



DISCOVERIES IN PRAYER

*'Come Holy Spirit,
fill the hearts of your faithful,
and kindle in them the fire of Your love,
send forth Your Spirit
and they shall be created
and You shall renew the face of the earth.'*

PART TWO
(Second Edition)

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DISCOVERIES IN PRAYER

(Part Two)

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Drawn to discover
to thank...
to ask...
to share...
to journey with!

EXPLANATION TO BOOKLETS, Parts 1 and 2 of 'Discoveries In Prayer'

These two booklets are copied from my book, '*Discoveries in Prayer*' published in 2007. (Booklets are easier to carry around and helpful for certain prayer-times. Hopefully they also will be on the web at (www.columbans.ie/spirituality) That book was a summary of talks given about praying and drawing hearers to discover new experiences in prayer. It also encouraged hearers to share experiences with one another leading to receiving deeper fruit. It stays with the basic movement of the '*human person*' being drawn to the Loving, Creating and Saving Being outside ourselves. Here it does not go on to specific Revelation, but is a good help for that 'journey'.



The first booklet, Part 1, will contain the general Introduction and the first seven chapters of the original book. Here is a brief description of the contents of each part (for the possessor of only one part). Part 1 develops a greater awareness of, and a growing relationship with, God in our ordinary daily lives. In our habit of special Prayer-time we are led from talking to the God we have heard about to discovering and meeting our God in events of our daily lives. We are helped to wait in

openness to notice 'God at work' in those events. In prayer-time we can, eg. meet God in 'events of our History'. Also Meeting God in Nature can become so fruitful. Discovering more *positive* things leads to a more thankful relationship to God. We are on the way to accepting that we are *important* to God! For times of need or sufferings or even protesting, we are able to go back to *the God we met before*' and begin our talk about it to 'our own God', waiting in trust.



Part 2. will cover Chapters 8 to 15. No 8 will focus on 'petition' and, through it, growing closer to God and also growing closer to others. I am now better able to talk to 'my own God.' But I must remain alert to how I am *talking to God* about my want and not just 'talking to myself about the want' or talking to the 'Want'. Also I must grow in awareness that only God can help, but it will be in His way and time! But perseverance in asking gives greater closeness and trust. No 9 is a concrete experience of Meeting God in a Painful Experience. From it I learned so much; I began to notice change in myself, happening both from the experience and by much reflection on it. In No 10 we see more how deepening the prayer of Petition can lead to fruitful self-knowledge. The book continues helping with Relationships, Forgiveness, Spiritual Sharing, and the potential of such, small or large, groups to influence Communities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

8. Asking My Own God for help	
Prayer of Petition (Part 1)	7
9. Meeting God in a Painful Experience	13
10. Showing God what I really want	
Prayer of Petition (Part 2)	21
11. The 'But start with me' Prayer praying for another person to change	27
12. Prayer & Forgiveness	33
13. Sharing about our Spiritual Journeys	
Help for one another	41
14. For Groups	52
15. Background to this book and programme	59



'ASKING MY OWN GOD FOR HELP' PRAYER OF PETITION (PART 1)

I now wish to talk about the prayer of petition and to reflect on how valuable this form of prayer is for bringing us closer to God and to one another. We are widening our understanding of prayer.

In the prayer of petition we come to God with what we want, what we desire and we know from experience how much felt 'wants' can move us. They give us energy for effort. What I want, what I really desire, can move me more readily and energetically than what I have to do as a matter of duty. Asked why we do something, we will generally find at the centre of our reason: 'It is because I want....'

On our part the effectiveness of our prayer of petition rests on the awareness that 1) we are talking to our 'own God' and 2) the growing awareness of what it is we really want.

1) AWARENESS OF TALKING TO 'MY OWN GOD'.

What we have done till now should help develop this awareness. We have seen the value of the mantra. So, my first step in a prayer of petition is to use my mantra to bring me before my 'own God' – the God I am coming to experience.

I begin by using my mantra till I feel I am back into remembering God's kindness to me. Then I change to repeating my mantra with the request added on, to the God I have come to know and believe in. Then I wait.

The mistake of 'talking to the want!'

Our experience will probably confirm that it is easier for us to be focused more on what we want than upon the One Whom we are talking to about the want! We often do not notice how very vague we are about Who it is we are asking to help us. I remember the speaker at one of the first prayer workshops I attended used to call this 'Talking to the want.' It is not talking to God. It is really talking to ourselves about the want, expecting God to listen in and then do as we have decided!

Even now, I can discover myself committing this fault, even after many years of telling others about this danger. This is because when we feel a want very intensely, it is inclined to take us over. We almost drown in it! So, that is why we have to deliberately begin by focusing on the One to Whom we are talking.

It may require a lot of time

When we are 'drowning' in the want, it can take a lot of time till we feel we are back before our 'own God'. Indeed, don't be surprised that, in times of intense feelings such as pain or fear or anger, it might take most of the prayer-exercise time just to get back to meeting Him. It might even take all the time! The waiting might even need to be carried over to the

next time we do the exercise. But no matter how long it takes, we first wait to become aware of our 'own God'.

2) GROWING AWARENESS OF WHAT I REALLY WANT.

The second step is then telling God what I want. The more concretely, honestly and correctly we express our want, the better the prayer can become.

Concrete and clear.

I find that being specific helps me to focus better. So rather than just asking God to give me patience, it is better to say, for example, 'God give me patience towards N.N.' or 'God give me patience in the Thursday morning meeting'. This can also mean that when I get that help, I can recognise it more quickly and be thankful to God for answering me.

'Dressing Up'

At times we may feel that we must appear before God as we think we should be or as we would like to be. For example, we can tend to be afraid to show anger before God – especially if our anger is towards God. We may feel that it is an insult to God to show Him our worst side. So we feel the inclination to 'dress up' before praying. But this is not being honest. It is not being present as 'we really are'. Such 'dressing up' is a barrier that keeps us at a distance from God.

Changing Ourselves

This inclination can lead us into another mistake. We feel the urge to change ourselves by our own efforts before we appear

before God. Clearly this is the opposite of what we are discovering. We don't have the power to change ourselves. It is God Who changes us. In fact, it is especially in our embarrassment and helplessness, shown honestly to God, that we can experience Him bringing about change in us. Our contribution is to be present with honesty and openness and trust in His transforming power. We put ourselves before Him 'as we are', just like we do before the barber, dentist or surgeon to wait and allow ourselves to be changed.

Saying 'God already knows'.

We may say, 'God already knows what I want so I don't have to tell Him'. My answer is 'Yes, God knows. But the problem is we may not'! And that hinders our talking to God about what we really want or really need.

Knowing oneself.

Knowing what we really want requires growing in self-knowledge. We all have a tendency to fool ourselves about ourselves. So knowing ourselves better and better is part of our spiritual journey towards closeness to God and others. This will be discussed later in greater detail.

These awarenesses needed for all prayers of petition.

As in the prayer-exercises, the two awarenesses of my own God and of my own wants, are needed in the simple requests for ourselves or others that we make, spontaneously, to God throughout our day, The prayer-exercises also train us to do these spontaneous prayers.

NOTICING HOW GOD MIGHT ANSWER OUR PETITIONS

Getting what we asked.

The clearest reason for believing that God has heard us and answered us is when we receive what we asked, e.g. the sickness gone, the worry solved, a chance for a new start.

Getting something better.

At times when we don't get what we asked exactly, we later suddenly realise we got something connected to it, but better! This usually takes longer to recognise.

Coming closer to God.

We may still be asking for what we want and not getting it. Yet, we suddenly realise that through asking, we have come closer to God. This gift of closeness is His answer to our petition! This may take even more time to discover.

