

Couple Prayer – Building Bridges to Each Other, Others, and the Father

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"Again I tell you, if two of you join your voices on earth to pray for anything whatever, it shall be granted you by my Father in heaven. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." (Mt. 18: 19, 20)

As we reflect upon these words our hearts are touched by the thought that Jesus had matrimonial couples very much in mind as He spoke them.

We are awed also by the promises these words hold for us - our petitions shall be granted by the Father and Jesus shall be with us - if we but pray as a couple. The question then arises: What specifically is couple prayer? We'd like to share our answer to this question with you as well as our reflections upon the following questions. How do we begin praying as a couple? What are the obstacles we face? What are the joys and growth we experience? Are there any parallels between couple prayer and dialogue? Why should we pray as a couple?

Couple Prayer

St. Theresa of Lisieux has a beautiful definition of prayer. We have modified it so that it is stated in terms of coupleness. We have adopted it as our personal definition of couple prayer and it is as follows:

"With us, couple prayer is a lifting up of our hearts together, a look towards Heaven, a cry of gratitude and love uttered equally in sorrow and in joy; in a word, something noble, supernatural, which enlarges our souls and unites them to God."

This "lifting up of our hearts together]" involves two dimensions. The first is a physical togetherness, i.e., although we pray together physically as a couple, we offer our own individual intentions. For example, in our family we have a mealtime tradition of sharing with one another something we are especially thankful for that day. Although we are physically together as a couple during the prayer of thanksgiving, our individual prayers may be quite different. Nevertheless, we know this dimension of couple prayer is good and valuable.

The second dimension with respect to our togetherness in prayer will be the focus of this article. To us this dimension has a deeper meaning. It's the togetherness that involves coming to our Lord as a couple with one mind and one heart. There are really many opportunities for us to come together to our Father in this way. It can be when we dialogue, when we make love, when the children are ill, when we receive the Eucharist, when we share a meal, when we discuss something important or when we give praise and glory to God.

It is important at this point to mention the value of private prayer in our lives. Private prayer to us is when we as individuals build a personal relationship with God. It's sharing with our Lord everything which is inside - good or bad. Our private prayer time is a big part of who we are and a needed part of our lives. Our Lord shares the importance He places in private prayer and calls us to pray in private in Mt. 6: 6.

"Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees what no man sees will repay you."

Finally, our private prayer enhances our couple prayer. We find the more open we are with God in our private prayer the more open we become in our couple prayer.

Getting Started

We wish we could say that we always prayed as a couple, but we can't. What we can do, however, is share our pilgrimage of couple prayer with you.

Prior to our weekend we hardly ever prayed together. If we did, it was because we were in situations where it was expected of us. Things like holiday dinners with our relatives or church related occasions like baptisms or funerals. Our prayer at these times involved mostly physical togetherness.

Our initial attempt at voluntary couple prayer came after our weekend. Dick and Rita Welch encouraged us to pray before our dialogue and so we gave it a try, with much trepidation we might add. Our couple prayer at these times involved primarily a physical togetherness. In any case it was a real first step on our pilgrimage.

In that first step, couple prayer became a real part of our dialogue time together and as months and years went by, our prayers changed. They went from a very short, "Lord, please be with us" to really lifting each other up to our Lord and asking Him to send His Holy Spirit to be with us in our dialogue.

Our prayer before dialogue really seemed to help us to become comfortable with one another in prayer. We then had the courage to seek praying together in other areas of our life. For instance, just recently our daughter was ill with chicken pox. She was miserable and nothing seemed to soothe her. We asked her if we could pray with her. We really rejoiced that we did. Once everyone overcame the initial awkwardness, we believe our Lord really united our daughter to us in a very special way. The three of us felt very peaceful and very close to one another.

Our love making is another area of our relationship which has been enhanced by couple prayer. We experience a rich, deep, closeness since we started to pray when we make love. It's really elevated our love making in our eyes and has really made clear to us how very important we are to each other. It's really obvious to us as we pray during our love making, how very much a gift our sexual relationship is from God.

Obstacles

Praying as a couple is not always easy for us. There are difficulties and stumbling blocks that we encounter.

One of these for me (John) is my tendency to hold back because Cathy might be listening. I may want to sing or raise my voice in praise, but at times I won't because I fear that I might appear foolish in Cathy's eyes. Another stumbling block for John is position. There are times I might want to lift my hands in praise or lay my hands on the children as we pray over them, but I don't because I feel embarrassed or uncomfortable in front of Cathy. What I've got to do at these times is to make the decision to love despite my feelings. Sound familiar?

Before dialogue, I (Cathy) looked on prayer as my own personal time with the Lord. No one, not even John, was going to invade my privacy with God. With this attitude it was and still is at times very awkward for me to come together with John to pray. It's almost like the feeling I had on our wedding night when we were together physically for the first time. When we started to pray I didn't know where to look or what to do with my hands. I didn't want to say too much because I thought John would probably think that what I had in my heart to say to God was silly.

