

Teach Us to Pray!

Reflections by Christoph Cardinal Schönborn

It is one of the things that make the strongest impression on me—watching someone who has sunk deep down into prayer. It is probably not just for me that this is so. The impression that Saint Padre Pio (d. 1968) made on me—a seventeen-year-old at the time—is unforgettable. And many people found Pope John Paul II, as someone once said, “a rock of prayer.” But we need not go so far afield. We find people who pray, here around us, in churches and sometimes even on the subway.

What is the mysterious thing that is happening there? What happens within a person who is praying—within the Muslim I saw at the airport in Rome, for instance, simply spreading out his little carpet and then quietly praying, undisturbed by the crowd?

Whenever Jesus prayed, that must have made a deep impression on his disciples. They often saw him praying—sometimes all night long. What was he doing? What happened within him? In today’s Gospel reading, we see him praying once again, somewhere or other. The place makes no difference. His prayer is the only interesting thing. Nobody dares to disturb him then. Only after he himself has finished praying, one of them ventures to ask him what they have all had on their minds for a long time: We want to learn that, too! Tell us, show us how you do it—how we can do it.

The best person to teach about praying is someone who prays himself. When children “catch” their parents praying, that often makes an impression that influences their whole lives: “So praying is not just something for children to do before going to sleep. It is something so important that even our parents do it.”

The disciples did not learn in theory how important prayer is but in quite concrete fashion—seeing Jesus himself. They found that, for their Master, it was something vitally important.

And now the surprising thing: Jesus did not give his disciples a course on the theory of prayer or on methods of learning to pray. Nor does he tell them how he prays himself. That remains his personal secret. It is as if he was trying to tell them, “Praying can be learned only by praying! But if you do want to pray, then do it in these words”—and then follows the Our Father.

Luke transmits to us a shorter form of this, probably the most famous of all prayers. Matthew gives us the version that is used in prayer by all the Christians in the world, up to the present day.

The entire Lord’s Prayer (it is also called that, because the Lord Jesus himself taught it) is contained in the first word, “Father!” * We have the impression that this was indeed the heart of Jesus’ prayer. In his mother tongue, he said “Abba,” the trusting, childlike “Dad.” Hence, trust is the basic tenor of the prayer he has given us.

What ought we to ask for? Should we ask God for things at all? Yes, but first of all for the most important thing: “Your kingdom come,” that you should take first place and thereby set everything in our lives in its rightful place; and then, that we should have what we need: our daily bread; God’s forgiveness, and forgiveness for each other, and being kept from going astray. So simple and so clear. Praying from our heart, every day, “Our Father”—that will grant us trust in God and set our lives in order.

* In German, the Lord’s Prayer begins with the word “Father”: *Vater unser...*