

PRAYER: HELPS AND HINDRANCES

Recently, in a course on prayer, I was working on things which help prayer and things which make it more difficult. The two lists related very well to each other, and I realised that really they complemented each other because for everything that helped, the opposite was an obstacle, and vice versa. For that reason, I gathered them together, and came up with one list of twenty pairs of opposites, which will form the basis of this article. The purpose of the article is to raise awareness of the things which can assist a life of prayer, and those which can be an impediment to it.

1. Lifestyle / Disordered life.

The principal contrast here is between a life which is lived from within, and one that is dominated from without. In the former case, the person deliberately introduces into life the things that will assist it, whereas in the latter, life is dominated by what comes from without, i.e. it is what others do which determines what happens in our life. When one has some control of one's life, one can introduce time for prayer, be it a set time, or in association with particular activities that we do, gardening, housekeeping, travel in a car or public transport. The person who organises life in a positive way will ensure that life fosters prayer. However, the one who is blown by every wind that blows will find that there is never enough time for prayer, and that, when it comes, one will be constantly distracted by the things that come from without. A well ordered life will be a better framework for prayer than one which is disordered. The life of prayer demands that we take control of our life, and positively introduce into it the things that are conducive to prayer.

2. Recollection / Lack of attention.

Attention is an essential element of prayer. A recollected life fosters such attention, whereas a life where the mind is left to wander freely will not foster attention. The principle which comes into play here is that one must be before prayer what one wants to be at prayer. The state of one's life before prayer will influence the state of one's prayer. A heart that is given over constantly to daydreams and fantasies, or to filling the mind with what comes from the radio or the television, will find it difficult to focus on God at prayer; whereas a life which is lived with attention to God as integral to it will focus more easily and consistently on God at the time of prayer.

Recollection is the cultivation of the presence of God in one's life. It is achieved by constantly turning the heart to God throughout the day, so that the heart is gradually, more and more, focused on God. It doesn't just happen naturally, but requires a constant effort on the part of the person. One needs to make use of those times during the day when the heart is unoccupied and alone. One must use silences constructively to make them an occasion for focussing one's attention on God. Some people cultivate this recollection by turning the heart to God during certain activities, or practising manual labour as a means of enabling them to focus their heart on God. Pierre De Caussade developed the spirituality of the Sacrament of the Present Moment, in which a person communes with God in each moment of the day. This is just one example of the efforts of spiritual writers to explain the recollection under consideration here.

Under the heading of "lack of attention", one could consider distractions at prayer, because these are basically moments when one's attention on God is wavering. When one gives in to a distraction, one allows one's attention to focus on something else rather than on God. The author of the "Cloud of Unknowing" offers two attitudes to distractions: the first is to fall down before them, as if dead; and the second is to look over their shoulder, as one might look over the shoulders of people in a crowded room to find a friend. In neither case, does it involve focussing on the distraction. In the past, I believe, we have tried to meet distractions by focussing on them to handle them. In fact, what we have done is give in to them by making them the focus of attention. In the face of distraction, one must keep the attention on God, never letting the distraction capture our attention. Perhaps a word could be said here about sickness. In sickness, it can be difficult to focus our attention on anything, as it can be in times of worry and tension. This is not so much a distraction, as a physical or mental weariness, to which we need to attend. Such occasions often call for a different form of prayer, one which requires less attention, or one in which there is a particular focus, e.g. vocal prayer or mantra prayer.

3. Simplification / Over-involvement

Being over-involved in activities in one's life does not create a good situation for prayer. When one is too busy, too involved in hobbies, work or social life, the interior life is caught up with the concerns of that over-involvement. Again, it is an application of the principle: Be before prayer what you want to be at prayer. In this case, it is not lack of attention that is the problem, but the focus of attention on things other than God, which draws those things into one's interior life, and makes them the centre of one's personal preoccupations. One is constantly thinking about issues arising from the various activities in which one is involved. I would put money worries here, as they can be a preoccupation which flow over into one's thoughts at all times, and don't create a climate for prayer. The person who is too busy has many things vying for the heart's attention, and often God doesn't get a high priority. Even when the work done is for God, one can be so preoccupied by the work, that one gives little attention to God.

