

The Theology of the Church Fathers: Prayer

We take for granted many of the aspects of prayer and spirituality we have today. Common devotions like the Rosary, chaplets, prayer manuals, and the various prayers we can find online didn't exist yet. Prayer in the early church was very simple. During the age of the Apostles, the earliest Christians focused on set times of prayer and the Our Father. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter went up to the Temple three times a day to pray. We can only imagine his style of prayer since we have no records of it.

As the church grew and developed throughout the first three centuries, prayer remained simple. Liturgical prayer, namely the Mass, was the center point and highlight of the prayer experience of any Christian. Beyond the Mass, each person would spend time each day in their own personal prayers. Often these prayers consisted of spontaneous personal prayers without any specific form and structure. The most common form of personal prayer was the Our Father. Since the time of Jesus, the Church understood this prayer as the perfect prayer and the only one given by Jesus. The Church encouraged the faithful to pray this prayer three times as day as indicated in the *Didache*.

Once Christianity was legalized in the 4th century, a whole new avenue and style of prayer emerged. Many Christians left society and headed out into the desert to live lives of solitude and prayer. These groups had many different styles of life. The most prominent group was the desert fathers and mothers. These men and women lived solitary lives in the desert or in small local communities. The desert fathers and mothers captivated the earliest Christians as people who dedicated their lives to prayer and coming to know God. Often people would wander out into the desert to find these men and women and seek their advice. We have many of their stories and teaching but they can be challenging to interpret. The challenge with interpreting and understanding the desert tradition is their lack of cohesion and structure. Each of the fathers and mothers wrote as they experienced. Therefore, we cannot interpret an interior logic or system underlying their thought. Here are a few examples of their teachings on prayer:

“They used to say of Abba Arsenios that on Saturday night when Sunday was about to dawn he used to put the sun behind him and stretch out his hands to heaven, praying until the sun shone on his face; and then he would sit down.” (*Book of the Elders* 216)

“Some people asked Macarius ‘How ought we to pray?’ The elder said to them, ‘there is no need to make ‘vain repetitions’ but to frequently stretch out your hands and say ‘Lord, as you wish and know how to, have mercy on me,’ and if warfare persists, ‘Lord, help me.’ He knows what is appropriate, and he will act mercifully with us.” (*Book of the Elders* 218)

“An elder said, ‘It is a wonder the way we offer our prayers as though God were present and hearing our words, but as for our sins, we commit them as though he does not see.’” (*Book of the Elders* 221)

As you can see from the above examples, the teaching of the desert fathers and mothers is rooted in experience. They share their experiences of prayer as guides to help those who seek to grow in

prayer. In a similar way, they are also little statements not full thoughts. The desert traditions didn't have books or full explanations of thought but simple little statements to reflect on.

Since the earliest persecutions by the Jews and then by Emperor Nero, many Christians believed that the way to best imitate Jesus was through martyrdom. Being killed for the faith was the ultimate sign of witness and imitation of Jesus who died on the Cross for our sake. With the legalization of Christianity and the end to persecutions by the Roman government, Christians wanted another way to grow in holiness and to imitate Jesus. Like the desert fathers and mothers, another group of men wandered out into the desert to seek simplicity and to grow in their relationship with God. Unlike the desert traditions, these groups formed small communities that supported one another and lived a common life. The first iteration of these groups is called the Benedictines formed after the rule and teaching of St. Benedict. These early monks would pray in common, eat in common, and live within the confines of a house or local community. As they developed a common life, they also developed forms of prayer and teachings on prayer. Below is a snippet from the *Rule of St. Benedict* on prayer:

“Whenever we want to ask a favor of someone powerful, we do it humbly and respectfully, for fear of presumption. How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the God of all with the utmost humility and sincere devotion. We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words. Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace. In community, however, prayer should always be brief and when the prioress or abbot gives the signal, all should rise together.” (Chapter 20 of the *Rule of St. Benedict*).

In combination with the foundation of the monastic communities, a whole new way of praying was emerging within the Christian communities. The Apostles taught the importance of praying three times a day. By the end of the 3rd century, it was common to pray five times a day. By the end of the 5th century, it was taught to pray as much as eight times a day. The church fathers usually focused on theology and promoting the truth of the Gospel. Some, however, gave some insights to the faithful who were seeking a way to deeper prayer.

The Church Fathers on prayer

Amount of prayer:

Although no specific guide was written or any declaration by the church, many of the fathers and spiritual masters of the early church guided the faithful to understand how much and how often they ought to pray. The amount of times throughout the day for prayer ranged from three times to over eight. Yet, within the context of the amount of time for prayer, the most common answer was “unceasingly.” Following from St. Paul’s exhortation, the goal of the Christian is to pray unceasingly, throughout the day, always, without losing a sense of God’s presence in one’s life. What does this look like? For some it meant interspersing the day with prayer including during work, throughout the daily chores, and to keep one’s mind constantly focused on God. For others this meant setting aside specific times of the day for the sake of prayer.

Types of prayer:

The most common form of prayer was spontaneous or personal prayer. People would give their petitions and requests to God or thank him for his action in their lives. The next most common form of prayer, and the one most often encouraged, is the recitation of the Our Father. Out of all the guides and explanations on prayer written by the Church Fathers, explanations of the Our Father was by far the most common. By the 6th century the tradition of the Liturgy of the Hours had formed within the monastic communities. Using the Psalms as the core of this type of prayer, the monks would gather five times a day to pray the Psalms together as a form of common, liturgical prayer. This tradition continues to be maintained by the monastic communities today. St. Benedict wrote several parts of his rule based on the necessity and importance of these hours of prayer.

