

## **Keep Your Eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:2) Growing Our Prayer Life**

### **Introduction**

Rick Warren in his excellent bestseller **The Purpose Driven Life**, near the beginning of the book, asks, "What Drives Your Life?"

He says that there are hundreds of circumstances, values and emotions that can drive your life.

He believes these five are the most common ones:

- 1. Many people are driven by guilt, running from regrets and hiding shame.*
- 2. Many people are driven by resentment and anger.*
- 3. Many people are driven by fear, resulting from a traumatic experience, unrealistic expectations, growing up on a high-control home, or even genetic predispositions.*
- 4. Many people are driven by materialism.*
- 5. Many people are driven by the need for approval, trying to be loved by everyone. (pp. 27-29)*

What purpose drives your life?

Why is it worthwhile for you to get up each morning and start your day?

I want to talk about our spirituality and prayer practices...

These can drive our lives.

### **I Spirituality**

Much today is written about the role of 'spirituality' in a healthy, meaningful life.

Oprah Winfrey tells her opinions on 'spirituality' on the latest copy of AARP monthly magazine. Her picture is on the front of the magazine as is the title "Finding Your Spirituality" (AARP Bulletin, Oct '15, pp. 16-17)

(I found this Oprah article just after the article on "Eating Your Way to Brain Health." AARP for those not a senior member of the firm is a magazine for us 'wisdom members' of the firm.)

For us Catholics, our spirituality flows from God's revelation, our Sacred Scriptures.

God has a purpose for our life.

God shows us how we can lead meaningful lives each day.

How do we discover what God asks of us...  
what will give meaning and joy to our lives each day,  
even in the midst of the suffering and pain that each of us encounters in our  
lives?

(I would like to add that suffering comes into everyone's life – you don't  
have to go searching for it. Suffering can help us to recognize that we are  
not god, the center of the universe. Suffering can help us to realize that we  
can't go it alone  
and that we need God's help and God's grace...  
suffering can mature us and help us to grow spiritually...  
or we can rail against the suffering we encounter because we can't seem to  
get it 'our way.'")

In the article I referred to above Oprah describes how the suffering in her  
life has led to her spiritual growth.)

(This, of course, would be the topic of another conference.)

In this conference I am going to talk about Jesus, about Pope Francis a bit,  
about Study, and then about prayer practices.

Jesus shows us the way... Jesus even says, I am the Way.  
I believe that our spirituality needs to be based on Jesus and is discovered  
thru prayer...  
Let me say it again... our spirituality is Jesus-based and discovered thru our  
prayer life.

## **II Jesus and You**

Here's a question for you, one you probably seldom ask yourself:  
Who is Jesus... to you?

We have our catechism answers...  
We know what we've been taught...  
But who is Jesus personally to you?

Fr. Ed Leen, a spiritual author of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, spoke of how we get  
to know and love Jesus.

1. We need to admire Christ

2. Admiration leads to love and devotion towards Christ
3. Love and devotion beget imitation... imitating Christ in thought, emotion and volition. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. (Jn 14:23)

We read and study the SS with # 1 and 2 in mind.  
The SS become alive and transformative.  
The SS stories do not immediately illumine the mind,  
warm the heart  
or exercise any perceptible dynamic effect for the beginner.  
It takes time and perseverance and a desire to mould one's live and discipline it and clothe oneself in Jesus.

Do you ever talk to Jesus?

How do you address Jesus when you pray to him?

Do you pray to Jesus... daily, once or twice a week, or just on Sundays?

Do you read much about him...?  
his words, his teachings, and his behavior?

I might suggest here a wonderful book written by the Jesuit James Martin entitled **Jesus, A Pilgrimage**.

Is Jesus only a Sunday occurrence to you...  
someone "up there" whom we approach on Sundays...  
but basically forgotten the rest of the week?

Let's take a look at this person, Jesus.

For some people Jesus is not important.  
They never think about Jesus.  
They never or seldom pray.  
But then, they are not following Jesus –

*We are Jesus' disciples –  
We are Jesus' disciples and so Jesus is important to us.*

In Paul's beautiful Letter to the Hebrews Paul encourages the early Christians:

*Keep your eyes on Jesus,*

*who both began and finished this race we're in.*

*Study how he did it. (The Message, Heb 12:2)*

### **III Celebrities**

We live in an age of celebrities.

Whom does our society keep its eyes on?

Celebrities.

Whom does so many in our society admire?

Celebrities.