Simplification of life is the other side of the coin of over-involvement. One of my favourite quotes in this regard comes from Baron von Hugel (Letters to a Niece p. XX - XXI) " Drop things; always keep on dropping and dropping. My religion, my illness, suffering and life have taught me that. Always drop things, don't chatter to yourself - you can't hear God if you do. We need not try to conceive God: he attends to all that. We have to make room for him in our souls. There was no room for Our Lord, you remember, at the inn. In this world, too, there is no room for him. Drop, then, all these things, these miseries: not by straining, or making or getting strength, but genially, gently; while attending, as you must, to these things, drop them; these flies that bother your nose, God nowhere visible. Resign yourself. That is God's plan - faithfully, wisely, resign yourself. Fussiness and activity! What a difference there is between action and activity (Aristotle, God is Action)! People waste their lives in these countless little activities and fussinesses. When I get up feeling I have a hundred things to do then I know it's all wrong. I try to get away, to go for a walk with Puck. I leave everything till I am better. I would like to learn from St. Catherine of Genoa the point of always attending to but one thing at a time. This one action of suffering, joy or renunciation, being at that moment the one will of God and the one means of pleasing him and of attaining true growth in oneself. It is the trait d'union with God. The more full and varied your life becomes, the more this great principle and practice is necessary -to prevent distraction and racket. Goethe's mother, when she was dying, sent down a message to a caller that she could not see her as she was occupied in dying. " I am busy with death." that's right - so I hope too to turn to death, busy with that, one thing at a time. My own experience now when my life is twenty times as full as it was at eighteen, yet it is much more unified and recollected. The great rule is "Variety up to the verge of dissipation: Recollection up to the verge of emptiness: each alternating with the other and making a rich fruitful tension. Thus we gather honey from all sorts of flowers, then sort out, arrange, unify and store, the honey gathered. After which we again fly out on our honey gathering expeditions. What an immense activity was Fenelon's: and a still larger activity St. Augustine's! Yet both were deeply recollected men. "

Leisure, relaxation / Weariness: physical, emotional

Because prayer is seen as a spiritual activity, one often does not appreciate that it is physical and emotional as well. The spiritual life is not removed from the physical and psychic aspects of human existence. The consequence of this is that weariness of any kind will affect the way people pray. There is some truth in the saying that we live in a society and culture that is characterised by physically and emotionally weary people. The demands of our ways of life can easily bring this about. It means that when people come to prayer they are so tired or lacking in ability to concentrate that prayer becomes difficult or impossible. The short term response to such a situation can be to change one's form of prayer to something that is possible in this situation. However, this is only a band-aid solution, though it is helpful for the weary person. The real solution is to look at the person's life, to attack the problem at its root. This can be done by ensuring that there is adequate leisure and relaxation in the person's life. Emphasis on action and service sometimes creates a situation where leisure and relaxation are seen as the symbol of slackers, of those who are not pulling their weight in a very demanding situation. However, the contrary is true: those who work and serve need leisure and relaxation to be able to continue in their work and service. Prayer is the foundation and motivation of Christian work and service, and whatever threatens prayer is threatening the things which flow from it.

The early desert fathers were seen as the great teachers of prayer. They realized the importance of leisure and relaxation for prayer life. The following incident from John Cassian bears witness to their belief.

