

Distraction in prayer is a fact of life! Our heads are filled with so much chatter, the idea that we constantly play videos inside our heads of all sorts of situations, problems, and past events. Martin Laird calls it a “cocktail party in the mind.” When we try to pray the cinema of our mind goes into overdrive.

Our bodies too, find it so difficult to be still. C S Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters* where Screwtape, a senior devil, is training Wormwood, a junior devil, has Screwtape advise his student that “. . .they are animals, and whatever their bodies do affects their souls.”

Most of our distractions come from our not being comfortable in prayer or from the constant “white noise” of our minds. Distractions will not go away, if we try to dismiss them, they seem to return with a vengeance; a proven way of countering them is to deal with them head on. In this way we can attempt to reduce their impact during our prayer.

The added benefit of using coping strategies with distraction in prayer is that they can have positive effects on our general stillness of mind throughout our day. Mark Twain once commented: “I am an old man now and have had a great many problems. Most of them never happened.”

When I am quieting down to prayer, trying to focus on stilling my mind it is then that distractions – from the mundane to the profound – start flooding into my head. Rather than push those thoughts away, I can allow those thoughts to become part of my prayer; praying that my trip to the supermarket later in the day will not be too stressful; or that my friend suffering with cancer will find some release from her pain today. Distractions lose some of their power to dominate if we allow them to become prompts. We find that our prayer time becomes a kind of daydream, but we daydream with those we love!

A second method is to give ourselves a focus point in prayer which we then use to refocus our attention when distraction pulls us away from that intention. This focus point might be a candle, or something else to look at; or something to hold and sense in our fingers – like rosary beads for the Catholic or misbaha for the Muslim, a pebble, or small stone. Many of the monastic traditions suggest using a word or short phrase to draw us back to prayer. Whatever your choice, use the focus point to gently draw you back to prayer; persistence in this approach is essential, but it does get easier.

Try not to be too hard on yourself when distractions arise in prayer; do not “tut” at yourself or get angry: remember, the evil one does not want you to pray and will do everything to distract you. Perseverance is the only true remedy.