by the Father Luke 3:21-22

When he is transfigured on the Mountain Luke 9:28-29

When he raises Lazarus John 11:41-42

When he teaches the disciples how to pray Luke 11:1-13

We should pray as Jesus did, and our prayer should be humble, persevering, confident in the Father's goodness and in conformity with his will. How do we know if it is? We will be at peace and there will be harmony between what we say and do and what we pray for.

INTRODUCTION

All of us are called to be prayerful persons--thoughtful before God. This is another way of saying that we are called to be contemplatives. This is true of all Christians, but even more so of us who have chosen to follow Dominic. This being contemplative means being open to hearing God's word in all aspects of our daily life.

The session on prayer in the Postulancy Program pointed out "that Dominican Spirituality is characterized by prayer, study and apostolate and that they are inter-related in the common ground of Sacred truth. The Dominican response to this Truth is to contemplate and share with others the fruits of contemplation, and thus, as Dominicans we must strive to develop the contemplative dimension to such an extent that our way of being at prayer, study and in the apostolate is precisely as a contemplative person. This contemplative dimension is formed and nurtured by our life of prayer."

Prayer can be liturgical or personal. This presentation will consider both of these types of prayer. I want to emphasize the importance of prayer in our life, and that we have to make time every day for prayer. By this I'm not saying that we have to spend hours praying every day -- but I do mean that we have to set aside a certain amount of time each day -- perhaps 20 - 30 minutes in the morning and 20-30 minutes in the evening for prayer. This is a commitment that we should make and one which we should not take lightly.

Taken on a very human level, if we want to get to know someone, we must spend time with that person -- time in which we share thoughts, hopes, feelings and ideas. So too, if we want to get to know God, we must spend time with Him -- and this is prayer.

In the Postulancy Program we showed the connection between prayer and study and how each one feeds, and is in turn fed by the other. This is an important point to remember in our present consideration of liturgical and personal prayer.

The Documents of Vatican II highlight the place of the laity in the Church today. "Since it is proper to the layman's state in life for him to spend his days in the midst of the world and of secular transactions, he is called by God to burn with the spirit of Christ and to exercise his apostolate in the world as a kind of leaven." (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 12).

Paragraph #4 of the same decree states: "Since Christ in His mission from the Father is the fountain and source of the whole apostolate for the Church, the success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity's living union with Christ. For the Lord has said, 'He who abides in me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing.' (John 15:5) This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is nourished by spiritual aids which are common to all. the faithful, especially active participation in the sacred liturgy." (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 14).

The Vatican II Document on the Sacred Liturgy states: "Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations....in the sacraments...in His Word. ... He is present, finally, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: 'Where two or three are gathered together for my sake, there am I in the midst of them.' (Matthew 18:20).(Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 17).

Paragraph #10 of the same document states:"Nevertheless, the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the fountain from which all her power flows." (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 110).

Chapter IV states: "Christ Jesus ... continues His priestly work through the agency of His Church, which is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the whole world. This she does not only by celebrating the Eucharist, but also in other ways, especially by praying the Divine Office.'

Paragraph #90 states: "Because it is the public prayer of the Church, the Divine Office is a source of piety and nourishment for personal prayer."

From the above we can see that the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours complement and support one another.

THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

It is not the aim of this presentation to teach you how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, but rather to motivate you to want to make this prayer an integral part of your prayer life.

Common liturgical prayer and group prayer are different. In common prayer the community listens, praises and responds to God; it does this through one another and in one another. In group or devotional prayer, prayer is offered to God in a private and personal way, even though this is done in a group; i.e., group recitation of the Rosary -- the prayers are recited together, but each person meditates privately on the Mysteries.

The overall importance of prayer for our spiritual growth and development was covered very well in the Postulancy Program. Here, I just want to emphasize the importance of both liturgical prayer and personal prayer as two aspects of the same ultimate goal, namely union with God.

In common liturgical prayer there are five actions, namely:

1. The community gathers - recognizing itself as Church and is personally present, giving attention to and responding to the call to prayer.
2. The community praises and thanks - offering its prayer to the Father through Jesus Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit.
3. The community proclaims and remembers - listening with the heart.
4. The community responds - deliberately and actively answering the proclamation.
5. The community goes forth - strengthened and renewed to be what it has celebrated.

In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy the Council Fathers state: "Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, 'The same one now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross' but especially under the Eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes, it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His Word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy 'Scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, finally, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: 'Where two or three are gathered together for my sake, there am I in the midst of them.' Matthew 18:20." (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 17).

The quote cited above hints at the fact that Christ is present when the Church prays and sings. We often think of the Liturgy of the Hours as the "Official Prayer of the Church" (See 190 & 98 of the same document.) , and we may know that we are saying it in the name of the Church, but I think we tend to forget that when we gather as a body to pray the Liturgy of the Hours (at a Chapter Meeting)-- that Christ is indeed present in our midst. If one were to ask us if we knew this, I'm sure we would answer, "Of course I do!" But do we really believe it? And if so, what difference does it make in what we are doing? Should it make a difference? Why? These are just a few of the questions that come to mind. I will leave each of you to formulate your own answers.

The Liturgy of the Hours is both a prayer of praise and of intercession. We praise God - not because it does Him any good, but because it does us good; it reminds us of just who we are nothing - and of who God is -- everything -- and that if it weren't for His love, we wouldn't even exist.

In the Liturgy of the Hours Jesus Christ is praying through us and we through Him, praising the Father. This form of prayer is possible only because God became man to teach us how to pray, and to pray with, in, and through us to the Father.

It is through the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours that we join Christ in his priestly ministry. Each one - Liturgy of the Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours, supports and complements the other. If we were to do a study of the Liturgy of the Hours and the Liturgy of the Eucharist for a given period, we would find that the psalms, readings and prayers all complement one another, and indeed are at times the same for both.

