



Behind the boss' back: Prayer in the workplace

Praying during the workday without disturbing others

From the syndicated column "The Prayerful Heart"

By Julie McCarty

Is there a way to pray in the workplace, without neglecting your job or infringing on the rights of others? A way to keep in touch with God while running a grocery store checkout, managing a daycare, answering phones, or meeting with clients? Or is prayer something restricted to that little Sunday box on your calendar?

A lot depends on how you define prayer. Praying the rosary while interviewing a new hire or meditating in a lotus position while running a backhoe certainly won't work. Your boss won't be a happy camper if you tell him or her that you missed a critical staff meeting because you were in a deep mystical ecstasy.

I suspect that few of us have ever thought about taking God with us to the workplace—but God is already there. After all, God is everywhere. Merely recalling God's presence is itself one type of prayer. Simple? Yes, but difficult to remember to do. Here are some ways to prompt yourself to pray inwardly during your work day:

--Place little reminders of God around your work area. If your office doesn't allow religious symbols, use ordinary objects, like family photos, a personal book with a spiritual cover, or notes posted inside your briefcase to remind you of the spiritual dimension of your work, writes Gregory F. A. Pierce in "Spirituality@Work" (Loyola, 2001). Writing a Scripture verse in your planner or selecting a gorgeous nature scene for your computer's desktop wallpaper are other examples of unobtrusive ways to draw your heart to God without forcing your views on others.

--Use your coffee break for a rendezvous with God. Little reflection booklets with the daily Mass readings, such as "Living with Christ" (Novalis), take only a few minutes to read, but help one enter into God's presence.

--Group with others for prayer time. In New York City, Muslims, committed to praying five times a day, meet in small groups during lunch or break times to recite the opening of the Koran and pray with bows, kneeling, and prostrations, writes Joseph Berger in the New York Times. He also reports that observant Jews similarly gather for minyan (prayer group of at least ten) in at least 180 places in busy Manhattan. Catholics might consider attending a weekday mass at noontime or forming a small prayer group to meet at a nearby food court or coffee shop.

--Set aside distracting thoughts. Just as you set aside distracting thoughts during prayer time, gently let go of distracting thoughts when a co-worker is speaking to you. Listen carefully to him or her—you might just hear the Spirit of God in something that is said.

--Try to bring more silence into the work environment. God speaks to us in silence. You can invite a higher intelligence into your office meeting without saying it in so many words, suggests Deborah Savage, adjunct faculty of theology and business at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. Savage says God’s grace is constantly present to us, but we need to slow down in order to notice it. For example, one business she heard about instituted a company-wide policy that allotted one specific hour each day for sacred work time: no meetings, no phoning, no interaction, just sitting at your desk to do your work.

--Practice awareness of the present moment. Savage also observes that we often mistakenly imagine the soul as one little compartment of who we are, when really our soul is “larger” than our body and connects us to God. You can’t very well leave your soul at home when you drive to work in the morning—it’s the spiritual thread that runs through every moment of our lives, she says.

Prayer is really more about be-ing, than do-ing, Savage reminds us, so it’s good to practice being attune to everything in the present moment: our feelings, our sensory perceptions, our thoughts, etc. Everything we are actually exists within the presence of God. As chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles declares, in God “we live and move and have our being.” God is always with us—even in the busy workplace.

