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Steps to better prayer

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Come to the Feast: An Invitation to Eucharistic Transformation *and coauthor, with Br. Michael McGrath, of* Blessed Art Thou: Mother, Lady, Mystic, Queen. *Fragomeni was interviewed by* NCR *staff writer Rich Heffern*.

***NCR*: Hitting hard economic times, people tighten their belts and pray more. What steps toward better prayer do you recommend?**
Fragomeni: Mary Oliver wrote a wonderful poem about prayer titled "Thirst." In it she announces: "I wake up with thirst for the goodness I do not have," a good definition of that desire for better prayer.

She concludes that in the end she'll be called by death, "expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning." We feel that thirst that can only be quenched by better prayer. Here are some steps toward prayer that can satisfy and reward us.

A first step is learning to *pay attention* to what's around you. Pay attention to the patterns and happenings of your life as they come to you daily, even to the inner distractions that visit us, as well as to the outer. A good beginning stance toward prayer is being in the habit of noticing what is happening around us, longing to be, in Mary Oliver's words, "the empty, waiting, pure, speechless receptacle."

The next step is to then *patch a few words together*. Prayer often moves you to put words together in your heart, in your mind, even on your lips. You're not in a contest for the best prayer in the world, just a simple acknowledgement, a calling to mind, a use of words to underline what is happening.

Prayer can be petition, lamentation, gratitude, words of confusion, reflection, thought. Whatever its direction, it begins with patching together some simple phrases.

Another step toward better prayer is *recognizing that everything is a gift*. In another Mary Oliver poem, "The Uses of Suffering," she tells about someone she loved who gave her "a box of darkness." It took her a long time to understand that was a gift. Cultivating a receptivity to life, an acceptance that whatever comes along, even the boxes of darkness, are gifts, is a strategy to pray better.

Participating in a panel discussion once, I was asked: For what are you most thankful? The usual suspects came to mind -- music, friends, family -- then it hit me like a ton of bricks. I'm really most thankful for the ability to be grateful. ...

That gratefulness translates to being open to anything that comes along, able to locate new understanding and opportunities for insight within any life experience. Then you're undefeated. You stand triumphant, aware there is hope even when everything seems impossible. In these looming hard times, that's an important resource.

Theologian Paul Ricoeur uses that openness as a metaphor to understand Jesus' resurrection, saying his delivery from death points to the human experience of the "possibility of possibilities."

A fourth movement to better praying is a *turning toward wonderment*, to bedazzlement, to gap-mouthed praise in the face of it all. The foundation of Christian life is to allow oneself to be bedazzled by the gift of Christ and the Spirit.

A final step that leads to good prayer is a turning toward service of others, being a gift yourself for those in need.

What stops us from good prayer?
Distraction is a block, particularly outer distractions like feeling the need to be multitasking.

Guilt, shame and anxiety are other blocks. It's a fact that prayer engages us in transformation. That transformation is an unknown that makes us fearful. We allow what John Donne calls ravishment by God, and we don't know where it's going to lead.

Another block is the expectation that prayer changes God. We pray for God to change God's mind about things, to intervene directly in our lives, to take back something adverse.

The greatest block of all, though, is a sense of unworthiness, the sense that one cannot receive that which one hasn't in some way earned.

People who pray in hard times often just feel that God is far away.
It's the dark night of the soul experience Catholic mystic St. John of the Cross wrote about. It's when all the satisfactions, the sense of pleasure that one receives from praying, disappear. It's when liturgy doesn't work anymore, when it's all arid.

John of the Cross says at that point one can just stand still in longing and wait for something to be given, wait for that sense of "pop" that happens in prayer. It happens within but it's not manufactured by us. But aridity in prayer is a horrible situation because we want it all instantly. We have lost all sense of the depth of living.

The steps toward better prayer I presented are really ways to wade into that depth. Our Christian faith is that the God of infinite mystery is a God who keeps flooding us with gifts precisely because we are sinners. This God overwhelms and overflows into our prayer. Longing for that God to come to us is good prayer too.

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