Changes in oneself.

Changes in oneself can come as a surprise discovery which takes time. We might continue asking for something and not get it, but we notice that we are becoming more thankful, or patient, or generous in our daily living. Then we begin to recognise that we have changed for the better. This is how God may answer us. For example, many years ago I used to pray a lot for trust, and God didn't answer as I expected. It was only after doing the Good Things Prayer for a few years that I realised that the exercise was changing me to trust more. I suddenly recognised that this was how God was answering me!

Discovering when God answers us

We may discover God's answers:

- * during a prayer time.
- * later, during reflection time.
- * when we are sharing deeply with another.
- * due to some special happening in our daily lives.
- * after repeating the prayer for a long time.

Try it and see!

This explanation of how to do the prayer of petition may seem complicated and unnecessary. But, just think, is it not like reading the directions of how to use a new washing machine or camera that we are taking out of the box for the first time? Reading the instructions seems a nuisance indeed, but it certainly helps. Yet, using the new machine soon becomes automatic and easy and we wonder why it seemed so daunting at the beginning.

MEETING GOD IN A PAINFUL EXPERIENCE

So far we have concentrated on letting good things bring us closer to God. Now we will look at how painful experiences also can do this. Who has no experience of pain - physical, mental or emotional – and in many different levels of intensity? What we have learned so far by praying through good things should help prepare us better to receive a new closeness to God discovered through painful experiences. Normally it takes more endurance and time to realise this, but, for me, it seems to be a more vivid and influential discovery.

Our normal reaction to our painful, sleepless nights or helpless days is to spontaneously and often cry out to God for relief and rescue. As the pain of family tragedy, failure of a project, a broken relationship, unjust treatment or such, impinges strongly on us, we find ourselves pleading to be helped. We may even find ourselves crying, ‘Why me?’ or, ‘Why did You allow this?’

I have found that, besides these spontaneous pleas, making prayer-exercises on such pain has helped me to eventually notice God in the experience and become closer to Him. This means deciding on a particular length of time to talk to God about the pain. I am sure the framework of the exercise conditions me to be able to hear God better. I will give an example from the time I was just beginning to discover the value of prayer-exercises.

A story

I had been feeling hurt and angry for some time. There had been different occasions when I felt that someone whom I had put effort and enthusiasm into helping had treated me unfairly. I prayed about it often but I was not able to let go of this hurt feeling or put it aside.

One day this person had done something that particularly annoyed me and I felt churned up inside. So to get some inner peace, I decided to go and pray about it for one hour. I went into the chapel. I often walked up and down as I prayed there. I started walking and repeating, ‘Lord I forgive him’ as I believed a good Christian and, I, as a priest should do. But all the things I had done for him, contrasting with how I felt I had been ignored, were bursting up into my prayer like bubbles when water is starting to boil. I kept suppressing these, going back to ‘Lord I forgive him’. At times I would feel strongly my yearning for inner peace but I kept repeating, ‘Lord I forgive him’. I kept this up for about half-an-hour. I can remember that, even though I was trying doggedly, the prayer was a heavy, lifeless kind of prayer.

The change

Suddenly, something happened within me. I seemed to waken up from something. I became alive with energy. I stopped in front of the altar. I realised I was terribly angry. I wanted so much to chastise him. I shook my head and loudly proclaimed, ‘No, I will not forgive. After this prayer I am going to call him and blast him. I am angry with him and I am angry with you, God, for not stopping him doing this to people.’

I continued to walk up and down, very energetically, expressing these feelings. As the hour of prayer moved on there were moments when I felt a little more peaceful but then new memories of hurts or slights would pop up again and off I would go again telling God, in much detail, how annoyed I felt about them.

God seemed to be listening and understanding, indeed, to be inviting me to tell him all. I had the feeling that God was there, walking up and down with me! He was not annoyed or angry but, rather, understanding. But then, almost imperceptibly my prayer seemed to change. God gently awakened me to a wider horizon of things. At the same time I felt He was strengthening me. Gradually I began to feel uneasy. An uncomfortable feeling that I was about to see something I was not going to like, began to stir in me.

Little questions began to surface. Had I not built up expectations that were unrealistic? Did I want to give help even more than this person wanted to receive help? Why? Was it because I wanted to be well thought of? Or to organise things as I thought they should be? Were my helping and my 'good deeds' not triggered by unconscious wants or needs of my own? Was that fair to this person? With a shock I realised that I had been unaware of such motivations in myself. The realisation hit me; it was I who needed to be forgiven by him! I came out from the chapel a more contrite and humble man.

Reflection

Afterwards I did a lot of reflection on this experience. I am going to sum up under four headings some of the things I

learned from it: about God Himself, about myself, about prayer and about forgiveness.

Pause!

Before reading further, pause to ask yourself what lessons you can learn from this story.

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT GOD

In the reflection I noticed that surprise was the strongest and most frequent feeling I had during the last part of this experience. Firstly, I was amazed at feeling that God was walking up and down with me. I felt 'this is unbelievable'! I expected that I should feel afraid. After all, not only had I shown a stubborn anger before God but I had shown it towards Him! And yet, here was He, walking with me, supporting and encouraging. Instead of feeling afraid, this was giving me a feeling of closeness. I was amazed.

I also found sadness and embarrassment at myself which eventually turned into a deeper feeling of gratitude to God.

I was awed at how expertly and graciously God had been able to begin to open my eyes and to change me. He was able to turn me around 180 degrees – and I didn't resist! I could not imagine anyone else being able to tell me, or show me, such motivations in myself. Yet God could do it, and in such a gentle, gradual way that I could accept it without resistance!

I was also amazed at the extent of God's patience. During the prayer time He was so patient with me when I was angry – and

mistaken in my anger at that! Then I realised that He had been watching me fooling myself all the years till then in this and other ways. He had seen, for example, how much of my hard work was often from an unconscious desire to feel important. He had waited for a time when I would be able to hear and accept these real truths about myself and that certainly took patience!

Gradually I realised that, although God wanted me to change and to accept His help to change, in the meantime, He still fully accepted me as I was!

Since childhood one of the things I had been taught about God was His patience, and I believed it, and had myself spoken about it to others. However, through this prayer experience, I had learned it in a new way. Like my experience of electricity and learning by discovery which I referred to earlier, I now knew these things in my very bones!

Pause!

In reflection on praying in your own painful experiences have you discovered any closer knowledge of God?

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT MYSELF

I came out of the chapel shocked, humble and contrite as well as grateful. I didn't feel crushed by what God had shown me. I felt very sobered. I had learned some 'home truths' about myself. I was very conscious that God had to do much more work in me than I had recognised and I had to cooperate with Him in a greater way to accomplish it. I had a long journey ahead of me, but at the same time, I felt I had come closer to God and felt greater trust.

God had shown me a strong feeling of anger in myself. Till this time, I had considered myself as a 'mild' person. Finding in myself such strong feelings of anger and revenge had unsettled me. Discovering how I had fooled myself was another shock. I had always prided myself on being honest, but here were signs that I was not as honest with myself as I had imagined. And I had not been aware of some of my own needs that had influenced me so much.

I realise now that I was able to accept these sobering revelations about myself because of the strong feeling that God walked with the real me and accepted me as I am! This brought feelings of gratitude and trust which drew me closer to God and made me more understanding and compassionate to others.

Pause!

Can you think of anything you learned about yourself from praying in painful experiences? How do you feel about it?