"Once while the blessed John was gently stroking a partridge, he suddenly saw a philosopher approaching him in the garb of a hunter. The latter, astonished that a man of such great fame and reputation should demean himself with such paltry and trivial amusements, said: 'Can you be that John whose great and famous reputation has made me want to make your acquaintance?' The blessed John replied with a question: 'What is that you are carrying in your hand?' It is a bow,' replied the philosopher. 'And why,' John went on, 'do you not always carry it bent?' I could not do that,' replied the philosopher, ' because the force of its stiffness would be relaxed by its being continually bent, and it would be lessened and destroyed. As a result, when the time came for it to send stouter arrows after some beast, its stiffness would be lost by the excessive and continuous strain: it would be impossible for the more powerful bolts to be shot.' 'Ah, my lad,' said the blessed John, 'then do not let this slight and short relaxation of my mind disturb you. Unless the spirit sometimes relieves and relaxes the rigour of its purpose by some recreation, it would lose its spring owing to the unbroken strain, and would be unable, when need required, to follow what was right."

It is important when people are weary or tense to realize that the worth of one's prayer comes from the love that is in the heart, not in how well one is able to exercise a particular form of prayer. Prayer in these conditions may seem to be terribly inadequate, but it can really be a great expression of love. There will always be times in life when one will come to prayer tired and tense. The point being made here is that this should not be allowed to become the normal thing. Relaxation and leisure in life will ensure that it does not.

5. Nourishment / Lack of Nourishment

Prayer needs to be nourished, i.e. the heart needs to be fed with things that will more easily turn it to God. If the heart is to mull over the fundamental Christian truths, then it must be exposed to presentations of those truths. This is achieved through reading, sermons, prayer days etc. The person who prays needs to be exposed to such activities. As one grows in prayer, one becomes more aware of the importance of the Christian mysteries, and enters more deeply into them. The mulling over in the heart of these mysteries is an important stage in the development of prayer life, and without it one's prayer can easily lose its Christian character. The monastic "Lectio Divina" was an essential ingredient of the monk's life of prayer. That reflective reading was meant to provide the material for prayer. The desert fathers taught that the heart was always thinking and likened it to a millstone which was always turning. Just as the miller could determine what was to be crushed by the millstone, so the monk could determine the things that were to be thought by the heart. It was by nourishing the heart with the things of God, that it was able to focus more consistently on God.

6. Prayerfulness / Act of Prayer

The final goal of prayer is not to be good at a particular act of prayer, but to lead a life which becomes a prayer. It is the way we live which reveals the quality of our prayer life. We pray to live better, to gain the strength to live according to the Gospel. Life itself is the greatest prayer. It is the great act of adoration and thanksgiving which we offer to God. The individual acts of prayer simply contribute to this fullest and most perfect expression of human surrender to God. Given the priority of prayerfulness of life, the act of prayer comes to be seen as a means or tool in the service of this overall prayerfulness. This does not mean that individual acts of prayer are not important. The good workman looks after his tools, and the prayerful person is concerned to pray well in individual acts of prayer. However, this emphasis helps to avoid an attitude to prayer which feels that prayer is successful simply if it feels good, or meets a certain set of standards accepted by the person. Prayer as an individual act is essential for the transformation of life, but alone it cannot bring about this transformation. Accompanying it must be the effort to practice Christian virtue in one's life. History shows that there have always been people who have put all their efforts into particular acts of prayer and achieving certain states in prayer. However, it also shows that these have not been the people whom the Christian community has accepted as its authentic teachers on the nature of Christian prayer.

7. Seriousness / Lack of seriousness

"Where you treasure is there also is your heart ". This saying of the Lord is a way of showing how seriously one takes a thing. We talk about people putting their heart into something, or we say that someone has lost heart. The commitment of one's heart to something reveals the priority of that thing in the person's value system. No one will deny the importance of prayer in the Christian life. But many of us who affirm its true priority do not live it as a priority in our life. The business man may claim that he loves his wife and family more than his work, but in fact it is his work that takes his time and energy, and which, in practice, is given priority. We can claim that prayer is important to us, but the real test is what happens in practice. Prayer is not to be seen as a hobby we can practice and enjoy, but an essential activity in which we must be engaged. It is not only the monks or religious who must be professionals in prayer, i.e. who treat prayer with a professional seriousness. Every believer needs to take prayer seriously, because this is an essential activity within the Christian life. Choosing to be an amateur in this area is to choose to be lukewarm, to not take seriously the journey to God. Paul's images of the athlete are meant to express how the believers should give themselves as fully and generously as do the athletes in the search for Olympic gold. To do less than this is not to take things seriously to be hard-hearted, lukewarm in living one's Christian faith

