The Four Pillars of Prayer:

A Practical Guide to Prayer in the Modern World
The Four Pillars of Prayer

Introduction

In my last year of seminary I found that I had some extra time on my hands, so I took up weight lifting. I started out by bench pressing just the bar, which is all I could really lift when I started out. After a few weeks of lifting, I got the point where I put weights on that bar, and could lift even more. A few weeks later and I was able to put even more weight on, and so forth. It was neat to see the progress that I was making in such short order!

During my Christmas break, I had an opportunity to go to Austria, and while in Vienna, I decided to visit the gym. There I was, land of the greatest weight lifter, and body builder of all time, Arnold Schwarzenegger!! As I walked into the gym, I looked around and saw all this big Austrian dudes lifting weights, and I felt as if I should
probably man up and show off all my own progress from the previous few months of lifting weights. So I picked out a bench, put the same amount of weight that I usually used back home, and lifted the bar off, and brought it to my chest.

That is where it stayed. Squarely on my chest.

I pushed and pushed with all my might and I could not get the barbell off of my chest! It turns out that the bar I was using back home was a 25 lb bar, and the ones they used in Austria were 45 lb bars! The other Austrian weight lifters just stood there and watched me struggle. I believe one of them laughed!

Luckily, I didn’t put the clips on the end of the barbell, and I let one side dip down to the right, and all the weights slid off of the bar and hit the floor with a loud THUD! Then the bar flipped over to the other side
(since there were still weights there) and more clanging and commotion happened as the weights from the other side fell off. That is when the Austrian dude came over and helped me with the empty bar that remained. Then he reminded me to use the clips next time. Had I used the clips, I would still be trapped under that bar 7 years later.

Prayer is a lot like weight lifting. It contains a lot of the same principles which we will discuss over the next few weeks in these articles. It is funny how sometimes the spiritual life mimics those things that we do in our physical lives.

So whether you want to get spiritually “pumped up,” I have discovered four “pillars” that make all of our prayer worthwhile, not matter what kind of prayer we might find ourselves doing. These four pillars of prayer come from Jesus’ suggestion of the Our Father, and subsequently from the Last Supper, where he says, “Do this in memory of me.” I
think you will find that if you follow this simple guide to prayer, your prayer life will be more fulfilling, and will profoundly change, and change you with it.

We will touch on these four pillars now, and dive deeper into them over the course of the next few weeks.

The first pillar of prayer is “quality” of prayer. A lot of us think that we need to spend hours and hours in prayer if we want to have a great spiritual life. That simply isn’t the case- since God is the one doing the “heavy lifting,” he is the one doing the work. It sort of goes back to our weight lifting idea- just because you have a lot of weight on the bar doesn’t mean you are doing the exercise in a way that is helpful to your body. It is more important to have a quality time in prayer, and not necessarily amount of prayer.
Prayer needs consistency. When I was weight lifting a few years ago if I wanted to map my progress, I had to do the same exercises every week. That way, I could compare last week to this week and see how I had grown. Every few months or so I would change my exercise routine, but only after consistency over the previous few months and weeks. Also, consistency in exercise gave me the opportunity to work on doing “quality” of exercise, and not quantity of exercise. So the two went hand in glove.

Prayer is the same way— we need to be doing the same types of prayer daily at around the same time. Consistency in prayer helps us to compare ourselves today to where we may have been yesterday or the week before. That doesn’t mean you do it forever, because sometimes we need to change things, but it meant that we could slip into a comfortable routine to help us find that quality prayer faster. Think about the “Our Father,” both “quality” and “consistency.”
Prayer should contain some kind of “activity.” That is, there should be a part of our prayer where we are “doing” something. Like reading the bible, praying out loud, etc. In weight lifting, there is clearly a part where you just have to get down to it and pick the weight up and do the exercise. It is the activity that helps us to work our spiritual muscles too.

“Activity” in prayer means that we are focusing our minds and bodies toward the task at hand, which is communicating with God. Think again about the “Our Father,” there is a part of that where we are saying or doing something.

