

CHAPTER THREE



Discerning the Relationship

We make judgments about relationships every day. This might happen subtly as we plan our weekends and decide whom we want to hang around with and whom we want to avoid, or it might be more explicit, like labeling someone on our social media a “close friend” or an “acquaintance.” Knowing the depth of various relationships in our lives helps us to know what, if any, next step we need to take for greater intimacy. The same is true in our relationship with God. Saint Ignatius of Loyola gave us a roadmap of our relationship with God in his *Spiritual Exercises*, which can help us to know where we are and where we are heading.

Ultimately, the goal of our relationship with God is the intimacy of mutual friendship.

While Ignatius defined mutuality and encouraged it, the *Exercises* do not go into much detail about the practicalities of that intimacy. In this chapter, I will pick up where Ignatius left off. I'll unpack the implications and practicalities of mutual intimacy with God by defining personal prayer and suggesting some marks, or indicators, that can help us discern the depth of our relationship with God. In doing so, we begin to see how mutual intimacy with God is similar to mutual intimacy with others.

What Is Personal Prayer?

I define personal prayer as single-minded relational time with God that cultivates a deeper, more authentic love and awareness of God, ourselves, others, and creation. As such, personal prayer is different from communal prayer—when we pray *with* others—and intercessory prayer—when we pray *for* others. Instead, personal prayer is special one-on-one time with God. This definition of personal prayer is not meant to be restrictive, nor is it meant to be a benchmark that feeds our egos and makes us feel like we've "accomplished" the task of spiritual growth. Instead, it is meant to encourage greater intimacy with God. In order to better understand personal prayer, let's look at some of the key words and phrases in my definition.

When I say that personal prayer is *single-minded*, I mean that it ideally avoids multitasking. Most of us are really good at multitasking, including during prayer. We pray while we do the laundry. We pray while we drive. While multitasking is fine for intercessory prayer, personal prayer ideally entails setting everything else aside so that we can be fully present to God. By doing

so, we reverence the importance of what we have to say to God and the importance of what God has to say to us. We find something similar in our human relationships.

When a husband is enjoying a football game on TV and his wife asks him about the weather, he will more than likely continue watching the game while he talks to her because the topic of conversation is fairly mundane. But, if she sits down next to him and says, “Honey, we’re pregnant!” he will turn off the TV, turn toward her, and give her his full attention (we hope). If we tend to think of our personal prayer as time spent with God talking about mundane and trivial things, we will probably multitask while praying. However, if we reverence that there are really important things that we want to share with God and God wants to share with us, we will set everything else aside and be single-minded during prayer.

Personal prayer is also *relational time* spent with God. In other words, it is time spent sharing the deepest, most important movements of our hearts. This is not easy! We often fear such vulnerability and transparency. Sometimes it’s easier and feels safer to simply let our personal prayer become time for Scripture study or spiritual reading. At other times, it’s more comfortable to fill up our personal prayer time telling God what he needs to do, whom he needs to bless, how he needs to forgive, and where he needs to manifest himself. We might avoid taking time to listen to God in prayer, finding it easier to believe that he isn’t interested in speaking to us. We might find it safer to believe that God is “out there” and we are “down here.” It might feel less overwhelming to think about God’s care for us as being more like how the president of the United States cares for Americans than like how a lover cares for his beloved. Regardless of the creative ways we avoid sharing

with God the most important movements of our hearts, they keep our personal prayer from being relational.

In addition to personal prayer being single-minded and relational, it is also time spent *with God*. While that might seem obvious, it's amazing how easy it is to turn prayer into a conversation with ourselves rather than a dialogue with God. Years ago, I heard a man say that many Catholics go to Eucharistic Adoration and spend an hour adoring themselves. This gentleman was expressing how easy it is for us to finish our prayer time without having consciously spent time with God. Personal prayer can easily become just "one more thing" to check off our to-do list, and when it does, we often spend our prayer preoccupied with what we need to get accomplished rather than focusing on God.

Lastly, personal prayer should *cultivate* a deeper, more authentic love and awareness of God, ourselves, others, and creation. This is just a fancy way of saying that our prayer should bear fruit. If we have been praying a particular way for years and we find ourselves growing angrier, more hateful, impatient, unkind, abrasive, and controlling, then we need to find a new way to pray! It might be that we are spending a considerable amount of time in prayer each day, but it's not relational prayer; it's not connecting our heart in intimacy with the heart of Christ.

While there's no one right way to pray, personal prayer is rightly defined and judged by the fruit it bears in our relationships with God, ourselves, others, and creation. When our hearts deeply connect with God in prayer we find the fruits of the Spirit listed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians being manifested, namely, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). In addition to these fruits, we might also find ourselves growing in the

Beatitudes,¹⁸ the theological virtues¹⁹ and the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.²⁰

Take a moment to consider a time when your personal prayer consisted of these four important aspects—*single-minded, relational time with God that cultivates spiritual fruit*. What was the experience like and when did it happen? For Beatrice, it happened just five weeks before she died. When she came to my office for spiritual direction the first time, she was filled with anger. It was clear that she had desired an intimate relationship with God her entire life yet feared what that intimacy required.

