

***I have been trying to pray, but sometimes I just don't feel like anything is happening. Also, I am nervous because prayer has started to feel like an obligation.***

That's a great question. Many people I talk with seem to think that prayer is just something that "flows" out of a person at all times. Yup...sometimes. Sometimes prayer comes easily enough and we feel close to God and it is pleasant to be in His presence and talk with Him. That kind of prayer can be a great gift. But make no mistake: prayer *is* an obligation. Get used to it; sometimes it is going to feel like an obligation.

Do we realize that our relationship with God is meant to be the single most important relationship in our lives? This means that you are meant to be closer to God than to your spouse. I am meant to be closer to God than I am to my dad or brother or best friend. I know that this can be very daunting. I mean, you can see your spouse; you can hold her. When you talk with your best friend, you know that they hear your words and they speak back. With God it can often seem different. With God He can often seem distant...or even absent.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to enter into relationship with God. This means that prayer cannot be merely "saying some prayers" before going to sleep. Really, that is nice. And if it is all you can muster, then keep it up. But you are called into a deeper relationship than that. (How healthy would a marriage be if you just sent your spouse a couple of texts throughout the day and ended the night with a memorized conversation before drifting off to sleep in the middle of it?)

My personal favorite section in the Catechism is entitled "The Battle of Prayer". It begins, "Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort" (CCC 2725). Did you know that? Prayer, while a gift of grace, always involves the reality that this is going to be a battle. It is going to be tough sometimes. The Catechism also teaches that we will often be discouraged, but that this doesn't mean that we are defeated. It doesn't mean that we are necessarily doing anything wrong; it is just the way things go. If we are wise, we prepare ourselves for this battle by knowing that it is coming. When we go to pray, it is sometimes like a nice soak in a hot-tub. At other times, it can feel like sitting in a stiflingly hot sauna and all you can think is that you want to get up and escape the suffocation. And sometimes you need to get up and take a break and sometimes you just need to sit there.

Want to know why? Because God is real. And if you are in relationship with Him it is a real relationship. In real relationships, sometimes they are pleasant and sometimes we want to run away. Husbands and wives know what I am talking about. Sometimes you can't wait to be with your spouse or your kids. And sometimes you would rather be somewhere else. Living up to obligations strengthens love when the feeling isn't there.

Real relationships are full of real obligations. But there are also false obligations we heap upon ourselves. The real obligation is the fact that I am called to give God my time and attention and heart and entire life. A false obligation is that I need to pray like someone else...or as much as someone else. Knowing what kind and how much prayer God is calling you to is a life-long process, but it must not be based off of how much someone else prays.

Another false obligation is when we pile up things to check off our prayer lists. I know people who "have to" spend their prayer time praying Morning Prayer and a Rosary and the Divine Mercy Chaplet and read-the-Bible-in-a-year and read through all of the prayer cards they have collected for the past twelve years. They spend their time with a list of false obligations. I have to pray...I don't have to pray in all of these different ways. The only prayer the Church requires is Sunday Mass. The rest is up for grabs.

My recommendation: clear the deck. Choose one way to pray and stick with it for a certain season. Give it a month or something. Let this method of prayer be the primary way you converse with God. After that season, evaluate it. How did it go? Would it be helpful to continue this kind of prayer or should you move to something else? You have freedom. You do not have to pray in a certain way; you just need to pray.

And yet remember, anything worth doing is worth working for. If having a deep relationship with God is worth it, it will take time...and effort.