



Prayer: Watering the Garden of our Souls

By Julie McCarty

At certain points in our lives, God leads us into new ways of praying. Perhaps we feel a hunger to spend more time meditating on the mysteries of the rosary than praying the Hail Marys. We may discover the only prayer we know is “Give me!” and decide to dig deeper into reading the gospels. Our time of Eucharistic Adoration, formerly filled with litanies, becomes mostly a time of loving God in silence.

The Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila often regretted not making more of a commitment to prayer earlier in her life. Once she gave her entire self to finding God in prayer, however, Teresa grew by leaps and bounds. As a 16th-century woman, she could not enter a college school of theology, but she read everything she could get her hands on about prayer. Teresa consulted many spiritual directors and “learned men” (as she called them). Most of all, she *prayed*. She put her mind and heart into the search to be completely one with “Her Majesty” (one of her names for God). Teresa’s insights about the spiritual life have helped Christians for centuries, and showed such wisdom that in 1970 she was the first woman to be given the title “Doctor of the Church.”

Teresa often found it difficult to find the right words to explain what she knew to be true about prayer. Because of this, she often used simple comparisons. Teresa sometimes commented that her own analogies made her smile because of their inability to fully communicate the ideas—but she hoped her readers would understand.

One of her famous analogies is found in her spiritual autobiography, in which she compares four ways of watering a garden to four phases of one’s prayer life. Teresa compares the soul of a person who is ready to get serious about praying to a garden bed that has been stripped of its weeds by God, who then plants good seeds (of virtue). The soul is ready to begin prayer “for real.”

The garden (the soul) must be watered with prayer. For beginners, the effort demanded is like that of one who lowers a bucket into a deep well, draws it out with a rope, and carries it to pour on the garden. Faithful prayer takes effort, determination, and perseverance.

In time, prayer eventually becomes a little bit easier. It is like using a “water wheel” tool of Teresa’s time to crank the water by hand, drawing it from an aqueduct system. The gardener, that is, the person who prays, gradually finds prayer a more peaceful activity. Teresa speaks here of the “prayer of quiet.”

A third type of prayer is like a garden that is watered by an irrigation system or a stream channeled off a river. One opens a gate, and the water floods the garden of the soul with very little effort. Because of the flooding, the water soaks deeper and remains longer. The flowers, Teresa says, are blossoming.

Finally, Teresa speaks of a fourth type of “water,” the rain that falls from heaven upon the garden of the soul. The person may experience a deep union with God at special times of the Lord’s choosing. One can prepare the garden for this great gift, but one does not *make* it rain. Only God can do that.

Lent is the perfect time to discover new ways to feed and water the garden of our souls. We can learn more about prayer by reading classics such as St. Teresa’s *The Interior Castle*, St. Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, or Brother Lawrence’s *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

A practical, user-friendly new book called *50 Ways to Pray* (Abingdon Press, 2006) is a great way to learn about a wide range of ways to pray. The author, Teresa A. Blythe, gives straightforward explanations of traditional Christian prayer forms such as *lectio divina* (sacred reading), the Jesus Prayer, praying with icons, Ignatian prayer methods, and others. Newer prayer methods are also offered, such as doing *lectio* with a musical piece or reflecting on images of God found in the media.

For a truly blessed Lent this year, allow your heart to open to God in prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal ways of praying that draw you closer to the Divine One who loves you immensely, thereby also leading you into deeper love of others and all of God’s creation. For love—genuine Christ-like love—is the real goal of prayer.