As time passed though it got easier to be more relaxed and more open. Yet there are still barriers which prevent me from being totally open in prayer. One big barrier is embarrassment. I get very embarrassed by what I say to our Lord especially when we make love. I'm awed at this time by John's openness while I feel red faced and uncomfortable.

Another barrier is lack of trust. I don't like to rock the boat - it has to be smooth sailing as far as I'm concerned. Would an argument start if I prayed for patience for John or better yet if I prayed for patience for me to cope with John? The answer always seems to come back to Friday night of the weekend - remember we are asking you to risk. Trust in the love that he has for you. O.K. Lord - till the next time!

Building Bridges

Praying as a couple has not only been something we've grown into, it has also been a source of growth for us.

Couple prayer is a way of building bridges to each other. Couple prayer enables us to reveal more of who we are and what we mean to one another. For example, when we lift up our dialogue to be anointed and blessed by the Holy Spirit, we are letting each other know how much we reverence one another. When we pray as we make love we also convey the dignity and sacredness we have for one another and our love making. Praying over the children reveals to us how much we care for the flesh and blood expressions of our love.

Couple prayer also enables us to build bridges to others. The birth of our fifth child, Patrick Francis, was an occasion when this happened. In the delivery room of the

hospital we prayed for Patrick's safe delivery. We asked the Lord to bless Cathy, the doctor and the nurse. Our praying together freed us to express our joy, excitement and thankfulness openly when Patrick was delivered.

This seemed to have an elevating affect on the doctor and nurse. The doctor seemed to be as excited as we were over Patrick's birth. This impressed us because his reaction had been subdued after the delivery of our fourth child. The nurse was excited also. She seemed to beam and really take an interest in Patrick. As she handed him over to John to be held she said, "It's great to see a couple as excited over their fifth as some couples are over their first"

Couple prayer is also an avenue for God to reveal Himself to us. There have been times as we prayed during our love making that God has spoken to us about how our love making expresses in miniature the love God has for us. God has shared with us in an intimate way the meaning of Jesus' prayer for all believers:

"I have given them the glory you gave me - that their unity may be complete. So shall the world know that you sent me, and that you loved them as you loved me" (Jn. 17: 22, 23)

Dialogue and Couple Prayer

We believe that there are many similarities between dialogue and couple prayer. In a very real sense our dialogue is a continuation of our prayer. We know that the openness we experienced in dialogue led us to take our first step in our praying together and now, as we've become more open in prayer our dialogue is enhanced by added vulnerability and the added awareness of the sacredness of our love for one another.

As we write to each other each day our goal is to write a love letter. We give so much more to each other in a love letter. It is more than a personal reflection of individual needs, wants, feelings, and attitudes. Our love letters hopefully always go that one step further: to convey to each other that we are loved, to build up as man and woman, husband and wife, and to reflect the love we have for each other as well as the love our Lord has for our beloved.

So too, when we come together to pray we don't want to merely bring our personal needs and wants; no, we really want our prayer to be like a love letter to our Lord and convey above all else our love for Him and our gratitude in His loving us so deeply.

Just as our dialogue has the WEDS formula to support it, there is a formula that we use to support our couple prayer. We call it H-O-P-E. The H stands for hold hands. This helps us to come before the Lord united. The O stands for openness, i.e., we should be open to and aware of God's presence as we pray. Openness involves putting aside the obstacles which interfere with couple prayer and the willingness to share with one another what the Lord is saying to us. The P is for prime time. This is a little different than the prime time of dialogue. For us it is the times we are most united as a couple – in our dialogue, in our lovemaking, in our love for the children. The E is for everyday.

Like dialogue, the full fruits of prayer will not be experienced unless it is a daily lived experience.

The word hope has a lot of meaning to us, much more than just a formula to follow when we pray. It is the hope that tomorrow when we wake up a little more of the world will be changed. It's the hope we have that when our sons grow up they will become priests. It's constant hope that more couples will experience the weekend and that all people will be drawn to our Lord. This hope we have, coupled with the fact that our praying together draws us closer to each other and closer to our Lord, is why we pray as a couple. The love we have for each other is blessed and sanctified in our couple prayer. Our coupleness is strengthened and our love for our children is enhanced. We really believe we were blessed the day Dick and Rita encouraged us to pray together and we believe that every prayer we pray together is twice blessed by God.

We know we've only experienced the first fruits of God's love through our prayer. We believe that our Lord has so much more to reveal to us through our coming to Him together, so we plan to continue in our couple prayer and to encourage others to step out in love and faith.

We seek in our prayer the Lord's will in all areas of our life: family decisions, our home, money, children. We seek to heal and forgive through our prayer. Most of all we plan to continue because we believe our Lord desires that we pray together.

In St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, we are encouraged to continue to pray:

"Dismiss all anxiety from your minds. Present your needs to God in every form of prayer and in petitions full of gratitude. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil.4:6, 7.)