Where to pray:

This may seem like a strange topic for us, but place was very important in the early church. During the earliest days of Christianity, the Apostles would go to the Temple or to synagogues to pray. Once they were banned from these places, they prayed in their house churches or wherever they were. Although location was not a major issue, location served as a medium for good, authentic prayer. The Church Fathers taught that you can pray anywhere and should be praying everywhere. But they also taught that locations such as churches, the tombs of martyrs, and holy sites are especially useful for effective prayer. During the later part of the age of the fathers, pilgrimages became a common way to visit these holy sites and encourage devotion to the saints. These holy sites also became hot spots for prayer and spiritual conversion.

What to pray

I have already stated the importance of the Our Father as the core prayer used by the people and the Liturgy of the Hours used by the monastic communities. But there is another useful and common form of prayer: Scripture. The earliest Christians were deeply rooted in Scripture throughout their lives. They would hear passages as Mass and reflect on them throughout the week as it inspired them and guided them to both know Jesus and pray to him. The lives of the earliest Christians were ones of proclamation and reflection on the Gospel both in daily life and in prayer.

The people of the early church had a great desire to pray but few resources. The Church Fathers were largely focused on theology and the proper teaching of the faith. Yet, within the context of these spiritual treatises is one of the greatest examples of prayer in the early church. Why did the Christians pray? Because they wanted to know Jesus. Knowing the truths about Jesus, who is God, is vital for a good prayer life. Therefore, they would listen attentively to the bishops and theologians speak so that they could pray most effectively. Much of the earliest forms of prayer sound like theological statements not prayers because part of praying was being precise about who we are praying to. The Christians wanted to know Jesus; they wanted to see his face; they wanted to be able to speak to him; they wanted truth. Thus their prayers became expressions of the truth about the Gospel and deeply rooted in Scripture and the tradition.

Origen of Alexandria

Unlike the other church fathers, whom we will explore in their lives and teachings, Origen stands as an anomaly. He is a church father. He was one of the most influential and important theologians of the early church. But he is not a saint. Also, his writing were used both to support and condemn people because he was considered heterodox. Today, modern scholars view him in a much more favorable and balanced light. His works are widely read as valuable for theology and spirituality as well as for understanding his historical setting.

Origen was born in Alexandria around 185 AD. He loved to study and, from an early age, took to academic rigor. At age 18, he entered the school of Alexandria as a precursor to seminary and study for the priesthood. Having been ordained by another bishop, Theoclistus, instead of the one who was educating him, Demetrius, Demetrius accused Origen of foul play and had him castrated. Historians believe that Origen castrated himself instead of as part of a punishment, which would have prevented his ordination and explained why he was prevented from becoming a priest.

He remained in Casesarea under the tutelage of Theoclistus to prevent Demetrius' rage from harming him. Origen found a friend in Ambrose whom he converted from either Marcionism or Valentinism and ordained. Ambrose was wealthy and gave Origen a good patronage to continue his theological works.

A new chapter of Origen's life had begun. Under the patronage of Ambrose, he hired a team of secretaries to write down his words, copy his books, and distribute them across the empire. His views started to deviate from the standard thinkers of his time. Whereas most biblical scholars and church fathers focused on the literal meaning of Scripture, Origen went the route of allegorical interpretation. He started proposing ideas of the pre-existence of the soul before conception, that souls became incarnate as a punishment, and that Jesus was one of the souls that fell away from God and happened to show the way to return.

These views led Origen into some strange and unfortunate places. With the Ecumenical Councils establishing orthodox doctrine and condemning heretics, some were on the hunt for heresies. Towards the end of the 4th century, Origen's, having been dead for over a century by this point, works were thought by theologians as heretical. The ultimate challenge was that only some of the works were problematic whereas others were solid. With this contrast looming over him, those who wanted to condemn heretics used Origen's writing to condemn people whereas others used it to support proper church doctrine. Origen never had a chance to defend or clarify his points. For these reasons, Origen was never declared a saint and instead became the measure through which people could condemn or support heretics.

On Prayer by Origen

Origen roots prayer in the mystery of God being made present before us. Prayer is the coming to know the God who came to be with us. He reminds us that prayer is a recognition that God wants to hear our voice and to be with us. God, the Almighty, wants to hear our petitions and to answer

our prayers even though we are not worthy of it. He sets off the beginning of this book by noting the Scriptural context of prayer. Remember: Origen was a great Scripture scholar. All things of the Christian life are rooted in Scripture and explained through Scripture. Therefore, we should not be surprised that he roots his entire work and his understanding of prayer on Scripture.

Like the other Church Fathers, Origen's work is not like the guides on prayer we read today. Most of the works produced today are guides for prayer or focus on techniques for prayer. Origen writes a defense of prayer. The first six chapters of the work focus on common objections to prayer as though he is writing a defense of the necessity and importance of prayer, which he is. Remember; he is writing to people who dismiss prayer and those who try to persuade the people against prayer, Therefore he is writing against the most common objections that people would have against prayer.

The next three chapters focus on "moods" of prayer. The four "moods" we would title "types" of prayer. Moods are another way of either describing types of prayer or feelings of prayer. The four moods are: intercession, requests (vows), thanksgiving, and confession.

The last part of Origen's work is a detailed description of the greatest prayer: the Our Father. He takes time to examine each of the lines and explain them in detail. He is one of the only church fathers to write a commentary on the Our Father in a spiritual sense.