And then there is a part where we aren’t doing anything. That part is the fourth pillar of prayer: “Passivity.” Prayer needs to be, in part, passive. So does weight lifting. When you go to the gym, you aren’t lifting weights all the time. In fact, a lot of going to the gym is resting in between exercises, letting your muscles rebuild.
Prayer is the same way— in prayer we have to have a time where we are not “doing,” rather we are “being.” In this passivity, we are listening to God. We are quieting our minds, and we are letting God work on us. A lot of people leave this part out, but remember, prayer is a conversation between you and God, and in every conversation there is a part where you speak (activity) and a part where you listen (passivity.)

Look at the “Our Father” again, there are parts where at some point everyone takes on a passive role— “Hallowed be thy name... they will be done!” Activity in prayer, and passivity in prayer. The “Our Father” teaches us everything we need to know about prayer!!

So here are the Four Pillars of prayer (and weight lifting): Quality, Consistency, Activity, and Passivity. Within that formula there is a lot of room to do that the way that best suits you in your spiritual growth
such as devotions, or meditation, or the numerous spirituality’s that are out there. This are the Four Pillars of the “Our Father,” too!

We will go into greater depth over the next few weeks as to how each one is important to developing our prayer life.
There are a lot of things I love in this life. I love God. I love my parents. I love my family.

But I have to admit, there is a really soft, greasy, and salty place in my heart for Taco Bell.

That’s right, sometimes I “run for the border” as they like to say in their ads. I have always liked Taco Bell, although I find that as I get older our relationship seems to be changing.

When I was younger, like in High School, I didn’t have much money. No kid really should, since that is just going get him in trouble. I worked at a movie theater as an usher, complete with bow tie and vest, for $4.25
an hour. There was no way that I was going to be able to afford filet mignon, or the baked salmon at the nice restaurants in town. Heck, there was no way I was going to be able to afford the value meal at Burger King. But there was always Taco Bell.

When I was in high school you could buy a complete meal- 3 tacos, a bean burrito, and even a drink for under 5 bucks. That is still pretty much the case today- even years later, nothing has changed. You can still get sheer quantities of food for under 5 bucks.

I find that as I get older though, Taco Bell and I don’t get along very well anymore. Now when I eat the bean burrito, the delicious soft taco, or even, when I really indulge, the crunch wrap supreme, I find that my stomach grumbles, and my heart begins to burn. Much like the book of Revelation, it tasted sweet in the mouth, but sour in the stomach.
So these days, I go more for quality in my food rather than sheer quantity. I prefer something that is not only filling and tastes good, but something that will really satisfy me in the long run.

Sometimes we can take the “quantity” approach to prayer.

We don’t have to bribe God to love us or give him grace. An “Our Father” faithfully prayed, with all of our mind heart and soul, is better than 5 chapters of the Bible hastily read. Now, I am not discouraging quantity of prayer, as long as it is ALSO quality of prayer.

If you have an active spiritual life, it is probably pretty easy for you to pray for an hour or two a day. It may be easy for you to pray some other devotions that take time. The truth is though, you have to build up to that.
When you go to the gym, you can’t expect to lift 300 lbs in the first week, you have to build up to it. So if you are just trying to get your spiritual life on track, or beginning a spiritual life, remember that sometimes less is more- quality my dear friends, not quantity.

Quality prayer is when all of our body mind and soul is focused (or attempted to be focused, because we all get distracted) on our conversations with God. Quality prayer is like spending quality time with a person you love- there is nothing more important than that time you spend with the other person. In prayer, there is nothing more important than directing everything we are toward God: our entire body mind and spirit, even if it is just for a minute.

So if you are beginning your prayer life, spend a minute a day completely devoted to God. Not doing other things, but setting that little time aside with God. Eventually, you can build up your patience, and
your time in prayer, and you will find more quality time will bring you closer to God.

