

Session 2: JOURNALING

1. Last time I started by giving you my definition of prayer: *Prayer is any intentional activity meant to orient us to God* (turn us toward God).
2. Wouldn't it be ideal if we could live in such a way that *all of our actions in life* were oriented to God? If all our intentional activity in life was meant to turn us toward God, then all of our life would become prayer; *to live* would be *to pray*.
3. I think this is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples to "pray always" (Luke 18:1) and what Paul meant when he said "pray without ceasing." (1 Thess. 5:17) You can't do that with "word-centered prayer."

Habitual prayer is not word-centered prayer, but the integration of prayer with our whole life. Those who knew him said St. Francis of Assisi was not so much praying as "transformed into prayer."

4. From answers to the questionnaire I gave out — and thank you for sending them back to me — it seems that many of you make prayer a frequent aspect of your day, using a variety of different approaches to prayer. That's wonderful. And the variety is good, too. I don't think "one size fits all."

[There is a book, called *Prayer and Temperament* by Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norrisey (available from Amazon for \$11.69), which describes prayer types based on the Myers-Briggs temperament typology. You might take a look at it. It is pretty Roman Catholic, but basically can apply to anybody.]

5. Many saints and mystics practiced constant prayerfulness, and it's good for us to have the same ideal. That's what St. Benedict was thinking about when he said, "To work is to pray" (*laborare est orare*). Brother Lawrence lived that way, too, in a very simple way: he offered his labors to God, no matter how menial they were — scrubbing pots, making shoes, waiting on the brothers.

—I wonder: Can we do that with our *own* work? Even if our work is "mental"? I think it depends on being conscious all the time of what we are doing and *why* we are doing it, living in what Jean-Pierre de Caussade called "the Sacrament of the Present Moment." This requires focusing clearly on the task at hand (whether something as "mindless" as washing dishes or pulling weeds, or as complicated as bookkeeping) but at the very same time, at a deep place in the soul, being in wordless communion with God.

Developing this habit requires discipline and *effort*, but as someone said last time, "nothing valuable is easy."

6. Eucharistic Prayer A in the Book of Common Prayer says "*Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself.*" If we were created for God, anything that turns us toward God has to be seen as an end in itself, a fulfillment of our true nature.

Thus, praying is an end in itself, not a means to something else (such as inner peace or healing). These — and other positive feelings or experiences — are what I call "occasional by-products of prayer," but they are not the purpose of prayer. Like unconditional love — prayer is an end in itself.

7. I announced *Journaling* as the topic for this session. I read all of the questionnaires that were sent back. And nobody practices journaling. A couple of you have tried it without finding that it worked for you. So maybe it's a good thing for me to talk about, because I have been journaling for thirty years.
8. I started journaling in 1979. Journaling was part of a "package" of changes I made in my private prayer-life in that year. It was my second year of being rector of a parish. For the first two years I had been there I had met with a group of 5-8 people for prayer and Bible study in the parish library four mornings

a week from 8:15 to 9:00 on my “office days” (Tues. through Fri.) After two years, this had become a burden. I was not praying except with a group, and the expectations of the people that I would somehow “be inspirational” for them every morning were leaving me drained.

A counselor advised me to drop the daily prayer and Bible study group and spend that same time each morning alone in Scripture reading and personal prayer, for my own spiritual health.

9. So I resumed reading the Daily Office, and I decided to keep a Prayer Journal. I had heard about other people doing this.

I would read the Office – or just the three Bible readings – and then I would pray silently, and afterwards I would write down my thoughts and reflections about the Bible passages. Sometimes I would also write down what I felt the Lord was saying to me.

When I write what I feel God is saying to me it is an exercise I what I call “faith imagination.” That is, “if Jesus were right here in the flesh, sitting beside me, what do I think he would say to me?” And I started writing that down. Not every day. I didn’t feel that God had a word for me every day, but some days.

10. As I have kept a journal over the years, my way of doing it has changed a bit. After the first few years I shifted from mainly intellectual reflection on the meaning of Scripture passages to “writing letters to God.” And when I felt that God wanted to speak to me, it was like imagining God “writing back to me.” This is what I still am doing.

