

ABIDING IN PRAYER

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Called to Be a Catechist

ABIDING  
*in* PRAYER

Inspiration and Professional Growth



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# INTRODUCTION

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The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is rooted on the four pillars of our faith: (1) The Profession of Faith; (2) The Celebration of the Christian Mystery; (3) Life in Christ; and (4) Christian Prayer. This book focuses on the fourth pillar: Christian Prayer.

Catechists have plenty of experience with the highs and lows of prayer, and not only in catechetical settings. There are moments when prayer seems easy, when we are moved by the eloquence of Scripture and touched by a sense of Divine Presence. There are other times though, when prayer seems dry as a stick and we feel tempted to leave it to the mystics.

Yet whatever the experience proves to be, prayer is at the heart of our mission as catechists. This book provides opportunities to learn about the church's rich tradition of prayer. It is hoped that these chapters inspire you to deepen your own commitment to prayer and encourage you to find new ways of helping your students to grow in their desire and ability to pray.

Throughout this book, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) and the *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) will be referenced. May you also be strengthened in your appreciation and understanding of these significant texts for our catechetical ministry.

# CONVERSION *and* COMMUNION

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DANIEL LUBY

*Because prayer is a multilayered reality, we can find hundreds of different descriptions of it throughout Christian tradition.*

Sometimes our prayer plans go just as we hoped. We begin the prayer service and find the kids and their parents completely attentive and engaged. The quiet is deep, the singing harmonious, the petitions and praises and longings heartfelt. The inspiration of the Spirit is palpable.

Sometimes things go badly. The room is noisy, and everyone seems distracted. Silences are interrupted by coughs and shuffling feet and impatient whisperings. The reader flubs a crucial passage, the music player stops mid-song, and our own prayer shifts from praising God to asking that it will be over soon.

The same factors that affect our prayer in catechetical ministry show up in our personal prayer as well. That's why it's important to step back occasionally and look at prayer anew, to clarify our understanding and refresh our practice.

Because prayer is a multilayered reality, we can find hundreds of dif

ferent descriptions of it throughout Christian tradition. A look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) makes clear that, however nuanced our language about prayer, three dimensions form the bedrock of our understanding of it.

### **The Dimensions of Prayer**

***Prayer as gift.*** This is the first and perhaps deepest truth we can express about prayer. Scripture reminds us that even our initial stirrings of love for God are themselves a response to God's invitation: "We love because he [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). "In prayer," the CCC notes, "the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first: our own first step is always a response" (n. 2567). Recognizing this fundamental truth about prayer helps us see that, far from being a burdensome requirement placed on us by an arbitrary God, prayer is a graced opportunity to respond to God's immense generosity.

***Prayer as covenant.*** The second foundational dimension recognizes not only that prayer begins with divine initiative, as gift, but also as covenant: "Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ" (CCC, n. 2564).

The biblical image of covenant describes the intimate communion between God and Israel, which Christ fulfills and transforms in his life, death, and resurrection. The ancient relationship of covenant is different from a modern contract. In a contract, both parties share equally in the responsibility of fulfilling its terms—Party A agrees to give this, in return for which Party B agrees to do that. In a covenant, there is mutuality between the parties—"You will be my people, and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:28)—but it is not a partnership of equals.

A covenant is an expression of election in which the stronger party chooses the weaker out of generosity and kindness. Contracts usually have escape clauses. If I fail to do my part, the obligations on which we agreed no longer apply and you are free to opt out of the relationship.

In the covenant that God makes with Israel and, through Jesus, with

all of us, God’s commitment to us is permanent, as eternal as divine love. Although we often fail in our obligations, God does not stop loving us and will not abandon us. Even if we have neglected the responsibilities of prayer, we can always take them up again through the grace and mercy of God—because we do not pray alone. Since it is a covenant, prayer is a joint venture, “the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves” (CCC, n. 2564). We have a vital role to play, but God does the heavy lifting.

In a covenant, there is mutuality between the parties...but it is not a partnership of equals.

***Prayer as communion.*** Prayer is a gift expressed as covenant, the ultimate goal of which is communion. In and through prayer, God lives in us and we live in God. Before it is words we say or gestures we make or postures we assume, “prayer is the habit of being in the presence” of God (CCC, n. 2565).

To understand prayer as gift, covenant, and communion is to recognize that prayer, at its root, is a relationship with God.

### **The Relationship of Prayer**

All the individual prayers we say, all the prayer journals we keep, and all the prayer services we lovingly share with others need to be focused on deepening and strengthening our friendship with God. How do we go about doing that? What attitudes of mind and heart must we cultivate to further the relationship of prayer? There are three attitudes of mind identified in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

***Conversion of heart.*** Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Jesus’ disciples ask him to teach them to pray. It’s worth noting that before he shares with them what we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6), he lays out a necessary preparation: conversion of heart. This is the first attitude to be nurtured (see CCC, n. 2608).