8. Flexibility / Rigidity

It is necessary here to distinguish between rigidity and consistency. Consistency in prayer means a faithfulness to one's practice of prayer, a commitment to prayer that endures throughout life. Rigidity refers more to an inability to allow change within one's prayer life, a refusal to adopt different forms of prayer or to pray differently according to the particular situation. Consistency, as commitment to prayer, is a necessary component of the prayer life. Rigidity, on the other hand, is an attitude best removed from the lives of those who pray. The opposite to this rigidity is flexibility, i.e. the ability to adapt one's prayer form and prayer time to changing situations and personal circumstances. When one is ill, it can be necessary to change one's practice of prayer. To attempt to continue rigidly with practices which we perform in normal times can lead to frustration and guilt, and do damage to our spiritual journey rather than promote it. A rigid approach to prayer makes it less natural, and makes it more difficult to be integrated in to one's life.

9. Confidence / Lack of Confidence

Cassian taught that in prayer "one deserves to be heard and to receive a response, to the extent that he believes that God watches over him and can grant it." (Conference 9, ch 32) Julian of Norwich takes it a bit further when she records the revelation of God to her "I am the foundation of your praying. In the first place my will is that you should pray, and then I make it your will too, and since it is I who make you pray, and you do so pray, how can you not have what you ask for?" (ch 41). And again, "Some of us believe that God is almighty, and "may" do everything; and that he is all wise, and "can" do everything; but that he is an love, and "will" do everything - there we draw back" (ch 73). Our tradition is very constant in teaching that we should have confidence when we pray.

However, there is another aspect of confidence in prayer. It is believing that what we are doing is good, that our practice of prayer, as we do it, is meaningful and acceptable to God. Often in the past we have not given people this confidence in their ways of praying. People who lack confidence in what they are doing are blown about by every wind that blows, and are

constantly changing the way they pray to fit in with whatever new thing they hear. It is important to help people come into touch with their way of praying and to accept that their prayer style is valid, pleasing to God and helpful to them. Lay people particularly have often been left with little confidence in what they have been doing in prayer. There is a third aspect to this confidence. It is not just a matter of being confident that God will respond, and being confident about one's way of praying. One also needs to be confident that God will draw one on in the life of prayer. Some people feel that they cannot get too far in prayer because they are only little people. They feel that the life of prayer is not for them, or, if it is, it is only at a minimum level. To this it must be said that the life of prayer draws its power from God, and going on in prayer is something to which God draws us. God is able to take the lowliest person to great depths of prayer. To say that we are not able to grow in prayer is to call into question the power of God. Julian of Norwich points out that it is God who gives us this ability to pray (ch 42), and if the ability comes from him, then he can also bring it to fruition. We need to co-operate. Often this lack of confidence is a false humility, which fails to recognize that this is God's work and that he does it search for experiences in prayer, and to an identification of prayer with certain types of experience which must be sought after. This sets up a false goal for prayer.

10. Perseverance, Courage / Acedia

To come to success in anything it is necessary to stick at it. Few areas of life are such that one can succeed without any effort at all. The life of prayer is one of the most demanding of goals, and it requires that one persevere with great courage. It is clear that the journey to God is not all plain sailing; that as one draws close to God great demands are made on one's faith, and it takes great courage to go on. Even in the ordinary everyday events of one's prayer life it is not easy to persevere. Yet perseverance is the key to growth. The desert fathers identified the reality which made such perseverance difficult and they named it "Acedia". Acedia is, for them, the vice of the monk, in that it sapped the monk's energy and made it difficult to persevere in the monastic commitment. In itself it is described as a spiritual lethargy, which made spiritual activity & difficult, and which can easily lead us to take up some other thing, which may be good in itself, but which is an escape from the action which is necessary for us to grow in our life of prayer. All who have tried to pray consistently will recognize this vice. It is overcome by ignoring it, by going on even when there is a temptation to go off and do some other good thing. Acedia reduces the spiritual journey to lukewarmness and seriously undermines any effort to pray consistently, or even at all.

