

What is prayer?

The Christian path is less about words than it is experience of God. It is the experience of God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, that makes us fully and authentically human beings.

The passion of Jesus was, and is, to share his experience of God with all who will listen and entrust their lives to the presence of God in his (Jesus') life. He knew that to be fully human each person must find herself or himself in God. This is where our true identity is to be found.

Jesus' life of prayer was the spring from which his experience of God flowed. This living water was the source of his vision, wisdom, words, and actions. His experience of God was so complete that he did not experience God as "other". Jesus expressed this by saying "I and the Father are One." He was identifying his Abba as the fundamental root and source of his life, rather than laying claim to his own divine status. All this was made possible through his life of prayer.

But what is prayer? I have learned from my mentors, including Jesus, and my personal experience that *prayer is the flow of life-giving and uncreated energy between God and each person as well as the flow of that same energy among persons*. Prayer is the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit who is both *the active flow* of energy we encounter in prayer as well as *the manifestation* of energy (grace) that comes directly from God. This energy is the source of creation rather than creation, itself. That is why it may be called "uncreated." But prayer is not only *a flow of energy manifesting God's grace*. It is also *our collaboration as we place ourselves within and respond to that flow of energy*. In prayer we intentionally enter into and become a part of a flow of energy initiated by God.

The natural result of this dynamic relationship is a radical change of consciousness; a change in the way we see ourselves, other people, the world around us, and God. We are transformed and see and experience life in a new way. As Saint Paul exclaimed, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." We begin to see as God sees. In Paul's words, we put on "the mind of Christ." This vision or insight becomes the source of our vision, desires, words, and actions. The change of consciousness takes place within our heart. As Saint Benedict learned, we are able to listen "with the ears" of our hearts.

The natural consequence of prayer, over time, is the gradual congruence of our desire with what God desires. This congruence becomes tangible in our words and behavior. It is making the image of God, already within each person, recognizable as the likeness of God in our daily and mundane tasks and relationships. Our desire to pray places us in direct and unmediated contact with the energies of God's transforming spirit. In the words of the Second Letter of Peter, God has promised that we shall "become participants in the divine nature." In this way, prayer plants our will and proper judgment firmly in the desires of God. It is a path into the realm of God, where God's unconditional love becomes the norm for human behavior and relationships. This is what Jesus described as God's kingdom. This sharing of divine and human natures makes it possible for God's desires to become manifest on earth as they are in "heaven."

Heaven, or the realm of God, is not “out there”. It is not some “other place” waiting for us in the future if we meet its entry requirements. Heaven is right here, right now. But it is not our creation. We do not bring it into being. Heaven already exists within each person and we are invited to enter what is already a reality. It is a place where the unconditional love of God is present. Heaven is present every moment of our lives, but we must be willing to cross the threshold and become what we find there. When that happens God’s realm is alive within us and will become tangible in society through our lives.

This is the heart of the Christian path. Each Christian faith community is a gift of God and the emphasis of its life is meant to be Christness, not Christianity. It is the vocation of the Church to manifest Christness in its life in such a way that it forms Christness in all its members.

In prayer, we are gradually formed by the God to whom we entrust our lives, whether in the prayer of our faith community or in personal prayer. Prayer is the way God breathes God’s life into us and forms us as authentic human beings. Prayer is the central locus of our experience of God and the source of the vision and strength that integrates the spiritual and material aspects of our lives. The venue for living as authentic human beings is our daily lives and becomes tangible in our human relationships and stewardship of the material world. If we neglect or lose contact with the spiritual dimension of life we jeopardize the health of our souls and are in danger of de-sacralizing and misusing the material gifts God has given us.

Each person’s deep foundation in prayer and her or his desire to be continually rooted in God’s presence becomes the womb of prayer for and bonding with other people and common good of society. The sacred energy we experience in our personal prayer flows through us to other people and the world. This flow of energy is pure gift. It is the source of all giving. A grateful heart makes the flow complete.

“A single grateful thought toward heaven is the most complete prayer.”

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing