

INTRODUCTION

Prayer, an encounter with God, is essential for deepening our personal relationship with him. It is as necessary to our spiritual life as breathing is to our physical life and just as natural and easy. This book introduces what prayer is, how and when to pray, and various forms of prayer. Perhaps most valuable are its pointers for speaking and listening to God as a daily habit.

The more we pray, the closer we are to fulfilling St. Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We find that our lives go along more smoothly, we have more strength to deal with difficulties, and we become holier. What's most important, the more we pray, the closer we are to God.

What Is Prayer?

Prayer is usually thought of as asking God for

Copyright © 2014 by Kathleen Glavich. Published by TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS, a division of Bayard; One Montauk Avenue, New London, CT 06320. 860-437-3012 or 800-321-0411, www.23rdpublications.com. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher. All rights reserved. ISBN 978-1-62785-052-0 ■ Printed in the U.S.A.

something or reciting a rote prayer. However, the classic definition of prayer is “the lifting of the mind and heart to God.” This implies that words are unnecessary. When you are simply thinking about or loving God, you are praying. St. Teresa of Ávila defined prayer as “a conversation with one who you know loves you.” God holds up his side of the conversation in several ways:

- All of God’s creation shouts out his love for us and declares his power and glory. Rightly Simone Weil said, “The world is God’s language to us.”
- God speaks to us in Sacred Scripture, revealing himself as our lover and savior.
- God speaks to us through other people. Their words or example can convey a divine message.
- God says things to us through our experiences and thoughts and even our dreams.

On our part, there are several reasons for speaking to God. We might want to praise God because he is holy and awesome, thank him for his abundant gifts, express sorrow for the times we

sinned and failed to love, petition God for something we need, or intercede for someone else. We might just feel like assuring God, who loves us outrageously, that we love him in return.

Jesus Is Our Teacher and Model of Prayer

Jesus modeled prayer for us. He prayed the psalms both by himself and with others in the synagogue (Luke 4:16) and the Temple. But Jesus also prayed spontaneously, such as when he thanked his Father for his revelations (Matthew 11:25–26). Before undertaking his ministry, Jesus made a forty-day retreat in the desert. The gospels also show Jesus praying before and during major events in his life.

Jesus prayed early in the morning while it was still dark (Mark 1:35). Sometimes he even prayed all night (Luke 6:12), considered quite a feat by those of us who find one hour a challenge. Jesus prayed before meals (John 6:11; Luke 22:17–19). And he prayed for his friend Peter (Luke 22:31–32). At the Last Supper Jesus prayed for all of his disciples and all of us (John 17:1–26). Finally, Jesus prayed while he was hanging on the cross (Luke 23:34; Mark 15:34; Luke 23:46).

KINDS OF PRAYER

Prayer comes in as many different styles as there are ways to cook potatoes. You have probably experienced most of the following kinds of prayer.

- Vocal (said aloud) prayer and mental (thought) prayer
- Personal (private) prayer and group (communal) prayer
- Traditional formulas, such as the Our Father and Hail Mary
- Prayers composed by saints and other people. Sometimes these express the exact thoughts and feelings we have in our hearts.
- Our original written compositions
- Spontaneous (informal) prayer
- Singing or listening to a hymn
- *Meditation*, that is, thinking about God

or the things of God. We can meditate on Scripture passages, prayers, pictures, or our own experiences.

- Affective prayer, which is responding to God with various sentiments, such as love and adoration
- **Contemplation**, the highest form of prayer, a wordless prayer in which we simply rest quietly in God's presence, basking in God's love. Intuition more than reasoning is involved here.

Informal Prayer

The easiest way to pray is to talk to God familiarly about whatever is on our minds, which is usually just the stuff of daily life. In the evening we can imagine God asking, "So, how was your day?" In heart-to-heart talks, we share with God our fears, desires, passions, dreams, disappointments, worries, joys, and sorrows. We are forthright with God, knowing that we will never shock him and that his love for us is unconditional. The Carmelite nun St. Thérèse of Lisieux admitted, "I say just what I want to say to God, quite simply, and he never fails to understand."

