

THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED PERSON'S PRAYER

By ELIZABETH GREELEY

IN ONE WAY one can say that prayer is no different for a handicapped person than it is for an able-bodied person. After giving it a great deal of thought I believe that it is. I can say that prayer is not different for a handicapped person because we read the same scripture, handicapped and able-bodied alike; what happens at Mass and other liturgical prayers is the same for you and me. I have to lead my own private life and to spread the gospel. I too am answerable to God for my actions. Like others I need him and want to follow him. In these respects we are no different. However my life-style is different because of my handicap and this does affect (i) my possibilities of participating in the liturgy and (ii) my thoughts and desires in private prayer.

The sacraments are an important part of my prayer-life

It feels very important for me to go to Mass each day as other people do, but I have the problem of getting there. Can I walk that far? Can I afford a cab if it is a bad day? Or a bus? How much energy have I got? Should I instead lie on top of the bed and read and ponder on the Mass? It takes a lot for me to say, 'No, not to-day'. Maybe I should say it more often, but at times I have to struggle to work out what is the right thing for me to do. I may be able to go to Mass only four times in a week.

When I am at Mass I want to receive Holy Communion but I have great difficulty in getting any food to the back of my mouth and further difficulty in swallowing. At the words of consecration it hits home that Christ changed bread into his body for me, that it was broken by human beings through pride the next day for me, that had there not been anyone else Christ would still have performed this act for me ... and how unworthy I am of it.

My favourite words as I receive Communion are, 'My Lord and my God!' Then, because of my swallowing problem, I am

worried, out of love, in case the consecrated host comes out of my mouth. I have to turn my prayer into action. With Jesus I must struggle at times to swallow the host with the aid of water. Sometimes I think of the cross; my struggle is nothing compared to the pain and suffering Christ went through because he loves me.

The struggle often leaves me with little time for thanksgiving. I talk to him quietly in my heart speaking about love, faith, trust, thanks—I am a sinner and yet he comes to love me and forgive me. I try to listen to him as well as share what is on my mind and the world's needs. But I always feel either my mind wandering or that there is not enough time before people start moving around the church. However it is always possible to return to him some time later; not that he has left me but, in spite of my weakness, I do want to share time with him. He is always ready to welcome me back.

He welcomes me back when I receive the sacrament of penance. This is a great source of grace even though I know that I can have my sins forgiven at the beginning of Mass, in my own private acts of sorrow and when receiving communion.

I have a speech problem which has always made face-to-face confession necessary. This practice has not presented me with any difficulty. My real problem for many years was to find a priest who believed that handicapped people are capable of committing sin. I need confession as much as anyone else. I am human, a weak and sinful creature. Being handicapped does not spare me this. I am tempted to sin, just like others. The sacrament of penance makes me confront myself with my sins and ask God for the forgiveness and love which he is waiting to give. It is important to me that I have found a priest willing to be my confessor and to help me obtain all the grace I can from this sacrament.

At times problems to do with my handicap have created difficulty and distress. I sometimes became confused between sin and difficulty. I would, for example, see it as a sin if I got disheartened or distressed if I had a set-back or found myself with a new problem. With the grace and help I received in confession, I could see in time that finding it hard to deal with my various problems due to my handicap is very different from the sinfulness and weakness against temptation that I must strive, and beg God's grace to help me, to overcome. It became more clear that my feelings of depression were not sin at all but normal painful

reactions that we all have with life's problems. Just one example: there is nothing wrong with feeling sad because I cannot eat everyday (i.e. solid) food; there would be sin if I was bitter and wanted to deprive others and not let them enjoy it (so far God has given me the grace not to let this happen).

I used to go to confession every fortnight but, acting on serious advice, I changed to going once a month. This step has made me see confession in a new light. It has taken away some of the anxiety. It has helped me to examine my conscience in a more careful and more responsible way. As well as having to look a bit deeper at my own sinfulness, in this way I now and again catch a glimpse of the grace God has given me and I have to thank him. This makes me think of all the other things I can thank him for. I go to confession because God is waiting to forgive me as he loves me so much; but over the years I have realized that it is also a time to thank him, maybe for healing something that was keeping me from him, or for some extra grace, or for some good news ... I have to remember that everything is God's gift to me.

Over the years the Church's approach to the sacrament of the sick has changed. When I was a child it was kept for people who were dying. Now people who are old and infirm or people who are handicapped are eligible for this great sacrament. This has caused me great joy and strength as well as concern. While I jump at any chance to receive more grace I personally want to be careful; I think I am afraid of the sacrament being abused. It is a wonderful sacrament in times of real need: I hope and pray it remains so.

