

If you've seen the movie *SISTER ACT*, you may remember this scene. Sister Mary Clarence is played by Whoopi Goldberg, dressed in full habit, placed in a convent for witness protection. As the new arrival in the convent, the prioress, Sister Mary Patrick, asks Mary Clarence to offer the blessing at table, and she responds: "That is very thoughtful of you, Mary Patrick. But I really....Oh. Yeah. Yeah. I can.....I can do that. Uh. Sure. Oh. Fudge. Uh. Bless us. O Lord for these Thy gifts which we're about to receive. And. Yea. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of no food, I will fear no hunger. We want you to give us this day our daily bread.....and to the republic for which it stands, and by the power invested in me, I pronounce us ready to eat. Amen."

GAUDETE IN DOMINO! REJOICE IN THE LORD. ALWAYS! Three points, all taken from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks. Rejoice Always.

The first one, prayer, is the key to the other two. But we often might feel a bit like Sr. Mary Clarence when it comes to prayer. We're not quite sure where to begin. That's ok. There are no experts at prayer, just like there are no experts in friendship. There are simply people who value prayer, and do it, who value friendship, and do it. The great teacher on prayer in our tradition is St. Teresa of Avila, who said "Pray as you can." Then she very wisely adds, "Many people spend years trying to pray as they cannot." She also said the if you spend the time, and intend to pray, you prayed! It doesn't matter what it felt like, if it was distracted and disjointed and dry. You intend to pray – you spend the time, you pray!

Anne Lamott says that her prayer every morning is "Help me, help me, help me." Her nightly prayer is "Thank you, thank you, thank you." In between those 2 prayers, she says, is an occasional "WOW" prayer when she is suddenly aware of God's work in her daily life. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2020, p. 36)

Prayer requires some time. And I'd suggest that we need AT LEAST 10 minutes a day. We can easily find it – IF we value prayer. Spend less time on FACEBOOK, TWITTER, and all those other platforms that keep changing as fast as we buy new phones. We can also pray in the car. Bishop Robert Barron suggests that the car can become our own little monastic cell. Pray the rosary, recite a litany or favorite prayer, simply offer God the silence of your companionship on the way to work, the store, to the gym (scratch that – can't go to the gym!), when you walk or jog, you get the idea.

It's also important to speak honestly – prayer is not about reciting a bunch of pious language. It needs to be open and honest, including anger and disappointment that all of us feel sometimes. Barron tells a story to illustrate the point: There was a lady who spent a long time in a Catholic hospital while her husband was dying, going through months and months of agony. Finally, she goes outside and sees a statue of Mary. She starts picking up clods of dirt and throwing them at the statue in a rage. Security sees what's happening and starts to pull her back, but the hospital chaplain comes out and says, 'Don't stop her....she's praying.' An honest conversation with God – she was praying. Read the prophets and psalms for a lot more of the same.

Prayer is not a one-way conversation. We have to be quiet and allow God the time to speak. And He always seems to speak in whispers. I never liked the statement "I'm going to say my prayers." This is not supposed to be a one-way conversation.

We live in a noisy culture, so we need to have silence. We need to silently savor the good that comes to us. J. Arthur Rank was a successful British businessman and one of the U.K.' most successful movie producers from the 1930s to the 1960s. Rank's colleagues said he never used the elevator in his office

building. Instead, he preferred his 'Prayer Stairs.' Rank took the stairs every morning and evening so that he could start and end his day in prayer. Each morning he would pray for God's guidance as he went up the stairs. And each evening as he walked down the stairs, he thanked God for His help that day. (DYNAMIC PRECHING, April-June 2020, p. 50)

We should also feel free to ask, seek, and knock, as we are directed to do so by Jesus Himself. A woman locked her keys in her car in a rough neighborhood. She tried a coat hanger to break into her car, but she couldn't get that to work. Finally, she prayed, "God, send me somebody to help me." 5 minutes later, a rusty old car pulled up. A tattooed, bearded man wearing a biker's skull rag walked toward her. She thought, *God, really? Him?* But she was desperate.

So when the man asked if he could help, she said, "Can you break into my car?" He said, "Not a problem." He took the coat hanger and opened the car in a few seconds. She said to him. "You're a very nice man" and gave him a big hug. He said, "I'm not a nice man. I just got out of prison today. I served 2 years for auto theft, and I've only been out a couple of hours." She hugged him again and shouted, "Thank you, God, for sending me a professional!" (John Ortberg, ALL THE PLACES TO GO, p. 70)

Also, it's important that prayer works for our current station/time of life. Only monks can pray like monks! We need to pray like what we are – grandmas and grandpas, moms and dads, teenagers, etc. And we need to pray realistically about the issues that go with our particular stage in life.

