

PRAY
HOW TO READ THE NEWSPAPER

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A seminary professor of spirituality has prevailed upon me to write this Thinksheet for use with his students, and I hasten to do so, as his class is about to "take up."...Qualifications? Well, I do pray the papers, have done so for decades. Prayed the NY TIMES (+, occasionally, the WALL ST. JOURNAL & a few others) daily for 20 years of commuter runs onto Manhattan ($\frac{1}{2}$ as on the UCC national staff, $\frac{1}{2}$ as on the NY Theol. Sem. faculty). In many retreats around the country, put the NY TIMES (& sometimes some other newspaper) on the altar to the Bible's right (so that, audience-seen, the Bible would be on the right; I can't always remember the details of the USA Flag Code, but my Bible-Display Code is easy: the Word, as that through which God gives me to see the world aright, has the place of honor over the world)...Two stories to reinforce my qualifications: (1) Many a clergy (if "chair," why not unisex "clergy"), many years after a retreat I led, has (yes, not "have") come up to me & said "What I remember best was the Bible & the newspaper alongside each other on the altar, & what you made of that & had us do with it." (2) Recently at NY Seminary I heard some teachers, former students of mine, agreeing that "no matter the course's subject or the agenda for the session, Willis always began with prayer immediately followed by something in the day's NY TIMES." (Such teaching was either good or bad, but it was mine, & it underlines my seriousness in this Thinksheet.)

1. I once saw a Chinaman play two games of pingpong at once. (If you think the old term "Chinaman" racist, change to "China man"; if you think it sexist to refer to the gender, change to "Chinese--a Chinese"). The two tables were backtoback (fronttofront?), & he was awesomely ambidextrous....Praying without ceasing, which the Spirit in the Word instructs us to, is double pingpong. One game is communion (listening/speaking) WITH God; the other is inner participation in the world IN THE PRESENCE OF God. Now imagine (it can only be imagined, as it's physically impossible) that the 1st game is being played vertically & the 2nd horizontally, so that your body, your "self," is the point of intersection of a cross, you being the crucifix. (Yes, watch it! You can let the devil tempt you to messianism even when you're doing so apparently innocuous a thing as reading the morning paper!) "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal.2.20). So we've arrived at three principles of Christian prayer:

(1) It's monotheocentric, our consciousness not scattered among many deities (idols, values) but gathered around the One God of Heaven & Earth. To the extent it's existentially what it is theoretically--viz, total, "prayer without ceasing"--it looks from the outside to be mono-maniacal. Down with single-issue politics, but up with single-issue praying: What is God's will, how do I-we discover it, & how then can I-we do it? (NB: Judaism & Christianity are not similar here, they are identical. We are of one faith though of two religions.)

(2) It's worldly, indeed more worldly than "the world without God." Philosophically we Christians must judge nonworldly, antiworldly, unworldly, & otherworldly religions & versions of religion (including Christianity) not as acceptable alternatives or even as only inferior: we must declare them to be, and confront them as, wrong. (Again beware the Evil One! No matter how pious the motive, indeed just when the motive is pious, our souls are imperiled whenever we, on whose souls Perpetual Light does not perpetually fall, declare any human being wrong!) The old Kirkridge slogan, "Pray & picket!", rests on this truth: Christian prayer, prayer when it's Christian (ditto for Jewish!), is an eso-/exo- (inner/outer, soul-&-world, reflection-&-action) continuum.

(3) It's christocentric-cruciform. Christian prayer is the ^{overt}

praxis of "one foot in heaven" & one on earth. With Jesus as the central model (1Jn.4.9,17), it's the way we Christians can be, and imperfectly but conatively are, "IN but not OF the world." Early Christian cruciform (cross-shaped) prayer & meditation contributed to, perhaps was the central energy & even origin of, the Cross as our Faith's central symbol. The Cross symbolized & (in pop Christianity, quasimagically effectuated) the power of God (Jesus' crucifixion-resurrection being viewed as a single, Christ-the-victim/victor event). But also, manifoldly, the wisdom of God. (See the brilliant 8th chapter, "Christ Crucified," in Jaroslav Pelikan's JESUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES, H&R/85.) Iconographic history lets us see, instead of only hear (through historical texts), the early Christians' feelings, ideas, & intentions vis-a-vis the Cross: "God be in my eyes & in my seeing" (as St. Patrick, in what was to become the land of the Celtic Cross, put it). Recall also this, from this Thinksheet's intro: "the Word, as that through which God gives me to see the world aright." The cruciform Word, centering all tensions, dualities, convergences (coincidentia oppositorum) & thus serving the purposes as much of the Christian mind as of the Christian heart. Note also my definition of a religion as "a way of seeing, & living in, the world." Existentially & intentionally, Christian prayer (as in "praying the newspaper") is Christian life, the Christian religion in being & in action. Prayer-spirituality-life are one.

2. But what concretely do I DO when I pray the newspaper? Here are some CLUES as to (1) what I do day by day & (2) what I've led others, on retreats & in classes, to do:

(1) I say something like this: "Lord, here is the world in my lap again, my baby for these moments. It's a real though deformed representation, even sacrament, of the deformed but real world you made & I have helped both deform & remake. It is bread I now offer to you along with the wine of my attention. Bless the world through this Mystery, this pale reflection of your Body broken & your Blood spilled."

(2) I put a simple check in front of articles I want to review quickly when I've finished the paper. In reflection on the action of reading the paper, I ask something like this: "Why did I read just those articles? are there any I should have read & didn't? if so, why didn't I?"

(3) I may write, in the margin next to an article, a prayer in the personal code of symbols, possibly + some words: do your own thing in this so little space....In groups, I've asked individuals to volunteer to read the margins of their newspapers & then share how the prayer (cor)relates with the article. Or, as training in this spiritual discipline, I may read an article aloud & ask the participants to write prayers to share. Humor, laughter, has never failed to erupt in these newspaper-prayer sessions.

(4) If I intend to clip, I underline the key word or phrase, draw a line from it to the mg., & there put "#." DANGER: Too many "#s" & I'm tempted to forget the whole thing & clip nothing! Be highly selective, realistically reflecting that you'll probably use almost nothing of what you clip. But NOTE: The very act of intending to clip, as it sharpens your attention, deepens the mnemonic impression & paradoxically makes it less necessary to clip in order to use in the future (memory being, in efficiency, in direct proportion to the intensity of attention).

(5) Talk back to the paper in apostrophe as you're talking with God in prayer. Fall into congratulation (& sometimes write notes), debate (& sometimes scream in Letters to the Editor), reverie (participating imaginatively in the action you're reading about). In your mind begin sermons, letters, essays, maybe even (!) Thinksheets.

(5) Balance your reading: Bible, newspaper, great literature.