I. THE PRACTRI.CE OF PRAYER:

WORKING AT IT TOGETHER

A friend of mine adamantly maintains that mothers with young children cannot be saints. Too much noise. Too many interruptions. Too tired too much of the time.

Most of us can probably sympathize with her. Many of us have busy schedules with frequent interruptions. By the time the day ends, how much energy do we have left to find that kind of Rest which makes personal communion with God possible ?

"The Saints" -- those women and men whom we remember on special days -- often had what may seem to us to be an unfair advantage. They lived in communities, frequently, where the Church bells rang out the times for prayer, every day. Then everyone was reminded to pray, and many did pray.

But we don't have those kinds of audible or visible reminders where we live and work. If you and I are to pray at all, we_ have to create the schedule. We have to find the opportunities.

Which means that we will have to work at it, self-consciously, if it's going to happen. As disciples of Jesus, we will have to find our own discipline, our own rhythm, our own routine. But that's easier said than done. In our busy, interrupted, and sometimes downright depressing days, it's very difficult to go it alone. The telephone keeps ringing, claiming our attention. The children ask for help. The hot-water heater seems to be broken.

Some have found it useful to find another Christian, probably not a member of your immediate family, who is also struggling to begin or to deepen the practice of prayer. Covenant with that person to hold each other responsible for a discipline of individual prayer that you both agree on. Agree to call each other regularly and meet together, say, once a month,to discuss how your individual disciplines are progressing, what problems you may have discovered.

When it comes to the practice of prayer, probably most of us are beginners, more or less. So we will have to find ways to work at the discipline. But even more, we will need to find ways to help one another to pray, ways of ringing the Church bells for each other every day.

II. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER:

CAUGHT SPEECHLESS?

Have you ever been "caught speechless"? Very few people haven't. Some, to be sure, have the "gift of gab" that will carry them through just about any imaginable situation. But most of us know well what it feels like to be in a social gathering or at a meeting where we find ourselves with nothing to say.

People who are not experienced with the life of prayer sometimes feel frustrated because — when they finally do find some time to pray — they have "nothing to say." If you suffer from this kind of frustration, here are some tips that might be helpful to you.

Be sure you have a private time and hopefully a private place to pray. Praying for beginners is a little like "singing in the shower." We're hesitant to open our mouths if we think anyone else might hear. That's okay.

Remember that God is not your English teacher in P.S. 39. You don't have to have pretty words or even complete sentences.

Remember that God can be trusted with your secrets. God isn't going to be shocked with news about you that might shock others. So you can say what's on your mind, including feelings of anger against God'

Remember that you don't have to do all the talking, nor do you have to talk all of the time. For prayer, as in other contexts, silence can be golden. W$_a$it on the Lord.

Try using a verse or verses from Scripture, perhaps repeatedly, interspersed with silence. "The Lord is my shepherd" — say it again and again, slowly.

But begin. Learning to pray, in some ways, is like learning to swim. You need to get in the water and paddle around. Standing on the shore and imagining yourself at the Olympics won't get you very far at all.

Someday, by the Grace of God, we all might grow spiritually to the point where we have the "gift of gab" with God. But for now, a few words, or even the deep groaning of our souls, will surely suffice.

III. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER:

YOUR POSTURE

The image of the little child kneeling beside his or her bed saying "Now I lay me down to sleep" is touching, but out of reach — perhaps rightly - for many of us. Our lives are generally too complicated and, sometimes, our bodies too uncooperative to kneel on the floor for our own prayers. We can kneel at the Communion rail. That makes sense, because it's such a familiar and longstanding practice. But what do we do about our posture in our own private discipline of prayer?

Each person is going to have to experiment with what is best for him or her. But two things seem to be clear in this respect: (1) your posture during prayer makes a difference, and (2) your posture during prayer should differ, somehow, from what can be called your everyday posture. (I'm thinking here about the special times you set aside for your prayers, not those equally important moments throughout the course of the day when, notwithstanding the noise of the world, you say in the silence of your heart "Lord help me" or "Lord forgive me," etc.)

(1) God creates you and redeems you and sanctifies you as a whole person body and soul, not just as a soul. So we respond to God best as whole persons In particular, we respond to God best when we pray as embodied persons. Accordingly, yourposture can help you flow in prayer; or it can get in the way of your praying.

