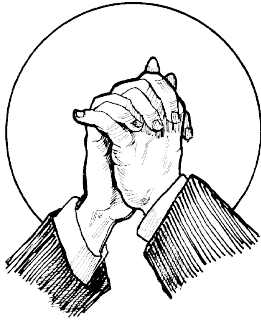


Prayer: The Soul Of All We Secular Franciscans Are And Do

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As in any relationship, communication is vital. So it is in the life of prayer of every Secular Franciscan. First and foremost, the very life of a Secular Franciscan begins with a call, a vocation, from God. Thus, one is invited to a deeper relationship. It is answered in various ways, but one that can never be overlooked, forgotten, or downplayed is that of prayer. Before all else, Secular Franciscans are called to be persons of prayer – persons who have their minds and hearts set on the things of God while working to accomplish them in this world. This commitment is the basis of their vocation.

Prayer – communal, private, or liturgical – is the lifeline of Secular Franciscans. It provides them with the spiritual energy needed to carry them through the tasks of everyday life. Prayer is for them, as it is for all Christians, communication with God. It is both active participation and quiet contemplation of what God would have them do.

The *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* addresses prayer in several of its articles. “Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel” (article #4). One of the best ways by which we can incorporate the Gospel into our daily lives is through the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*. This is a traditional form of applying the Scripture to daily living. It has four basic principles, the “4 R’s,” if you will: **Read**, **Reflect**, **Respond**, and **Receive**. We place ourselves in the presence of God and enter into the written Word.

This first step requires a careful, open, and pensive reading of a Scripture passage. It could be the Gospel of the day or any other passage that is part of our daily prayer. (I mention Gospel because it is the basis of the life of a Secular Franciscan.) This reading may have to be reread two or three times in order to grasp the meaning of the passage, or just to give oneself the space to settle into it. The second step requires a reflective understanding of the text. What was the Scripture passage saying in its own day? How does the passage translate into the trials and joys we face today? Do we understand the message God is trying to convey? Study guides may be helpful here. Responding to this message for our own lives is the third step of *Lectio Divina*. How does the Gospel challenge us? What does God ask of us? How willing are we to respond to God’s invitation to live in closer union with Him? If so, what is the cost, and how far am I freely willing to go? Finally, when we have completed this spiritual inventory, we sit back and gently receive the gracious gift God has in store for us, realizing that this “gift” may not always seem like a gift. It is in this step of *Lectio Divina* that we sit and listen to God. Prayer, like any form of communication, requires that we both speak and listen. Often we forget to do the latter. Either we don’t have enough time or we don’t want to hear.

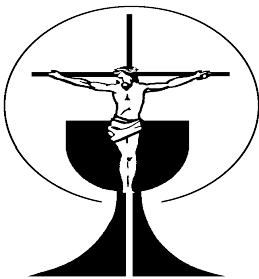
“. . . Let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do” (*O.F.S. Rule*, article #8). Prayer, active communication with God, and contemplation, quietly entering into the silent Mystery of God, the “acting” and the “being” of prayer are the root of the life of Secular Franciscans.

Contemplation is being present to the silent Mystery of God and allowing that Mystery to touch us, to heal us, to challenge us, to draw us into a deeper and more intimate union with God. Contemplation is prayer without words, without thoughts, without agendas. Contemplation is silence, pure silence. It is prayer at a very deep level, a level that needs no words, a level that needs no feelings, a level where God can be God with us and we can be the true person God created us to be – without our masks, without our false pretenses. We exist in this space with God in total freedom.

We do not contemplate in and of ourselves; rather, contemplation is the action of God in our lives. We can prepare ourselves for this gift of God by opening ourselves to the Divine action and presence in our lives. Contemplation is an unconditional “yes” to the will of God. We rest in the Presence of God so that, if God chooses to rest in us, we are prepared. An excellent method for entering into a state of readiness is *Lectio Divina*, as described above. Contemplation is the “gift” we receive from God. Another way of preparing ourselves for this encounter with God is *Centering Prayer*. Books by Father Thomas Keating, O.C.S.O. and others on this method of prayer are very helpful.

Some forms of meditation also lead to the quiet needed for contemplation as St. Clare advised Agnes of Prague in reference to the Crucifix: “Gaze upon Him, consider him, contemplate him as you desire to imitate Him” (*The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague*, as found in Armstrong, 1993, p. 42). As Sister Iliia Delio, O.S.F. wrote so eloquently in her book *Franciscan Prayer*, “Clare begins with a ‘visual reading,’ a gazing on the image of the crucified Christ, which leads to meditation or consideration of Christ, then to contemplation and imitation of Christ. ... Prayer is the energy of evangelical life because it transforms the desire for gospel life into the practice of gospel living. Clare’s template of prayer, gaze – consider – contemplate – imitate, is the template of evangelical life and the relationship with God that makes this life alive.” (pp. 9 – 10)

The language of God is silence and to enter into total dialogue with God we must be willing to enter into this silence. In this silence, God allows us to see ourselves with our faults, to become aware, to acknowledge, to repent, to be healed, and so to be set free. In the deep recesses of this silence with God, we know truth and we are set free – free to rejoice in the goodness, the mercy, the awesomeness of God.



