

Reprinted with permission of America Press, Inc. © 2001
All rights reserved.
For subscription information call 1-800-627-9533
or visit www.americapress.org



ART BY JOSEPH PODLESNIK

I pray because my heart aches for God, even though
I also am often afraid of closeness with God.

‘Why Do You Pray?’

– BY WILLIAM A. BARRY –

OFTEN PEOPLE ASK, “Why do you pray?” In all honesty, at one time I prayed because I was a Jesuit. In other words, my answer was, “I’m supposed to pray.” Prayer was an obligation and, to be frank, a burden. At times I have prayed in order to placate God—to get God off my back, as it were. Many times I have prayed in order to obtain something, a favor, for example. Such an answer to the question makes prayer utilitarian. No doubt, my motivation for prayer still has vestiges of these answers. However, in my better moments my answer to the question is, “I pray because I believe in God.” Let me explain. In the process I hope that I will also say something helpful about how to pray.

WILLIAM A. BARRY, S.J., the author of numerous books on prayer and spiritual direction, is co-leader of the tertianship program for the New England Province of the Society of Jesus in Weston, Mass.

Why did God create this universe? Let's play with the image of the garden in the second and third chapters of the Book of Genesis. The image becomes clear after the sin of the first man and woman. We read:

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen. 3: 8-10).

If we sit with this image for a while, we realize that the earth is visualized as a garden where God and human beings engage in daily work and get together in the evening to pass the time of day, perhaps to talk over the day. The man and woman are unafraid before God; their transparency is symbolized by the fact that they are naked and show no shame. This image speaks to my heart, and I hope that it will speak to yours. It tells us something about God's dream for our world.

God wants a world where we work in harmony with

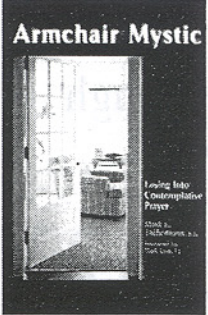
God's intention in creation, a world where God is active and we are active, where, indeed, we cooperate with God in developing the planet. God wants us to be partners in this creation and to be intimate in our relationship with him. Sin throws a spanner into the works. Human beings act contrary to God's intention and become ashamed and afraid of God. The relationship of intimacy is broken.

But God does not give up on his desire. Of course, there are consequences to human sin. The next few chapters of Genesis describe them. Cain kills Abel; human beings die at an earlier and earlier age; incest and other abominations follow; finally, in Chapter 11 human beings lose the ability to communicate with one another at the tower of Babel. Yet God does not give up.

Chapter 12 of the Book of Genesis begins the story of God's efforts to bring us back into right relationship. God calls Abraham, from whom will come the chosen people, a people chosen not just for themselves, but to be light for the world. You can read the following chapters of the Abraham cycle as a story of growing intimacy between God and Abraham and his wife, Sarah. In other words, the reversal of the catastrophe of human sin comes about by the recovery of an intimate relationship with God, a relationship in which human beings once again are asked to become partners with God. God chooses Abraham, and through him the Israelites, to be the carriers of God's dream for the reversal of the effects of sin. The culmination of this choice of Israel, of course, is the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. We who are followers of Jesus are to be the light of the world by living his way of partnership and intimacy with our Father.

So the God in whom we believe wants a relationship of intimacy and partnership with each of us and all of us together. He wants us to be one family. If this is true, then God's creative desire, which brings the whole universe and each one of us into existence, touches us in the depths of our hearts. We are made for union with God, and our hearts must want that union at a very deep level. Augustine wrote, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Julian of Norwich echoes the same idea: "For by nature our will wants God, and the good will of God wants us. We shall never cease wanting and longing until we possess him in fullness and joy. Then we shall have no further wants." Why do I pray? I pray because I believe in this God. Not only that, I pray because my heart aches for God even though I also am often afraid of closeness with God. I have met many people who express this longing for God.

All of this brings us to the question of how to satisfy this longing for God. The simplest answer is to engage in prayer. Here is where the hope that I might have something useful to say about how to pray comes into



Armchair Mystic

Easing Into Contemplative Prayer

By Mark E. Thibodeaux, S.J.

Contemplative prayer step-by-step

Armchair Mystic

Easing Into Contemplative Prayer


By Mark E. Thibodeaux, S.J.

This user-friendly book blends theory and practice, gently and concretely taking the reader through the first steps of contemplative prayer. *Armchair Mystic* begins with the necessary details of time and place to pray, then presents the maturation of the prayer life in four stages: Talking at God, Talking to God, Listening to God and Being With God. *Armchair Mystic* will prove invaluable to individuals and small groups who are new to contemplative prayer, or who wish to deepen their experience of it.