A church organized a Tuesday morning mom-and-tots group where the kids would play and the moms could indulge in adult conversation and sip coffee while it was still hot. The group became very close, laughing and crying, talking and praying.

One day the group took up a book on prayer. The author wrote that making quiet time for personal prayer was crucial to the spiritual life. Most of the moms said they tried to fit in such 'quiet time' during nap time or laundry time or dishwashing time or shower time, but all agreed that a set daily 'quiet time' was an impossible luxury.

The book offered a solution for the quiet-time dilemma: "Get up earlier." All the moms have to do is get up and have the quiet time in the dark before everyone else is awake, because – quoting the book – "you can sleep when you're dead."

So let's get this straight. A bunch of baby-brained, undernourished zombie moms were being told by some monk that what they really needed to make their prayer better was LESS SLEEP!

One young mom spoke up: "Sleep is the only thing I know I need to have if I am going to be a decent mom for another day. I need sleep, because my kids need me to get dressed and go to the park and read the same book 400 times and kiss boo-boos and settle disputes over Legos and cut a single grape into 11 pieces and scoop turds out of the bathtub and not kill anybody, either by accident or on purpose. Sleep is LIFE!"

"How could God entrust her," she asked, "with the care and protection of 3 kids and then expect her to get up at the crack of dawn to 'be quiet with Him' because 'I can sleep with Him when I'm dead.'" She continued "I don't think that's how it works. I think God is with us. Like, day in and day out, in the chaos and the noise and silliness of life, He is there...never absent from the clamor of our kids' laughter, their squeals, their skinned knees, their fussing and whining and raging fits in the TARGET parking lot. God is not withholding Himself from us, waiting for us to come to Him in the wee hours of the morning as a measure of our devotion....! So I'm gonna honor God intentionally in my sleep, because I'm pretty sure God wants me to

be the very best mother I can possibly be to my boys....Tomorrow I'll be sleeping in. And I'm not even gonna worry about it, because I'm pretty sure I'll have plenty of quiet time with God *when I'm DEAD!*" (CONNECTIONS, March 2019, p. 1) And one last thought, from THE DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST, George Bernanos writes: "The wish to pray is a prayer itself." Just DO IT. And don't worry about how!

Second, which follows from being a person of prayer. "In all circumstances give thanks..." If we are able to give thanks for COVID, then we're getting it. And let's be honest. We can whine about COVID, but also know that it's forced us to our knees, forced us to look at a lot of our routines, habits, ways we spend our time and helped us to ask ourselves some honest and soul-searching questions. "Is this good for me?" "Do I want to continue to live this way?" "Are there better ways of doing this?" "Having more time with my family – even though there are days we want to kill each other – has truly been a good thing." "I never appreciated my spouse so much, or my children, or my parents, or the fact that I have a job." "I think I want to continue to eat together every night – even when we are no longer in this COVID time – we never spent enough time together as a couple/family." There are a lot of lessons in COVID if we are open to learning them. And there are lots of blessings.

Third, REJOICE ALWAYS we are told. I think the prayer and gratitude pieces set us up for a joy-filled life. Not a silly, tiptoe through the tulips kind of joy. No, a deep-seated, soul satisfying sense that "God is in the heavens, and all's right with the world." Even if we don't like every single moment. Who ever has? Life always has its seasons of happy and sad, easy and difficult, eagerly anticipated and positively dreaded. Times when we rejoice at new birth and times when we say a last, painful farewell.

This is the rich tapestry of human living if we have the eyes of faith. GOD IS GOOD! ALL THE TIME! ALL THE TIME! GOD IS GOOD" is a mantra that grew in the African American community in the midst of the struggles of slavery. Even in their slavery, they could say God is good. All the time. Surely we can do this in COVID!

A final GAUDETE SUNDAY story, which I hope might add a bit to your joy. A 7th grader writes: My teacher asked what my favorite animal was, and I said, "Fried chicken." She said I wasn't funny, but she couldn't be right because everybody else laughed. My parents told me to always tell the truth. I did. Fried chicken is my favorite animal. I told my dad that happened and he said my teacher was probably a big animal lover. I am too. Especially chicken, pork and beef. Anyway, my teacher sent me to the principal's office. I told him what happened, and he laughed too. Then he told me not to do it again.

The next day in class my teacher asked me what my favorite LIVE animal was. I told her it was chicken. She asked me why, so I told her it was because you could make them into fried chicken. She sent me back to the principal's office. He laughed, and told me not to do it again.

I don't understand. My parents taught me to be honest, but my teacher doesn't like it when I am. Today, my teacher asked me to tell her what famous person I admire most.

I told her, "Colonel Sanders." Guess where I am now.....