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT PRAYER

Start praying from the feelings

From the experience I got a very compelling lesson about not 'dressing up' before God. As I have said before, this means not praying from the 'me' I think I *should* be but from the 'me' I really am. It also showed me that my feelings are closer to the core of the real me. Earlier, I had even heard that in prayer, feelings do not count. This taught me otherwise. So when, a little later, I went to a workshop on prayer and the guide kept saying, 'Get in touch with the feelings', I easily understood. I realised I should have started off the prayer saying, 'I can't

forgive' or 'I won't forgive' and relied on God to do something about me, and, as I discovered, change the real me before Him and not an imaginary me that did not exist.

'Give God His turn'

Another very important thing that I learned is that I must not run away after pouring out rebellious or mean feelings at God. There is the temptation to 'hit and run', afraid of what I might hear in return. Instead, I must wait and give God 'His turn' to be heard. This, of course, is not easy because to wait like this requires trust in God's goodness to me. It also requires belief that God is great enough to take all my anger and not be repulsed by it nor change His attitude to me. But it does require 'fastening my seat belt' to keep me anchored before Him.

Value of prayer exercises

Of course, I recognise that God's help can show itself at any time and in any way and can not be programmed by us. But this experience was strong confirmation of the value of prayer-exercises which I was beginning to learn about at this time. As you saw, in this tough experience I had decided to pray for an hour and so stayed during the lifeless, tedious prayer. Then, after I erupted, I still had to stay! And it was in the remainder of the hour that God was able to get through to me.

My experience also taught me that it takes some time after pouring out negative feelings at God, before I can begin to notice God moving my heart to positive feelings of being precious to Him. So let us remember to wait! Wait! Wait!

This is a good, concrete example of an experience in which I

was convinced I was meeting God. I could use it before other prayer times to go back to the conviction of His presence.

Of course this prayer experience did not solve my emotional problem all at once. I found I had to go back to God many more times to talk about this feeling, but I was able to do it better.

I began to realise that praying in a deep condition of pain from loss, fear, yearning, anger or worry is a special place for eventually meeting God at a new level.

And as usual the experience from the prayer-exercise greatly influenced my spontaneous prayer.

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT FORGIVENESS

This incident taught me not to presume my strength to forgive but to recognise my limits and to start praying from there. It also led me to a deeper understanding of the connection between receiving forgiveness and granting it and coming to appreciate the 'Forgiving God'. I will say more about this later, in Chapter 12.

In other pains

I gave an example from an emotional pain of resentment. But prayer-exercises like this can also be used in the pain from fear, worry, grief or sickness, etc.

Questions

Have you noticed any changes in your prayer?

Have you noticed any changes in yourself because of your times in prayer?

Any other discoveries?

SHOWING GOD 'WHAT I REALLY WANT' (PRAYER OF PETITION – PART 2)

Recap

In this book, I delayed talking about the Prayer of Petition until we established a better foundation for it. I pointed out how easy it is to make the mistake of concentrating more on the request than on Whom we are making the request to. The prayer-exercises we had been doing before Chapter 8 should have helped in building up the habit of first turning to God very consciously.

Also highlighted was the difference between making a request 'out of the head' and making it from deeper within oneself. I often pointed out how being aware of our feelings brings us into this inner world in ourselves. Noticing our feelings helps us to recognise parts of ourselves that, previously, we had not paid attention to or had been unaware of. This self knowledge can, in turn, lead us into a deeper closeness to God. It is open-ended; it can get deeper and deeper.

In this getting to know our real inner self better, we must have noticed how much prayer-exercises contributed to this. They gave us space, time, focus and receptivity for accepting these revelations about self.

Going deeper

In this chapter, I want to deal with going deeper into self knowledge by using prayer-exercises of petition. I will start off by giving a concrete example. As usual, I rely on repetition of words to help me stay focused, to wait, and to share with God.

So, for example, I want to get this book finally finished. In a planned prayer-exercise I turn to God and ask for help. While repeating my mantra and request, I gradually become aware that I am praying out of a feeling of frustration. Showing this to God I begin to feel uneasy that maybe God might not want the book finished. I feel resistance to accepting that possibility. I have put so much work into it so far. Some people have said it could be a useful book. I could not 'let go' with docility. I show this honestly to God. My head says, 'If God wants a book like this, He can provide it without me, let go in trust'. But I can find no willingness in myself to accept this. Showing this resistance to God, I realise I have a very limited amount of trust. And then I start a new petition, 'Lord, I want more trust.'

Or the idea that maybe God just wants it postponed and more work done on it, presents itself. I find resistance to accepting even this. Telling God this, begins to make me aware that I want the satisfaction of completing and achieving something. This leads further to noticing that I want to impress, be appreciated and well thought of. I show these to God and wait.

Or, the resistance to putting aside the book leads me to recognising that I want this tidied up now and then get on to the next project. I gradually acknowledge how restless I am inside. I am continually being pulled along by the lure of ‘what next?’ It can lead me to end up praying for patience.

What happens (The process)

In this way, a fairly lengthy Petition prayer-exercise can lead us into deeper self knowledge. I imagine it like a miner being brought down the mineshaft in a cage that lets him see the different layers in the earth. I see the deeper wants underneath the one I started with.

I am not advocating self-analysis here. I emphasise that God shows me as I wait with openness. So, simply stated, the process, shorn of its distractions and wanderings, goes something like the following. In a prayer-exercise of repeating a request to my own God, I become more aware of how I feel at that time. I continue by sharing this feeling with God. I become aware of a new want coming into my consciousness. I accept this, sometimes with reluctance, and now spend my time sharing this with God and waiting for Him to work on me. I finish up praying from a deeper or more basic want.

Results

Thinking about the example, it is understandable how we can be led to recognising in ourselves feelings such as anxiety, insecurity, loneliness, fear, resentment, jealousy, weariness.

This can make us aware of a want to be in control, feel superior, seeking stimulation, always to feel beyond criticism, overcautious to put insights into practice and so on. This eventually can lead to bringing a new, deeper want to God.

Review

Reflecting on the process, I realise that I have experienced God revealing to me more of myself. At the same time He is accepting this ‘me’. This helps me to accept that same self. I also realise that God, through His working in me, is revealing more of Himself to me. In any relationship, the more ‘real’ and open and accepting of each other we are, the deeper the relationship becomes. It is the same with our relationship to God. So, a reciprocal thing happens: the closer we come to God, the more of our real selves is revealed to us and the more our real self is revealed, the closer we can come to God. It is a deepening spiral.

So, even if we do not get what we specifically request, a growing closeness to God may be the answer. Actually, I think I have been brought closer to God more by His seeming to ignore my request than by having it granted! In review, I ask myself could this closeness be what God wants. And deep down, I begin to discover that is what I want too. So, really, the deeper we go, the more we realise that our own basic wants and God’s wants are the same. And as I said before, we can do things more readily because we want to, rather than because we are told we ‘must do’. We have more energy for them.

Liberated

By showing these newly discovered compelling wants to God, we can become less their slave. We discover that, not only are they stronger and more basic, but they have been influencing our behaviour in unrecognised ways till now. Like in the story in Chapter 9 and my struggles with forgiveness, we are brought out of a more idealistic idea of ourselves into a more real one. We find that what supports our attitudes and drives our actions is a mixture of our ideal motives and these deeper, unnoticed wants. Unfortunately the latter exert the more control on us. Coming to recognise them, accepting them, and asking God to work on them, frees us to see and choose to act better for the benefit of ourselves or others. Though, of course, it still requires much generosity and effort on our part.