If you are already have a great spiritual life, remember, you can fall into the “quantity” mentality as well. Make sure whatever prayer you are doing you have the deep intention of devoting your whole body mind and spirit.

Think of potholes- yes, potholes! A little tiny bit of water gets into a crack, it freezes, and the whole hole explodes out! Prayer works the same way- we just need a little crack to let grace in, and our hearts can blow open by God’s grace.

Take a look at the “Our Father.” Usually it is just an minute, but look at the quality of that minute! We hear the scripture, we get a message, we break break, and the words we say come from Jesus Himself!! What a
quality minute, and it is “noble” in its “simplicity!” The “Our Father” always indicates to us the way we should pray.
The Four Pillars of Prayer: Consistency

There are many ironies in life. “Less is more,” “sometimes you have to lose to win,” when it rains on your wedding day.” (Isn’t THAT ironic? Don’t you think?) And there is a great big irony in my life: I love to bowl. I have always loved bowling—nothing like getting your frustrations out on those ten wood pins with a 20 lb ball. Sometimes I imagine peoples’ faces who frustrate me on them. Hey, it beats actually throwing a twenty lb ball at someone’s head!

My dad used to take me bowling when I was a kid. After my High School prom I went bowling. Both of my seminaries that I attended had bowling alleys. Bowling has been woven into the very fabric of my life. And that fabric turns out to be very heavy, because bowling balls are hard to weave into anything.
So what is so ironic about the fact I like bowling? I am terrible at it. I mean super super terrible. I can get a gutter ball even when they have those “gutter guards” up for the kids to prevent them from getting gutter balls. I really shouldn’t be let within 500 feet of an alley.

I have had my moments- I have gotten a turkey (three strikes in a row) and I have also scored in that same game under 100 points. Under 50 points. In fact, I think the only time I knocked down any pins were the three turkeys.

So what is my problem with bowling? That is an easy one: consistency. I have never thrown the ball the same way any time I have tried bowling. And it doesn’t help that the people I have bowled with all give me different advice. “Put a spin on it Wagner!” “Straighten your arm!”
“Why don’t you go order the pizza?” (They were just trying to get rid of me there.)

Consistency is really important in sports- Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, any of these guys are incredibly consistent in their games, and are fun to watch because they can do the same spectacular feat over and over.

Consistency is also very important in prayer. At one point of my own personal prayer life, I was trying something different every day- Reading the Bible, silent prayer, really really talkative prayer, reading a devotional book or listening to music, and everything in between. In some ways it is good to be open to a variety of prayer, but once you find one that works, sticking to it and doing the same type of prayer can have some pretty amazing benefits.

Consistency also means praying at around the same time every day.
For one, consistency in prayer gets us past the “technique” of a particular prayer.

Reading the Bible is just one example of prayer. However your prayer takes shape, it should have some similar, and consistent qualities from day to day. For instance, we should have our formal prayer time at the same time every day. We should start in a similar if not the same fashion every day. We should be doing the same, or similar things every day, whether it is a favorite devotion, or reading the scripture, or sitting in silence.

The important thing is that consistency in prayer lets us focus on the heart of our prayer- trying to connect with God- rather than trying to figure out “what” we are supposed to be doing.
If you have been consistent with a type of prayer for awhile, and it isn’t bearing fruit, I am by no means saying you should stick with an unfruitful prayer- sometimes God calls us to change up our routine, but then stick with that new routine for awhile. whatever it might be.

The “Our Father”: doing the same things, every day! A model for our own prayer!

Consistency brings us comfort in our prayer. Comfort allows us to “let our guard down” with God and let him in. Consistency allows us to stop thinking about praying, and actually pray! It is a beautiful pillar of prayer!
A couple of years ago we had a pretty rough winter here in Ohio. In the middle of February we had a particularly rough one. There was ice and snow everywhere - it was freezing - even polar bears were complaining about how cold it was! I probably should have been worried that I was seeing talking polar bears in Ohio. They were all drinking Coca-cola for some reason.
So of course, in the middle of all the ice and snow and polar bears, I decided that the logical thing to do was to wash the salt off of my car. So one night (yes, night!) I was driving home from a friend’s house, and I decided to stop off at the local touch less car wash.

