



Back to the Basics: ‘Growing in Christ’

November 3, 1999

The following is an excerpt from the third talk in Archbishop Chaput's "Back to the Basics" Jubilee Lecture Series. It was presented Nov. 3, 1999, at the John Paul II Center for the New Evangelization.

John the Evangelist tells us that “God is love.” God himself tells us in Scripture that he wants not our burnt offerings and holocausts, but our love. The form of our personal prayers is much less important than the heart behind it. Those of you who are married know that the usual expressions of love within a marriage – flowers, gifts, the words “I love you” – are important and beautiful. But what moves the heart like an earthquake is when a spouse does something unexpected – out of love – which is unique, unselfish, spontaneous and sincere.

Persist in Prayer

So it is with God. He wants our love. He wants our attention. The sincere gift of our self is important. How we do it – the wrapping on the gift – is secondary. I'd even take it a step further. When we focus too much on the technique of prayer, we can subtly reduce God to an instrument of our wants, and we shift the focus to our own efforts. The only “technique” Jesus told us to use is the Our Father. Beyond that, any form of prayer, from the most ancient and venerated, to the most spontaneous and personal, will do the trick. The point is to try. The point is to persist – whenever and wherever you can turn your heart to God.

Why must we pray?

Here's another point about prayer. We pray for four basic reasons . . . but the first three get the lion's share of our attention. We ask God for things we want and need. We praise him for his greatness. And we thank him for his gifts. But the most important kind of prayer we often overlook. Above all, we pray to listen for God's will. Remember the words of Mary to the servants at Cana: “Do whatever he tells you.” We can't hear what God wants to tell us if we don't create a habit of listening – and the inner silence and stillness it requires. Prayer is not a monologue. God knows us better than we know ourselves. If we listen, sooner or later we'll feel his presence.

Suffering has great meaning

And here's my final point about prayer. Some of you will remember the old Latin saying, *laborare est orare* – “to work is to pray.” Work is a form of prayer. We can “pray without ceasing” because everything we do and experience can be lifted up as a prayer to our Father. Our work, our joys, our achievements and disappointments . . . and most especially our sufferings. Back in 1984, John Paul II wrote a very moving apostolic letter called, *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*. In it he writes that each person, in his or her personal suffering, becomes “a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ” (19).

He writes that “ . . . every human suffering, by reason of [a person's] loving union with Christ, completes the suffering of Christ. It completes that suffering just as the Church completes the redemptive work of Christ” (24). And this is why the Church reveres the “creative character” of suffering – because “in suffering there is concealed a particular power which draws the person interiorly close to Christ” (26). Even the worst suffering, when given over to God, has power and meaning as prayer. Scripture is filled with examples, which is why the Holy Father describes the Bible as “a great book about suffering” (6).