

Distractions in Prayer

By Kevin O'Brien, SJ

From *The Ignatian Adventure*



It's natural to become distracted during prayer sometimes. If you can, simply acknowledge the distracting thought and let it go. Sometimes, however, what at first seems like a distraction offers an opportunity for a graced encounter with God. Thus, if the distracting thought continues, then carefully discern whether it's really a distraction or something you need to pray about.

In the course of a retreat in daily life, things happen at home, at work, or in relationships that beg for prayerful reflection. We should not hesitate to pray over the "scripture of our lives"• if we think that God is trying to get our attention through what we initially thought was a distraction.

In contrast, some thoughts are really unnecessary preoccupations; we can tend to them later. Review the suggestions for preparing for and structuring your prayer time. Following these long-tested counsels can help focus your prayer. If distractions persist, talk with a spiritual director or guide about them. If you tend to fall asleep when you pray, adjust your posture or time of prayer.

Sometimes it can seem that nothing is happening, but deep down, God might be stirring up something—we just haven't realized it yet. As you grow in the habit of prayer, avoid the temptation to judge or rate your prayer: "Today was good prayer; yesterday was just OK."• (Imagine rating each time you spent with a friend or loved one!) God can put anything to good use, even distractions and preoccupations.

In the end, heed the encouragement of St. Francis de Sales and others after him: If all you do is return to God's presence after distraction, then this is very good prayer. Your persistence shows how much you want to be with God.