

How Can I Learn to Pray More?

The urge to pray more can only come from the Holy Spirit and the good news is that you don't have far to look to find some excellent resources— by Fr .John Bartunek, LC @Catholic Spiritual Direction .com

A Cultural Warning

The warning is fairly simple. As you know, our culture is based primarily on feelings, on emotions. This is how advertisers convince us to buy things – whether new music, new shoes, or a new mattress. They use images, jingles, and clever stories (think about the Super Bowl commercials) to stir up pleasant emotions. And so we then associate those emotions with the product being advertised, and we purchase it, subconsciously thinking that the product will make those pleasant emotions a permanent part of our life. In our consumer society, we are trained from an early age to behave according to that pattern. Of course, it's not true. No emotion, whether pleasant or unpleasant, lasts forever. Emotions come and go – that's how God designed them. And sometimes they come and go without any reasonable explanation. A good mood or a bad mood can be triggered by the weather, by a hormonal surge, by something we ate, by the phases of the moon...

God's call in your life will touch a deeper chord than mere emotion. Certainly, his presence has an emotional resonance – sometimes, at least, when he permits it. But because he knows you so thoroughly, and because he loves you so completely, he doesn't want his friendship with you to be based merely on feelings. He wants it to go deeper. As a result, it will be important for you to gradually learn to go deeper and deeper in your prayer life – and that's where the warning comes in.

Sometimes our prayer gives us consolation at the level of feelings and emotions, but other times, it doesn't. In both circumstances, what matters most is your heart. Your heart is the very center of who you are, the "I" at the core of your soul. When you pray, you let God into that core, and you listen to him there, and speak to him from there, and sometimes just sit with him, in his presence, letting his grace enlighten and strengthen that most intimate and beautiful aspect of who you truly are. This is why real prayer can occur even when we are extremely sad, emotionally, because of the loss of a loved one, for example. It can also happen when we simply feel emotionally dry – like a desert. In prayer, as Blessed Cardinal Newman put it, "Heart speaks to heart" – God's heart and your heart.

A Counter-Culture Recommendation

Now for the recommendation. In order to help you continue to go deeper in prayer, it is recommended by all the great spiritual writers (St Francis de Sales, St Teresa of Avila, St Ignatius Loyola...) that we give a little bit of structure to our prayer life. If we don't, we run the risk of just praying when we feel like it, and if that's the case, it's hard to get down to the level of the heart. So I would suggest that you think about what kind of daily and weekly prayer commitments you would like to make to our Lord, as a way of showing him that you really do want to know him, love him, and follow him more and more – wherever he leads. Here are some ideas that may get you started:

- **Daily:** morning offering, at least 15 minutes of mental prayer, Rosary, 10-15 minutes of spiritual reading, evening examination of conscience, (any one of these could easily be combined with Adoration).
- **Weekly:** Sunday Mass, daily Mass once or twice during the week, a weekly Holy Hour (preferably on Thursdays), the Way of the Cross on Fridays.
- **Bi-weekly:** a good confession.

If that seems like too much or too little, that's fine; it's just meant to give you a starting place. There is no "right or wrong" here – it's just a matter of you deciding to give some structure to your prayer life, because you want to make sure you are doing your part to grow in your friendship with Christ.

Of all the items I listed, *the most important one for your discernment is, without a doubt, daily mental prayer.* Mental prayer keeps the soul in tune with the Holy Spirit, assuring that you are in the best possible disposition to receive God's grace throughout the day (and in the other sacraments) and to fulfill whatever he asks of you. It is the main spiritual exercise for everyone who is sincerely seeking to discern and follow God's will in their life.....