

The Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Battle of Prayer

C. S. Lewis on the Problem of Prayer

Well, let's now at any rate come clean. Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it is over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to finish. While we are at prayer, but not while we are reading a novel or solving a crossword puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us. And we know that we are not alone in this.¹

What Kind of Work is the Most Difficult?

1. **Physical Work:** "The almost exclusively physical work of those who live by manual labor, by a craft, or in the army... No matter what one may think about it, this kind is the easiest of the three."

2. **Intellectual Work:** "The intellectual toil of the scholar, the thinker... the writer, of the professor, who put everything they have into the effort to communicate all they know to others; of the diplomat, the financier, the engineer, and so on.. This labor in itself is far more difficult than the first kind, for there is a saying that 'the blade wears out its sheath'.

3. **Spiritual Work:** "Finally, there is the labor of the interior life... *Of the three, this kind, when it is taken seriously, is by far the most exacting....* How many there are who can boast of great courage in the first two types of labor, which lead to wealth and fame, but who, when it comes to the effort to acquire virtue, are totally deficient in ambition, energy, or courage..." Who does not know this from experience? *There are times when we might be inclined to prefer long hours in some exhausting occupation to half an hour of serious mental prayer, to an attentive hearing of Mass, or to the careful and intelligent recitation of the Breviary... To withdraw from a life which, though full of things to be done, is easy, and to live on the supernatural plane, making the supernatural sink in to every detail of our existence during this retreat; to compel one's mind to see everything, during this time, by the light of faith alone, and one's heart to forget everything in order to seek Christ alone, and His life; to remain face to face with one's self and lay bare the infirmities and weaknesses of one's soul; to throw the soul into the crucible, and turn a deaf ear to all its cries of complaint: *all this is a prospect which makes some people, otherwise ready to face any fatigue, turn tail and flee when there is no longer a question of an expenditure of merely natural energy.*"²*

The Catechism on the Battle of Prayer

Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. *It always presupposes effort.* The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ, as well as the Mother of God, the saints, and he himself, all teach us this: *prayer is a battle.* Against whom? Against *ourselves* and against *the wiles of the tempter* who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God. We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. *The "spiritual battle" of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer.* (CCC 2725)

¹ Cited in Timothy C. Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change* (West Chester: Ascension, 2009), 1.

² Jean-Baptiste Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate* (Rockford: TAN, 1977) 28-29, 30-31.

1. Difficulties in Prayer

The Catechism on Distraction in Prayer

The habitual difficulty in prayer is *distraction*. It can affect words and their meaning in vocal prayer; it can concern, more profoundly, him to whom we are praying, in vocal prayer (liturgical or personal), meditation, and contemplative prayer. *To set about hunting down distractions would be to fall into their trap, when all that is necessary is to turn back to our heart: for a distraction reveals to us what we are attached to*, and this humble awareness before the Lord should awaken our preferential love for him and lead us resolutely to offer him our heart to be purified. *Therein lies the battle, the choice of which master to serve.* (CCC 2729)

Where is Your Heart?

Jesus said: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*" (Matthew 6:19-21)

The Catechism on Perseverance in Prayer

Finally, our battle has to confront what we experience as *failure in prayer*: discouragement during periods of dryness; sadness that, because we have "great possessions," we have not given all to the Lord; disappointment over not being heard according to our own will; wounded pride, stiffened by the indignity that is ours as sinners; our resistance to the idea that prayer is a free and unmerited gift; and so forth. The conclusion is always the same: what good does it do to pray? To overcome these obstacles, we must battle to gain humility, trust, and perseverance. (CCC 2728)

The Catechism on Dryness in Prayer

Another difficulty, especially for those who sincerely want to pray, is *dryness*. Dryness belongs to contemplative prayer when the heart is separated from God, with no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones. This is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24) If dryness is due to the lack of roots, because the word has fallen on rocky soil, the battle requires conversion.¹⁹

The Parable of the Sower

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. And as for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience. (Luke 8:11-15)

2. Temptations in Prayer

1. The *Catechism* on Lack of Faith

The most common yet most hidden temptation is our *lack of faith*. It expresses itself less by declared incredulity than by our actual preferences. When we begin to pray, a thousand labors or cares thought to be urgent vie for priority; once again, it is the moment of truth for the heart: what is its real love? Sometimes we turn to the Lord as a last resort, but do we really believe he is? Sometimes we enlist the Lord as an ally, but our heart remains presumptuous. In each case, our lack of faith reveals that we do not yet share in the disposition of a humble heart: “Apart from me, you can do *nothing*.”

2. The *Catechism* on Acedia (Spiritual Sloth)

Another temptation, to which presumption opens the gate, is *acedia*. The spiritual writers understand by this a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart. “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” The greater the height, the harder the fall. Painful as discouragement is, it is the reverse of presumption. The humble are not surprised by their distress; it leads them to trust more, to hold fast in constancy. (CCC 2733)

3. The *Catechism* on Unanswered Prayer

Filial trust is tested—it proves itself—in tribulation. The principal difficulty concerns the *prayer of petition*, for oneself or for others in intercession. *Some even stop praying because they think their petition is not heard*. Here two questions should be asked: Why do we think our petition has not been heard? How is our prayer heard, how is it “efficacious”? (CCC 2734)

In the first place, we ought to be astonished by this fact: when we praise God or give him thanks for his benefits in general, we are not particularly concerned whether or not our prayer is acceptable to him. *On the other hand, we demand to see the results of our petitions*. What is the image of God that motivates our prayer: an instrument to be used? or the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? (CCC 2735)

Are we convinced that “we do not know how to pray as we ought”? Are we asking God for “what is good for us”? Our Father knows what we need before we ask him, but he awaits our petition because the dignity of his children lies in their freedom. We must pray, then, with his Spirit of freedom, to be able truly to know what he wants. (CCC 2736)

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” (James 4:3)

Do not be troubled if you do not immediately receive from God what you ask him; for he desires to do something even greater for you, while you cling to him in prayer. (Evagrius Pontus)

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Vindicate me against my adversary.’ For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? *I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” (Luke 18:1-8)

3. Persevering in Prayer

The Catechism on Constant Prayer

Pray constantly ... always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (1 Thessalians 5:17). St. Paul adds, “Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance making supplication for all the saints.” (Ephesians 6:18) For “*we have not been commanded to work, to keep watch and to fast constantly, but it has been laid down that we are to pray without ceasing.*” This tireless fervor can come only from love. Against our dullness and laziness, the battle of prayer is that of humble, trusting, and persevering *love*. This love opens our hearts to three enlightening and life-giving facts of faith about prayer. (CCC 2742)

1. *It is always possible to pray*: “It is possible to offer fervent prayer even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop, ... while buying or selling, ... or even while cooking.” (St. John Chrysostom)

2. *Prayer is a vital necessity*. “Those who pray are certainly saved; those who do not pray are certainly damned.” (St. Alphonsus Liguori)

3. Prayer and *Christian life* are *inseparable*: “He ‘prays without ceasing’ who *unites prayer to works and good works to prayer*. Only in this way can we consider as realizable the principle of praying without ceasing.” (Origen)

Jacob Wrestles with the Angel

And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "*Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel* (Hebrew, “*He Who Wrestles with God*”), *for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.*” Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" *And there he blessed him*. So Jacob called the name of the place Peni'el, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penu'el, limping because of his thigh. (Genesis 32:24-31)