So, we need not be surprised to find resistance to accepting these revelations. For example, we may notice a fear that, if these things are true, no one could like us and we would finish up isolated from everyone, and so we are tempted to postpone accepting these budding revelations. Or the suspicion that to face up to them and to allow the changes to happen at this time, will demand too much generosity, self-discipline and perseverance on our part. It is only the experiences of God accepting us 'as we are' that strengthen us sufficiently to accept ourselves more and more and journey deeper into this close relationship. This is also a growth in maturity. It makes us more honest with others, more understanding of others and so we come closer to them as well as to God.

Later, we come to recognise that we have been using a lot of energy, throughout our lives, to hide these truths from ourselves.

Freed from this resistance we can now use this energy to do other good things. Resistance to knowing and accepting ourselves can cause stress, which can affect our health, while self-acceptance can bring inner peace and healing.

But, I think, the greatest fruit is greater recognition of, not only God working *in* us and in our weaknesses, but working *through* us. We find ourselves, more and more, in gratitude, passing on God's gifts to others.

The strength of gratitude

If you come to prayer feeling grateful, stay with that feeling. As you remain gratefully present to God, you may become aware of new invitations. These show us deeper wants within us. So wait until God shows these to you. The feeling of thanks will strengthen you to accept what is shown. So cherish this feeling of gratitude for as long and as fully as you can.

It is my experience that God helps us to know our true selves only in as much as we are strong enough to accept what He shows us. God waits until we are ready.

Longer prayer-exercises?

One result of this chapter may be examining oneself about the length of the prayer-exercises. Am I giving enough time?

THE 'BUT START WITH ME' PRAYER PRAYING FOR ANOTHER PERSON TO CHANGE.

I have been in situations where working, living or dealing with another person has made me wish for God to move us apart or change the other. And I have prayed hard for this. But, normally, the prayer would soon fall into thinking about the faults of the other and my negative feelings would take over. I would end up in turmoil, no better than when I started. The discovery I am going to talk about now has helped harness the energy from these strong feelings leading to fruitful change in myself, greater closeness to God and to others.

Discovering the 'but start with me!' prayer

When I was beginning my serious study into prayer, I listened to tapes by a laywoman. One of her topics concerned praying for someone else to be changed in some way. She gave, as an example, the religious conversion of her husband. She told how, for many years, she had been praying for his conversion but it didn't happen. Then she felt moved to change her prayer to 'Lord, change my husband, but start with me'. Some time afterwards, to her amazement, he told her that he had joined a class preparing for baptism. So, in her talk she recommended that always, when we pray for

another to change, we lengthen the prayer to, 'Lord, change N.N. but start with me!' and emphasise the latter part.

I used it, at first, for a situation of strong feelings of frustration and dislike but I find it may be used for any situation where there is a desire that another person be changed in some way. This can be someone we like or someone we don't like, a friend or an antagonist, a close member of the family or it could be a group, a fellow worker or one's boss, a superior or a dependant and so on. The thing to keep in mind is, after asking for change in another, to add and emphasise, 'but start with me!' Maybe there will be no change in the other but there will be in me and this praying for another has begun it.

THE EXERCISE – AND THE 'TRIANGLE'

So I made it into an exercise for myself which I call the 'TRIANGLE'. As with other exercises, we begin by deciding for how long, we turn to our own God and ask Him to change the person or situation but to start with me.

The first point of the triangle: 'My own God' at work.

The first point of the triangle is bringing ourselves before our own God. The truth that God desires and is working to save all may come into our mind strongly. We might find ourselves repeating 'You are at work to save'. As we continue, a wider view of things opens up. We become more aware that God is

looking at the whole situation, including this person or situation. But the reasons why we want the person changed can intrude and take over our attention and energy. This moves us to the second point of the triangle.

Second point: God's relationship to the one we want changed.

Now we repeat something like, 'You are working to save; please, change N.N.' The other person is filling our minds now; the black spots keep popping up. We feel our reactions to them. We feel strongly we want this person changed. For a while we may be held there. However, it can begin to penetrate our consciousness that God also must see the faults in this person and His saving desire wants this person's growth even more than we do. Yet, it looks like God can wait for this person to change. Because we do not like waiting this causes an uneasy feeling in us and brings us to the third point of the triangle.

Point three: Our own relationship to God.

We still feel it is right to ask God to change the other and we keep asking. Awareness of our own attitudes may come into play here and we notice a tendency to focus on the other's faults when, in fact, another question is nudging in: 'Am I concerned for the change in this person for his or her own good or is it primarily for how it affects me?' In other words, how much does this desire to change the other come out of our own self interest? This challenges us to wait and see.

We may be brought back to God's saving action, to His desire to save this person, and His patience and generosity. We begin to feel challenged to see our need and to accept God's gift of more patience, understanding or generosity towards this person. Here we may feel resistance and resentment because if this person did not need to change, then we would not have to subject ourselves to all this struggle. 'but start with me', helps us to stay in this feeling till something changes in us.

The triangle at work

Each prayer exercise develops differently. For example, the third point may become simply, 'Lord, make me more' Or 'change N.N.' may intrude again leading to contemplating God desiring to save everyone and then, perhaps, awakening us to a need for personal change of which we were unaware. And so it goes.

A long-range prayer.

It seems to me that the stronger my emotional desire for change in another is, the more often I have to do this prayer. But I also find that the same strong emotions fuel my concentration and my stamina. I have only to turn to the urge to change the other to refocus myself and feel new energy.

Fruit.

At a personal level, each of us we may notice even small changes in ourselves. For example, during the day, we

discover, to our surprise, we have acted with unusual patience or generosity or tolerance towards the person we have been praying for. Or we may find that we are less critical and more tolerant towards people in general. And so we return thanks.

I find too in the course of a day that, while feeling annoyed with or thinking critically of someone, I suddenly seem to wake up and begin asking, 'Lord, start with me'. I realise how these exercises have schooled me for this spontaneous prayer and in the need and openness to change.

Flowing from this prayer is that I notice a growing habit of making an effort to compliment people when I recognise even small but admirable things in them. I do not mean flattery, which is dishonest and manipulating, but genuine acknowledgement.

REFLECTION

Since this exercise helps to lead to greater self-knowledge, helps change us, gives a closer union with God and a gradually changing attitude to other people, I suspect that God uses the struggles of daily life to bring about changes in us that make us more like Himself.

I am becoming more aware that everyone needs to keep changing till they die. God is continually calling each of us to grow into being a 'special' person with His help. This growth is greatly influenced by our relations with others –

both by the good relationships and the difficult ones! We are always learning that we can only change ourselves. But as we do change we often make it easier for others around us to change too. So I find this prayer exercise a valuable one indeed. It is one important aspect of meeting God in relationships.

PRAYER AND FORGIVENESS

1) THE CHALLENGE OF FORGIVENESS

In a book on Prayer, it is impossible to avoid the question of 'forgiveness'. As we journey deeper into prayer and closeness to God, He keeps leading us into this challenging world of forgiveness. It certainly is a place we naturally don't want to enter.

Our experiences of injury and injustice.

Without doubt we all have, in different ways, experienced being hurt, unjustly treated, neglected, betrayed or such. We have felt deeply the anger, sadness or fear that it could happen again. We have strongly reacted by complaining, wanting to punish, to overcome, or at least to change the culprit. As you read this, you may even be experiencing something like this at the present moment. At least, we have had experiences like these in the past. Even if we think we have forgotten them we will discover that, if we give them a chance to come back to memory, they will do so and, to our surprise, strongly and with the same old fierce feelings and reactions.