I pulled up to the machine that lets you select your carwash, put in my order and my credit card, and the door in front of me raised up, and I drove my car in to the wash. All of the mechanisms began to pop and crack and whir, the robot arms moved around spraying my car with the multicolored soap, and eventually the strong streams of water blasted the salt off of my car.

The carwash was over, all of the mechanisms shut down with the exception of a few small streams of water, and the light went from red to green, and it told me to have a nice day.
The only problem was that the door in front of me was still shut. It seems that it was frozen solid, since it is covered all day in water, and water tends to freeze in sub zero temperatures.

So I got out of my car and pushed the emergency door open button. There was a little noise, but alas, the door remained closed. My car was completely stuck in the carwash. I had two choices- call the police, and look like an idiot, or spring into action.

I found a human sized door and walked through it to the outside. It was cold... so cold. The door shut behind me, and I was locked out, my car patiently running inside of the carwash. So I called the number on the side of the carwash: a machine telling me to leave any complaints at the sound of the beep. You should have heard the complaints I left at the beep. They probably shouldn’t be repeated here.
So I went back to the machine that took your order, bought another carwash, which opened the door behind my car, and I backed my car out of the carwash. The carwash people eventually called me, and I got TWO free car washes out of it. I waited until summer.

Now I had two choices here, I could have waited for help to arrive, or I could do something. Sometimes waiting is the better option, but sometimes, we have to spring into activity.

The same is true for prayer. In prayer there are times in which we are to do things, and times when we are to listen. Activity in prayer is a very important part of the prayer.

It is in activity of reading the scripture out loud, or perhaps we are saying the things we need to say to God. Every time we pray there
should be some activity in our prayer. Prayer, remember, is a two way conversation.

Activity is important to prayer for a variety of reasons. When we are praying actively, we have to listen to what is coming out. It is interesting the things that I say and do in prayer give me an insight into what is happening in my soul. What I do reveals to me, and to God, what is underlying in my heart.

Activity is also a reaching out to God- activity helps us to move from where we are, to where we want to go. It sets the mood of motion toward God. Activity in our prayer is our own personal movement toward God. Don’t worry, he will move to (we will just cover that in the next article).
In the last article, we talked about consistency in prayer- the same is true when it comes to activity in prayer- we should be doing the same types of “things” as long as they are helpful. So a portion of our prayer needs to be some activity on our part, no matter what that particular activity might be.

That leads us to next week’s article: Passivity. I think this is a part of prayer that people often neglect. It is the part of prayer where we await a response- where we listen- where we let God form us. While activity in prayer is very very important, what is more important is to wait for the response, and to let God form us. Prayer is not just an activity that comes from us, it is a conversation- one talks, and the other responds. A lot of our communal prayer takes this form. So have an “active” prayer life- because in the next chapter we are going to talk about how to listen!
Let me just start this article off with an apology. I am sorry Fr. Dave Young.

Fr. Young and myself have been friends for a long time. I remember meeting him at a seminarian prospect dinner my freshman year at the Josephinum. He came into the seminary the next year. What can I say, I am a heck of a salesman!
When we were newly ordained, I twisted Fr Dave’s arm to take a trip. He really didn’t want to go, but, like I said, I am a good salesman. The trip I convinced him to go on was to Mexico. He and I blended in perfectly with the population... about as well as a pit bull among poodles.

I twisted his arm again, and convinced him that scuba diving would be a good idea for us to try. He had no arms left to twist at this point. So we took our little scuba diving class, learned how to put on the tanks, how to breathe under water, and how to put on the masks so that we could see under the water.

It was finally our big moment to try it in deeper waters. We got on a boat that took us out to the middle of the water, we got our equipment on and got into the water. The scuba instructor had to fill my vest with weights, due to my naturally buoyant nature. I immediately sunk to the
bottom. I took some weights out and figured out how to stay at the same level with my breathing. It was a lot for an uncoordinated guy like myself to do.