"Mark Thibodeaux's easygoing style, his light touch, his way with a story, are genuine helps to learning what prayer is and how to practice it."—Emilie Griffin, author of *Clinging: the Experience of Prayer*

Religion-Prayer/Spirituality
Paperback, 192 pages
ISBN 0-86716-430-1
\$9.95

Available at your local bookstore
or order directly:



ST. ANTHONY MESSENGER PRESS
AND FRANCISCAN COMMUNICATIONS
1615 Republic Street
Cincinnati, OH 45210-1298
1-800-488-0488

play. If God wants a relationship of intimacy and partnership with each of us (and all of us as a people), and if we have a reciprocal desire for such a relationship, then prayer is similar to what happens in any relationship of intimacy. Intimacy between two persons develops through mutual self-revelation. So in prayer I try to let God know who I am and ask that God reveal himself to me. It's that simple. As with Abraham, it is a matter of growing mutual transparency. As we grow in trust in God, we reverse the results of the sin of Adam and Eve. We are not ashamed to be naked before God, that is, to be open with all our thoughts, feelings and desires.

Of course, even in human relationships what seems simple can become complex and difficult because of our fears and insecurities. So in our relationship with God: fears and insecurities can get in the way. We may feel that we are not worthy of God's attention and love. It is true, of course, that we are not worthy of God's love, but God loves us anyway, freely and, it seems, with reckless abandon. So our fears are, in fact, groundless. But we have to grow out of these fears, and the only way to do so is to engage in the relationship with God and find out for ourselves that God is hopelessly in love with us.

In principle, then, prayer is a simple thing. I tell God what is going on in my heart and wait for God's response. The psalms are examples of this kind of prayer. In them the psalmists tell God everything that is going on their hearts, even things that we shudder to say. Psalm 42 tells God how much the psalmist longs for God. Psalm 104 praises God for the beauties of creation. Psalm 23 speaks of trust in God even in a dark hour. Psalm 51 begs God to pardon sins. Psalm 13 pleads angrily with God: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" The beautiful Psalm 137 ends with this chilling prayer against the Babylonians: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock." These psalmists let it all hang out in prayer. The psalms also record God's communication to the psalmist and to the people. For example, in Psalm 40: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me out of the desolate pit." In other words, the psalmist experienced God's presence as a lifting of spirit in a hard time. And in Psalm 50: "Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you," etc. Prayer is a simple thing, but it requires a growing trust that God really wants to know everything about us, even those things that seem unsavory, and that God wants to reveal himself to us.

What happens when we pray in this way? Just as two friends change because of their deepening intimacy, so too we are changed by a deepening intimacy with God. But the change comes about through the relationship itself, not

through sheer willpower. As we relate to God in this way, we become more like God. This happens in human relationships, does it not? We become like our best friends in our likes and dislikes, in our hopes and desires, etc. So too, we become like God through the kind of prayer indicated. We become like what we love.

The best way to become like God is to grow in our knowledge and love of Jesus of Nazareth, God in human flesh. When making the full Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, I come to a point where I desire to know Jesus more intimately in order to love him more and to follow him more closely. But I can know another person only if that person reveals himself or herself to me. So this desire to know Jesus more intimately is a desire for Jesus to reveal himself. If I have this desire, I must then take the time with the Gospels to let them stimulate my imagination so that Jesus can reveal himself, that is, reveal his dreams and hopes, his loves and hates, his hopes for me. As I engage in this kind of prayer, I will be surprised by what I discover about Jesus and thus about God, and about myself. In the process, I will come to love Jesus and become more like him.

Why do I pray? Because I believe in God who loves us with an everlasting love and wants us as partners and friends. I pray, in other words, because God has made me for it. A

Some helpful books on prayer as a relationship.

My own God and You: Prayer as a Personal Relationship and *With an Everlasting Love: Developing an Intimate Relationship With God* (Paulist Press) have been found helpful by many people. Mark Thibodeaux, S.J.'s *Armchair Mystic: Easing Into Contemplative Prayer* (St. Anthony Messenger Press) has just been published and is down to earth and gives very helpful pointers on how to engage in the relationship with God. Thomas H. Green, S.J.'s classic introduction to prayer, *Opening to God*, was followed by *When the Well Runs Dry* (Ave Maria Press). Kathy Coffey has written an engaging book, *God in the Moment: Making Every Day a Prayer* (Loyola Press). Margaret Silf's *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Loyola Press) offers insightful and creative ways to pray. Jacqueline Syrup Bergan and S. Marie Schwan have written a five-book series that takes the reader through the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises very helpfully; the series title is "Take and Receive" (St. Mary's Press, Winona, Minn.). *Moment by Moment: A Retreat in Everyday Life* by Carol Ann Smith, S.H.C.J., and Eugene F. Merz, S.J. (Ave Maria Press) is another helpful resource for this kind of Ignatian prayer.

W.A.B.