

# Rise to God in Prayer

by Abbot David Altman, OCSO

During this Easter season, we read and hear about the Resurrection of Christ and the post-resurrection experiences of Jesus' original disciples. That is history in terms of events that physically happened. To understand Scripture, the reader always has to keep in mind not only the factual presentation, but the meaning that God wants the reader to accept for himself, about himself. Our acceptance of God's word makes His word living and active, in us.

The work God assigns for us is to apply the Resurrection-theme in our personal lives for our profit and growth. The most obvious application is our continued rising above our present level of moral and spiritual living to newer and greater degrees of unity with the infinite God. The infinite gap between God and us allows and calls for lifelong effort to realize lifelong progress.

The most practical application of the Resurrection-theme is found in prayer. We rise above ourselves, we rise to God, with the use of our free wills to communicate with God. The principle is clearly experienced: relationships are defined by communications, so that a good relationship with God will largely be determined by an individual's prayer-life.

All prayer is assisted prayer. The Holy Spirit prays in us, and in effect prays for us, communicating with God in the ways He wants to hear. This is not some divine ego trip, because remember that God is infinite love, infinite good will, so that whatever He wants, expresses infinite good will. That is why we have such trouble when our plans conflict with the Lord's plan. We are fighting infinite love and placing on ourselves the burden of that conflict, in addition to resisting the benefits of infinite love.

As consecrated religious, we are all trained in the assisted prayer process called *lectio divina*, Latin for "divine word" or "divine reading." It is the practice of reading, meditating on, and praying with the Bible. When I was growing up, I heard a number of people talk about reading the Bible. They boasted that they did some Bible-reading every day. Some years after I became a *lectio divina* person myself, I wondered if, after reading passages from the Bible, they stopped there, thus rendering their time and efforts largely meaningless, valueless for their personal lives.

There are two ways we can read any kind of writing: for information and for imparting values. Reading can merely be an exercise of the mind, as when we read a newspaper to know current events, or read the Bible as history, in order to know past events. I remember counseling a friend who was always upset at current events reported in the papers. I explained that he was justified in being upset, because the sensational events reported in the news are upsetting. Emotional involvement with current events can lead to frustration at what is actually

happening versus what ought to be happening. The result is anger and a lack of interior peace. The answer to any problem is to attack it at its source, and then the superstructure has nothing to build on. Cutting down or cutting out newspaper-reading solved the problem.

Lectio divina, true prayer, goes beyond mere reading into meditative and affective prayer. Matter for the mind goes into matter for the heart, which is the will, the faculty of loving. It is this way that we meet God. Prayer is the bridge between us and God, over which we ask for and receive God's word, His messages.

After listening to God's word over a period of years and taking His word to heart, implementing it in our personal lives, we develop a sense of God's loving care and the directions He wants to take. Not everything we think about and think about doing is worthy of divine approval. Our thoughts are always subject to the judgments of the Holy Spirit of truth and love and peace, and it is these three qualities that judge our thoughts, words, and actions as coming from God or not. Can truth, love, and peace be justifiably applied to what we are thinking, saying, and doing?

There are four steps in lectio divina, and stopping at any one of them can limit and even destroy the value of the entire process. The first step is to listen to or read a Biblical text. Hearing is not always dependable, because we can fulfill the Scriptural prophecy of hearing but not listening or understanding. We hear the same passages so many times that they may not really mean much to us.

The passage must receive our meditation or reflection. A stop, look, and listen experience has to take place, or else we won't stop, and significantly, the word of God passes us by. Talking with God about the meaning of the passage promotes openness to receiving and accepting the message, the meaning. The message is the word of God, and we can fulfill Biblical prophecy here as well. Remember how many individuals in Scripture refused to accept Jesus, the Word of God in human form. We can refuse to accept the word of God in literary form.

The key concept for success in lectio or any kind of prayer is openness. The one criterion of openness made all the difference between those who became the disciples of Christ, and those who refused. As we say today, they didn't get the message. The reason was their lack of openness. They lived in their own limited worlds, as everyone does, but they were so attached to their worlds, that they refused to give them up for something much greater and much better. They destroyed their own futures, and so can we.

Most of the difficulty that arises from reading and praying Biblical passages is that they are critical, and criticism can be difficult to accept. A key to success in Biblical praying as well as the spiritual life in general is the ability to overcome our natural reluctance to accept criticism.

The importance of this particular kind of openness is made clear when we realize that rising to new life in God means a critical giving up of past levels of unity with God. Every step

forward is an implied criticism of what went before. Accepting criticism equates to allowing God more into our hearts. The mind can be set up as an intellectual road-block, so that the human heart, the will, is not touched by God's love, His will.

Why would anyone refuse the entrance of God into the deepest recesses of their heart? There is something morbidly attractive and pleasurable about holding on to anger, resentment, attachments. They are our self-justifying defenses. In this connection, some of us may think that we have no problem with our vow of chastity, considering our advanced ages or just lack of temptations. We always have a problem. All of our faults, failings, sins are all their own kind of impurities, adulterating our love for God, taking up so much room within our hearts that there is no room for the divine presence.

There is another word, in addition to openness, that more pointedly identifies our response to all of God's overtures and invitations in our lives. That word is our "yes." Remember all the successful characters that the Biblical literature describes. All of them offered their common, positive response to God, and they consequently received God Himself, and the many benefits of His presence. There is one sentence out of the Bible that should be always prophetic of us, the one phrase that ought to identify our response to God. It is Our Lady's famous fiat. With every approach, with every reproach that the Lord makes to us in His Biblical presence, inviting us to rise above our present lives, He listens for us to say, "Be it done to me according to your word."

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