Experiment with various postures, keeping in mind that prayer if fundamentally a moment when you enter into the Rest of God, spoken of in Genesis, or the Peace of God that is so frequently attested in the Scriptures. Be comfortable, so you can be comforted. Be at rest, so you can be blessed.

(2) At the same time, try to do something different. Why? Because we need to break through the tight shell of the everyday consciousness, in order to let God have the space to break through to us. You may want to kneel. You may want to stand on your tip-toes with your hands in the air, as many early

Christians did. You may want to sit quietly with your hands folded.

As a variation on such postures, you might want to try swaying forward and back, in a slow comfortable rhythm, breathing regularly, as you pray. But whatever you do, try to find one kind of posture for at least part of your prayer-time that's unlike anything else you do during the busi-ness and the ordinariness of the day.

At one point in my life, I tried to say my prayers at night flat on my back in bed. I quickly fell asleep. So I realized (now it seems so obvious) that I needed to find some other posture to allow me to "center in" on God's presence. At that time, I went back to the simple beginning, like a child, kneeling. That helped.

IV. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER:

BEING PRESENT-MINDED

I have been discussing the logistics of prayer, simple, but important thoughts such as finding your own quiet place and time in the midst of a noisy, hectic world, and a friend to help you keep to that discipline; speaking to God even when you feel tongue-tied; experimenting with different kinds of posture, to give God an opening, during your prayer-time. I now come to what is probably the most important logistic of all, being present-minded, rather than absent-minded.

I had a friend in graduate school who was absent-minded at times (who isn't?). Once I stopped by his desk deep in the stacks of the library to fetch him for lunch. He assured me that he would be right with me, but first he had to find his glasses.

He then busied himself looking for them, in his pockets, in his briefcase under various stacks of papers on his desk. I finally had to tell him that he was wearing his glasses.'

So in our praying. Sometimes we busy ourselves with this detail, now that. Find the time. Find the place. Say the "right thing" to God. Find the "right posture" in which to pray. We sometimes so busy ourselves with finding out how to pray, that we forget that God gives us all we need to pray, long before the thought of praying ever dawns on us.

God gives us the Holy Spirit, to dwell within us. With the Holy Spirit within us as our "inner eye," as with eyeglasses, we can see the things of God in focus, if we just look. We don't have to busy ourselves constantly trying to find the spectacles we know we need in order to see God's presence and God's will for us clearly.

God gives every rank-and-file Church member the Spirit. This is the glorious spiritual democracy of Christianity.' God does not give true clarity of vision, somehow, only to the spiritual superstars, the saints, and only glimpses to the rest of us, the footsoldiers of the Kingdom.

(MORE)

Not at all. The Holy Spirit, the creative power of God, the eternal bond of love that unites the Father and the Son, the blessed Comforter of God who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves — that Spirit dwells in your heart, personally.

So we really don't have to busy ourselves all the time trying to find out how to see God in our lives. All we need to do is to look to God through the clarity of the Spirit, in the power of the Spirit, as through eye glasses, in order to seek, and then, in moments of inner Grace, to see God's presence with us and around us as we pray.

This, then, is the most important logistic of prayer: to be present-minded, not absent-minded.

V. THE PRACTICE OF PRATER:

FINDING THE CREATIVE SPIRIT WITHIN

Sometimes we must travel a long way to discover the obvious. The ocean has always been a source of wonder and awe for me, whether along the rocky coasts of Maine, the high dunes of the eastern shore of Cape Cod in Massachusetts or the magnificent seascapes of the Big Sur region in California. There I have often stood wordless, in the midst of thundering storms or contemplating the gracious blue swells on a cloudless day, before the majesty and the mystery of God's creative power. (Psalms 29 and 104 express such sentiments powerfully.)

Some of us may need to make such pilgrimages now and again, to the ocean, to the mountains, to the forests, or, perhaps, to observatories where we can scan the glories of the heavens, such as the rings of Saturn, or to laboratories where we can contemplate, let us say, the elegant structures of crystals. Some of us need to be reminded of the powers and the glories of our Creator, and the vastness of God's royal domain, extending over eons through millions of galaxies and billions and billions of subatomic centers of energy.

Still, all those journeys would be for naught were we to forget the truth of St. Augustine's statement that God "is nearer to us than we are to ourselves."