The instinct to protect oneself

We recognise that there is a natural human instinct to protect ourselves from hurt and injury. The idea of forgiving seems like we are not protecting ourselves. To forgive would seem to be deliberately welcoming the loss of something important to us. Therefore, the opposite, namely 'not to forgive' would

seem to be a good thing! And if it is a good thing, it must come from God. Thus, not forgiving should increase our inner thanks and peace. But does our experience confirm this? No! Our experience shows us that the condition of 'not forgiving' causes unrest, dissatisfaction, bitterness and coldness in our hearts. So, 'not to forgive' can not be what God wants.

So where is God leading us? – and why?

Indeed our prayer experience seems to show that God wants us to forgive those who injure us. The deeper our prayer becomes, the more we become aware of the challenge to forgive. In our daily living, we seem to become more sensitive to new hurts and injuries. Painful memories of the past which we thought were well buried and forgotten are now, surprisingly, coming back into our prayer and into our daily consciousness. People who hurt us in the past and whom we thought we were finally free of, come back into our lives and we are again in the struggle to forgive. We realise more and more that forgiveness plays a big part in our spiritual life.

Christians and forgiveness

Of course, as Christians we know that forgiveness is very central to Christ's teaching, and was a very central part of His own actions towards others. It is tied in very closely to His Resurrection and thus to new life in us.

Explaining forgiveness from the experience of a 'praying human'

However, in this book I want to talk only from my experience of 'praying as a human'. So I have come to answer my

question using the following analogy. I used to imagine forgiveness as something like papering over an ugly hole made in a wall. Nobody can now see the hole though it is still there. I used to think forgiveness was like that. Now I compare forgiveness to freely rebuilding a whole new wall, and doing so as often as the wall is damaged!

Likewise, I used to think forgiveness meant deliberately trying to return to the relationship that existed before the injury and forcing myself to imagine that it hadn't happened. Now I understand it as recognising, fully, that it did happen but, in spite of that injury, I now want to make a whole new relationship with the person who injured me! It is a new attitude, energy or life that is beginning to grow in me. True forgiveness will include a desire that the other be blessed and happy, even if it is of no benefit to me! Thus, it has no self-interest but is centred on benefit to the other person. Forgiving is giving birth; it is offering a new life to someone. It is a purely generous gift. I want to be an instrument of good for the other. This forgiveness will result in an even deeper relationship than before the injury. This is a central point.

Being able to forgive is a gift from God

My own experience and understanding of being able to forgive someone has led me ultimately to realise that to forgive another shows that God has given me a special gift! I have become more like God and am acting more like God. Therefore, to forgive is not a loss but a gain. Indeed, the one forgiving receives the greater gift.

We must first experience being forgiven

Of course, as we shall see, before we can forgive we have to experience the gift of being forgiven! Thus, when we can forgive, we really have received two gifts: being forgiven and being able to forgive. Through both experiences we deepen our relationship with God and with other people. At the same time, we must recognise how difficult it is to receive these gifts!

2) STEPS IN PRAYING TO BE ABLE TO FORGIVE

Really, what is harder to do than truly forgive? Obviously, it does need special strength from much prayer. In my praying about forgiveness, I go through the following steps:-

Praying 'I can't forgive'.

I find myself in a condition where I don't want to do much else but pray for liberation from my hurt feelings. Because I feel like I am trapped in an emotional blizzard, my times for prayer increase. Firstly, spontaneously, many times during the day and night, I cry out to be freed from this turmoil.

Secondly, I make special times, i.e. prayer-exercises, to pray about this problem. Before each time, I decide how long I am going to pray about it. Then I turn to God and ask Him to lead me out of this terrible turmoil.

As I begin the prayer I recognise I expect God to help me. I repeat things like 'God, I am hurting', 'help me', 'I am angry', 'free me'. I know I was told that God wants me to forgive. But at this time my hurt feelings and convictions are just too strong to be able to do so. I simply can not. So I have

to start my prayer for forgiveness from the honest condition of recognising and repeating, 'I can't forgive. I can't forgive'.

Maybe nothing changes much and that is how I end the prayer time. So, at the next prayer time, I begin where I left off, by repeating 'I cannot forgive'. And if necessary, at the next time and the next time and I keep doing this till something new does happen!

'I won't forgive.

Sometimes I even unearth a feeling of, even if I could forgive, I will not! I just have to hold this stubborn, obstinate feeling before God and wait for some new movement within myself.

Seeing times i needed forgiveness!

The first change I usually experience is something like the following. Into my head gradually come memories of times when I was stupid, selfish, neglectful or hurt others and needed forgiveness!

Realising God forgives me!

Then I begin to realise that I wasn't punished or even shamed because of these. In fact, at times such as these God seemed to give me special gifts that were helpful for myself and others. I did nothing to earn these. God gave them to me freely. I begin to realise God is showing me times when He forgave me!

Accepting forgiveness isn't easy!

I am also learning that not only offering forgiveness but accepting it is not easy. It means I must first be conscious that I have done wrong. I try to avoid accepting that fully. Even if

I do recognise it, I am inclined to put it out of my mind. Or I may concentrate on trying to first correct my fault by my own efforts, in order that I can imagine I didn't really do much wrong. All these natural reactions are working inside me to avoid accepting that I needed forgiveness and got forgiveness, without earning it in any way!

God has already forgiven us even before we ask

When I am told that God has already forgiven me since the moment I first did the wrong – before I even asked for forgiveness – it is even harder to believe! It makes me ask myself, 'Then why ask for forgiveness?' I answer myself by saying, 'It is part of my recognising that I need it, as well as recognising God's generous goodness.' Spending time on the need opens my heart to accept it with gratitude and trust. It reminds me of the sun shining outside my room window but until I open the curtains the light can not pour in. In the same way I have to open my penitent heart to accept the forgiveness which God has already granted.

Being led towards forgiving others.

Often, the next change in my prayer is the appearance of possible reasons why the other person might have become such a person to act like that towards me. I don't go searching for these but I notice them beginning to appear. These cause my attitude towards the other to become less severe. I have had experiences of suddenly being given a chance to do something good for that person and being able to do it easily and without thinking, causing me to be greatly surprised at myself!

Even when I cannot forgive, I find I can, to some extent, pray for the other to be blessed. And this can lead into the ‘..start with me’ prayer of Chapter 11.

Growth in accepting and granting forgiveness

But all these are signs that I am growing in being able to accept forgiveness as well as becoming able to forgive. Actually, accepting forgiveness and granting forgiveness are bound together. Growth in one means growth in the other.

3) DISCOVERIES

During our forgiveness prayer we may discover strong reasons why someone must be corrected or punished smothering any movement towards forgiveness. It causes struggle in us until a small voice seems to say, ‘Yes, this person should be corrected! But are you the one to do it? With what heart do you want to correct him?’ And we realise we want to do it from an angry, punishing, self-righteous, aggressive heart. Then we realise that it is more important to first have our own heart changed!

I remember once, after I had prayed myself into peace and forgiveness towards an offending person, I suddenly imagined an approaching occasion when I might be hurt again. Back flooded the turmoil and anger and I had to pray till the inspiration jumped into my mind, ‘it’s simple, if you are hurt again, why not just forgive again? After all, THAT IS WHAT GOD DOES!’ And suddenly, this took away all my turmoil and, surprisingly, gave me a happy, positive outlook instead!

Having to go through the process again – and again – and again

I have had the experience of finally praying myself into peace and forgiveness, and feeling I was a whole different person. Then I have found in my daily living I had lost this good attitude, and have had to climb the steps again, – from the bottom! We often go through the process again and again, but each time we gain new strength.

‘Specialising in forgiveness!’