She began our meeting focused on her distaste with the Song of Songs in the Old Testament, also known as the Song of Solomon. She explained that it was “too intimate” and “should not be in the Bible.” At the end of our session, I encouraged her to read the Song of Songs as the author intended—as a play—with her taking the part of the bride and God taking the part of the groom. At the age of 82, she was fearful, but willing.

Beatrice returned to my office a couple of weeks later filled with joy. She explained how she finally understood the Song of Songs, and more importantly, she finally understood that God was madly in love with her! She had experienced relational prayer! That particular Scripture allowed her to finally express her deep love for God without feeling embarrassed or shameful, and it allowed her to fearlessly hear God’s unconditional love for her. This became a particularly important consolation for both Beatrice and her family when she died about a month later.

18 Matthew 5:3–11; Luke 6:20–22.

19 1 Corinthians 13:13.

20 Matthew 25:34–40.

Beatrice's experience reminds us that God is clearly not satisfied with simply creating us or even saving us. He has continually revealed through Scripture, creation, and Jesus Christ that he desires to be in an intimate, unique, and personal relationship with us. Our personal prayer is an essential component to that intimate relationship with God, just as meaningful conversations are essential to lovers. Let's look, then, at some of the marks of an intimate relationship with God that has been deepened through relational prayer.

Marks of Relationality with God

Knowing some of the marks of healthy human relationships can help us to discern our relationship with God and the relationality of our prayer. For example, most of us have experienced the important differences between casual and intimate human relationships. Casual relationships are driven by our own needs, while intimate relationships are driven by the other person's needs. Another way of saying this is that immature love looks after its own needs while mature, authentic love selflessly desires what is best for the other.

When we are in a casual relationship with God, it is often all about us. We want God to do this or that. We need him to fix this or that. We go to church and pray primarily because we don't want to feel guilty or because we hope it will help us get what we want.

A deeper, more mature relationship with God primarily focuses on God. We find ourselves wondering what we can do to please God because we love him. We desire to be in church because of what we can bring to God through our praise and gratitude, as well as what we can bring to others through our loving presence. Such selflessness is a mark of our healthy and relational love for God.

In addition to intimacy being deepened by selflessness, there are numerous other marks of healthy human relationships that we can apply to our relationship with God. Psychology helps us name such marks. Many psychologists agree that the following characteristics are the most common marks of healthy human friendships:

Honesty • Communication • Shared responsibility
Respect • Trust • Support • Commitment
Specialness • Sense of playfulness/fondness

Using these characteristics, as well as others, I have formulated the following eleven marks of a healthy relationship with God. When our personal prayer remains deeply relational, we will more than likely see these marks evident in our friendship with God; they will help us to be confident that we have a personal, intimate relationship with him. I have included some questions for each mark and hope they are helpful in discerning the ways in which your friendship with God can grow in intimacy and mutuality.

1. Friends are grateful for one another.

Healthy relationships are saturated in gratitude. Without regular expressions of appreciation, friends and lovers will eventually feel used and unappreciated. The same thing is true in our relationship with God. This is undoubtedly why sacred Scripture is filled with reminders for us to thank God. For example, Saint Paul instructs us to “persevere in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). Also, the New Testament word “eucharist” means “thanksgiving” and was an essential quality of the early Christian community.

Not only is it important for us to express our appreciation for God and what he does for us, it's also important for us to receive God's appreciation. Healthy relationships require such reciprocity.

- When was the last time you let God thank you for who you are and what you do for him?

This might include receiving his gratitude through the words and actions of others, or simply through his Holy Spirit speaking to you during personal prayer. Any resistance within us to letting God thank us is a reminder that we still have room to grow in our mutuality with God.

2. Friends admire each other.

What do you admire most about your best friend? Maybe it's her deep kindness and acceptance of others, or her generosity. Most of us are conscious of the gifts we most admire in our friends, and more than likely, they have shared what they most admire about us. This is a mark of a healthy friendship. The same is true in our relationship with God.

When our prayer is relational, we find ourselves aware of what we most admire about Christ and are open to hearing him share with us what he most admires about us. We primarily learn what we most admire about Christ through our knowledge of him in the gospels, and we primarily come to know what he most admires about us through others and through prayer.

- What do you admire most about Christ right now in your spiritual journey? What does Christ admire most about you?

3. Friends desire to become more like one another.

Often, the very things we admire in our friends are the things we desire to emulate. Take for example Ruth and Naomi. In the biblical book named after her, Ruth expressed her desire to become more like Naomi, saying, “Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16). Just as she desired to become more like her friend, we find a similar thing in our relationship with God.

Recently in prayer, I reflected on the core values that guide my life and ministry and compared them to Jesus’ core values. These meditations have been very fruitful and beautiful, especially as I continue to discover values in Jesus that I desire to imitate. It has opened up new dialogues with Christ and new experiences of intimacy with him.

- What aspect of Christ’s personality and service do you most deeply desire to imitate?

Through personal prayer, our response to this question will move beyond such generalities as “everything,” as we find ourselves answering in very specific ways, such as, “to serve the least among us,” or “to bless the person who has hurt me the most” or “to accept the blessing of poverty.” Such answers indicate that we have truly come to know Christ and we desire to mirror his gifts.