People Magazine, Super Market Tabloids, Entertainment Tonight, ESPN...  
these News sources tell us the foibles, failures and fortunes of our *Stars*...

what happened to whom,

who did what to whom,

who divorced whom,

who's getting married again...

so many Americans never seem to tire reading about celebrities.

And so often it's Bad News...

not too uplifting, not too encouraging... is it?

What kind of role models are these to our young?

We Catholics have to be careful lest we are seduced by celebrities and their way of life.

We have to be careful about keeping our eyes fixed on them.

### **IV Pope Francis**

Did you have a chance to keep your eyes on or read about our Pope's visit to our country back in September?

If not, why not?

I was touched by his actions and not just his words.

After talking with those in Congress who wear expensive clothes and some of whom I would guess partake of expensive lunches (am I being skeptic here?),

Francis goes to have lunch with the homeless and he even serves some of them lunch. A PR gimmick?

Then in NYC after speaking to all of the powerful at the UN – bless him for doing that – he goes to visit school kids in Harlem.

Then after his wonderful address and Masses in Philly, he goes to visit the inmates at a Philly jail.

Also, while he was in Philly he visited a residence of elderly Jesuits, reminding his fellow Jesuits not to forget about our frail elderly.

Gimmicks? I don't think so. I think this is our Pope Francis walking the footsteps of Jesus. I believe he has 'kept his eyes on Jesus'.

In the introductory words on the Year of Mercy in 2016 Pope Francis beautifully reminds us that...

*Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. (Misericordiae Vultus, #1)*

These are the words of a man who has 'kept his eyes on Jesus'. (Heb 12:2)

### **V Keep Our Eyes on Jesus... Prayer**

How can we spend more time with Jesus?  
Our Catholic tradition speaks of 'prayer'.  
What is 'prayer'?

Remember the old catechism description of prayer:  
*A lifting of the mind and heart to God.*

I like Mother Theresa's description of 'prayer'.  
*Making room for God in our hearts'.*

Look at 'prayer' in the *Subject Index* in the back of the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**.

Part IV of the **Catechism** deals specifically with 'Prayer'.  
It is well worth studying.

*'Studying' vs 'Praying'...*

Studying is not prayer, but will help us to understand more about prayer and hopefully develop our own prayer life. I believe we must 'study' all of our lives. If you play Bridge you have to study. If you are a corporate executive you have to constantly update yourself. What are we willing to do for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

In the Index of the **Catechism of the Catholic Church** there is one whole column dealing with many aspects of 'prayer'...  
and this is not Liturgical Prayer – the Sacraments and the Divine Office.

This is our own personal prayer.

It would certainly be worthwhile for you to read these references in the **Catechism**. Call it some homework! It's studying.

### **VI Personal Prayer Movements**

Before I describe some of the forms of personal prayer I would like to suggest three helpful preparations for our personal prayer.

*Some Questions...*

*Questions # 1...* Do you have a prayer space in residence?

Many prayerful people find a 'prayer space' helpful.

This could be anywhere that is quiet and perhaps a bit secluded in your residence. It might be a small table or a desk with a comfortable chair. On the table or desk you might have a Bible, a Crucifix, a candle, a journal, a favorite spiritual book or any combination of these. It helps if the space is near a window which overlooks some pleasant scenery – not necessary, but helpful.

This is your 'sacred space' where you go to pray.

*Question # 2...* Do you have a prayer time?

It helps if you have 15 to 30 minutes each day set aside for your prayer in your prayer space. Many people find this works for them. Be sure it's a time when you are not too tired or worn out.

*Question # 3...* How do you begin your prayer?

If you come in from work or from a busy day, go to your prayer space, sit down and begin to pray... good luck.

My guess is that you will be distracted and find it hard to pray.

If you begin your prayer early in your day or late in the day, here is an exercise I suggest before you begin your prayer time.

It's a brief preparation for prayer...

Sit in a comfortable chair and take some deep breaths. Relax.

Let your shoulders droop and breathe deeply.

Take your thoughts, your worries, your fears and your troubles from the day and let them float away. If they return, just push them away gently. You are not going to focus on these. You are at prayer.

Perhaps even put on some quiet music if you wish.

After several quiet minutes, begin the prayer movement you want to practice.

### **Various Forms of Personal Prayer**

## **A Lectio Divina**

(See, [A Retreat with the Psalms](#), Enders and Liebert, Paulist Press, 2001, pp 21ff)

A monastic form of meditative prayer

Having a conversation with a text

No set amount of time... just what feeds the soul / 10 min at the beginning

Choose a text... could be the Bible, or something from spiritual reading...

Your chosen text could be one of the psalms, or one of the stories of Jesus or the Passion of Jesus...

