

I was one of those people who always loved school. I could happily have been a professional student – in fact, my family says I almost was – 17 years straight of higher education without a real job. I was just interested in all my classes and so it came easily to me. But there was one time I got a taste of what others know all too well. In high school I took accounting as an elective. My basketball coach was the teacher and he was a great teacher so I figured, why not?

But then I started the class. Don't get me wrong. Accountants are fine people. My brother-in-law is an accountant. Some of the nicest people I know are accountants. But trying to learn basic accounting theory and practice just about killed me. I hated it. I'd never been so bored in a class. And it wasn't easy! You actually have to know what you're doing. I started getting D's on tests. That had never happened before. The information just wouldn't stick.

The problem was that I just wasn't interested in any way in accounting. In all other classes I could find something fascinating to learn, but here – nothing. And I suddenly had an idea of what many other students felt about school. It was hard and it was boring. Settling for a C suddenly made sense to me.

“Lord, teach us to pray.” The disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. They must have seen Jesus' deep relationship with the Father – and wanted it. Their plea is also ours. One thing Catholics desire is to know how to pray. I hear it regularly. And I see such teaching of prayer as a primary responsibility for me as pastor. That's why I preach about it so often. Remember the “20 minutes a day” refrain? But the problem is that those 20 minutes are hard going.

And I think the biggest problem with praying 20 minutes a day (besides finding the time and keeping to it) is the problem of distractions. What are distractions? You know when you start to pray but at some point realize you are no longer praying? And you couldn't say when you stopped praying, but your mind is now full of “What's for dinner?” “How am I going to get the kids to soccer practice and the dance recital at the same time this afternoon?” or “Why did that jerk say that?” Those are distractions – the thoughts that take us away from prayer. And we all have them. The saints have distractions.

So how do we not let the inevitable distractions keep us from prayer? We are not in full control of the thoughts coming into our brains. Our consciousness is like a conveyor belt – thoughts come in – and thoughts go out, some are intended by us – some are not. And some of the thoughts are useful, and some are spiritually harmful.

When we notice a distraction on the conveyor belt of our mind during prayer – we don't have to pick it up and examine it. We can just let it go by. And if we do that then our pray continues. The thought may come again, may come repeatedly, but until, or unless, we consciously “pick it up” off the belt and examine it we don't stop praying, and we can return to prayer. In fact, those distractions can help us grow spiritually. Every time we reject a distraction and return to meditation we are consciously choosing Jesus again – and that itself is true prayer. Our prayer time may be filled with distractions, but if we were not diverted by them, then such prayer (hard as it is) might be the best prayer imaginable.

But that's not easy. Distractions can be tenacious. And that brings me to another way to handle distractions in prayer. Rather than trying to let the distractions slip through our brains, we can engage them -- by bringing God to bear upon them. The Dominican priest Herbert McCabe once said that, "Distractions are nearly always your real wants breaking in on your prayer for edifying but bogus wants." Distractions are partly due to our spending prayer time praying for things we don't really care about, but things that we think we should be praying for. Sometimes this is a matter of formal written prayers by someone else that we are trying to pray. Sometimes it is a matter of a list we've made of things to pray for -- but the list is stale and just a habit. Sometimes it's all just a matter of pious "pretend." I'll pray for what I think I should be praying for. Frankly, that leaves us bored.

And here I come back to my high school accounting class. I found it so boring, and I became so distracted in class, precisely because I just wasn't really interested in it. That also holds true in prayer. We have to be authentic in our prayer -- pray for what is real in our lives.

Fr. McCabe said, "If you are distracted, trace your distraction back to the REAL desires it comes from -- and pray about these. When you are praying for what you really want you will not be distracted. People on sinking ships do not complain of distractions during their prayer." For example, if we find ourselves during the 20 minutes thinking about how we can pull off getting the kids to two places across town -- at the same time, we could stay with the problem -- which is real -- but bring God into the thought to make it prayer. "God, how can I do this? Do you want me to do this? Why am trying to do this? Help me! God, does something have to change in my life so I don't have to do this?"

Am I daydreaming about a movie or TV show? Ask, "God, what do I find so absorbing there? What does that say about you and me, God?" There will also be thoughts that are seeds of sin -- lustful, vengeful, angry thoughts. I don't say take pleasure in those. But do bring in God, and admit to Him the attraction of acting out on those thoughts, and ask Him for His help. The need is real, so the prayer will be real.

The point is that if we don't want distractions to ruin prayer, then we have to be authentic in our prayer -- and often we are not. Prayer is communication with God. And honesty in communication is necessary for any relationship if it is to grow. Like those first disciples, so for us, prayer is a matter of expressing our real desires -- asking, seeking, knocking, it's a matter of faith, honesty and perseverance. The Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him and really mean it.