Making an Intention

Catholics believe in the communion of saints, that is, the saints in heaven, the souls in purgatory, and the faithful on earth bound together in the body of Christ. One corollary of this belief is that the good performed by one member can be applied to another. In other words, we can “offer up” facets of our lives—our works, our prayers, our sacrifices, and our sufferings—for specific intentions and trust that God will apply them. For example, we can offer up a dreaded surgery for the intention of peace in the Middle East. This practice infuses meaning into our actions and in particular our sufferings. When we encounter a trial, we can always “kiss it up to God,” that is, offer it to God and put it to good use.

Short and Long Prayers

One-line prayers called aspirations or ejaculations can be prayed throughout the day, lifting our minds and hearts to God in the midst of work. They are said to be like jewels added to our actions. Here are some of the most common aspirations:

Jesus!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph!

My Lord and my God!

Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like yours.

O sacrament most holy, O sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment thine.

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.

My God and my all.

My Jesus, mercy.

Jesus, my God, I love you above all things.

Jesus, for you I live; Jesus, for you I die; Jesus, I am yours in life and in death.

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place my trust in you.

O Heart of Jesus, burning with love for us, inflame our hearts with love for you.

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us.

O Sacred Heart of Jesus, I implore that I may ever love you more and more.

A *litany* is a rather long prayer invoking God or a saint under many titles. The invocations in each set are followed by the same response, such as “have mercy on us” or “pray for us.” Popular litanies are the Litany of Loreto to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Litany of the Sacred Heart, the Litany of the Holy Spirit, and the Litany of Saints.

Twenty-Third
Publications
Sample

CARVING OUT TIME FOR PRAYER

How carefully we plan the ambience for a special meal or a special event! We pay attention to decorations, sound, and scent to create just the right atmosphere. Certain conditions also contribute to a good prayer experience. The following are some to keep in mind.

Nurturing our relationship with God through prayer is a challenge when our lives are hectic. But did you ever notice how we always find time to do the things we really want to do, such as work out or watch a certain television program? If we don't make an appointment with God for a specific prayer time, but relegate him to spare time, he's likely to get no time. Once we make a habit of praying at a certain time, if we ever skip it, we will miss it. Considering the weighty significance of prayer, it makes sense that we give it our first and best time.

Be Still and Know That I Am God!

(Psalm 46:10)

Great things happen in silence. Flowers and babies grow, snow falls, and the sun rises. We need silence to calm down, to rest, and to think better. Likewise, we need quiet to pray and to hear God's soft voice. So when we pray, we turn off the cell phone, the television, and the radio, and silence the thoughts buzzing through our minds. We focus on God, whose name is Silence.

Alone with the Alone

Just as a married couple needs quality time alone together, sometimes we need to be alone with God for a close, intimate conversation. This means finding a place where other people won't distract us. We might drive to a quiet street and park or take a solitary walk in the woods. On a bus or in a crowded room, we can be "alone" by closing our eyes.

Holy Place

It helps to have a special prayer place where we automatically fall into a mood for prayer. We might have a prayer corner in our house, or a chair that is our "prayer chair." The place

where we meet God could be a certain room in the house, a place outside, a chapel, the library, a spot in the park, or a bench by the lake. This sanctuary can exist only in our mind! We can mentally construct a room designed in our favorite colors, furnished with our preferred kind of chair, and decorated with paintings and objects. This prayer room might feature a picture window with a spectacular view or a blazing fire in the fireplace. In our imagination we can enter that room, make ourselves comfortable, and then visualize Jesus joining us.

Prayer Aids

Any of the following objects will help keep us focused on prayer.

- A Bible, perhaps one with a beautiful cover, is God present in his word.
- A crucifix reminds us of God's great love for us.
- A picture or statue of Jesus, Mary, or another saint is also helpful.
- A burning candle stands for the mystery of God or Christ as the light of the world.

- Incense (grains or a stick) symbolizes our prayers going to God as its smoke rises.
- Potpourri appeals to our sense of smell.
- A picture of a glorious nature scene or an item from nature such as flowers, a plant, seashells, rocks, or driftwood can make us think of God's presence.

These items can be placed on a lovely cloth. Some people like to hold a crucifix or other object as they pray. Music is also conducive to prayer.

Our Bodies at Prayer

Prayer is usually associated with kneeling, either on the floor or on a kneeler. This posture expresses humility before our great and awesome God. We can, however, pray in any of the following ways: standing, sitting up straight on a chair (not too comfortably), sitting cross-legged on the floor, walking, running, lying in bed, prostrate (face down on the floor), sitting on a prayer pillow, kneeling on a kneeler, sitting on our heels, or using a prayer stool (a small raised plank on which we sit with our legs under it).

Hands can be folded or resting open on our lap, palms up (in an attitude of reception) or palms down. We can extend our arms out to the side in the form of a cross. At times we might raise our arms to God, genuflect, or bow. The Lotus pose is another option: sitting with the legs crossed so that the feet rest at the bend of the knees, and then resting hands on heels with forefingers and thumbs touching to form a circle. On the other hand, we can dance before the Lord, imitating David who danced before the Ark of the Covenant. Involving our bodies in prayer is praising God with our whole being.

Calming Yourself for Prayer

Here are some ways to settle into prayer:

- Do something you find calming. You might walk slowly, listen to music, or crochet.
- Inhale slowly and deeply, count to five, and then exhale slowly. Repeat this three times.
- Relax your muscles. First tighten the muscles on the top of your head for a few seconds and then loosen them. Then do the same in turn for your forehead, eyes, mouth, cheeks,

neck, shoulders, arms, hands, chest, thighs, lower legs, and feet.

- Imagine that you are floating on a cloud or down a river.
- Become aware of your mind. What is revealed to you?
- Mentally move from one part of your body to another, becoming conscious of the sensations in it.
- Be aware of the air as it passes through your nostrils.
- Listen to the sounds around you. Realize that God is sounding all around you.
- Hold an object. Use all your senses to become fully aware of it.
- Say your name over and over as if God is calling you.

Choosing a Name

Addressing God by a particular name at the beginning of prayer helps in focusing our attention and shaping our prayer. You might use Father,

Gracious God, Spirit of God, Jesus, Savior, Creator, or come up with an original name for God.

Prayer Boosters

There are many kinds of prayer books on the market that can be a resource for prayer. Some are collections of prayers. Others offer a short meditation for each day based on the daily Scripture readings. Some Web sites also offer daily devotions, such as www.dailygospel.org and livingwithchrist.us.

A Prayer List

Making a list of people and intentions that you want to pray for can help you remember them when you pray. You can keep the list in a prayer book or Bible where you will be likely to see it.

SPECIFIC PRAYER TIMES

Corrie Ten Boom asks, “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?” It’s normal to pray during times of extreme emotion, such as when we are terrified, sad, or elated. Sometimes prayer comes unexpectedly in a flash, for example, when we behold a breathtaking sunset. Ideally prayer is a daily habit, carried out as regularly as we take three meals a day. Habits make it easier to do good things, but forming them takes time and persistence.

Most Catholics have a habit of praying at three main times:

In the morning. This might be our first and perhaps our best time to pray. We are rested, and the concerns of the day haven’t yet occupied our minds or used up our hours, leaving none for prayer. In order to pray, some people set their alarm to rise a little earlier. And some even pray a little in bed before they begin to move.

Before and after meals. We depend on God for the food that keeps us alive, so it's only courteous to be mindful of God at mealtime. Before meals we ask God to bless our food, and after we've enjoyed our meals we thank him. These meal prayers are called "grace." It's always good to include in meal prayers an intercession for those who do not have enough to eat.

