

Dealing with distractions in prayer

Part of our growth in prayer requires that we discern what form(s) of prayer are best for us and which to avoid. For this reason, it's good to explore different forms of prayer. Some will be new. No one will find all of them suitable. Creative people will probably find contemplative prayer easier; analytical people may prefer *lectio divina*, and so on. In part, that's the idea of this series.

There is no point in saying to ordinary church folk like us, 'pray like the saints of old!' At best, we'll get disheartened and at worst we'll give up, insisting that it's all impossible.

Sometimes we are distracted when praying because of something nearby. One of the giants of the faith said, 'How many hours of prayer have I lost because of flies circling above my head!'

As anyone who has tried to pray knows that time spent in prayer is interspersed with times when the mind wanders. Whoever we are in terms of our personality, we will inevitably be distracted when we first pray. And by 'first pray', I mean not only when we're a beginner but also when we first sit down and try and concentrate on God. It's always good advice to 'do what we can, not what we can't.'

In the past, distractions in prayer would have been attributed to the devil: people would have said 'he doesn't want you getting close to God by praying.' Many Christians today do not find talk of the devil useful. Alternatives from modern psychology are more useful to most of us today.

When applied to prayer, psychology says first that the power of our prayer depends on factors such as the state of health, our physical environment, and our determination. But it also depends on our personality. For example, some people are extroverts while others are introverts (most people's personalities lie somewhere between these extremes). Again, some people are by nature creative and others are more methodical, and so on. Our personalities differ.

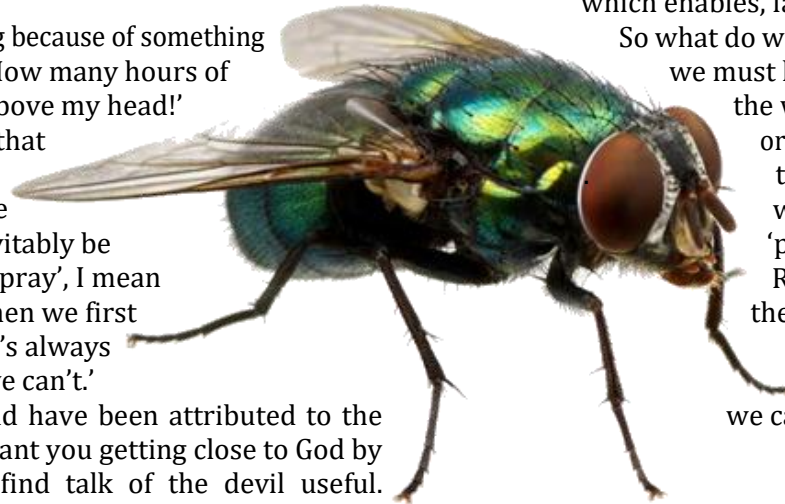
All of us have aspects of personality we would prefer were not there. Some people worry too much. Others are given to irrational fears. Some of us will suffer from excessive anger, greed, or lust, etc. Psychologically, most of us cope to varying extents by suppressing those undesirable aspects of personality. We may even refuse to acknowledge their existence, even to ourselves. We shun them because they induce shame.

Unfortunately, suppression is probably the worst thing we could do, for

what lies beneath the surface, just out of reach to the conscious mind, soon acquires power over the sub-conscious mind. And the power exerted is in indirect proportion to the extent to which we stamp it down. The so called 'Freudian slip' is a classic example.

It's no wonder our minds flood with these dreadful fears, angers and cravings when we try to empty our minds at the start of prayer. They come from the subconscious, and represent a 'status report' from within. Unfortunately, whatever is locked away in the subconscious is usually that which enables, facilitates and feeds our creativity.

So what do we do about it? Professional psychologists and saints agree: we must learn to love ourselves, 'warts and all'—indeed, especially the warts. If we can face our fears and acknowledge our feelings or whatever 'haunts us,' then we can start defusing this inner tension. When we grow somewhat stronger, spiritually, we can learn to love our hidden side. This does not mean 'pandering' to our negative feelings: that would be wrong. Rather, we should learn how to utilise them. In this way, they lose their power to disrupt our prayer. In fact, the great saints agree: they can work to our advantage, just as the judo expert uses his opponent's weight to his advantage, we can use our fears to enhance and explore our own spiritual creativity.



Exercises

Try to empty your mind completely in order to concentrate on God: try to 'recollect ...'

Inevitably, within quite a short time, something will cause a distraction. Notice what it is that distracts. It may be a feeling, a task, a fear. Consciously bring it before God, offering it to Him as a gift. As you offer it, it may help to imagine your own hands bearing a brightly polished plate bearing something that represents these distractions.

It may also help to keep a pad handy. If a certain distraction simply will not go away, write the details and then return to your prayer. Once it's written down, it's often easier to stop worrying about it. Ask God to help you to use this thing, this fear or what-ever, in His service.