In the past few years I have spent time in hospital and have experienced some major increase in my degree of handicap. I have received the sacrament of the sick twice where I felt it was right, and welcomed it with open arms. The first time was when I was making an eight-day retreat. There was a priest there who was unwell and due to go to hospital. I remember being asked by the very sensitive person who put it to me, what my reaction would be. I had mixed feelings as I did not feel ill but I felt it would support the priest. It was in fact a lovely way to end that retreat.

The second time I was asked to receive the sacrament I was again on retreat, this time with handicapped friends. At this time I was trying to face up to a new area of handicap and was going through a difficult time in coming to terms with it. I welcomed the opportunity and can still remember the peacefulness I felt afterwards. This sacrament does not remove the pain of suffering.

For me the healing comes in the feeling that once again I have found peace of mind and heart with God's help and I know that I will be given all the help I need to deal with this setback.

There was however another occasion after this when I was going into hospital and was offered the sacrament of the sick. I remember having very mixed feelings but accepted it, more out of courtesy than anything else. Why did I have mixed feelings? Looking back I am sure it was because I did not know how to handle my own reactions or the priest's. No-one likes going into hospital, but I had been in many times. I did not feel ill, just depressed which is normal when one is in and out of hospital. Looking back, it did help me to draw closer to God.

I have still felt, however, at times very strongly, that it was not right for me to receive this great sacrament in case it should be abused. There are occasions when at a special Mass where the sacrament of the sick is available when I do not feel the need, but other people, priests or relations of the other handicapped present, show that they think I ought to receive it. A special problem occurs in a group for disabled people to which I belong in the parish. The group meets monthly and likes to receive this sacrament every second month. I become torn because, although I am the leader of the group, I am not sure that this is the right thing to do. I become very disquieted and withdraw mainly because I want to maintain the value that the sacrament has. I feel it must not be used as a crutch. I am always going to be handicapped but I am not always facing new areas of handicap. Handicapped people are not always ill and they are not all old. Because I want to keep this sacrament sacred I am willing to put up with the embarrassment at times of having to withdraw so as not to receive it. I would rather do so at a cost than lose the invaluable benefit I personally can draw from the sacrament when it is clear to me that I should receive it.

I like to say the Office. It is sometimes hard to get to the church when they are saying it there. And when I do, I must accept not being able to say it aloud or to keep up by mouthing it to myself. But on the other hand I am lucky to be able in silence to pray with the rest of the Church. Also, when I turn the pages I sometimes remember Christ on the cross when he could not move his hands.

I am, however, still able most days to say Morning, Evening, and Night Prayer; alone, but I know that the rest of the Church

is saying it. This makes me feel part of the Church. I like to take my time over the psalms and as I reread them over the weeks they, and other parts of the scriptures, become more meaningful.

I find the Office enriching it but feel it important to make sure that it does not lead me to forget the importance of private prayer.

Personal prayer

My own personal prayer is a very important part of my life, in spite of the many human factors that make it difficult. However, I have also experienced times of endless graces that are given to me through prayer. When I pray I ponder on how much God loves me and ask him to increase my love for him and my love and thanks for myself—begging him to deepen my trust. I pray for the needs of the world, for my family, friends and those who have asked for my prayers. I have to depend a great deal on others for personal help. It is important that I pray for their needs too. What I tend to forget is that God is with me in my prayer. Now I have come to understand that it is not my talking to God that matters but rather my making time to listen to what God has to say to me.

My different moods

My prayer can vary according to what is happening in my life. I rejoice and thank God for the good things as well as expressing my concern for others. At times when setbacks or increases in handicap occur I feel a burden to others. I have to ask God to help me with these kinds of feelings by sending his Spirit to give me the grace to discern my various feelings and moods in order to know when to act or when to wait until they pass.

Having to come to terms with new areas of handicap is not easy to deal with for all those concerned. At times I have found it very hard to turn to God and talk to him about this but at the same time I depend on his grace to get me through. I can never say 'please make me better' but rather 'always give me the grace to turn this into something positive'. By this I mean using all in my power to go on trying. At other times I say 'why Lord, why? I do not understand what I have done to be faced with this. Help me to turn it into something positive'. It is hard as my handicap means changes in routine from day to day. This is very difficult to put into words because at the end of the day all that matters is that I know that I want to belong to God more than anything else

even when I know that the struggle will be there the next day. But I must plod on.