Occasionally the journal would take on the character of a diary, but it was rarely a record of events – unless the events were really momentous ones in my personal life, or family, or parish.

11. I find that – for me – journaling is a way of focusing intensely on opening my heart to God. I never share my own prayers, my “letters to God,” although I have very occasionally shared (with Joan) a “message” from God to me!

I know the value of wordless prayer, prayer of the heart and the “dark night of the soul,” but it has been important for me to express myself to God in very deliberate words. And I think this is something that the psalmists did. Many of the psalms are really like what I try to do in my journal. Look for example at the places in the Psalms where the psalmist addresses himself to God as “You.”

Read the portion of Psalm 40 and Psalms 42 and 43 on the handout. What I do in my prayer journal is something like this. I have a very vivid sense of God as Person – not as an impersonal force – and so I address myself to God, sometimes as Father, sometimes to Jesus, often simply “Lord.” I try to express myself with absolute honesty, withholding nothing.

12. For a long time, many years really, I wrote as if what I was writing could be read by someone else or might be read by someone else. This left me always a little bit self-conscious. But eventually I shifted into the kind of openness that arises from the awareness that what I write truly is just between me and God – not that there is anything in my prayers that would surprise or startle anyone, even if they did read them. But the journal entries are heartfelt and personal, and thus are simply not meant for anyone else’s eyes. They are my private words to God.
13. Does anyone here have experiences with journaling that you’d like to talk about? There are many different ways of journaling.
14. I recommend journaling to you because it has been very meaningful to me. If you want to try journaling of the sort that I do, I can offer some practical suggestions.

- First, do not get one of those expensive, leather-bound journals to write in. The fancy book will make you self-conscious immediately, and you will start worrying about your grammar and punctuation. Instead, get a cheap, lined composition book or notebook to write in. Don't spend more than a couple of dollars on something to write in.
- It might help even to destroy what you have written, so that you will be sure that it is private. For someone who is anxious about having his or her words read by someone else, this can offer some security. Certainly you do not want your journal to become the object of anybody else's curiosity.

I have not destroyed my journals; in fact, I go back and re-read journal entries from, say, a year ago at this date – or further back. (I keep my old journals in a box in the basement, so they are not all within reach.)

- You have to get over any self-consciousness there might be or any sense of needing to “say things a certain way.” Your journal is not a piece of public writing or a performance. Don't worry about your handwriting or your grammar or your spelling.
- For me, it is important to write with absolute sincerity and no effort at “performing” for God. I write what comes spontaneously. (This authenticity did not come quickly.) Sometimes when I read old prayers, I think “So what? This is very boring.” But, then, when I wrote it, it was from my heart and was what was important to me.

15. God loves us in the same way as a caring father or mother loves a child. God is happy to hear us say what we're thinking about, what we want, how we feel – everything – in much the same way that loving human parents want to hear their children talk about what interests or concerns them, even if the parents really already know. (We'll talk more about this subject in the session on “Being Honest” in two weeks.)
16. In my journal I will sometimes write, “Today I was reading _____” (a book or a passage from the Bible), “and I thought....” This is somewhat like a diary, but those thoughts move quickly to prayer or reflection on the spiritual meaning for me of what I had read.
17. And I write my intercessions in my journal, too. Writing my intercessions on a regular basis keeps me faithful in my commitment to pray for other people. And I am specific about what I am asking for these people, although I know quite well that God knows their needs without my saying anything, and that God is at work in their lives in ways beyond what I might even imagine.
18. As I have said, I don't write because I think that God doesn't already “know” all the things I am putting on paper. I write in order to get in touch with myself, with my heart, and to be as “real” as possible with God.
19. Does anyone feel like practicing journaling? Is there anything else I could tell you about journaling that would be helpful?
20. I encourage you, if you are going to practice journaling, not only to write your prayers (or whatever else you feel moved to write), but also use faith imagination and write down what you think God wants to say to you. Some of the things I have written, over the years, that I felt God was saying to me, have been very important in my life.

