

# Prayer: Leading not into temptation

Sometime in the midst of Lent, many of us experience “those little, tempting thoughts” — rationalizing or otherwise suggesting that we can take “one little bite” of chocolate, “Sundays don’t count” or we can “double up” tomorrow on prayer or our other penitential activities that get crowded out by everyday concerns.

Although our human inclination might be to give in to those seemingly minor temptations, one small 2017 neurological study suggests that we can lean on a key practice to give us the spiritual muscle to rise above those temptations: prayer.

Researchers at the University of Graz in Austria set out to determine whether persons who pray regularly (at least a few times per month — the “high frequency of prayer” — HF group) had a greater or lesser ability to control their own brain activity than those who prayed less frequently or not at all (the “low frequency of prayer” — LF group).

Such ability can be very helpful when we want to turn away from something (such as that snack between meals!) and can help motivate us to engage in action beyond what we crave or, through distractions, think we have to have.

The HF group self-reported as 85 percent Catholic and 15 percent Protestant, and the LF group self-reported as 50 percent Catholic, 15 percent Protestant, and 25 percent “seceded from church.”

A questionnaire was given to each of the 40 participants, 18 males and 22 females ranging from 19-39 years of age. Questions included participants’ feelings on religion, God and prayer, and issues of self-awareness or mindfulness. Brain structure was measured, and there was no difference in it between the HF and LF groups.

Using a neurofeedback system, participants were asked to control three vertical, moving bars on a screen. As they did, they were rewarded with a sound and points that were displayed on the feedback screen.

Participants were not coached beforehand on how to score points, but they were

asked afterward about their strategies, which included cheering, emotional, achievement — and concentration — oriented strategies. Brain activity was measured by EEG, a test that measures brain waves.

Researchers determined that the HF group was more likely to use “relaxation strategies or meditation and prayer during (neurofeedback) compared to the LF group” and, they concluded, “individuals with a high frequency of prayer, who are assumed to be experts in focusing attention on inner states and self-referential processes, showed an increased ability to gain control over their own brain activity during (neurofeedback) as compared to individuals with a low frequency of prayer.”

Although this study was very small and limited to specific time constraints, it does give us wonderful food for thought (pardon the pun).

Instead of considering prayer as a practice separate from other tasks that we “think” through — making decisions, achieving goals or even resisting temptations — this study seems to imply that those of us who pray regularly and often are engaging in a practice that affects our ability to think, even helping us stay focused on specific actions or goals.

As we move deeper into Lent and approach Holy Week and Easter, we will meet many of the same temptations that have picked away at our early Lenten resolve. Controlling our thoughts to keep focus on this blessed season can be difficult.

I, for one, will turn ever more frequently to prayer for strength to resist — and, yes, pray that I can keep my thoughts focused throughout the rest of the year ahead, too!

*Copyright ©2018 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.*