

'Surrender your hearts'

My dear friends in Christ:

"Prayer is a wine that gladdens the heart. It moistens the dry soil of conscience; it strengthens faith, invigorates hope and activates charity."

These words of introduction were written by Saint Bernard in the 12th century, but they are words that apply even today when people have a renewed interest in prayer. We can see this interest in prayer in our society in the increasing number of meditation groups springing up, and even in the number of magazine articles devoted to prayer in various forms. This deepening interest in prayer again tells me that all of us need prayer in our lives, and that we seem to be growing more aware of our need.

But what do we seek in prayer? Is it a refuge...or is it energy? Is it a way of escaping the world...or a way of entering the world in a Christian fashion?

I believe that we are seeking prayer because we know it is the soil in which faith takes root, and that it is also a Christian way to influence what happens in our society.

Contemporary spiritual writers identify a need for prayer as a sign of maturity. The theologian, Father Bernard Haring, says that above all people want to know "what genuine prayer is, and how they can pray in a way that does not separate faith from life, but brings faith into their daily life, and brings all their life home to God." Father James Burtchaell points out that we ought to model our life of prayer on Jesus' prayer and adds, "Jesus' prayer walks pace by pace with his work, as left foot and right tread beside one another on one trail." Dom Virgil Michel, founder of the liturgical movement in the United States, preached that liturgical prayer and social concern are partners in the expression of the Gospel today.

Our task then is not to isolate ourselves in order to pray, but to pray that we might break out of the prisons of our own isolation in order to serve the people around us and our God. When Jesus prayed just before his death, he put it this way: "I am not asking you to remove them from the world, but to protect them from the evil one." (John 17, 15)

So prayer is part of a Christian's daily life. But sometimes we are embarrassed to be thought of as prayerful. Our society is so pragmatic that quiet moments of prayer can be seen as wasteful. Yet, I believe we pray because in prayer we meet the Lord of life—the person who brings us life. Our concern for prayer should not cause us to wonder

what prayer will produce, but it should help us to realize how much we depend on God for life.

The reform of our liturgical rites begun by the Second Vatican Council has helped us to meet with the Lord in prayer. For example, the revised Rite of Penance, which is to be used here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore beginning with Ash Wednesday, calls us to be converted to God with all our hearts. And how are we to be converted if first we don't pray with trust in God who "through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins."

Through the death and resurrection of Christ, you and I are free. When we pray we try to be open to the God who transcends all the joys and agonies of everyday life. When we pray we go beyond everyday life and ask the basic question of our existence: What is the meaning of life?

The Scriptures speak of prayer as a "pouring out of the soul before God." (1 Samuel 1, 15) The psalmist tells us that prayer is a longing for God, "as the deer longs for the flowing streams." (Psalm 42, 1) Prayer is a response to the call of God. Prayer is God's gift, but it is also our answer to that gift. People are not machines that God keeps in motion. We are free, and our prayer only has value when we exercise that freedom.

Our concern for prayer should not cause us to wonder what prayer will produce; however, it should help us to realize how much we depend on God.

I believe that prayer is a Christian way to influence what happens in our society. How can this happen?

Our model here, as always, is Jesus. Jesus prayed with and for those he served. The same hands that reached to the Father in prayer extended themselves to people who were starving, and sickly, and filled with spirits that left them insane.

The spirit that Jesus found in prayer gave him the strength to touch people and make his Father's kingdom live on earth. If we pray, searching for the spirit, we may come to know the strength that will make it possible to incarnate Jesus' desire that people who are hungry would be fed, that people in prisons would know the freedom of concern, that people who are sick and in pain might know the healing care of thoughtful people.

It is in prayer that we pause, and search for the meaning of life. The search for the meaning of life has brought about changes and a deeper understanding both of private and

liturgical prayer. With a deeper understanding of the Liturgy, especially in our celebration of the Eucharist, we have come to see again the need for praying together.

We pray together not so we can, through numbers, exert more influence on God. We pray together to give expression to a common belief. We pray together so that our voices might be added to the voice of Jesus. If we succeed, there might be a constant echo in our world of the intimacy and love that exists between Jesus and his Father. If this intimacy between Jesus and his Father is shared in prayer, might we not in time tear all people from the swamps of their own ego, and help them plant themselves in the soil of love? Should we be able to do this, then prayer will influence what happens in our society.

The gospel teaches us it is not enough to say, "Lord, Lord," when we pray. The heart of successful prayer is conversion—changing ourselves so that we become more like the people God had in mind when he created us.

The season of Lent which we are just beginning provides us an atmosphere for personal penance wherein we can more deeply appreciate within the Liturgy and private prayer the need of conversion. Thoughtful and compassionate giving of self to others in their spiritual and material need will aid in a personal spiritual discipline that is so necessary for growth. The manner in which we develop our penance can be as varied as our personalities and dispositions; however, each of us must approach the penitential season with a generous dedication.

This, then, is the simple invitation which I issue to you, my people, whom the Lord has entrusted to me and whom I love: *Be converted to the Lord in prayer, acknowledge him as Savior, surrender your hearts to him so that he may change them.*

What a preparation for Easter that would be...if we truly dedicated our energies to prayer, penance and service! The feast of the Resurrection would explode with light and peace. We will have advanced even closer to the great feast in the Kingdom, the wedding banquet of the Lamb, where all things will be made new. I pray that we may have the courage to follow that path.

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