11. Guidance / Lack of Guidance.

I recall on one occasion in my life that I had decided to forgo the advice of my spiritual director, and go my own way. No sooner had I made the decision when I met a friend who has been reading St. Bernard and quoted for me a saying which had appealed greatly to him. St Bernard said: "He who is his own master is the disciple of a fool." I think St Bernard is right. We do need help from others, and this is true in the life of prayer. Cassian used to say that "the traveller who does not know where he is going will have all the weariness of the journey but never get there." I think we could paraphrase that and say "the traveller who knows where he is going but does not know the way will have all the weariness of the journey but never get there" We need help to know where we are going, and how to get there. It is easy to be deluded or led astray in the life of prayer, and enlightened help from others can be of valuable assistance in appreciating how we are going in our prayer life. Access to someone who is experienced in prayer, even though it may not be frequent, is something that will be of great assistance to those who pray.

12. Patience / impatience

I once heard someone say that "the good spirit says be holy, and the evil spirit says be holy now." What the good spirit recommends takes time and patience, what the evil spirit says demands an impatience and instant gratification which is the enemy of a real life of prayer. The pursuit of quick results, the expectation of instant success is a major obstacle to the life of prayer. Like marriage, it needs time to be established, and people must work at it constantly. It is slow, patient work that brings growth in prayer, not frenzied activity. Evelyn Underhill puts it well.

"If you have ever been down into the engine-room of a great liner, you will have noticed the long, slow, smooth motion, the unhurried pace of the engine and felt the sense of quiet, irresistible power with which the ship is driven on her course. Just because of the vastness of the journey and mighty surrounding forces, there is no hurry, no fuss.

Where is the land to which the ship would go?

Far, far ahead is all her seamen know:

And where the land she travels from?

Away Far, far behind, is all that they can say

And then perhaps, you have been on deck when that ship, lying alongside some wharf, is discharging cargo or baggage, and the air has been filled by the tut-tut-tut- of the little donkey-engine, all bustle and fuss, and with an air of tremendous importance lifting out a bit of luggage or a barrel. It is a remarkable contrast - the tranquil power with which the whole ship moves onward in action - the fussy effort of activity in which pettier jobs are done. Do not use the donkey-engine for your prayers; or, if you really must, do realize that the donkey-engine does not move the propeller."

The effort to be holy quickly, to come to instant gratification in prayer can lead to an attitude of having to succeed in prayer. The need to succeed becomes a motivating factor. This can only lead to false expectations and losing touch with the reality of where one is on the journey. It can also lead to a

13. Faith / feeling

The acknowledgement of God's presence in our prayer is more a matter of faith than feeling. It is faith that tells us that God is always present. He is there even when we don't feel his presence. St. John of the Cross says that God shapes us by the feelings of his presence and the feelings of his absence. This means that in our spiritual journey, God sometimes tests our love by letting us feel that he is not there, and at other times gives us a definite feeling of his presence. The underlying presupposition here is that God is always present, but how that presence is manifested is different. Feeling has a place in prayer, but it is by no means the ultimate guide to the value of our prayer, nor to the presence of God in our prayer.

An over-emphasis on feeling, usually good feelings, can obscure the role of dark and difficult times in prayer, of pain, suffering and failure. Our tradition certainly suggests that these times do exist. If we judge our prayer by consolations and feelings, then we will often misjudge the value of these experiences in prayer. When St. Teresa of Avila taught her sisters about prayer, and especially about how to begin, she gave them the maxim: " Embrace the cross." What she meant was always be ready to embrace the difficult things in prayer, because at the beginning there can be difficulty in focussing one's heart on God. She says that if you only go to prayer for consolations and good feelings, you will find it difficult to go back to it if these things do not occur. Such an approach leads to inappropriate expectations. However, if you go to give, to embrace whatever difficulties arise, you will continue to pray, and thus grow in prayer. This advice, to embrace the cross, is particularly important in the advanced stages of prayer, and only those who have learnt it early will be proficient in it later.

