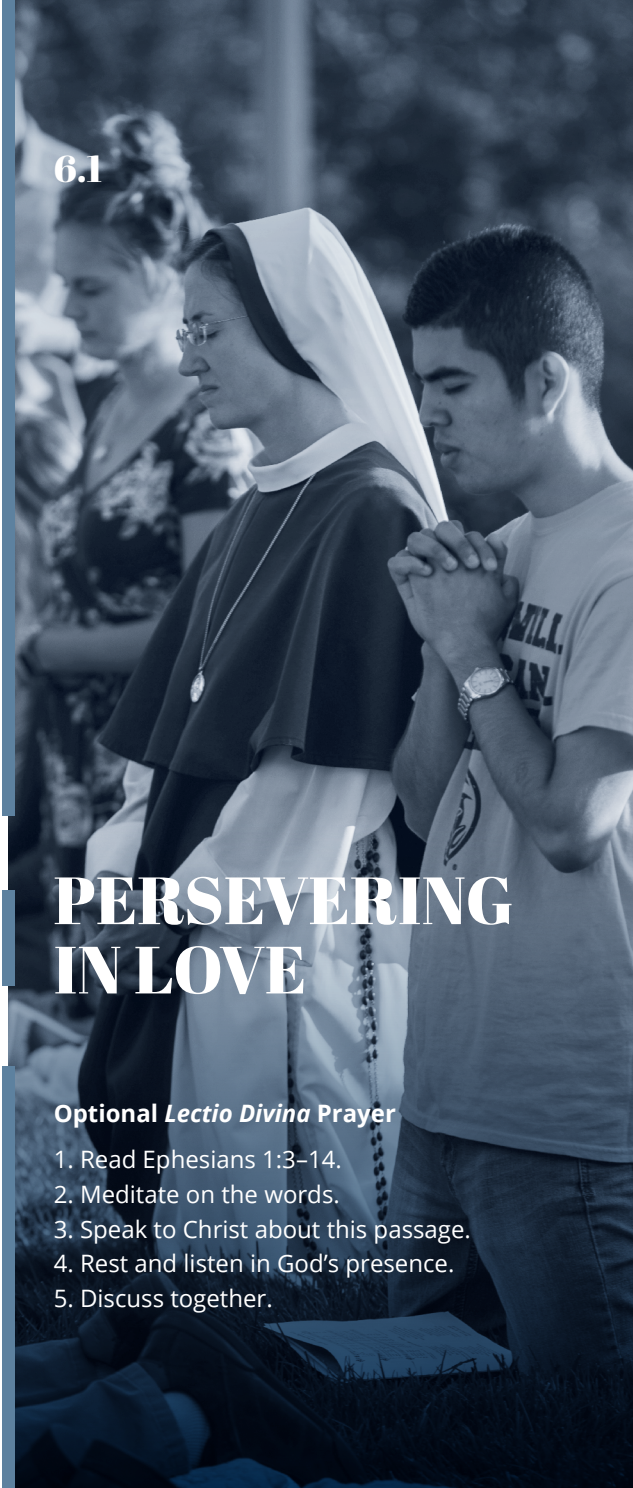
6.1

DEEPER PRAYER

PERSEVERING IN LOVE



Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read Ephesians 1:3–14.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

Teresa of Jesus, barefoot and determined, set out on a journey.

Notes

Her mission? To bring the Carmelite convents of Spain back to their founding principles of poverty, silence, and penance after years of lax spiritual practices and worldliness throughout the order.

Many who knew Teresa in her early days in the convent would have been surprised by the zealous reformer she had become. Teresa Sanchez de Cepeda y Ahumada entered the prestigious Carmelite convent in Avila at twenty-one years of age. Beautiful, intelligent, and charming, the outgoing Teresa was not as comfortable in the quiet solitude of the chapel, but preferred the thriving social life of the parlor, where visitors of high social and political rank frequently entertained the sisters with meaningless conversations, distracting them from their spiritual practices. Teresa struggled through her required periods of prayer, even saying at one point, "I don't know what heavy penance I would not have gladly undertaken rather than practice prayer."

For twenty years, Teresa half-heartedly pursued the contemplative life of her order. But one day, when she was nearly forty years old, Teresa experienced a profound conversion after seeing a statue of the suffering Jesus and realizing "how poorly [she] had thanked him for those wounds."[1] That experience shook her prayer life to its core, and she began pursuing a deeper union with Jesus with renewed discipline and love.