Article #8 continues, “Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist.” Within the context of the Mass, we enter into the Paschal Mystery of Christ. We celebrate again the Supper He left behind, “Whenever you do this, do it in memory of Me.” Eucharist is the celebration of a life accepted freely in love, given freely in death, so that all of us may one day come to share in the glory of God. The Mass as the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist combines the richness of the stories of our Judeo-Christian heritage which culminate in the stories of the life and ministry of Jesus with our sharing of the most sacred meal.

As we meditate on the words and partake of the meal, the life of Our Lord becomes united with our own. We walk out into the world a new creation – no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. This is the person we bring to our home and to our workplace. This is the person who is attuned to the Paschal Mystery of Christ. With such a generous meal, we are fortified to go forth and be Eucharist for others – bread that is broken so that all may have life. The Paschal Mystery involves the death as well as the resurrection of Christ. Each time we enter the Paschal Mystery, we freely enter into Christ’s dying so that we may also rise with Him. Eucharist involves both, and it is to both that we say “Amen” when we receive Our Lord in this generous sacrament of love.

Again, Article #8 continues: “Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.” Another form of public worship in the Church is the *Liturgy of the Hours*. As Eucharist is an entering into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, the *Liturgy of the Hours* is an entering into the ever-present, providential love of God. The purpose of the *Liturgy of the Hours* is to offer to God the entire cycle of our daily life. Its basis comes from Jesus and the disciples being in constant communion with God. Often in the Gospels, we read about Jesus going off to pray in the early morning, after performing miracles, late into the night. On other occasions, Jesus calls the apostles away with Him to rest awhile and to pray, after they had returned from their various missions.

Within the *Liturgy of the Hours* are seven different times in the day when religious, secular, clerical and lay persons set aside the ordinary tasks of life to turn their minds and hearts to God. The number of *Hours* (“hour” in this context refers to a prayer period rather than to a 60 minute time span) prayed differs for those persons called to different lifestyles. All seven hours are required for most members of the clergy as well as those men and women who live a monastic life.



For Secular Franciscans, *Morning* and *Evening Prayer* become the hinges of the whole day. *Morning Prayer* offers praise to God for the marvels of creation; *Evening Prayer* offers thanksgiving to God as the day draws to a close. Each setting consists of psalms, canticles, a reading from either the Old or New Testament, a responsory, a canticle from the Gospel of Luke, intercessions, the Our Father, and a concluding prayer. (At times, the psalms or the readings can be changed to suit the various needs of the person praying. However, the official prayer is outlined by the Church.) The other five *Hours* consist of the *Office of Readings*, *Night Prayer*, and the Lesser Hours, *Mid-Morning*, *Mid-Day*, and *Mid-Afternoon Prayer*. These can be celebrated by Secular Franciscans according to their needs and circumstances.

In addition to the formal *Liturgy of the Hours*, the *Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order* suggests these other forms of prayer (cf. Appendix II, pp. 103 – 104):

- 1) A shortened form of the *Liturgy of the Hours*;
- 2) The *Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary*;
- 3) The *Office of the Passion* (written by St. Francis of Assisi);
- 4) The *Office of the Twelve Our Fathers*;
- 5) Special prayer forms for the liturgical seasons [examples would be: *Stations of the Cross* during Lent, or the *Franciscan Crown Rosary* (commemorating the Seven Joys of the Blessed Mother) during May and October].

As members of the Catholic Church, Secular Franciscans are familiar with and participate in other prayer forms in addition to those mentioned above. Some of these forms are the traditional (i.e., five-decade Dominican) Rosary, Divine Mercy novena, exposition and benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament, litanies, chaplets, spiritual reading on the lives of the saints, or meditations on their writings. Here we have focused on those particular prayer forms that are specifically mentioned in the *O.F.S. Rule* and the *Ritual of the Secular Franciscan Order*. This is not to deny the importance of any of these other prayer forms. Those selected are important to Secular Franciscans because they were important to Saint Francis himself and can be traced back to the early *Rules* of the Order.

“Let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do . . . going from gospel to life and life to the gospel” (*O.F.S. Rule*, articles #8 and #4). This, in essence, is the life of prayer of a Secular Franciscan, a life that is lived in open and honest communication with God, the Giver and Sustainer of Life, the Giver and Sustainer of this vocation that we profess as Secular Franciscans.

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