We have to become more aware of what we are about in this prayer, if we are to be effective pleaders before God for the rest of humanity.

We intercede with God, not just for our own needs, but also for the needs of others who cannot, or will not or do not sufficiently pray for themselves. Therefore, we literally stand between God and the rest of humanity. This is an astounding burden, when you take the time to think about it. By our choosing to be Dominicans we have voluntarily taken on this role.

PERSONAL PRAYER

We are all familiar with the Baltimore Catechism definition of prayer as the lifting of the heart and mind to God. In reality this prayer is very simple, and at the same time very complex. It means being open to God and being ready and willing to listen to him speaking to us.

In the Old Testament we read that "the Lord said to Elijah, 'Go outside and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will be passing by.' A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord -- but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake -- but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was fire -- but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went and stood at the entrance of the cave." (1 Kings 19:11-13).

This can be taken to symbolize the fact that we have to wait for the Lord to speak to us, and that He will only speak to us when we are quiet and still. With our hectic and noise-filled life, it is often difficult to find a place where we can be quiet. For some of us this place of quiet may be a church in the early morning or at lunch time. For others it may be a quiet corner of a house or an apartment before anyone else in the house is stirring, or long after every one else has retired to bed. Each of us has to search and find our own place and time of quiet.

Our forms of personal prayer will also be as varied as we are. Each of us is called to relate to God in our own particular and unique fashion. Over the years many books have been written to help people to pray. For some of us, these books may be a help, but in the end, we will pray best when we pray the way God leads us to pray. At the end of this presentation are listed several books that might be helpful for some people.

When I think of personal prayer, the first prayer that comes to mind is the Rosary. After the Our Father and Hail Mary, it is probably the next prayer that we learned. As Dominicans we should have a great devotion to the Mother of God and to her Rosary. There are many books written about the Rosary. Some of them are listed in the catalog of items available from the Dominican Laity Office in Washington.

In all of the documents relating to our Holy Father St. Dominic there are related not so much things that he said, but the witness of those who saw him pray. For St. Dominic prayer was as important as breathing. There are many records of him spending whole nights in prayer, and we know from the testimony of those close to him that he always spoke of God or to God. This tradition of unceasing prayer has been handed down in the Order which he founded. So, we too are recipients of this gift... but we have to learn how to use it. I think this idea presents a challenge to us who live in the latter part of the twentieth century that was unknown in the time of St. Dominic or of his early followers. We live in a culture and environment where we are constantly being bombarded by noise. For our own health, mental, physical and spiritual, we have to be able to find a quiet place where we can get away from all this noise and just be quiet.

In Francis C. Lehner's book Saint Dominic - Biographical Documents, the author includes a section entitled "The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic". This treatise can speak to us once again of the intense love of God which was manifest in Dominic's life.

These prayer forms were expounded upon at congress '83 by Sr. MaryAnn Follmar, O.P., and are included in the booklet "Dominican Spirituality and Prayer" which is available from the Laity Office. (It is also published as a separate volume with an introduction by Simon Tugwell, O.P.) Since we are composed of body and soul and the actions of one have an influence on the other, the study of these "Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic" may serve to increase our desire to pray and to intercede for others.

In the Gospels we learn about the prayer of Jesus. We read that "Rising early the next morning, he went off to a lonely place in the desert; there he was absorbed in prayer." (Mark 1:35) And again, "when he had taken leave of them, he went off to the mountain to pray." (Mark 6:46)

This 'going off to a lonely place to pray' is repeated again and again, and I think it is put there to reaffirm for us that we too, have to go off to a lonely (or quiet) place to pray to the Father in secret. (See if you can find other examples of this)

We also see Jesus praying with the Jewish people in the local synagogue, and also at the Temple in Jerusalem. To me this points out the value of communal and liturgical prayer.

I recently read an article about a woman who decided that she had to pray more. She decided to get up an hour earlier each day and spend that time in prayer. Each day she got up and went to her designated place of prayer, which was a special chair in the living room. She sat down and tried to pray. Each day, for the greater part of the time she was there she was bombarded with thoughts about things that were bothering her, things that she should do, and all sorts of other distractions. It seemed to her that very little time was actually spent in prayer. But she did not give up. Eventually, after about a month, the thoughts that seemed to surface only when she sat down to pray seemed to grow less and less, and then more time was actually spent in prayer.

I think this will happen to all of us as we try to be quiet and center our attention on God. All sorts of thoughts will come to the fore. We must just brush them aside and return to God. We should not let these distracting thoughts captivate our attention when we are trying to spend time in prayer. No matter how enchanting these thoughts may seem to be, we should let go of them when we are praying. If they are important, they will surface again at another time when we are not praying.

Scriptural prayer is another form of prayer that is personal and private which has been given renewed impetus since Vatican II. Actually, it never went out of style. If we look at the ancient traditional of Lectio Divina, which was explained in the Postulancy Program, we see that the basis for this is Sacred Scripture. Also, we can find Scriptural Prayer as an important component in the prayer of St. Dominic.

SUMMARY

In this presentation I have shown the importance of both liturgical prayer and personal prayer for our own spiritual growth. I have tried to point out some of the scriptural references for both the concept of liturgical prayer and periods of personal prayer, and also examples from the life of St. Dominic.

I have also tried, by what I have said, as well as by some of the references I have cited, to point out the importance of spending a certain amount of time in prayer each day. This is not something we should dismiss lightly.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe your sense of your personal spirituality as it is now.
2. What would you like it to become?
3. Is there anything that you can do to facilitate/encourage movement to where/who you would like to be spiritually speaking? Describe.
4. What fosters nearness to God for you?

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