Seeing with new eyes the lukewarm practices in the Carmelites all around her, Teresa was moved to inspire her sisters to re-commit to daily silent prayer and penance. Despite facing much opposition, Teresa went on to found seventeen new convents, and young women flocked to them. An active reformer, Teresa traveled, wrote, and taught frequently — but all throughout her efforts, she never allowed her work to keep her from prayer. She discovered that "prayer and comfortable living are incompatible."[2]

Notes



For twenty years, Teresa settled for a dry, distracted, and inconsistent prayer life that produced very little fruit. But after her conversion, her deep commitment to the spiritual life transformed everyone around her: her community, her religious order and, eventually, the entire Church. St. Teresa of Avila was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970. The sister who resisted prayer became a great saint of the interior life. Like her, if we want to share Christ with the world, we need to be people who are willing to persevere in the journey of prayer.

DISCUSS

What about St. Teresa's story is inspiring or convicting to you? How has your prayer life deepened or changed in the last six months?

SOUL OF THE APOSTOLATE

As St. Teresa of Avila's life demonstrates, mission and conversion are the fruit of a deep and disciplined life of prayer. The more a heart is immersed in the life of Christ, the more fruitful each missionary action can be. One bishop said of Teresa and her order, "Ten Carmelite nuns praying will be of greater help to me than twenty missionaries preaching."[3] In the same way, our outreach efforts will only be effective to the extent that they are born out of deep, committed daily prayer.

Notes

Jesus himself makes this clear in John 15:5: "Apart from me, you can do nothing." He did not say "apart from me, you can do some things" or "without me, you'll just be a little less successful." Jesus makes clear that our actions, even those done for the good of his kingdom, will be fruitless without his grace.

Unfortunately, sometimes we become so busy with projects and activities in service of God's work that we don't allow him to be the true source of our missionary efforts. St. Bernard describes this difficulty, using the images of reservoirs and channels:

> The channels let the water flow away, and do not retain a drop. But the reservoir is first filled, and then, without emptying itself, pours out its overflow, which is ever renewed, over the fields which it waters. How many there are that are devoted to works, who are never anything but channels, and retain nothing for themselves, but remain dry while trying to pass on life-giving grace to souls! We have many channels in the Church today, but very few reservoirs.[4]

We need to be filled with Christ's love to share it with anyone else. To pursue a life of mission without first being filled up by grace is to allow our hearts to remain dry and untransformed. As we enter more deeply into mission, the temptation will be to fill our schedule with meetings over coffee, events at our parish, and other outreach activities, leaving less and less time to pray and participate in the sacraments. It can be tempting to think that we are being successful evangelists in this way. However, "we must never leave the God of works for the works of God."[5]

DISCUSS

Looking at your current prayer life, are you more like a channel or a reservoir? Do you struggle with the temptation to choose activities over time for prayer, the sacraments, and spiritual formation?

Notes

CHASING A FEELING

If we hope to lead others to Jesus, we need to first be deeply rooted in him ourselves. But maybe you've felt the frustration in your heart: "I know that prayer is important, but right now, it's just difficult! Prayer feels boring, and, sometimes, I just want to be anywhere else other than alone with Jesus in prayer. I want to share his love with others, but how can I do that if I don't *feel* like I am being filled?"

The spiritual life is full of highs and lows, and you will encounter times when prayer is difficult, dry, or boring. But the truth remains that Jesus shows up every time we pray, and the success of our prayer does not depend on how strongly we "feel" his presence. Being faithful to God each day in prayer is much more important than any feelings of his closeness we might experience in prayer.

St. John of the Cross describes the desire for an emotional experience of God in prayer as "spiritual gluttony." What does this mean? We can be tempted to crave consolations and emotions as proof of the effectiveness of our prayer. We do things to try to spark that feeling of God's closeness, and we get frustrated or discouraged when the feelings aren't there. St. John has strong words for those seeking such things:

> "They think the whole matter of prayer consists in looking for sensory satisfaction. When they do not get this sensible comfort, they become very disconsolate and think they have done nothing. All their time is spent looking for satisfaction and spiritual consolation; one minute they are meditating on one subject and the next on another, always in search for some gratification of the things of God."[6]

Are we coming to prayer to praise, honor, and love our King? Or are we coming to get something from him, some insight or emotion? As we mature in prayer, Jesus sometimes takes away some of the consolations, delights, or ease of prayer — not because he never wants us to have these, but because he is purifying us, increasing

our desire for him alone. He is also testing our hearts: Will we remain faithful to him in prayer even if the feelings aren't there? Our closest friends are people who love us for who we are, not for what we do for them. That's the kind of friendship the Lord wants with us: a deep friendship based not on how he makes us feel, but for who he is.

