

When you pray: Step 1, be real

BY FATHER
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It is often the case that as Christians we forget that people outside our faith do not necessarily speak our language. "Christianese" is a tongue-in-cheek term for the language spoken in exclusively Christian circles. The Urban Dictionary comments that "Christianese makes no sense to anyone unfamiliar with biblical texts, but earns you major points in the eyes of other Christians, because it means your words are holy."

Even more problematic than those outside the faith not understanding the language of Christians is the fact that many of us inside the faith don't fully grasp what we are saying. Too often among believers the Christian faith is reduced to comfortable words that have lost their real meaning. In past columns I've discussed such words as "tradition" and "religion" that fall into this category. Today I want to talk about another such word, "prayer."

Everyone knows what prayer is, right? It seems that the concept of prayer is

commonplace in our culture. Most people think they know what prayer is because in our culture the concept of prayer has become very flexible; it can mean almost anything we want it to. But what is prayer really? And more importantly, what is prayer in the authentic Christian context?

Before we define what prayer is, it is always good to say what prayer is not. Prayer is certainly not us

telling God what He already knows. Prayer is certainly not putting a coin in the cosmic slot machine so that we can get what we want from God. Prayer is not us arrogantly telling God what His promises are in the Bible and holding Him accountable to them. Prayer is not simply a psychological exercise or a self-help technique intended to bring us serenity like meditation or Yoga.

So what is prayer? There is not enough room in this paper to adequately cover the topic of prayer, but there are a few things that can help us understand

Christian prayer. In the traditional Christian context prayer has always meant communing with God. By "communing" we mean being aware of the presence of God, seeking His presence and sharing our intimate thoughts and feelings with Him. Prayer often involves words but can also be practiced in complete silence. We ought also to understand that every action of the Christian life is supposed to be prayer; that is, as Christians we are called to "become" prayer. Certainly this is part of what St. Paul meant when he told us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

Along with this brief definition of prayer as "communing with and being in the presence of God," it is important to note that for Christians, real prayer assumes that we are standing in the presence of the real God. There are many false gods, but there is only one true God. The Christian God is not interchangeable with gods from other religions and we should add that God is not interchangeable with the multitude of false gods we make up for ourselves. Prayer in traditional Christianity assumes that we are communicating with the Most High God:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, The Holy Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that God has made Himself known in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and not as some abstract, absolute, or cosmic energy.

As is often said in our culture, "we need to keep it real!" Real prayer not only requires the real God; it also requires a real person. Each of us, when we approach God, must bring our authentic selves. All intimate relationships require us to share ourselves completely, which means we have to be open and willing to be vulnerable with God. When Adam and Eve fell in the Garden of Eden, their first reaction was to hide and cover themselves. In order to commune with God we have to be willing to lay aside our "coverings" and face the shame of our own spiritual nakedness.

Finally, although we may "come boldly to the throne of grace" (Heb 4:16), our boldness always has to be tempered with humility. How we approach God matters, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). The scriptures tell us that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) but they also say that "God

is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29), and that "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31). These passages remind us that authentic prayer always involves repentance and humility.

May God bless us in our Christian walk to find true prayer: prayer offered in humility, by real people standing in the presence of the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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