

Courage to Pray

Excerpts from Father Tom's favorite book on prayer:
Courage to Pray by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom

Prayer is the search for God, encounter with God, and going beyond this encounter in communion. ...our first steps in prayer take the form of astonishing reverent fear and a sense of sadness. We are astonished at the discovery of ourselves which is also the beginning of knowledge of God; we are astonished to see the world open out towards God's infinity. We are afraid, glad and terrified when we come into the presence of God's holiness and beauty. We are also sad, both for ourselves and the world. It is sad to be blind, it is sad to be unable to live the fullness of our vocation, to be trapped again and again in our own limitations. It is sad to see our world without God, vacillating between life and death and unable to choose life once and for all or to escape once and for all from death. It is always a mutual encounter. It is always a discovery not only of the other but of ourselves... At the start, any man seeking this encounter is alone and must learn to recognize the existence of the other. And this recognition must take place in a relationship and not in isolation.... we must be prepared to set ourselves aside to some extent, to go beyond ourselves and to admit the other's needs and his rights to independence and freedom outside of us....there remains a central mystery that we cannot solve. If we could become detached from ourselves and gain the inner freedom which the Fathers called apathy, that is to say the absence of passion, we could see things more and more luminously. We could also see the splendor of God's presence in this dark and opaque world. We could see grace active everywhere and in all things. Hearing means bowing our heads in humility which is capable of accepting what the other person is sowing on the ground of our mind and heart....We must listen in order to hear and profit by what we hear. This is the proper attitude to God, total attention because we must hear him, and the desire, determination to receive his message and profit by it, that is to say be transformed, changed, to stop being what we are and to become what we are called to be. We must love... for we only see what we love. We think we see what we hate, but really in our hatred we see only deformed images, caricatures. We must also have a pure heart capable of finding God beyond the darkness which hides him.

...if we want to pray with a free heart, we must make our peace with God, our conscience, our neighbor and even the things about us. We must want to obey with all our heart, like a son, like children of the kingdom who truly want what they pray when they say 'Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done.'...let us be careful not to seek mystical experience when we should be seeking repentance and conversion. That is the beginning of our cry to God. "Lord make me what I should be, change me whatever the cost." We must try and discover the real person we are, the secret person, the core of the person to come, and the only eternal reality which is already in us...God cannot save the imaginary person that we try to present to him, or to others or ourselves. It is important that before we start to pray we should take time to recollect ourselves, to reflect and become aware of the real state in which we present ourselves to the Lord....We have to become aware of the different states in which we

pray. Otherwise our prayer will not even contain the truth of the moment....when we stand before him, we should leave all this knowledge of him behind, however true and rich it may be. We should stand before the unknown God, the mystery, the divine darkness, we should be ready to meet God as he wishes to reveal himself to us today. When we cannot feel the presence we must be able to wait with awe and reverence.... God's apparent absence is usually caused by our own blindness.

Are we prepared to find God as he is, even if this encounter condemns us and upsets all the values which have hitherto been dear to us? An encounter with God is a free act where God is in control and it is only when we are humble, as well as beginning to love God, that we are able to support his absence, to be enriched even by his absence. Instead of seeking to share God's serenity, we ask God to share our tumult.

Let us rise in the morning and offer ourselves to God... Let us ask the Lord to bless this day and bless us in it. ... Every encounter is an encounter in God and in his sight. We are sent everywhere we meet on our way, either to give or to receive, sometimes without even knowing it. It is for us to be Christ's presence on earth, sometimes victorious and sometimes crucified. We must be able to be quiet and meditative, look calmly at all the things that puzzle us, for we will not be able to understand everything until we see God's whole plan... Human wisdom must give way to the capacity to contemplate the mystery before us, to try and discern the invisible hand of God whose wisdom is so different from human wisdom. But his wisdom is in the human heart.... We must learn to wait till we understand. We must try and discern God's plan by attentive prayer and silent meditation.... We must try to do this gradually, starting with a few hours or less, because if we force ourselves to strenuously and for too long to pay attention in this way, we will find it beyond our strength and we will collapse.... Then gradually, as our will becomes trained and the concentration of our heart and mind improves, we will be able to spend whole days in prayer. When spontaneity and enthusiasm is lacking, we force ourselves to pray. We are not primarily seeking the joy of an encounter with God but the deep transformation that God alone can work in us. Our prayer should be sober, attentive and humble. It should express the reality of its own poverty as well as our firm convictions and desire.

In dreary times we can start from a scripture text. When God seems absent, the heavens empty and the void immense, we should direct our prayer not to him but talk to ourselves. We should address each word of our prayer to our own depressed and dormant soul. We must treat our soul like a mother taking a naughty child onto her lap and telling him a story.>We must not straightjacket our will, but let it lie comfortably at rest... We should be able to let ourselves go, be supple, not passive but in an attitude of surrender.

We have to learn to discern two kinds of silence. God's silence and our own inner silence. An encounter does not become deep and full until the two parties to it are capable of being silent with one another...When our silence is deep enough, we can begin to speak from its depths, but carefully and cautiously so as not to break it by the noisy disorder of our words. Then our thought is contemplative.

Another book bat Anthony Bloom

Beginning to Pray