(If you have trouble understanding the text, you might want to get a study guide first and read it... Scott Hahn has some nice commentaries on the Gospels. [Goggle Amazon and type in Scott Hahn, Gospel!](#))

Four movements

1. Read (lectio) - read and reread... maybe even out loud (esp if the psalms)... till something feeds you and/or you desire to pause.
2. Meditation (meditatio) - repeat the word or phrase that fed you, turn it over in your mind...til you feel like stopping.... (This leads to memorizing the text or phrase, which then gives you words when you have no words of your own for prayer... and it gives you something to go back to during the day time and time again...the text becomes your own.)
3. Prayer (oratio) - the text sooner or later evokes a response to God...when the time comes you will feel like moving to petition, thanksgiving, praise, or repentance, or simply talking to God.
4. Contemplation (contemplatio) - the process can lead to simply resting in God's presence, allowing God to nourish, love, heal, challenge or teach you.

At any time during this process the mind can wander and we can become distracted... or we can simply "dry up"...simply return to the lectio if you want to continue the prayer.

Lectio Divino need not proceed according to the steps outlined... you can move from lectio to oratio to contemplatio, then back to oratio and meditatio...

You might want to take a few moments after your prayer to write down the major movements which you experienced.... What happened?

Keeping a prayer journal can be helpful...

Be patient with this type of prayer, and perhaps talk it over with your spiritual director or with a spiritually mature friend. Don't be a loner.

### **B Stations of the Cross...**

This is a beautiful way of walking the journey to the Cross with Jesus. When I make the stations I ask Jesus to show me his heart and his feelings, besides the physical pain he went thru.

We can also focus on Jesus' virtues...

his faithfulness, his trust in the Father, his courage, his patience, his forgiveness.

There are also a number of contemporary Stations of the Cross which focus on the sufferings of people today as a participation in the sufferings of Jesus. (You could 'make the Stations' while seated for prayer or you could move around a set of Stations... but try to relax as noted above before you begin.)

### **C Dialogue with Jesus... There is a beautiful story about prayer with Jesus. Story... The Empty Chair**

*The old man's daughter had asked the local priest to come and pray with her father, who was ill and bed-ridden. When the priest arrived he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The priest assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. "I guess you were expecting me," he said.*

*"No, who are you?" replied the old man.*

*"I'm the new associate priest at your parish," the priest replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."*

*"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bed ridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?" Puzzled, the priest shut the door.*

*"I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At the Sunday Mass I used to hear the priest talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head. I abandoned my attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "til one day, about four years ago, my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and, in faith, see Jesus on that chair. It's not spooky because He promised, "I'll be with you always." Then just speak to Him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now.'"*

*'So, Father, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm.'*



*The priest was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old man to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, anointed him with oil, and returned to the rectory.*

*Two nights later the daughter called to tell the priest that her dad had died that afternoon. "Did he seem to die in peace?" he asked. "Yes, when I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange Father. In fact, beyond strange – kinda weird. Apparently, just before daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on the empty chair beside his bed."*

You can just talk with Jesus. Let him know how you are doing and what worries you.

*Applied to the Passion of Jesus:*

Just look at the crucifix or picture a crucifix in your mind's eye and talk to Jesus. Let him respond to you.

I would not make this my main prayer exercise, but I do use it once in awhile.

And remember, 'keep your eyes on Jesus'.

## **D Meditation**

This is sometimes referred to as a Jesuit form of prayer.

*Relax first... see above.*

Take a story from the Scripture... perhaps the Garden of Gethsemane.

Try to picture the scene in your mind's eye.

Picture Jesus entering the Garden with his disciples.

He tells them to sit awhile and he goes a short distance to pray.

He begins to reflect on his coming sufferings...

Perhaps he is fearful, perhaps he is anxious...

Can you see Jesus kneeling and intensely praying to his Father?

Can you hear him beg the Father 'to let this cup pass'?

Observe Jesus... try to enter into his suffering... ask Jesus to help you understand what he is going thru...

Talk to Jesus and let him talk to you.

Or perhaps just take the time to watch Jesus, accompanying him in his upset and fear...

Just be with Jesus. 'Keep your eyes on Jesus'.

Finally thank Jesus for his courage, his faithfulness, his love for you that he would do this for you.

Ask Jesus to give you the courage to watch with him and to live your life for love of him.

Take your time with this. If you get distracted, just let the distraction float away...Try not to fight them or become obsessed with them.

You might begin with 10 or 15 minutes of this type of prayer.

Some people find this type of prayer a beautiful experience. Others do not.

