

I try to pray, but I keep getting distracted. Am I doing something wrong?

Maybe.

Seriously, it might be your fault, but it isn't something that can't be dealt with, so don't panic and stop reading or anything. Let me ask you a couple questions: Where are you trying to pray? When are you trying to pray? Now, of course we can pray anywhere, but do I limit my prayer time to when I'm driving to work? Am I trying to read the Bible at the kitchen table while someone else is making breakfast? Do you keep falling asleep in the middle of your prayers? Well, it might help if you didn't try to pray while lying in bed snuggled beneath the covers. Do you leave your prayer up to chance ("I'll get around to it if I can find the time")?

St. John Chrysostom reminded us that we can (and ought) to pray while we are at work, or while we are shopping, or while we are making dinner...but that can't be the bulk of our prayer time. I know a doctor who prays the Rosary while running, a bishop who does it while swimming laps, and a priest who listens to the Psalms on his iPod while on his treadmill. But for any of those individuals to enter into intimate union with God, they will need to find a quiet place where their only occupation is relationship with God. Think of it this way: Sometimes I will call my dad while I'm driving somewhere. I am calling because I want to talk with him, but also because I don't really have anything else to do at that particular moment. He doesn't mind; he likes talking with me. But what would it mean if I called when there was nothing else on my mind but the conversation I was having with him? Wouldn't that at least open up the possibility of a more meaningful (and fruitful) conversation?

And haven't you noticed how much easier it is to talk with someone you see on a regular basis? You don't have to spend time on chit-chat, and you don't have to try and figure the other person out...you can dive right into what is most deeply on your mind. It is much more difficult to stay focused when you only speak occasionally.

So, to set yourself up for success, find a quiet place, a time that is specially set aside for prayer, and be consistent with that place and time.

If you are still bothered by distractions, let me ask another question: what do you think your prayer ought to look like? Many of us imagine that, if we were really able to pray well, that would mean that all of our prayer would be total bliss the entire time and even if we knelt down for an hour, it ought to seem as if hardly a moment had passed by. Well one thousand years may be as one day to God, but sometimes a holy hour can seem like an eternity to us.

Here's a little hint: you are going to be distracted in prayer. No matter what you do. The trick is: don't panic. C.S. Lewis wrote that, as a boy, he would become so preoccupied with focusing on every word of every prayer that he nearly drove himself mad as he began his prayers over and over, trying to get through even one prayer without his mind wandering. It ultimately contributed to his leaving religion for a large portion of his life. He thought God wouldn't accept a prayer uttered in distraction. He was wrong. If you find yourself distracted in

prayer, please don't think you have to start the prayer over again in order for it to "count". Instead, calmly bring yourself back to focusing on God.

So many times, when we find ourselves distracted in prayer, we are like a new driver on a slippery road. We realized we've veered off course, we panic, and we turn the wheel so far that we overcompensate and end up in the ditch on the other side of the road. Many times, we realize we've just spent the past fifteen minutes of our prayer thinking about The Simpsons, so we get upset with ourselves and interiorly beat ourselves up for the next twenty minutes! Do we realize what has happened? We've become distracted by our distraction. St. Therese of Lisieux recommended that we simply recognize that we've been distracted and then calmly bring our attention back to God. If we become distracted again (even five seconds later): no problem. Once again, recognize the distraction, then calmly return to the Lord.

Last thing. If you find yourself distracted by the thoughts of all the tasks you still need to accomplish, bring a piece of paper and a pen with you to prayer. When these thoughts occur to you, write them down so you can more easily focus on God without the distraction of your to-do list.