

Lorenzo Ghiberti, Gates of Paradise,
Moses on Mt. Sinai, 1452

**THE PRAYER OF THE HEART
BY LAWRENCE CUNNINGHAM**

HOLINESS AND PRAYER



God is holy by definition. When the prophet Isaiah describes the seraphs as singing “Holy, Holy, Holy” in the Jerusalem temple (Is 6:3), a praise of God taken over in the Christian liturgy, the triple affirmation precisely describes God. The word “holy” (Hebrew: *kdsb*) means something like “separate” or “different.” The word designates God’s separateness: God is not the cosmos, not a creature, not we humans infinitely magnified. God alone can say without qualification “I AM” (see: Ex 3). Everything else called “holy” –whether it be places, times, instruments, clothing, images, persons or whatever – is holy only in relation to God who alone is holy. Not to put too fine a point on it: to be holy is somehow connected to God who alone is, in fact, holy. One primary link to the holiness of God is by prayer.





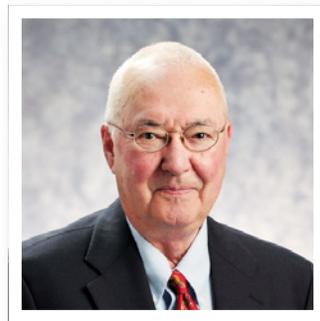
When we turn to God in prayer, either as a community or as an individual, we are doing something that is holy, which is to say, we are making some conscious connection to the source of holiness, God. The *Catechism* puts it nicely by saying that “the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion him” (§2565). That brief but powerful sentence contains within it three words that call out for closer examination: life, habit, and communion. These three terms serve as the inspiration for what follows.

For the Christian, prayer is not a discrete act done now and again. It is a way of life. “Remembering God” (which is one way of describing prayer) is interwoven into one’s way of life whether it be a simple act of thanking God for the food set out at table or offering the day to God upon rising. Punctuating the week by participating in the liturgy is part of this way of life.

To pray as part of one’s life constitutes a habit. When Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks of habits he has in mind a certain quality that gives form to the way we are. In the life of virtue, a habit shapes our truthfulness, our honesty, etc. To say that we are honest persons, to give an example, means more than performing an act of honesty on a single occasion. To have the habit of prayer is to say that prayer, as it were, comes naturally to us. It is a part of who we are. The habit of prayer is energized even when we worry that our prayers are not heard or when we find it hard to articulate our prayer. It is the disposition or intention to pray that counts.

Thirdly, our life of prayer is done in communion. It is crucial to note that even when we are alone, our prayer is not solitary. When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, he began with the words “*Our* Father” not “*My* Father.” This Christian prays in union with Jesus. The liturgy addresses its prayer “To the Father, *with* the Son, in the Holy Spirit.” That is why the *Catechism* cited above describes our prayer in the “presence of the thrice-holy God.”

If we pray as a habit in our lives with some sense of all who pray with us, we are beginning to shape our lives as holy. We are a holy people in the sense that we attach ourselves consciously to the One who is by definition, Holy. Since our vocation is to be part of the Holy People of God we can say that if we remember God in our lives we are striving towards holiness.



Lawrence S. Cunningham is John A. O'Brien Professor Emeritus of Theology at the university of Notre Dame.

How, practically speaking, do we develop the habit of prayer? There is no single pattern suitable for everyone but there are some small things that we can do.

- 1 Begin each day by remembering God and asking for grace for that day.
- 2 Cultivate the spirit of gratitude for the gifts we have received.
- 3 Remember others, especially those in need, and “lift them” up before God.
- 4 One small gesture is to sign ourselves with the sign of the cross; it is both an act of faith in the Holy Trinity and a prayer which says that we do all things “in the Name.”

The great saint and Doctor of the Church, Saint Therese of Lisieux, taught what she called “The Little Way” which meant that she hoped to do every small thing in her life as a kind of prayer. She desired to do the ordinary and make it extraordinary. Her “Little Way” is one that we all can adopt by believing deeply that under the shadow of God all that we do that is good and all that

we are are themselves forms of prayer. Saint Paul tells us to “pray constantly” (I Thess. 5:17) and the best way we follow that injunction is to make our very lives a prayer. When we do that we are holy, which is to say, we are in communion with the “thrice-holy God.