14. Appropriate passivity / excessive activity.

The balance of activity and passivity in one's prayer life is an important aspect of the spiritual journey. There is a time for activity and a time for passivity. As we begin in prayer there is more activity, as we endeavour to focus our attention on God. As one progresses, prayer can become more passive, and to continue to be active is an impediment rather than a help to progress. The need for activity at the beginning of prayer has in the past given rise to an excessive emphasis which has flowed over into the time when passivity needs to be fostered. Passivity has suffered at the hands of activity. However, activity can also suffer at the hands of passivity. With modern emphases on passivity at prayer, it can happen that it is stressed to the detriment of that active meditative prayer which does have an important role in creating the foundation for a life of prayer. A balance is necessary here, and spiritual writers have made it clear that to move from active forms of prayer to passive forms of prayer is not just to be left to the whim of the person, but is to be the result of definite growth that has taken place within the person.

15. Freedom / Clinging to past experiences.

One of the most basic demands of the spiritual journey is that we be free to journey. It is so easy to become comfortable in the way we live spiritually, and not to be willing to step out of this rut and move on in the journey. This can happen in prayer. The beginning stages of prayer often contain consolations which a person can come to associate with good prayer. When growth occurs and demands moving on from these types of prayer, a person can be reluctant to go on. Growth brings with it new forms of prayer, and one has to learn these new forms. This can make one feel that one is starting all over again. One feels one has gone back to square one, but in fact it is square one on a different board. In the difficulties of this new learning, a person can long for the good experiences of a former type of prayer, and try to recapture it. To do this will impede one's ability to progress in a new way of prayer. Freedom to go on, to be open to new ways of praying, is essential for the life of prayer. To cling to past experience is an obstacle to future growth.

Sometimes people cling not only to past experiences of prayer, but particular methods of prayer. This is true not only of older methods from past days, but even newer methods which have arisen in our own days. The issue here is not whether or not the methods are useful in themselves, but rather whether the person is able to give up these methods when growth in prayer calls for it. Many lack the freedom to do this, and can be contained within a framework which may have helped in the past but is now an obstacle to growth.

16. Prayer: growth / Prayer: problem solving.

It is a traditional practice to take one's problems to prayer. Certainly, solving problems in our lives is something in which we should involve God. However, while the practice is good, it should not dominate prayer life. There should be a variety of things that we do in prayer, and to make it only a problem solving situation is to limit its potential and real role in the spiritual journey. The example of marriage can be helpful. A married couple spend time together for many reasons. Sometimes they are together to discuss the education of the children, or the finances of the family, or some other issue. They also come together to make love, to foster their basic union which is the framework in which they do everything else. So too in prayer we can do a variety of things. There is a place for problem solving. However, there must also be time for just being with the Lord, for fostering that basic relationship which is the framework within which all else takes place. In our prayer life it can be helpful to handle some of these issues at different times . Certainly, if the problem is a major one, it will dominate one's life and prayer. But, still, it is good to find some time to get away from the problem and to just be with the Lord to deepen one's relationship with him.

17. Good time / Bad time

It can happen that we tend to fit our prayers into our life when ever a space occurs, rather than providing positive occasions for prayer. If we leave prayer to take what is left over in our busy day, we often find that we are tired or tense, and can do very little. It is better to find good time in our life, time when we are fresh, can concentrate, and give ourselves uninterruptedly to God. One of the best indications of the seriousness with which we approach prayer will be the type of time we give to it; not just the

amount, but rather the quality of the time. Prayer needs to be a positive element of our life, one which we deliberately build in, rather than something that is fitted in when there is spare time. A busy life can be the enemy of prayer, but prayer is not the enemy of a busy life. Those who pray work generously for the Lord, and time given to prayer, good time, will enhance one's whole life. Prayer as an extra, as something else to do within a busy life, will not enhance life.