When prayer is a struggle

I have had the experience of wanting to pray but finding it very hard indeed: prayer seems dry, my mind wanders. I feel that I am letting God down by not finding it easy to pray. However, I have to remember that this is not the way that God sees prayer. God knows my needs before I ask for them. Prayer is a gift. Prayer is a time of growth. When I ask God for help or plead with him to help me to trust him more it becomes clear that my prayer is never answered in the way I feel it ought to be. I forget that God made me for a purpose that I cannot see; that I know only part of that purpose which is to love him and my fellow human beings. He has a plan for me. When I have low patches and find myself questioning his ways, my prayer is often negative. But on looking back, I can see that God was with me all the time. For me this is when that word 'trust' becomes so powerful.

I can look back over the last ten years and see the crises that have occurred: crises of housing, setbacks, increasing handicap, people dying, people whom I love or on whom I depend moving away. I used to feel 'this will never end—I will not be able to cope'. It is at times like these, however, that God seems to work in me and shape me. I cannot put this into words—it is too deep and may sound arrogant. But I do realize it on looking back. In the midst of the crisis I often cannot feel that God is with me. I forget that he knows what he is doing and that he has a plan. But when the penny drops I see that it was a growing point. The trouble is that, being human, I can write objectively about this now and really mean it. However, it is sad but true that when the next difficulty comes I know that I will forget.

This is why it is important for me, without being too introspective, to look back at the highs and lows of my prayer life. It calls for great honesty with God and with myself and so I find it useful to have someone else as a sounding-board. This involves a risk so my trust has to be deep and that only comes through asking God to help me trust him and those whom he sends to help me work through to him. When I discuss how my prayer is going I find that I keep things in perspective if I share the good experiences when I am at peace with God in prayer as well as the difficult times when it feels as if I am alone—which, of course, I am not.

My typical day of prayer

Before I am fully awake, without planning, thoughts about Christ comes to mind. It may just be 'I love you Jesus—come and live in me so that you may grow more and more and I grow less and less'. If I am worried about personal matters or about other people's concerns these may come to mind sooner than I expect. When I am fully awake I will praise, honour and adore God and speak to the Father in the words his Son gave us and ask him to help me to trust him.

After lunch, as I am resting on my bed, I may listen to a tape of the gospel or, if I am feeling low, a tape on the Stations of the Cross—or the other side entitled 'God is love'. At times I fall asleep while listening but soon remember where I have left off. I try to talk to Christ throughout the day telling him about my feelings just as you would to a friend. I try to listen to what he has to say.

When the day is drawing to a close I sometimes listen to a tape in order to help me to think about him again. Now and again, if I have had to miss out on a time to pray during the day, I sometimes try to catch up. When I am ready for bed I look over the day asking for forgiveness where I can see that I have failed him, as well as thanking him—trying to talk to him as a friend. I try to end the day with the rosary but more often than not I fall asleep! Sometimes I will not sleep through the night. At this time I am happy to read from the New Testament.

I find it helpful to aim for a kind of 'timetable' of prayer during the day—although I have to admit that it does not always work out perfectly!

- 7.45 a.m. I awake. A thought comes to mind about my awareness of God.
- 8.00 Fully awake. Give time for my own private prayer. Morning Prayer of the Church and the gospel of the day. This period of prayer altogether will take up to forty-five minutes.
- 2.00 p.m. After lunch, lying on my bed, I listen to a tape on the gospel, or psalms or anything that will draw me near to Christ. The time factor may vary.
- 6.00 Most days I try to go to Mass. When I cannot I read the readings and Evening Prayer of the Church.
- 10.30 When I am at home, most days this is when I begin to think and reflect on the day I have had and bring

God into it all. Some days I will put on a tape again and try to draw my thoughts to God. I like to say Night Prayer of the Church in bed. I will spend time on my own private night prayer. Although I find it very hard, I try to say the rosary but more often fall asleep. Sometimes, if I wake up at night, I read from the bible.

Are interruptions just distractions?

We all have our prayer times interrupted for all kinds of reasons. One reason that is outside my control is that sometimes the people who come to give me the physical help I require arrive while I am praying and, obviously, I must welcome them. It is not just a question of accepting the distraction or interruption, but of making these experiences prayer—finding God in whatever situation arises.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to give an honest account of my prayer life which will be different from other people's. It may appear as if prayer is easier and second nature for me. But although it is very important to me and I know that I cannot live without prayer, being human I often fall by the wayside. I need to ask God over and over again to teach me to pray. Prayer is a gift and we are told to ask for the gifts we need. One gift I continually ask for is the very desire to pray.