We will always find coming into our consciousness new people that have to be forgiven. God wants us to experience His forgiving love and new life flowing into us and through us to others. I am also convinced that each one has a special power to help the person who hurt him or her greatly, – the greater the hurt the greater the potential to help. We will find too, that we are led back into our oldest and strongest relationships to forgive things, e.g. conflicts with family, tensions with oldest friends. These seem to be the hardest to do and the last ones we can face. Yet, we are often led back into them. God seems to want to really school us in forgiveness. He seems to want us to specialise in it! But this is consistent with discovering that God brings us closer to Himself by making us one and more like Himself, the Forgiving God.

SHARING ABOUT OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS

HELP FOR ONE ANOTHER

My own experience and the experience of many who have participated in these prayer exercises, is that sharing with others about their discoveries in prayer has increased manifold the good effects of the prayer. In this chapter I want to talk about sharing. I am thinking of two people sharing or a small group sharing. A large group can be divided into different smaller groups.

It can be so fruitful. In fact all I have written in this book has come out of stacks of notes on my reflections after praying and sharing about these with others! But first, I want to state clearly what, in this book, I mean when I use the word 'sharing'.

1) WHAT THE WORD 'SHARING' IN THIS BOOK MEANS.

The word 'sharing' can mean different things, at different times, to different people. For example, it can mean telling one's troubles to another to get sympathy or support or advice. This can be a very useful kind of sharing. But that is NOT what I am talking about in this book. Here is what I mean.

The content of our sharing

When I say 'sharing' here, I mean to emphasise its two bases: noticing God's activity, and our own reflection on it. This sharing is about how each discovers God, what He is doing in their daily lives, and in their prayer times. It is also about their responses to this experience and about any effects or changes coming from it. Obviously, reflection is a necessary preparation for this kind of sharing.

Sharing becomes easier and deeper

I do not say sharing about inner experiences is easy. Even to notice them requires time and effort. Then to talk about them requires further effort. But it is encouraging to know that it becomes easier and more fruitful with practice. I will talk about different stages of it below. However, the following important points must be kept in mind.

Must be done freely, respecting one's own privacy.

It is vitally important always to remember that sharing must be done freely. No one should feel that they 'have to share'. It means waiting for an inner inclination to share, even though it will probably require effort to do so.

It also means deciding about how much to share at any time! We must always respect our own privacy! We should feel free to choose what parts we want to share at any time. Whom we are with, our present mood, etc, will determine our decisions.

It is only when we are sure that we want to share this

particular thing, here and now, that we should do so. If there is any doubt, wait! If we can't arrange our thoughts about what we experienced or how to say it, we are not ready to share. So we must wait.

Good listening.

For fruitful sharing, listening is as valuable as speaking. One reason is that attentive listening helps another to share. It gives support and an unspoken message about the importance of the sharer. It is easy for a listener to fall into the mistake of 'half-listening' and, while someone else is sharing, to be mentally preparing their own material for sharing. This spoils good listening to another. One must listen and concentrate on what the other is sharing and trust God to help, if necessary, when time comes for one's own sharing. Otherwise, it is enough to say 'I am not ready to share today; I will just listen to you others'. Without embarrassment, simply saying I have nothing to share today is itself good sharing.

If during a sharing period there is no one ready to share and everyone becomes silent, that is not a loss. It can be a very fruitful period of silence together.

Remember, we are told that the way we listen to another person, tells us how we listen to God!

Confidentiality

Of course, we must respect the privacy of others too, and be very careful to keep what is shared within the group.

Why sharing is so fruitful

- * *It deepens the sharer's own experience and insights.*
The effort needed to understand better my own experience, in order to tell another about it, makes the experience more vivid and deeper for myself.
 - * *Learning from what others share.*
Hearing others share of their discoveries of God working in their lives can help me to notice similar things that God is doing for me too, but which I hadn't noticed before this.
 - * *Wider awareness of God's action*
Hearing how God is working in others too, and in so many different ways, gives me a much wider view and deeper admiration of God at work.
 - * *Consolation and closeness*
If I share about a struggle, failure or slump while experiencing others not being critical or shocked, I am strengthened and consoled. If another shares about a failure to respond to God's gifts or invitations, it consoles me. I am relieved to know that I am not the only one who has failures or embarrassing weaknesses inside me.
- In fact this kind of sharing brings us closer together. We realise that we are weak, struggling people, journeying together, but trying to do our best. This sharing helps us to accept one another with understanding and compassion.

Growth in sharing

Early, as we begin to learn the practice of sharing on prayer experiences, let us confine ourselves to searching for, and sharing good-things only. Even if it seems only a very small good thing, start with that! In our prayer times there will be times of confusion, struggle or barrenness and to share the experiences can be very helpful. However, I don't recommend doing this until one has first had some experience of fruitful sharing about good things.

We will notice that we gradually begin to share more about how we feel as we discover these workings of God, e.g. joy, surprise, or gratitude. We will also be able to share about how we respond to these with, such as, trust, generosity, courage, or hope. Later, we will be able to talk about negative feelings too.

Remember this! We don't share about our troubles! But we do share about *how we talk with God* about our troubles!

Growth in sharing is part of our journey into intimacy with God, with self and with others. It is wrong to compare oneself to others. Each one's rate of growth is unique. It is important to develop at each one's own pace. Even as we progress it is not at a steady pace. I think we move more like frogs – a series of staying put then taking a long leap forward!

Silent prayer to begin

It can be very helpful before sharing for the sharers to be silent together for a few moments, aware of one another..

Review of the sharing

It is also very fruitful to end the sharing by reviewing it silently for a few minutes. Each one could ask oneself questions such as, 'Did I get anything from this sharing?' 'Did I listen well?' 'Did everyone get a chance to share?'

Examples of ways, places, times, etc for sharing.

I am encouraging friends making 'dates' for sharing. Even if a group is using this book to study prayer together and are sharing when they assemble, I still encourage other times or ways of sharing. If the group is only meeting once a month this added time of sharing can be valuable. The ways of sharing may vary. It may be face-to-face in places such as a coffee shop, going for a walk together, a scheduled phone call. Agreeing on a set time and for how long helps this practice. It also can be done by e-mail, letter, tape, etc.

2) FURTHER BENEFITS FROM SPIRITUAL-SHARING

Habit of praying with others

I have also discovered that my own developing habit of sharing, has helped me develop a better habit of praying with others. Now as I talk with someone about good news or bad news I am more ready to say, 'Let's say a prayer of thanks together' or 'Let's ask together for guidance in this situation'. I find it is happening more spontaneously and frequently. When someone asks me to pray for something I usually say, 'Let's do it here and now'. Also, I might ask people who happen to be nearby to join us, because I believe that adds strength to the prayer.

Family prayer

I think spiritual sharing can help to build a habit of family prayer. For example, before a meal together, pausing briefly to look at the good things in one's day, then making a few short prayers with these in mind, could help a family to pray more comfortably together.

Building up a spiritual community

This type of sharing also helps build a good, spiritual community that prays together. The common focus is centred on what God is doing for, in, and through each one, leading to seeing what God is doing for, in, and through the group.

It gives greater mutual respect and a common spirit of gratitude. We realise that, while discussions can be divisive, sharing is very unifying – even where there are generation gaps, social gaps, cultural gaps, etc.

One of the most important things I have learned in my life and work as a priest is that developing the habit of listening and sharing can foster spiritual growth, unity and mutual support within a community!

3) SPECIAL HELPERS FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE.

It is important to be aware of the availability of help for spiritual growth that special, experienced 'spiritual helpers' or 'spiritual companions' can provide. There has always been

in the Church a tradition of such people. At some periods they have been more present than at others and their ways of helping have changed from time to time. At present there is a growing need for many such helpers. Thankfully, their numbers are gradually increasing, especially among lay people. Also the way of spiritual help is becoming more like what it was in an earlier Church.

