

“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matthew 6:5-6).

Rooted in the teachings of Christ, three spiritual practices, or “marks,” have traditionally marked the season of Lent: prayer, fasting, and alms giving. I would like to discuss each of these in turn over the next few weeks as we begin our Lenten journey together, beginning with the foundation for all of them – prayer.

Jesus’ instructions to his disciples on prayer, as seen in the Gospel of Matthew, might at first give the impression that Jesus opposes public prayer. That is clearly not the case, however, as both Jesus and his disciples themselves regularly participated in public prayer, both in the temple in Jerusalem and in synagogues. So if Jesus doesn’t oppose public prayer, what does he oppose? Jesus is speaking against the hypocritical, showy, ostentatious prayers of the religious leaders of his time, who prayed, not to commune with God, but to appear holy and to present themselves as the necessary intermediaries between God and his people, thus ensuring their own privileged place in Jewish society.

Jesus shatters that illusion by encouraging the people to go to God themselves in prayer and to build up a close, personal relationship with their loving Father, who knows them even better than they know themselves. This personal relationship with God, cultivated through private prayer, does not take the place of our public relationship with God as members of his people, nor does private prayer take the place of public prayer. Both forms of prayer are necessary, as shown by Jesus’ own spiritual practice. They complement one another, with private prayer building each of us up as unique members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and public prayer, such as Sunday Mass, building up the Body of Christ as unified whole.

Lent is a privileged time each year when Christ calls us to renew our prayer life on both fronts. He calls us to deepen and expand our personal prayer, committing serious time and attention to building up our personal relationship with God. There is no one way to do this. One of the great beauties of being Catholic is that there are so many different forms of prayer within our tradition that, if you find that one isn’t necessarily working for you, simply try another until you find one that does. A good place to begin exploring different types of personal, or “devotional,” prayer is the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (usccb.org) under the heading “Prayer and Worship.”

But Jesus also calls us to renew our participation in public prayer, particularly during Lent in the sacraments of Eucharist and Penance, or Reconciliation. We have ample opportunities to do this throughout Lent in our regularly scheduled Masses and opportunities for confession and in additional opportunities, such as the communal penance service at Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Palm Sunday (April 9), and, of course, you can always call to make a personal appointment for confession. We also have communal prayer of the Stations of the Cross every Friday during Lent at 6:30PM. While the stations are actually a devotional form of prayer, and may be prayed privately anytime, praying them with the larger community brings an added dimension, building up both our personal relationship with the Lord who saves us through his suffering and death and our community as his Body still suffering today. In these ways and more, Lent gives us many graced opportunities to answer Christ’s call to prayer. May we answer his call this Lent and beyond.