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Prayer at the Appointed Hours: Frequent and Prolonged Prayer

by *St. Augustine of Hippo*
Early Church Father and Doctor of the Church



This excerpt of Augustine's letter to Proba on Prayer (Ep. 130, 9:18- 10:20: CSEL 44, 60-63) is used in the Roman Catholic Office of Readings for Monday of the the 29th week in Ordinary Time. Here Augustine treats of the daily prayer of the Church known as the Liturgy of the Hours or the Divine Office, but also informal, short regular prayer known as aspirations or ejaculations. He also speaks of the beginnings of contemplative prayer in which contemplation occurs with the aid more of sighs of longing and silence than words.

Let us always desire the happy life from the Lord God and always pray for it. But for this very reason we turn our mind to the task of prayer at appointed hours, since that desire grows lukewarm, so to speak, from our involvement in other concerns and occupations. We remind ourselves through the words of prayer to focus our attention on the object of our desire; otherwise, the desire that began to grow lukewarm may grow chill altogether and may be totally extinguished unless it is repeatedly stirred into flame.

Therefore, when the Apostle says: *Let your petitions become known before God*, this should not be taken in the sense that they are in fact becoming known to God who certainly knew them even before they were made, but that they are becoming known to us before God through submission and not before men through boasting.

Since this is the case, it is not wrong or useless to pray even for a long time when there is the opportunity. I mean when it does not keep us from performing the other good and necessary actions we are obliged to do. But even in these actions, as I have said, we must always pray with that desire. To pray for a longer time is not the same as to pray by multiplying words, as some people suppose. Lengthy talk is one thing, a prayerful disposition which lasts a long time is another. For it is even written in reference to the Lord himself that he spent the night in prayer and that he prayed at great length. Was he not giving us an

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example by this? In time, he prays when it is appropriate, and in eternity, he hears our prayers with the Father.

The monks in Egypt are said to offer frequent prayers, but these are very short and hurled like swift javelins. Otherwise their watchful attention, a very necessary quality for anyone at prayer, could be dulled and could disappear through protracted delays. They also clearly demonstrate through this practice that a person must not quickly divert such attention if it lasts, just as one must not allow it to be blunted if it cannot last.

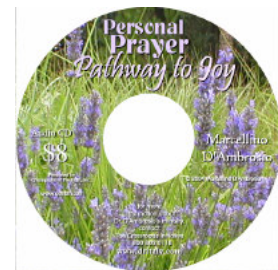
Excessive talking should be kept out of prayer but that does not mean that one should not spend much time in prayer so long as a fervent attitude continues to accompany his prayer. To talk at length in prayer is to perform a necessary action with an excess of words. To spend much time in prayer is to knock with a persistent and holy fervor at the door of the one whom we beseech. This task is generally accomplished more through sighs than words, more through weeping than speech. He places *our tears in his sight, and our sighs are not hidden* from him, for he has established all things through his Word and does not seek human words.

Personal Prayer: Pathway to Joy

Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Ph.D.

Everyone knows that personal prayer is important. You can't expect to deepen a relationship with God talking with Him only once a week! But how, in the midst of the busy, noisy life we all lead, can we develop a pattern of daily prayer that really works? And if we are successful in carving out some moments for prayer, what do we do? How should we spend that time in way that would be most fruitful?

Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio has taught spiritual theology academically, but, more importantly, he's had plenty of practice applying that tradition to everyday life. With a family of seven, a business, and a non-profit corporation to run, he knows the challenges that a busy, active life can pose to the Christian who wants to pray. In this talk, he lays down principles and gives practical suggestions on how busy laypeople can develop a prayer life that leads to joy and personal transformation.



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