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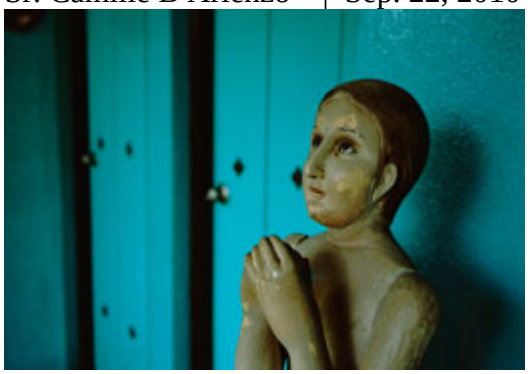
# Prayer expands the heart and inspires action

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Sep. 22, 2010



(Newscom/Danita Delimont Photography)

***ESSAY***

The invitation to offer an essay on prayer came as a surprise. I am not a contemplative. My personal history recalls prayer styles that failed to increase my faith or stir my spirit. As a young sister, litanies bored me. As an older one, labyrinths hold no appeal. I explored the charismatic movement, and I profited from its emphasis on shared prayer and scripture, cherishing forever the injunction of the prophet Micah: To act justly, to live tenderly and to walk humbly with God. I walked away from the rest of it because it felt artificial. But each of the three I discarded is a wellspring of grace for others and I am happy for them.

Nevertheless, with this admission the question niggles: What might I possibly have to offer? My discoveries seem anemic when compared to the comfort zones of other sisters whose long periods of silent meditation provide safe harbors in their spiritual journeys. And yet I truly love what has long been a resting place for my restless spirit. My joy comes from the action prayer inspires. I embrace the challenge and simplicity of loving God first, then our neighbor as ourselves.

?What is prayer?? asked the Baltimore Catechism of my youth.

?Prayer,? it replies, ?is the lifting up of the mind and heart to God.?

Prayer, for me, is about relationship. Thinking about God, seeing the divine image in all of creation, deepens a tender affection for the Giver of all good gifts. Relationships require faithful attentiveness to the source of our love and wonder.

The concept of prayer expands my soul to realms beyond words. It brings me into the lives and longings of those Jesus cared most about: the poor, despised, abandoned, persecuted and imprisoned. It urges me to encourage life?s Good Samaritans. These are individuals who, even without knowing it, live out the Our Father, the prayer that Jesus gave us. Their compassion advances the kingdom Jesus provided, a kingdom of kinship, of familial concern for neighbors and strangers alike. Its plea for forgiveness in the way we forgive others is the heartbeat of reconciliation, the refusal to harm another because we don?t want to be harmed ourselves. Practical.

Many of my devout friends have a prayer corner in their rooms. Sometimes these overlook a garden, a favorite tree, a skyline. Religious symbols and music enrich their sacred space, excluding distractions.

My sacred space embraces my computer. When I compose my weekly commentaries broadcast on a New York radio station, or when I prepare reflections for prayer services for my Catholic counterparts, or homilies for the Protestant churches that welcome me to their Sunday services, I open my mind and heart to our everyday world. I try to do what Jesus encouraged -- to read the signs of our times and to respond to them, to bring the good news to the poor, to encourage those who hear me to alleviate suffering and to dispel hatred. My favorite prayer is the one attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: ?Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love.? It pleases me that this universally appealing peace prayer is also the favorite of my godson, David Hammer, who recites it in his cell on death row in Indiana.

I did not grow up in a household that included grace before meals or the rosary. The one religious symbol I recall was a large, framed painting of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in my parents? bedroom. My mother went to Sunday Mass, but I don?t think she did so regularly. Among her longtime treasures was a book of the life of St. Rita of Cascia. I found it in the attic years after she passed away. On the inside covers, in her own handwriting, were reflections and reactions that spoke a longing to tend the world?s poor and abandoned. She did that. There were often beggars at our door and strangers at our kitchen table. We weren?t wealthy, but my mother didn?t have the heart to turn away those who brought hunger to our doorstep. When my father once chided her for letting every beggar take advantage of her, she said, ?Now, Lou, if they?re taking advantage of me, that?s on their conscience. If I send them away hungry, that?s on mine.?

Many years later I would learn that Catherine McAuley, the Irish-born foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, a woman unknown to my mother, had taught her sisters that it is better to feed a thousand impostors than to refuse one truly hungry person.

When I was very young, my mother taught me to say my night prayers, to bless people we loved and ask God for what I wanted. I wonder how she felt as she listened to my heart?s desire: ?When I wake up,? I prayed, ?I want to have blue eyes, blond hair and a baby brother.?

That my requests went unanswered did not deter me from asking for other favors. When I had barely turned 8 my mother lay dying in our home. I remember climbing onto her bed to report that my girlfriend had just assured me there was no Santa Claus. ?Is that true?? I asked. Ever so patiently she told me about St. Nicholas and the spirit of Christmas, and the gifts shepherds and kings brought to the Baby Jesus. My next question came easily. ?If there?s no Santa Claus, is there a God??

I?ve offered countless prayers of petition, out of concern for others and at their requests. I?ve beseeched God for wisdom and safety for myself. But the image of a Santa Claus God renders me much more comfortable with prayers of praise and thanksgiving. And there is so much for which to praise God with a grateful heart: the loves of my life, the beauty of the world, the richness of laughter, the call to alleviate suffering and to reverence the earth.

While prayers of petition are surely part of my life, for me the greater advantage comes not for offering God advice on how to handle concerns, but in drawing from time spent thinking about God, direction on how to change myself in order to respond to life?s challenges.

As a young sister I learned to hold prayers of petition suspect. Stationed at our motherhouse, I observed an older sister who spent hours in chapel each morning and the rest of the day tormenting all who crossed her path. At length I concluded she might be using her time in chapel to report to God all the affronts she experienced, real or imagined. In these complaints she reinforced her own unhappiness and imposed it on others.

Even after 59 years of religious life, I admire God?s patience with that unhappy sister and with the rest of us. Nothing stops the likes of me from accepting the invitation Jesus extends through St. Matthew?s Gospel (11:28): ?Come to me all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest.?

The first spiritual book I remember giving me lifelong direction was Edward Leen?s *In the Likeness of Christ*. One line rang true enough to be the GPS of my lifetime: ?Religious life is not something; it is Someone.?

God, revealed in a million stars, in countless faces and places, in daffodils and diadems, is that Someone. Each morning I cross the street to meet Christ in the Eucharist, embracing therein the millions who have loved and learned from him. My heart expands with the prayer that asks God to ?bless and protect all God?s children, wherever they may be.? In it, I hold family, friends, teachers, students, old and new, friends of many faiths and none at all. They have provided the stories, the joys of my life. In Eucharist I praise and thank God for being so faithful to one so old and still learning to pray.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D?Arienzo is a past president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.]

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