Today in this ministry, the emphasis is on helping anyone who wants to grow spiritually. Even when things are going well, these seekers or 'travellers' still want both help to discover where they seem to be invited further, and support to move in that direction. So, the 'travellers' visit the helpers on a regular schedule. They first talk about the good things that are happening before exploring together what new invitations to growth may be contained in their daily living and prayer. The helper as a listener and a mirror, with patience, understanding and good questions, helps the traveller to recognise these invitations more clearly, and the decisions to be made. Responsibility for decisions must rest with the seeker.

At first, it might seem almost impossible, especially for lay people to find many such people. When I was young, these guides were all priests. Today many Religious Sisters and many lay-people are proving themselves to be excellent spiritual helpers, and the numbers are increasing. Of course, the need for them is also increasing as, more and more, people become aware of the help for spiritual growth these people can give. I have received much help from many of them.

Qualifications

The necessary qualifications for a good helper are:-

- To have, themselves, a good, steady prayer life.
- To have gained considerable experience from striving to develop their own spiritual life in the midst of good and bad conditions.
- To have considerable experience of being helped by spiritual companions.
- To have the ability to listen well, put people at ease, help them talk about their inner life, and about choices to be made.
- To have good common sense and good balance in making judgements.
- To have the ability to recognise and suggest when a more experienced person might be more helpful.
- To be themselves availing of supervision in their ministry.
- To have a desire to learn more about the spiritual life by study, attending guidance courses, reading, listening to talks, etc.

I dream of the day such helpers will be present and recognised in every community.

4) A MODEL OF A SPECIAL, WELL-DEVELOPED, METHOD OF SHARING

Here is one example of a concrete, well-developed method of sharing. I have used it myself for three years with three

other people: a Sister and two lay women. As a group we decided to do it like this. Others may not want to, or be able to, do it in the same way, but may get hints from it. It is a form of 'group spiritual companionship.'

Venue. We meet once a month, for two hours, at a decided time and place. One of the four agrees to be time-keeper.

Start. We start with 5 minutes silent prayer for guidance during the sharing.

First Sharer. For about 7-8 minutes, some one of the four, shares on the past month's prayer experiences, - good things, struggles, wants, hopes, etc.

Then there is 3 minutes silence for pondering on that sharing and for the listeners to notice any effects it may have had on them.

Then one, two or three of the others, for no more than 2 minutes each, may share on how they were affected. This is not discussion or advice. But it is a form of feedback and may help the first sharer see new things in his or her experience.

Then there is another 3 minutes silence, mainly to pray privately for the person who has just shared.

Second Sharer. Another person shares for about 7-8 minutes – and the same procedure of silence and feedback follows.

The Third and Fourth Sharers do likewise.

Chapter 14

Finish. Then we usually finish up with about 4 minutes silent reflection of what each one got from the whole session.

Next venue. Finally, the place, time, etc of the next meeting is decided.

If can't attend. Anyone who can not attend may, by letter, phone or by briefing another of the group, report on things he or she would like to share. After the report, the group prays for the absent person for 3 minutes but does not share on how the report affected them.

Timekeeper We usually take turns at timekeeping and conducting the session.

Hints. As I said, not many might want to try something like this in the early stages of discovering deeper prayer, but it will give hints for the future. Also they may get tips or suggestions from it for improving their present ways of sharing, e.g. having more silent pauses.

In the Church of the future. My hope is that in the Church of the future, sharing times somewhat like this will become more and more common. Today, I notice examples of different sharing groups emerging in different communities.

FOR GROUPS

Who is this book for?

As I said before, the contents of this book were talks originally prepared for groups and influenced by the sharing of many groups. The first aim of this book was to help group leaders. The second aim was to provide a supplementary aid for individuals of such groups. Experience showed that individuals benefit from group prayer exercises. So from the start these talks had groups very much in mind.

But in publishing the book here, I had to recognise that there was more likelihood of an individual picking it up in a bookshop and trying out the exercises alone, experimenting with them and reflecting on them. This would make it into an individual's long-term, 'do-it-yourself' instruction manual.

So I chose to focus on the individual but with the intention of adding these two chapters on SHARING and GROUPS while suggesting throughout the book that the individual think about some kind of group participation. When I say 'group' I mean a number of people who meet regularly together to pray in silence for a definite period and then to review and to share on it. I consider anything from two or more to be a group. Thus, I hope the benefit of a group's help is realised.

New groups

Since I believe some participants will eventually feel drawn to cooperate in starting or leading new groups, for the remainder of this chapter I want to offer encouragement and some practical hints which experience taught me were helpful. I saw the value of three or four people leading a group. The team effort enhanced preparing for, and conducting the prayer sessions. It lessened the burden on any one volunteer leader, especially one coping with unexpected events or obligations.

Helpful points for leaders

I offer the following suggestion:-

- Before a group begins, each participant meets with a leader who explains the aim of the programme, namely to help people to discover ways of coming closer to God and to others, especially through praying.
- It is also important to talk about attendance and practice of the exercises between meetings.
- A little about silence, listening and sharing is also practical here.

The duration of the course and the importance of commitment to faithful attendance is discussed.

Group size

Group size can vary greatly. Though I have had a few groups of over fifty people, my average was about twenty-five. Some participants have started new groups with just eight. In all

these groups, for sharing, people divide into smaller groups of about three or four each. The big or small size of a group should not hinder its starting.

Elements of a meeting

For me, the essential elements of a meeting are: a short, guided, private review of what happened since the last meeting; an explanation about some aspect of prayer; some silent prayer time together; review and sharing about this; suggestions about practices till the next meeting.

Frequency of meeting

I started off by meeting weekly. Then I switched to twice a month and found it more practical and fruitful. Some groups chose to meet only monthly and received much help from this. But my own preference would be for twice a month. If less frequent, I would suggest that in twos or threes, participants should make private arrangements to share one more time between meetings, over coffee or by telephone or even email.

But the most important thing is how each individual prays and reviews in his/her own time between meetings!

Further benefits from joining a group

There are many advantages in following these talks as a group. The decision to join a group and the effort to attend, prevents one from postponing or forgetting stages of the programme.

There is encouragement and stimulus from meeting the others.

There is the strength which praying with others gives.

There are the values of sharing which we have already seen in Chapter 13.

Where

My experiences come from groups in the church hall, in convent halls or in private homes. Private homes are being used more frequently, especially with some former participants uniting to become leaders of new groups.

Attendance

This book, more than just explaining about prayer, aims at stimulating practices. The talks are like steps of stairs, one talk built on the previous one. Thus, in a group, attendance from the beginning is essential. Also, regular attendance is very important. A meeting missed is to be supplemented before the next meeting by tapes, printouts or the guidance of another participant. A missed meeting, not supplemented, causes loss, not only to the person who was absent, but to the whole group's smooth progress. A commitment to regular attendance is necessary.

Length of Course

For that reason, before starting, I would announce when the course would end and any special breaks or holidays. This

helped some people to arrange their schedules and make a firm commitment to attend. After a course ended, participants who wanted more, would join a new group and repeat this course. It was from these repeating participants that leaders of new groups eventually emerged.

Sample Meeting.

