## For Personal Reflection

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1. How do you experience prayer? Does it come easy for you? Is it tough for you?
2. How do you pray? Where do you pray? When do you pray?
3. Of the four characteristics that Francis de Sales suggests can help us to experience more satisfying and fruitful prayer, which one do you find most attractive? Why?
4. Of the four characteristics that Francis de Sales suggests can help us to experience more satisfying and fruitful prayer, which one do you find most challenging? Why?
5. In what ways is your prayer healthy and helpful? In what ways might your prayer need to be strengthened or improved?

## Further Reading


Pulpit and Pew: A Study in Salesian Preaching. Vincent Kerns, MSFS. S.F. S. Printing School. India: Visakhapatnam, 1976.

Introduction to the Devout Life. St. Francis de Sales. Translated by John K. Ryan. Image Books, Doubleday. 1989. Part II, Chapters 1—13.


De Sales

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# Care...

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

## At Prayer

*Attention deficit*: a term—sometimes an actual diagnosis—often used to determine why a student might be underperforming at school.

The truth of the matter is that from time to time we all suffer attention deficits, 'senior moments' and other forms of forgetfulness and/or wandering minds.

Including when we pray.

*"Francis outlines four virtues that should be part and parcel of our own prayer with an aim to nourishing our minds, enlivening our hearts, transforming our attitudes and shaping our actions."*

Francis de Sales devotes no less than thirteen chapters in Part II of his Introduction to the Devout Life to the topic, practice and challenges of prayer. Among the many facets of prayer considered, he addresses the experiences of dryness and distraction.

One of the reasons that people frequently give for praying infrequently—or ceasing to pray altogether—is that they get nothing out of it. In a sermon given in February 1622, Francis de Sales considers the root cause for this dissatisfaction or frustration with prayer:"The fact is that our faith is not sufficiently attentive. We believe well enough, but we are lacking in trust. There is no doubt about it: the greater our care at prayer—the greater our attention to understanding our religion—the greater will be our faith...careful prayer demands a faith that is alive and active."

Drawing from the example of the Canaanite woman who was persistent in her plea—in her prayer—to Jesus (Matthew 15: 21 –28), Francis outlines four virtues that should be part and parcel of our own prayer with an aim to nourishing our minds, enlivening our hearts, transforming our attitudes and shaping our actions.

"Trust is one of the essentials if prayer is to please God...there can be no greater defect in our prayers—or in our attitude to everything that happens to us (especially our sufferings) - than lack of trust: it leaves us undeserving of the help for which we ask. Trust goes hand-in-hand with faith: we can measure our faith by the extent of our trust."

*"Frustrated at prayer? Distracted at prayer? Practice trust, perseverance, patience and humility. Take care at prayer: anything doing is worth doing it well…"*

Trust-filled prayer should lead to a second characteristic of effective and enlivening prayer: perseverance. "So great was the Canaanite woman's trust that she persevered in her appeal. Though our Lord turned a deaf ear to her request, she continued to pray, to ask for pity. Her lips could form no additional words, as she continued to follow him with her eyes. How persevering that prayer! If only we were like that!. We want to enjoy our prayer, so as soon as it becomes wearisome or distasteful, we start to complain…and tempted to give it all up."

Perseverance at prayer should lead to the third characteristic of careful prayer: patience. "Perseverance at prayer is a sure clue as to whether or not someone is patient. This is the virtue by which we preserve our balance amid the ups and downs of life...Sometimes Our Lord treats us as he treats the Canaanite woman. Our prayers are not answered immediately, so that we may practice patience: that virtue by which we preserve our peace of soul as far as we can amid the disturbing events of daily life."

*"The truth of the matter is that from time to time we all suffer attention deficits, 'senior moments' and other forms of forgetfulness and/or wandering minds...including when we pray."*

The practice of patience should lead us to practice the fourth characteristic of careful prayer: humility. Recall that Jesus refers to the Canaanite woman as a dog, not exactly the gentle Jesus that Francis de Sales came to love so much. "Far from being offended, this poor woman patiently admitted to our Lord's description of her: 'But I take you at your word, for dogs follow their master and feed on the crumbs that fall from his table.' This humble attitude of hers won from the Savior her hearts desire:'Woman, for this great faith of yours, let your will be granted.' Assuredly, all the virtues delight the heart of God, but humility please him most of all."

Frustrated at prayer? Distracted at prayer? Practice trust, perseverance, patience and humility. Take care at prayer: anything doing is worth doing it well, and taking care at prayer is a great way to care about God, ourselves and others.