If you don't, then move onto another form of prayer. But try this type of meditation once in awhile just to stretch yourself.

### **E Litanies...**

Beautiful traditional prayers that give us many images to use as we pray the Litany... try the Litany of the Sacred Heart (my favorite) or the Litany of the Passion.

As you pray the Litany, if some image strikes you, spend time with it like you do with *Lectio Divina* (See above.)

You don't **have to** finish the Litany... it's there to help you pray.

*(Google: Catholic Litany Sacred Heart or Passion.)*

### **F Prayer Before the Crucifix...**

*This is a beautiful traditional prayer. You might pray this slowly before a crucifix. Remember to quietly prepare for prayer first.*

*Loving Jesus, for how many ages have you hung upon your cross  
and still we pass you by and regard you not except to pierce anew your  
sacred heart?*

*How often have I passed you by, heedless of your great sorrow, your many  
wounds, your infinite Love?*

*How often have I stood before you, not to comfort and console you,  
but to add to your sorrows, to deepen your wounds, to scorn your love?*

*You have stretched forth your hands to life me up,*

*and I have taken those hands that might have struck me into hell*

*and nailed them back onto the cross rigid and helpless.*

*Yet I have only succeeded in engraving my name on your palms forever.*

*You have loved me with an infinite love*

*and I have taken advantage of that love to sin the more against you.*

*Yet my ingratitude has but pierced your Sacred Heart*

*and forth upon me has flowed your precious blood.*

*Loving Jesus, let your blood be upon me not for a curse, but for a blessing.  
Amen.*

## **G The Rosary**

*Study... Wikipedia* has a fine presentation on the history of the Rosary and description of what the Rosary is, including the mysteries.

The Rosary is a meditative prayer helping us to ponder Christ's life and Mary's life.

Do the relaxing exercise before the Rosary, then quietly pray the Rosary, trying to keep your gaze fixed on the mystery... perhaps on Jesus on the Cross, or Mary crowned queen of the universe... keep the image in your mind's eye while reciting the decade.

## **H Other Simple Prayers During the Day**

### **Morning Offering...**

Thank God for this new day. Offer your day to God, perhaps thinking of what you have to do today. Ask God's presence and Jesus' presence in your day. There's nothing that will happen this day that you and Jesus can't handle.

### **Meal Prayers...**

A time to give thanks and remember our blessings.

### **Evening Prayers...**

A time to ask, "Where was God in my day today?"

"Did I encounter Christ anywhere today?" and "How did I respond?"

Is there anything for which I am sorry?

### **During the day...**

Conversation with God... You can simply carry on a conversation with Jesus during the day. We talk to ourselves all day long – a conversation goes on in our head... Try to include Jesus in that conversation.

One of our Confraternity of the Passion members recently sent me this beautiful and simple description of her conversation with Jesus:

*Jesus is my best friend. It's so much easier to talk to him while driving than to be on the phone...and safer to!*

Simple repeated short prayers during the day... You can take a simple Bible phrase or a short prayer... God's will be done, Help me Jesus, Thank you Jesus, Be with me Jesus... and pray that phrase often during the day.

Both conversation and simple repeated short prayers are a way of staying close to God during our day.

An wonderful traditional prayer that can be repeated frequently during the day (I do it at times during my daily walk) is called

**The Jesus Prayer...** Lord Jesus, Son of God and Savior, have mercy on me a sinner.

(Google 'the Jesus Prayer'... interesting background and development)

### **I Centering Prayer**

This is a form of meditation with which I am not too familiar.

I know a number of people who use it.

It is approved by the Church.

(See *Intimacy with God, An Introduction to Centering Prayer*, by Fr. Thomas Keating. See Amazon.com)

### **Eucharistic Adoration**

A prayer growing in popularity today is Eucharistic Adoration...

To spend quiet time before the Blessed Eucharist. During this time you can use any of the prayer forms described above.

**Do you have any favorite Prayer or way of praying you would like to share with us? Let me know.**

Oprah's Daily Practices of her spirituality...(AARP Bulletin, Oct '15, P. 16))

- Silence – each morning to center herself in her day
- Gratitude – throughout the day... keeping an eye on her blessings and keeping a gratitude journal listing five things daily.
- Presence – living in the moment – take nothing for granted
- Prayer – kneels every nite as a ritual of reverence.

*From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.*

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In this same magazine you can find an article on the 'spiritual drive' to volunteer entitled "Called to Give Back", which describes and gives examples of how seniors who volunteer experience a rich payoff for their efforts and a deeper meaning to their senior lives. (pp. 18-21)