In the evening before retiring. At night we thank God for the blessings of the day. We might do an examination of conscience, a review of our behavior that day, and then pray an act of contrition for any failings. To make an examination of conscience you might go through the Ten Commandments and consider whether you have been faithful in keeping each one. Or you might think of each place where you were that day and consider whether you were loving there: at home, at the office, in the store, at a party, at a game.

Sunday: A Day of Prayer

Sunday is our Sabbath, our day of rest. It is our day for worship—specifically for celebrating Eucharist—and for extra prayer. It's time to listen to God speak in creation, for example, by

enjoying our backyard, by visiting a park or a zoo, or by using nature for recreation and going swimming, horseback riding, or skiing. Sunday is also the time to strengthen family and community ties and to do something for those in need. On Sunday we seek creative ways to say to God, “I love you too.”

Other Occasions for Prayer

At certain times in life, such as those listed below, our hearts might naturally turn to God. Sometimes, though, at these times we might forget to tap into the power of prayer.

- facing a crisis
- making a serious decision
- on seeing a beautiful sight
- when we are tempted
- after having sinned
- when a friend or relative is sick or in trouble
- on receiving a special blessing
- before going on a journey

- when we're not getting along with someone

Filling Time

Odd moments can be used for prayer. During the day the many downtimes when we are forced to do nothing can turn into prayer moments. Here are some opportune times:

- on hold on the phone
- waiting for a red light to change
- standing in a checkout line
- waiting for a bus
- waiting for something to download
- in an elevator
- waiting for the doctor or dentist
- on the treadmill

Mechanical jobs like mowing the lawn and crocheting an afghan usually require little or no attention. Why not pray at the same time? In these cases, multitasking is good for your health. Some people like to pray on long, monotonous trips.

Pray Always

St. Paul exhorts us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We can heed this advice throughout the day by being mindful of God, who is ever mindful of us. An analogy is a husband who is always aware of his beloved when she is working in another room, or even when he is miles away from her. He is with her in remembrance and feelings. Reminders—for example, a crucifix on the dashboard of our car or the name “Jesus” on a card beneath our computer screen—prompt us to think of God. One person has made touching a doorknob a cue to recall God’s presence. God is never farther away than the inner recesses of our own hearts. As Meister Eckhart once noted, “God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk.”

St. Teresa of Ávila recommended that we imagine that the Risen Lord is by our side all during the day. We can communicate with him every so often, with or without words. Theophane the Recluse summed up this kind of prayer: “The hands at work; the mind and heart with God.” Sometimes while engaged in something, we receive an impulse to pray. We should

always try to cooperate with this actual grace as quickly as we answer our cell phones.

St. Paul advises, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). When we offer ourselves and our lives to God—for example, by praying the Morning Offering—everything becomes a prayer. By making a conscious effort, our whole life can be prayerful.

The Divine Office

You probably know that certain religious gather at midnight for prayer and that priests pray from a breviary. They are praying the Divine Office, also known as the Liturgy of the Hours or Prayer of Christians. The Divine Office is the official daily prayer of the church, the whole people of God. These are the seven hours of the Office: Morning Prayer, Midmorning Prayer, Midday Prayer, Midafternoon Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer; an additional Office of Readings can be prayed at any time.

All Christians are invited to pray the Divine Office, at least Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer (formerly called Vespers). In some parishes people pray these prayers together. Some lay-

people have their own Office book and pray the Office individually. The Office is mainly psalms and Scripture readings. It parallels the seasons and feasts of the liturgical year celebrated at our daily Masses. A booklet called an Ordo is a guide to the feasts and prayers for each day of the year. Because the hours of the Office are prayed all over the world around the clock, all time is sanctified.

Praying in the Home

The home is rightly called the domestic church. Prayer, therefore, should certainly be part of normal family life. Children learn to pray best by observing their parents pray and by praying with their parents. Some families schedule a time for weekly prayer together and take turns leading the prayers.

