

POST #3 - HOLY HOURS, PRAISE AND PRAYER

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Getting Our Praise On

Seminary formators need to speak about the power of praise in a believer's life. They should teach that we are never too poor or sinful to praise God, that praising God lifts us out of our poverty, our sinfulness, and ourselves. Formators should remind seminarians that praise is our response to the presence and glory of God, presence and glory which are all around us, whether we perceive them or not.

There is power and strength in praising God, if we will lift our eyes from our own mesmerizing troubles and poverty. Seminary formators should remind seminarians over and over that the Lord hears the cry of the poor but spurns the prayer of the proud (Psalm 34; James 4:6). We are never too poor, spiritually, to praise God because, of itself, praise is about God and not about us.

The praise of God in the Divine Office is a wonderful antidote to the crippling, painful self-absorption that so limits many seminarians during parts of their formation. Similarly, the praise of God in the Office can wear down the selfish insistence that, "Unless I am feeling it, it is not worth doing."

As a seminarian gradually releases any self-centered grasp on public prayer, paradoxically, he will begin to experience the objective power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the Liturgy. Praising God, inside and outside of the Office, frees us and gives us more access to freedom and power in Christ.

It is good when we can pray the Office with full consciousness and attention, but it is not always possible. At times, because of the stage of prayer we are in, or because of our physical limitations, or because of our sinfulness, we will be able to pray only by focusing our love on God through the prayers. We may wish to pray the prayers with full consciousness, but find that the prayers become a kind of window through which we look on God, loving Him with what powers of consciousness we have at the moment.

Prayer During Holy Hours or Times of Personal Prayer

In order for a man to be ready for the life of the priest, he should pray the prayer pattern of devout priests in our day, that is, he should regularly pray a holy hour. If a priest is to flourish, if he is to live pastoral charity, he needs regular, sustained union with God in personal prayer. Formators in many of today's diocesan seminaries, as they have gotten to know the needs of the men who come into our seminaries and as they live in today's presbyterates, have become convinced that a holy hour is a key element in bringing the men to sustained union with God.

The Incarnate Son of God took sustained periods of prayer to be in union with His Heavenly Father. We, who live His priesthood, also need time with God. In this work, I will refer to this time as the holy hour, which is usually, but not always, prayed in the presence of the Eucharistic Lord.

In Matthew 19, Jesus speaks of those who are celibate *dia he Basileia*, which is usually translated as "for the kingdom." Such translations are good and accurate. It is also true, according to certain translations, that some are celibate *dia he Basileia*, "because of the kingdom." We are able to be celibate because the kingdom of

heaven is here in mystery, and the most intense expression of the kingdom is in the Eucharistic celebration and presence. We, who have so much of the world in us, spend time with the Kingdom, in the presence of the Kingdom, as we are transformed by the King.

I am writing these paragraphs from the St. Michael chapel of the Shrine of St John Vianney in Ars. Here, St. John Vianney would see an older man praying. That man, Monsieur Chaffangeon, whose house was across from the church, described his prayer as, “*J’avise le bon Dieu et le bon Dieu m’avise.*” The easy intimate relationship with God in which we look at Him and He looks at us, we advising Him and He advising us, comes because we spend time with Him; we get to know Him. Our Eucharistic holy hour is a way in which the Holy Spirit leads us into this loving gaze and friendly conversation.

Seminarians often need this prolonged time of prayer in order for them to move more deeply into their lives and their histories. When using only short periods of time, it is easy to skim the surface of our consciousness, to avoid penetrating the crust of selfishness and unbelief. We need to engage more deeply in order to dismantle the structures of unbelief,¹ of despair, and of refusal to love. And finally, that inward movement takes us to God who dwells within.

We dismantle the structures of rebellion against love, faith, and hope so that we can break through the crust, the hard shell, so that we can go through the caverns of emptiness and arrive at the deepest level of our souls, where God dwells. This dismantling, of course, cannot be done on our own; we need the Holy Spirit to more directly remove our selfishness, the effects of our long rebellion, and to move us through the caverns of emptiness inside. We need the Word of God to reveal and bring new life into our desolation and dry yearning. We need the love of our Heavenly Father to make possible our access to the interior tabernacle, the house of God within.

So, we direct our men to praying an hour of personal prayer each day. During the first years, most men need assistance to *frame* in their prayer. Such framing is helpful for some and unnecessary for others. For these others, the frame would feel like a straightjacket, but many men need their director’s assistance in coming to deeper levels of prayer.

The Holy Hour in Parts

One way to move gradually and humbly into praying a holy hour is to divide the hour into parts so that the men new to the seminary become comfortable in prayer. One schedule would be for the seminarian to begin, as St. Ignatius says, “for the length of an Our Father” to look at God who looks at him. St. Augustine says that we can begin loving only if we see love looking at us first. So, we begin by looking at God looking at us. It may be helpful for beginners to talk about how to take this look. Some have a ready awareness of God and any explanations can seem clumsy. Others come in with a belief in God, but for differing reasons, cannot say that they are subjectively aware of Him, or experience Him. For those who have this lack of awareness, it is good to encourage them to begin their prayer by making an act of faith such as, “I trust in You. I believe in You whom I do not see. I love You.” Formators ought to speak with the men about God who loves them and knows them more than they can possibly know or experience. Formators should encourage the seminarians to take a step in the dark and to affirm God’s love, presence, and power—even if they are not sure what those words mean.

¹ I am grateful to Father John Horn, SJ for this image of dismantling structures of unbelief.

A friend of mine went through a long period when she had no awareness of God. In her prayer, she used to imagine that there was a wall between her and God. She would sit against the wall and speak to God over the wall. She later came to see that she had constructed the wall. Such uses of the imagination can help us stay humble, stay true. This humility and truth are essential for the men's prayer.

After the man makes acts of faith, hope, and love in God, a second step would be to spend 10 minutes reviewing what his day has been like, and telling God, friend-to-friend, what the day has been like. A third step is to spend 20 minutes meditating on the readings from the day's Mass. A fourth step would be to pray one of the hours from the Office. Then, he might spend 5 minutes praying for people by name and for more general intentions. Then, he might pray a litany, perhaps one of the following, each day: the Litany of the Sacred Heart, the Litany of the Precious Blood, the Litany of the Holy Name, the Litany of Loreto, the Litany of St. Joseph, the Litany of the Saints, the Litany of the Holy Spirit. The litanies are acts of faith, hope, and love; and they help give the men experience in praying the devotional prayer of the Church personally. Then, the man might do 20 minutes of spiritual reading, finishing with a few minutes of thanking God for the blessings of his life.

This step-by-step format for hour-long prayer can and should be discarded as soon as it constrains the prayer. For a beginner, a written format can be the difference between the beginnings of prayer and a bewildering emptiness and awkwardness which become great barriers to encountering God. Another gradual approach to use would be to have the man spend 15 minutes in private prayer each day, augmenting the amount of time as he is able to show himself capable.