



## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS OF PRAYER, LITURGY AND RITUAL

*I encourage everyone to take a moment to read this short chapter by Ronald Rolheiser, a specialist in the field of Christian spirituality and author of "The Holy Longing" that received a Book of the Year Award, and numerous other books. (Most of the content in this document on the Eucharist are taken from his writings.) I think you will find his thoughts extremely helpful as we proceed forward with this Eucharist journey and our "Daily Moments of Reflection" and contemplative prayer. Please give me your input, and let me know your thoughts on this! ~ Jeff Pratt*

Author: Ronald Rolheiser

A Friend of mine, an alcoholic in recovery, likes to explain the dynamics of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting this way: "It's funny, the meetings are always the same, the exact same things get said over and over again. Everything is totally predictable; everyone, except those who are there for the first time, knows already what will be said. And we're not there to show our best sides to each other. I don't go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to share my talents or to be a nice guy. No, I go because if I don't, I know, and know for sure, that I will start drinking again, and eventually destroy myself. It's that simple. I go there to stay alive!"

In a curious, but accurate way, that can also be a description of the Eucharist, at least of one important aspect of it. Among other reasons, **WE GO TO THE EUCHARIST TO STAY ALIVE.** The Eucharist is meant to be one of the ways God nourishes us. It is daily (weekly for us!) manna that helps keep us alive within the desert of our lives.



Monks have secrets worth knowing. One of these is that a community sustains itself not primarily through novelty, titillation, and high emotion, but through rhythm and routine, through simple, predictable, ritual processes. For example, a wise family will say to itself, "We will all be home at regular times, we will all eat together twice a day, and we will all be together in the living room at least once a day - even if it isn't exciting, even if real feelings aren't shared, even if some are bored, and even if some are protesting that this isn't worthwhile. We will do this because if we don't, we will soon fall apart as a family. To stay together we need regular, straightforward, predictable, daily rituals. We need the manna of daily experience to each other. Otherwise we will die."

In the Eucharist, God sustains us in just this way. In a homily Dietrich Bonehoeffer once gave this advice to a young couple: "Today you are young and very much in love and you think that your love can sustain your marriage. It can't. But your marriage can sustain your love." Love and prayer work the same; the neophyte's mistake is to think that they can be sustained simply through good feelings and good intention, without the help of a ritual-container and a sustaining rhythm. That's naive, however sincere. **LOVE AND PRAYER CAN ONLY BE SUSTAINED THROUGH RITUAL, ROUTINE, AND RHYTHM.** Why?

What eventually makes us stop praying, John of the Cross said, is simple boredom, tiredness, lack of energy. It's hard, very hard, existentially impossible, to crank up the energy, day in and day out, to pray with real effectively, real feeling, and real heart. We simply cannot sustain that kind of energy and enthusiasm. We're human beings, limited in our energies, and chronically too tired, dissipated, and torn in various directions to sustain prayer on the basis of feelings. We need something else to help us? What?





Ritual - a rhythm, a routine. Monks have secrets worth knowing, and anyone who has ever been to a monastery knows that monks (who pray often and a lot) sustain themselves in prayer not through feeling, variety, or creativity, but through ritual, rhythm, and routine. Monastic prayer is simple, often rote, has a clear duration expectancy, and it's structured so as to allow each monk the freedom to invest himself or hold back, in terms of energy and heart, depending upon his disposition on a given day. That's wise anthropology.

**PRAYER IS LIKE EATING.** There needs to be a good rhythm between big banquets (high celebration, high aesthetics, lots of time, proper formality) and the everyday family supper (simple, no-frills, short, predictable). A family that tries to eat every meal as if it were a banquet soon finds that most of its members are looking for an excuse to be absent. With good reason. Everyone needs to eat every day, but nobody has energy for a banquet every day. The same holds true for prayer. One wonders whether the huge drop-off of people who used to attend church services daily isn't connected to this. People attended daily services more when those services were short, routine, predictable, and gave them the freedom to be as present or absent (in terms of emotional investment) as their energy or heart allowed on that given day.

Today, unfortunately, we are misled by a number of misconceptions about prayer and liturgy. Too commonly, we accept the following set of axioms as wise: Creativity and variety are always good. Every prayer-celebration should be one of high energy. Longer is better than shorter. Either you should pray with feeling or you shouldn't pray at all. Ritual is meaningless unless we are emotionally invested in it. Each of these axioms is overly romantic, ill thought out, anthropologically naive, and not helpful in sustaining a life of prayer.



**PRAYER IS A RELATIONSHIP, A LONG-TERM ONE, AND LIVES BY THOSE RULES.** Relating to anyone long-term has its ups and downs. Nobody can be interesting all the time, sustain high energy all the time, or fully invest himself or herself all the time. Never travel with anyone who expects you to be interesting, lively, and emotionally invested all the time. Real life doesn't work that way. Neither does prayer. What sustains a relationship over the long term is ritual, routine, a regular rhythm that incarnates the commitment.

Imagine you have an aged mother in a nursing home and you've committed yourself to visiting her twice a week. How do you sustain yourself in this? Not by feeling, energy, or emotion, but by commitment, routine and ritual. You go to visit her at a given time, not because you feel like it, but because it's time. You go to visit her in spite that you sometimes don't feel like it, that you sometimes can't give her the best of your heart, and that often you are tired, distracted, restless, overburdened, and occasionally sneaking a glance at your watch and wondering how soon you can make a graceful exit. Moreover, your conversation with her will not always be deep or about meaningful things. Occasionally there will be emotional satisfaction and the sense that something important was shared, but many times, perhaps most times, there will only be the sense that it was good that you were there and that an important life-giving connection has been nurtured, sustained, despite what seemingly occurred at the surface. You've been with your mother, and that's more important than whatever feelings or conversations might have taken place on a given day.

Prayer works that same way. That's why the saints and the great spiritual writers have always said that there is only one, nonnegotiable, rule of prayer: **"SHOW UP! SHOW UP REGULARLY!"** The ups and downs of our minds and hearts are of secondary importance.