"The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof," says the Psalmist (Ps. 24:1). Likewise, we are told that the Creative Spirit of God "renews the face of the earth" (Ps. 194:30). But we need to remind ourselves that that very Spirit, the Life Force of this vast universe, who hovers over the primeval stuff of the creation (cf. Gen. 1:2), also dwells within us, as the creative energy of our praying — long before we . even begin to find words to utter.

As St. Paul writes, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes for us with

sighs too deep for words” (Ro. 8:26).

This is that wonderful "obvious" dimension to praying that sometimes only comes to awareness only through a journey to the shore, but which is always there for us every step of our lives, however removed we might be, at any time, from the great wonder's of our Creator's works in and through the glories of this universe.

VI. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER:

ADDRESSING GOD PERSONALLY

At various points in his presidency, former President Carter took to the habit of making house calls. He visited ordinary families in their homes, in order to "get to know the people" and, not at all incidentally, to get some good publicity as well. I imagine that those families must have had mixed feelings when he arrived. Ordinary folks do not host a President of the United States everyday.

Contrast the feelings that the President's daughter must have had as she waited for him to come home after a long campaign trip. Everyone else knew him as "Mr. President," but, for all that, he still remained her "Daddy," the one to whom she wanted to tell her problems, the one to whom she might tearfully protest for not allowing her to stay up late enough or, more likely, for being away too much.

Although we scarcely would want to think of God as akin to any President we know, since we know their foibles all toowe11, our relationship with God has, or can have characteristics not unlike the ones I have just described. On the one hand, we can at times have a sense of distance, of being far-removed from the Creator of all things. On the other hand, we occasionally can have a sense of warm immediacy with God.

In the religion of Jesus's day, the balance had shifted markedly to the s ide of distance and awa before the Creator. First century Jews were even reluctant to say the name of God, for fear of cheapening the experience of God's holy otherness. Accordingly, they stressed God's majestic, kingly rule in their prayers, much more than God's intimacy with individuals.

Surely Jesus himself stood in awa before the powerful rule of God in the universe. So he taught his disciples to pray, "Hallowed be thy name." God is indeed high and lifted up, the Lord of all, for Jesus.

But Jesus breaks radically with the piety of his time by calling God "Father," in the way he does. Actually, the word Jesus uses — its Greek

version is Abba -- is probably best translated as "Daddy." No other Jewish teacher of the day spoke of God in this scandalously familiar way.

The God to whom Jesus prayg, and to whom, in Jesus's Name, we pray, is no Unmoved Mover of the philosophers, absolutely removed from human experience. Nor is this God only the exalted Lord of the creation, ruling all things. He is our "Daddy." We can address him personally.

So we can cry out to God like children, when we are hurting or when we are happy. We surely don't have to sit back in idle resignation while some "relentless turning of the spheres" grinds out our fate.

"Why have you been away so long?," we can say to our Father in heaven. "Why haven't you cared for us the way you said you would? We need you now, to take care of us." These are legitimate sentiments for our prayers, because the God to whom we pray gives himself to us personally as our Loving Parent, calling us by name, cradling us tenderly in his motherly arms, as our Abba.

The God to whom we pray is not "too busy" running the world to hear our cries and to be with us intimately.

VII. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER:

PRAYING IN THE NAME OF JESUS

A community center not far from my Church recently offered a course in "Spanish for Professionals." This was in response to a felt need on the part of social workers, clergy, and others to be able to converse with the h ispanic peoples whom they are attempting to help, in a way that the people themsleves could understand.

To be reached personally, indeed to think about most of the important things in life, our "mother tongue" is often crucial. Men I spent a year in Germany, I recall, I always found myself using English whenever I said my prayers or counted my money!

The God to whom we pray is not only the creative Spirit of the universe who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and not only the near and accessible Parent whom we can address with childlike affection and emotion ("Daddy," "Abba Father"): the God to whom we pray is also the God who knows how to speak our language.

Have you ever wondered how you can speak with a God who creates and rules the whole universe? The answer is that God has learned to speak in the language of your own humanity and mine. The Word has become flesh and dwelt among us! God speaks to us in and through the personal presence of Jesus Christ.

We don't have to ascend to some exalted suprasensory mystical place to be in touch with God. We just need to liHDn to Jesus, who walked on earth with us, and who still addresses us personally through the Word of God.

This is one of the reasons why many, if not all, of our prayers will want to end "in the Name of Jesus." For, God initiates personal communion with us in our human mother tongue, through Christ our Lord. We respond to God, continuing the conversation as God has initiated it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.