- *Opening Prayer* by Leader or a member asked beforehand.
- *5/6 minutes Guided Review.* I usually ask about 5 questions with a pause in between. These questions are to help the participants notice any significant actions by God in their daily lives, especially since the last meeting or since the Group began.
- *Talk* (about 20mins) on a new prayer-exercise or on a further explanation about some point of prayer.
- *Silent Prayer* (20mins) based on the talk.
- *Guided Review of the Prayer time.* (5mins.) I usually ask some questions between pauses. These questions are to help the participants to notice what happened in the prayer, e.g. any difference in feelings between the beginning and ending of the prayer, any surprises, anything memorable, anything the participant wants to share? (see Chapter 6 in Part 1 booklet)
- *Sharing.* Usually in groups of three. (About 15mins.) (Chapter 13)
- Suggestions for praying until the next meeting.
- Closing Prayer by a member or a Leader.

(Some groups use music or relaxing exercises at the beginning. Tea is often served at the end or during the meeting.)

Helping others to pray

One of the aims of this book is to guide and encourage participants to help others to pray which, itself, is a great work. Besides that, experience teaches that the best way to learn and to come to understand anything is to try and explain it to others. So, helping others to pray better benefits the helper as well as the one helped. I have witnessed many examples of people who have started doing this. Some are now leaders of new groups; others help the old, the lonely, the hospitalised to pray better; still others have used parts of this book for teaching children in Sunday Schools, etc

Many participants have gone on to attending individually directed retreats and to visiting regularly an experienced spiritual companion. I can see that in the future, many lay-people in our churches will become suchlike spiritual companions for others. I hope that this book will help this development.

Teach from your own experience

Throughout the book, I used stories from my own experience to explain things. I encourage leaders to use their own stories and experiences in a similar way rather than using mine. I hope this book may become a sample for some groups to prepare their own series of talks. Recently I heard from four ladies in Japan. They were veteran participants of this programme. They were preparing assiduously to start it in a neighbouring parish. They told me that after much reflection and discussion they had decided to begin from the exercises on 'Praying Nature'. I was delighted to hear of their way of

preparing and of their confidence in adjusting the content. I have since heard that the group is progressing wonderfully.

Also there are many, many other prayer-exercises or ways of praying, e.g. using music, which are not included here. Likewise, while in this book we are not drawing on Scripture or Liturgy, participants may well feel drawn to a line in Scripture that encapsulates points made here and inspire to deeper reflection. These are to be received with attention and gratitude, and invite to further praying with the Scriptures.

So happy and fruitful journeying to all you who want to launch out into the deep!

BACKGROUND TO THIS BOOK AND PROGRAMME

This book is the result of the efforts of many people. It is based on a book first published in Japanese in 2005. That, in turn, was based on talks in my own limited spoken Japanese, and on pages of my English notes translated into good Japanese, with great willingness and effort, by one of the participants. Many former participants helped in deciding what would be included and how it would be presented. Many hours of discussion went into the editing and printing of that book. I feel great gratitude and admiration towards so many.

Almost twenty years ago, I started a short course on prayer with some Japanese parishioners. I did so because, for a long time, I had felt the need for such a programme for people who had just been baptised and were adults. There were many programmes and books for leading people to Baptism, but I could find nothing to help after they had been baptised. So finally I decided to start something myself and I soon found that many long-time baptised people also wanted to attend the course and wanted more help to pray better.

I started with only six talks, based on my own experiences in trying to pray better. The talks kept increasing. But I stuck to my resolve to talk only about what I had experienced and discovered

by myself about prayer. My experience was enlarged by the input of many others. I went to talks and workshops on prayer. I did individually-directed retreats and sought personal spiritual guidance. I listened to tapes and read many books about praying and spiritual development. I kept trying to put what I was hearing into practise. I talked about what I was discovering.

I found that the more I tried to explain my experiences and discoveries to others, the more I myself deepened what I was learning! Also, listening to participants sharing about their own discoveries in prayer taught me a lot more.

In my second attempt, I announced I would start the prayer course for a year if there were 21 applicants. 63 applied! So I started three groups at once. At the end of each session, I gave out a printed summary of the talk. I also taped each session and left tapes of each talk in the office so that people could borrow them or copy them. Then I decided to divide the course into two, namely 'Praying as a Human' and 'Praying Scripture'

Since then, I have conducted both courses many times but this course of 'Praying as a Human' has been the more frequent. Many of the same people continued to attend and repeat it again and again. Quite a few brought people from other churches and some of these started to lead this course in their own churches, using their experiences, the printouts and my tapes.

During the 16 years I was conducting these courses in Fujisawa I was sick twice for two lengthy periods, but many of the

participants formed groups and carried on without me. This gave me great satisfaction as well as gratitude to God and to them.

In my last two years, I decided I would do each of the courses one more time. I decided to do the 'Praying as a Human' course twice a month, on Saturdays. I announced that I was doing so in the hope that some men would attend because very few had ever attended, or could have, previously. I was hoping 10 or 12 might come. Then, some ladies, especially repeaters, asked could they attend and I agreed. To my amazement there were 106 applicants! So I had to make two big groups.

There were 17 men and of those 11 were doing it with their wives! One couple were catechumens, another couple were Protestant. There were three non-Christian husbands of former participants, a few Protestant women and a few non-Christian women. There were four Sisters and one Novice. A certain number were from churches outside Fujisawa. About 30 had done this course at least once before and they were a huge help in setting up the place, handling the printouts and name lists, keeping the sharing on the right lines, serving the tea, etc.

The next year I gave only the 'Praying Scripture' course while two teams of 'repeaters' conducted two courses of 'Praying as a Human'. I attended these but only as a participant – listening, praying and sharing with the others. I soon became convinced that the leaders explained and guided the courses better than I ever did. Their experiences as housewives,

businessmen, office workers, parents, etc, in their own culture and in more natural language, gave more help to other participants than I could give. They planned a longer period for the course and moved more slowly. They started off by using my notes as well as their own experiences in prayer and in life. Gradually they talked more and more from their own experiences. Two of the leaders of one group were businessmen who had been baptised less than ten years. Since I left last year, three new groups have started, one centring on couples. Another group has begun in a neighbouring parish.

Before I was scheduled to leave Japan I decided to arrange my material in folders for leaders of groups. I asked for feedback from former participants and we spent many hours in discussion. The outcome was that, instead of some folders, 1200 copies of a book were printed! 500 more copies have since been printed. So that is the background to this book which, with the help of many, many others, I am now presenting in English.

My dream is that the book will do more than help individuals to pray. I pray that it will stimulate new groups, learning from their own experiences and making useful adaptations, to guide others to pray better.

Recently I received this note from a young Japanese housewife and a leader of a new prayer group. I think it sums up so much of this book. She wrote, 'The Journey of Prayer? I am discovering that as long as I travel with the others, even an imperfect person like me, can go it. My imperfections become the source of my strength.'

ADVICE

Out of these many hints for better prayer, focus on those you are finding fruitful. Feel free to set aside others. The time may come when you will discover their help also. And remember that sharing about one's spiritual journey with another (an anam-chara) or others is very fruitful.



THANKS

The existence of this book and these booklets is due to the experience, input, sharing and cooperation of countless 'Pilgrims' on our Spiritual Journey in the 'Modern World'. But I would like to highlight two helpers, Bob Doherty, a Boston Jesuit who, post Vatican II, spent much time with the Columban Missionaries in Japan fostering Spiritual 'seeds' towards *awareness* of and deepening relationship to God and His active presence 'in the Modern World'. Also Sister Patricia Sweeney, a Columban Missionary Sister, helped so much to present our experiences so clearly in the book.

Discoveries in Prayer Parts One and Two
are available on the Web at
www.columbans.ie/spirituality

Also on the Web by M. Hanratty are Booklets
"Discoveries in Praying Scripture"
Volumes One and Two
They are available on the Web at
www.columbans.ie/spirituality/praying-scripture

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