Notes

DISCUSS

Do you find yourself falling into spiritual gluttony in your prayer life? Do you judge the success of your prayer by how you feel? How have you sought to love God for his sake, not just for the delights he gives?

THE STRUGGLE OF PRAYER

The *Catechism*'s description of prayer can be a helpful truth to ponder as we navigate struggles in prayer: "[P]rayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God … The 'spiritual battle' of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer" (CCC 2725).

What are the common struggles you experience in the battle of prayer? Does prayer feel **dry**, boring, or uninteresting? Are you experiencing **discouragement** in your prayer journey or feeling tempted to believe that the Lord is far from you? Are you **distracted** and having a difficult time staying focused in prayer? Are you having trouble keeping the prayer commitments you have made?

When these struggles occur, there are actions we can take to overcome them.

In prayer we must not seek the consolations of God, but the God of consolations.

— St. Francis de Sales

Notes

The most essential thing is that we should love God without any motive of self-interest.

— St. Teresa of Avila



- ***Examine:*** One important step is to examine our lives and to see if there is anything preventing us from praying well. Are you getting enough sleep? Is your schedule a source of distraction? Are you choosing a time or a place to pray that keeps you from entering deeply into prayer? Do you turn you phone off during prayer? Is there a sin in your heart that you are avoiding bringing to the Lord? Noticing the areas of our physical and spiritual lives that may be an obstacle to our prayer can help us make necessary changes.

- ***Accept the Invitation to Go Deeper:*** Dryness in prayer is an invitation to go deeper. Think of a child who is just learning to walk. In the beginning, they need their parents to hold their hands as they learn how to take steps. Eventually, however, the parent begins to let go, allowing the child to walk on their own. In prayer, consolations can be like God holding our hands to get us started. But as we grow, he begins to let go — not so that we fall, but so that we can learn to go even further in our relationship with him.

- ***Offer It Up:*** Offer your discouragement to God. These little sufferings can be a source of grace for our lives and the lives of others when we unite our struggles to Jesus on the cross. By doing this, we can turn our dryness in prayer into powerful intercession for others.

Notes

- ***Persevere and Trust:*** All Christians experience struggles in prayer. These are not a sign of unworthiness or that God has abandoned us. Trust that God is working, even when things are dry, and persevere through the difficulty. When prayer gets hard, we can be tempted to give up, but that's exactly what the enemy wants us to do. Keep showing up, persevere in your prayer commitments, and do not panic when it gets difficult. Instead, turn to the Lord and trust that he is working.

- ***Seek Help:*** Another good step to take in times of struggle in prayer is to seek help from a trusted spiritual mentor or spiritual director. We can be tempted to keep quiet about our struggles in prayer so that we don't seem weak, but seeking help is a great way to remove obstacles and receive guidance and encouragement.

DISCUSS

Are you experiencing any of these struggles in your prayer life? In what ways is the enemy trying to draw you away from prayer? Which of these steps do you need to take to pursue a deeper relationship with Christ?

TAKE ACTION

Take five minutes and make one or two resolutions for your own prayer life. What do you need to change with your prayer so that the Lord can fill your heart and his love can overflow to others? How will you deal with the struggles you are facing in prayer? When and how will you make these changes?

Notes

KEY CONCEPTS

Soul of the Apostolate: Without a deep commitment to daily prayer, our apostolic work will not be fruitful.

Spiritual Gluttony: We should not chase feelings in prayer but should seek the Lord for who he is, not how he makes us feel.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Soul of the Apostolate by Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard

CCC 2725–2745: "The Battle of Prayer"

The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living by. Fr. Timothy Gallagher

Introduction to the Devout Life by St. Francis de Sales

Worshipping a Hidden God by Archbishop Luis M. Martinez

The Power of Silence Against a Dictatorship of Noise by Robert Cardinal Sarah

Notes

Notes

[1] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila: The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, trans. David Lewis (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1997), 65.

[2] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C., ICS Publications, 2000), Chapter 4, para. 2.

[3] Jean-Baptiste Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1946).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Image Books, 1959), 175.