My trip to Italy:

* Dinner for 5 siblings (and their families) and a mom after 40 years!
* Begging for change: have people given their dignity up?

Jesus’ disciples’ seem to have arrived at a turning point in their spiritual training (out of envy of John’s disciples’ advanced learning or simply out of curiosity for what Jesus was modeling?): they ask Jesus to teach them to pray! The Church continues to pass on this basic element but are we clear about what the ancient teaching is all about?

Sometimes our prayer sounds like begging, harassing God until God does what we ask. Is that the meaning of being “persistent” in our prayers ([Lk 11:8-10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+11%3A8-10&version=NrsV) and [Lk 18:1-8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+18%3A1-8&version=NrsV)) as if we needed to bang on heaven’s doors to be heard by God?[[1]](#footnote-1) Is God reluctant, unaware, and needing to be roused by our prayers before God will do anything? Or are we encouraged to be shameless in our asking, unconcerned of how we sound or look simply because we have come to believe that the One we are addressing in our petitions is indeed “our Father”?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Often times our prayer is essentially focused on what we want. We experience satisfaction, frustration or confusion depending on how we interpret to be God’s response to our prayers. It’s easy to fall into the trap of a transactional relationship with God and then question God’s very existence if things don’t go our way.

Jesus jumps on the disciples’ request to teach them to pray and at first, he seems to pass on a theological prayer “formula.” Many books have been written since antiquity about the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer. From a more pietistic standpoint, we deeply perceive the therapeutic consolation we receive every time we recite this prayer to the point that we resist any new translations we come across.

Jesus’ didactic intent is spiritual in nature. He is modeling to us the kind of intimate relationship God wants with God’s people: in the inner encounter with God “hidden (i.e. *mystical*[[3]](#footnote-3)) things” can be revealed to “infants” ([Lk 10:21](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+10%3A21&version=NrsV)), *aka* simple people eager to receive. This level of intimacy we are invited to grow into.[[4]](#footnote-4) Unfortunately, we seem to be content with a superficial knowledge of God, we limit our knowledge to intellectual memorization of the attributes of God. We know about God but do we know God? We know religion but do we have faith? We say God is our Rock, our Lord, our Savior, but what do we mean by that? Are we open to a personal encounter with the divine? Are we open to being transformed, even to die to our old self?[[5]](#footnote-5)

Father Thomas Merton begins his little booklet “What Is Contemplation?” with these words:

“There are so many Christians who do not appreciate the magnificent dignity of their vocation to sanctity, to the knowledge, love, and service of God. There are so many Christians who do not realize what possibilities God has placed in the life of Christian perfection - what possibilities for joy in the knowledge and love of Him. there are so many Christians who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the power of that Love to do them good, to bring them happiness.”

Jesus’ petitions to God are, in my opinion, a challenge to us disciples: Can you take it? Do you dare to call God “*Father*”? Then, equally as challenging, to consider God as “*our*” Father? Are you ready to do *God’s* will, to receive the “*daily bread*” of the Spirit, to *forgive* others and so on? R. Rohr warns the Church:

Until people have had some *mystical,* *inner spiritual experience,* there is no point in asking them to follow the ethical ideals of Jesus or to really understand religious beliefs beyond the level of formula. At most, such moral ideals and doctrinal affirmations are only a source of deeper anxiety because we don’t have the power to follow any of Jesus’ major teachings about forgiveness, love of enemies, nonviolence, humble use of power, a simple lifestyle, and so on, except in and through radical union with God.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Although it is imperative to be emotionally, ethically and spiritually grounded when challenges come our way, or when we experience the silence or even death of God, prayer does not simply ready us for the things to come. When we pray at the start of a brand new day or before engaging in a new activity we certainly open ourselves to the possibility of approaching life with a positive attitude to accept what is. But even more than that, prayer offers the hope, perseverance, and spiritual elasticity to seek God in the present moment even when all seems grim. In every “now” we are empowered to ask not only “Where is God in all this?” but even more “Where am I?” or “Who am I in all of this?” We are empowered not only to face the darkest depths of our perceived forsakenness by God on our cross but also the temptation to forget and to renounce our dignity as a beloved child of God. Prayer reminds me who I am and opens me to God in me! In prayer, I learn to come closer to the one who learned obedience through what he suffered ([Heb 5:7-8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+5%3A7-8&version=NrsV)).[[7]](#footnote-7) In that suffered, passionate obedience I learn to ask, to search, and to knock: I dare to trust. Amen.

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnKbImRPhTE> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Liefeld, “Parables on Prayer (Luke 11:5-13, 18:1-14),” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Cristian idea of *mystery* referred not so much to what is *secret* as to what is *hidden:* Carl McColman, *Christian Mystics: 108 Seers, Saints, and Sages* (Hampton Roads Publishing Company: 2016), xv-xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “In the total religious experience we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit. It is in the waiting, brooding, lingering, tarrying timeless moments that the essence of the religious experience becomes most fruitful. It is here that I learn to listen, to swing wide the very doors of my being, to clean out the corners and the crevices of my life—so that when His Presence invades, I am free to enjoy His coming to Himself in me…” (Howard Thurman: Essential Writings, ed. Luther E. Smith, Jr., 45-46) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Dt 5:23-25](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+5%3A23-25&version=NrsV); [1 Jn 4:11-13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+John+4%3A11-13&version=NrsV) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Adapted from Richard Rohr, [*Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*](https://email.cac.org/t/d-l-pkifjy-pulelyyh-r/) (Franciscan Media: 2008), 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jurgen Moltmann, The Trinity And The Kingdom, Fortress Press, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)