The image of conversion, especially for those who are “cradle Catholics,” may seem at first more fittingly directed toward people whose choice for Christ is still to be made. But although our conversion has already begun, it is not yet complete. Look at what Jesus asks of us in the first part of the Sermon on the Mount: reconciliation, love of enemies, selfless generosity, forgiveness, and single-minded devotion to God’s will.

It is clear that the level of transformation to which Jesus calls us requires more than a momentary decision. Conversion of heart is a life-long process of growing into ever deeper friendship with the Lord. Apart from it, prayer can never deepen.

**Filial boldness.** A second attitude that prayer requires is what the *Catechism* calls “filial boldness” (CCC, n. 2610). God’s love for each of us is so passionate, so eager to draw us into deeper friendship, that we can ask for what we need with the confidence of a child asking a loving parent.

The Scriptures are filled with examples of people pouring out their needs to God—from Abraham testing God’s patience to seek mercy for sinners, to Mary assuming Jesus’ assistance for their embarrassed wedding hosts at Cana, to the army of sick and injured and troubled souls who ask for Jesus’ healing and help. Jesus himself urges us to “ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). The boldness he invites is founded not on our worthiness but on the kindness of God. “What father among you,” he asks, “would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give?” (Luke 11:11–13).

**Humility.** When the Lord tells the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector (see Luke 18:9–14), it is not the Pharisee’s litany of virtue or his rigorous adherence to the law that Jesus praises; it is the humility of the tax collector, who acknowledges his need for mercy, which the Lord lifts up as an example. The CCC notes that “humility is the foundation of

prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that ‘we do not know how to pray as we ought’ (Romans 8:26), are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer” (n. 2559). To pray authentically, we must remember who it is we address in prayer, and who we are—forgiven sinners, God’s beloved daughters and sons.

### **Practical Requirements for Prayer**

Given a sound understanding of prayer as a relationship of intimacy, and an appreciation for the proper attitudes required for prayer, what must we do to put that understanding and those attitudes into action?

Finding the right prayer practices often requires trying out different approaches. What fits one person may not fit another. What is beneficial at one stage of life may shift with time. Regardless of the specific methodology undertaken, we can cite several practical requirements that apply across the board.

For us to pray effectively we must invest time. For most of us, that means establishing a rhythm for prayer, a pattern through which we can integrate prayer into the movement of our days and the seasons of our lives.

Another necessary component is quiet. The noise that pervades our lives in contemporary society makes it a challenge to find even a few quiet moments. Wherever our circumstances allow—whether it be in the car on the way to work or a quick visit to the Blessed Sacrament or a few minutes at home at the beginning or the end of the day—we need to put ourselves in a quiet place so that the listening component of prayer can happen.

Scripture has the power to enrich our prayer dramatically. Many people find that reflecting on the daily readings from the Lectionary is a practical and simple way to stay connected, not only with our ancestors in faith but with the ongoing prayer of the entire church.

As with all aspects of discipleship in Jesus, participation in the Mass is an

Finding the right prayer practices often requires trying out different approaches. What fits one person may not fit another.

essential element of prayer. Eucharistic adoration is another way to deepen our appreciation for the Mass and to expand our capacity for prayer.

### **What Does This Have to Do with Me?**

A busy catechist reading about prayer in such general terms may well ask, “What does all this have to do with me?” An anxious RCIA candidate whose annulment is stalled as the Easter Vigil approaches, a classroom of energetic nine-year-olds with short attention spans, a bright bunch of teenagers who simply can’t see why they need to be confirmed: attending to these kinds of pressing needs in your catechetical ministry can seem a lot more urgent than prayer.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* tells us that “No methodology, no matter how well tested, can dispense with the person of the catechist in every phase of the catechetical process” (n. 156). For this reason, the catechist’s relationship with Christ—and so the prayer of the catechist—is an essential component of everything she or he does. Without prayer, without an ongoing friendship with Jesus, everything we do as catechists will be hollow, and our catechesis will be as one-dimensional as the false front of a movie set.

### **Amen**

Our goal here is not “success” in prayer; rather, it is sincerity in our desire to deepen our relationship with God and openness to grace. In the Christian tradition, one of the most common ways we end prayer is with the word *Amen*. It seems fitting to consider what we mean when we say that simple, familiar word.

The Hebrew word *amen* is customarily translated “so be it.” When we say Amen at the end of prayer, we are not claiming to have mastered all the techniques of prayer or answered all the questions or comprehended all the mysteries. We are affirming in one word our conviction through faith in the truth of all that we have said. We are affirming our confidence in the Lord Jesus, who is himself “the definitive ‘Amen’ of the Father’s love for us” (CCC, n. 1065).

## *Your Thoughts*

**1** How can I cultivate a deeper sense of prayer as gift, covenant, and communion? (Be specific.)

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**2** What is the role of prayer in my life as a catechist? What are the gifts and challenges I have experienced with prayer?

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## *Try This*

Create a prayer journal. Each week write a description of your experiences with prayer or your approach to prayer. See if you discover patterns or insights. If you wish, share these insights with a spiritual director or companion.