The instructor told all of us to get a buddy, and to keep our eye on our buddy the whole time. So in between looking at the fishies (and there were a lot of colorful ones) I would every so often make sure that I could see Fr. Dave. I looked. There he was. I looked. There he was. I looked.... um. Father?

I lost him, and my air tank was running low, so I had to go back to the boat. That was fine because I was getting tired, and my ears never equalized, so it was painful for me to be underwater. I was happy to be back on the boat. I figured maybe Fr Dave went back too.
I got on the boat, and he was no where to be found. I told the instructor that I had lost him, and so the instructor (Marco as I recall) jumped in and went to look for him. There was nothing I could do. I just sat there, and let the instructor do his job. I was afraid, not only that I lost Fr Dave, but also that I had just lost a newly ordained priest... what was I going to tell the Bishop?! What was I going to tell Fr. Dave’s mother?

Luckily, Marco did his job and brought Fr. Dave back to the boat. Fr. Dave and I have not traveled together since.

It was hard to sit there on the boat and be passive. I am used to being a problem solver, or at least trying. I just had to wait there and let Marco do his job. I so desperately wanted to drive the boat around looking for Fr. Dave- or jump in the water with Marco, but I just had to sit there.
Being “passive” like this, is hard for us, particularly us Americans. We are “do-ers” by nature- we are a lot more like Martha than Mary. So sitting there waiting for things to happen is really against our nature. We are certainly not a “passive” people.

The same is true for our prayer lives. We like being active there too. We like to see that we are making progress, or checking things off of a list. We like “activity” in our prayer. Passivity makes us feel like we aren’t doing anything, but wasting time.

While activity in prayer is important- see last week’s article- we often neglect passivity in prayer. Passivity in prayer is when we sit in silence, letting God do His work. It is that part of the prayer where we are “wasting time with God.” It is hard for us to do, because we often want to be doing.
Passivity in prayer is the most important part of prayer. It is where we are waiting for God to respond, and we have to be very quiet, because as Elijah learned in the book of Kings, God speaks in the breezes, not in the thunderbolts and earthquakes. He whispers to us His answers and His requests.

Passivity is also where we allow ourselves to be molded and shaped by God himself.

Jesus is always “passive” in the sense to his Father’s will. He always lets Himself be moved in the direction His Father desires, even to the “passivity” of the cross. In that passivity we are all changed forever- the whole universe is changed forever.

In many ways, Eucharistic Adoration is the ultimate passive prayer- we simply sit in his presence.
Passivity, in my opinion, should make up the majority of our prayer time. After we have said our part in our activity, such as verbal prayer, reading the scripture, or whatever it is we might be doing, we need some time for it to sink in- to change us- to listen to God’s response. Sometimes God is “under the water,” like Marco, doing what needs to be done to find what it is we are looking for, and we need to patiently wait for him to bring to the surface what He needs to.

The bottom line is this: our personal prayer should always flow from, reflect, and flow back to the “Our Father.” The “Our Father” is the model of our prayer. It contains all of the “Four Pillars” of prayer that we have covered these last few chapters: Quality, Consistency, Activity, and Passivity. Those are the Four Pillars of the way we conduct our highest communal prayer, and so much happens- Heaven and Earth are united, we hear the scripture, we get a message, and Jesus Himself
appears!! How miraculous! Our personal prayer, while there are many expressions like private devotions, or scripture, or whatever, should be an imitation of the “Our Father.”

What a great gift the “Our Father” is- it teaches us to live in so many ways- it teaches us grace, thanksgiving, and love. It teaches us to pray, as it is the eternal “conversation” between Jesus and His Father in the Holy Spirit that they share (and we share with them). It is the model for Heaven on Earth, and a taste of what heaven will be like in the future.

Let God Love you. Love Him back. Do that over and over. That is prayer.