18. Companionship / Individuality

Unquestionably prayer is a very personal and individual thing. However, we often do not appreciate that it also has an important social dimension which can be of great assistance in developing the life of prayer. At times, Christian spirituality has focussed too much on God and the individual person to the extent that the social nature of our relationship with God has been played down considerably. Recognizing that we do not go to God alone can help us to realise that we need to be with others sometimes in our prayer. The life of prayer is not easy, and can be greatly assisted by being involved with others who pray. Prayer groups have arisen in our own time as an indication that people are encouraged in their prayer by praying with others. The most basic form of this social encouragement in prayer is the liturgy, and especially the Eucharist, where we pray in a special way with others. To go one's own way, to over stress individuality in prayer, is not only to lose an important help to prayer, but also to cloud the very nature of the spiritual journey itself. Excessive individuality in prayer can breed isolation from the community, and lead to departure from it.

19. Understanding / Information

Because one has information about prayer it doesn't follow that one understands prayer. One of the difficulties of our time is that there is an abundance of information on any subject. Prayer particularly is the focus of much study and discussion, and there seem to be innumerable courses and talks on it. An excess of information, particularly undigested information, can be a major obstacle to prayer. The purpose of information is to lead to understanding which is a great help to prayer. However, while understanding is meant to be the outcome of information, the understanding does not always result from it. Information is more likely to lead to understanding when there is consistent practice of prayer in a person's life. Then the information can be applied to the reality, and be assessed in terms of it. The practice is the important thing, the information is ancillary. Consistent practice of prayer will help turn information into understanding.

20. Pray as you can / Pray as you want to.

In the life of prayer there is often a clash between realism and idealism, between what we actually can do at this time in the here and now, and what we would like to be able to do. For many, what they want to do is not what they can do now. It is important to realise that while ideals have a place, to live in the ideal world is not appropriate unless it coincides with the real world, which it rarely does. One must always base one's prayer on reality, on what can be achieved at this time. Such a realistic approach can lead us on to the ideals we have. However, to prematurely practice what we want to often leads to us not being able to sustain it, if we can do it at all, and can lead to frustration and guilt in prayer. Walter Hilton's image of the two hounds brings out the point well.

" The holy fathers who went before us taught that we should know the measure of the gift God has given us, and act accordingly; not pretending to more than we have in fact. We may always desire the best, but we may not always achieve it, because we have not received the grace for it. A hound that only runs after the hare because he sees other hounds run, rests and turns home again when he is tired. But if he runs because he sees the hare, he will not stop, although he is tired, until he has caught it. It is the same in the spiritual life. Whoever has a grace, however small, and deliberately gives up acting on it, and strives after one that has not yet been given to him, because he sees or hears that other men have it, may indeed run awhile until he is tired, but then he will turn home again, and he will be lucky if he does not get home lame as a result of his fancies. If on the contrary he acts according to the grace that he has, and seeks greater by humble and persevering prayer, then when he feels moved to follow the grace he desired he may safely do so, on condition that he preserves his humility. And therefore, as far as in you lies, desire without measure or discretion to obtain from God all that pertains to his love or the joy of heaven. For who desires most from God will receive most. Act as you are able, and beg God in his mercy to make up for your deficiencies. "

Another application of this principle of "pray as you can" is not to try to pray as others do. Hilton's comments show why. We must act according to the graces that we have, not according to those which other people have. What other people have cannot be the standard for our prayer. So often, we compare ourselves with others in prayer, and can feel inferior in the light of the experience of others. However, we need to recognise the individuality of prayer and to appreciate that what is appropriate for one person at their stage of the journey may not be appropriate to another at a different stage. We must rest in the grace that we have received, and do what we can with that.