Family members could make it a nightly habit to bless one another. This can be done with holy water, laying on of hands, or a hug. They might trace the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one being blessed and say, “God bless you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Occasionally, families might carry out a simple reconciliation prayer service in which the

members ask for forgiveness. For example, before a meal, persons could take turns stating they are sorry for something and the others would reply, “We forgive you.” Or general failings such as “For the times we hurt others by arguing” can be mentioned, and everyone would respond to each one, “Lord, have mercy.”

The church year’s seasons and feasts are opportune times for prayer at home. For example, the family could pray around its own Advent wreath, read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke, and pray special meal prayers during Lent.

Christian Hymns

Music is an integral part of worship on earth and in heaven. The psalms in the Book of Psalms were originally prayer-songs sung in the Temple. St. Augustine claimed, “Singing well is praying twice.” Adding our voices to the choir’s during the Eucharist is certainly a way to praise God. But we might also sing Christian songs while doing housework or driving in the car—even with the windows down! Parents of small children might sing a soothing Christian hymn as a lullaby.

CHALLENGES TO PRAYER

Some days it is easy to pray, and praying leaves us feeling upbeat and renewed. Then there are the other days when we are bored, restless, dry, or plagued by distractions. All we can muster is “Here I am, Lord.” Hubert van Zeller commented that it helps to remember that “we go to pray not because we love prayer but because we love God.” We can take comfort in these words: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). One help to good prayer is realizing that Jesus is not just an idea or a hazy one-dimensional image, but a real, live person. The following are some common challenges that make it difficult to pray.

Misconceptions about Prayer

Some people are prayer-shy because they have

the wrong impression of prayer. Here are some common misconceptions.

- *Prayer should be long. **False!*** Short prayers can be effective. What do people cry out when their house is on fire? They do not scream, “A conflagration is devastating my abode.” They yell, “Fire!” Your most frequent prayer might be, “Help!” St. Augustine said, “A long speech is one thing, a long love another.”
- *Prayer should result in a torrent of wonderful thoughts. **False!*** Perhaps the grace that comes from prayer is not an idea at all, but a moment of joy, a tear in the eye, a sense of peace, a desire, or a resolution.
- *Prayer should be formal. **False!*** St. Teresa of Ávila advises, “Try not to let the prayer you make to such a Lord be mere politeness...avoid being bashful with God.” Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* is a good example of informal prayer. To him prayer is not so much a duty but a visit with a friend. We don’t have to try to impress God with grand words. He knows us through and through and loves us. By the way, being real and

honest with God might mean giving full play to our emotions. This is how the psalmist prayed in the psalms of lament. For example, repeatedly in Psalm 13 he complained, “How long, O Lord? How long?”

- *Prayer is difficult. False!* James Finley recalls, “Merton once told me to quit trying so hard in prayer. He said, ‘How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun.’” We needn’t struggle to pray. Meister Eckhard says, “Get out of the way and let God be God in you.” The Jesuit Thomas Greene describes the higher form of prayer as floating as opposed to swimming.
- *I am not worthy to speak to God. False!* Every person, though sinful, is a child of God, loved and redeemed by him. Jesus went out of his way to be with sinners.
- *Deep prayer is only for great saints. False!* All of us are called to be holy, to be saints. We are all redeemed and baptized. We do not have to be superintelligent or supergood in order to experience deep, profound prayer. God showers his gifts, including the gift of prayer, on whomever he wishes.

Bad Feelings

We don't always feel like praying. But it's precisely when we're discouraged, upset, or frustrated that we need to pray most and when we need God the most. Perhaps we resist praying because we think we "get nothing out of it." But remember, lovers are more intent on giving than on receiving. A passage from mystic Juliana of Norwich's *Revelation* encourages us to persevere through negative feelings:

Our Lord is greatly cheered by our prayer. He looks for it, and he wants it....So he says, "Pray inwardly, even if you do not enjoy it. It does you good, though you feel nothing, see nothing, yes, even though you think you are dry, empty, sick, or weak. At such a time your prayer is most pleasing to me."

An antidote to dryness in prayer is to pray ready-made prayers. They might spark love in our hearts.

Distractions

Often when we pray, our minds flit from one distraction to another. We think about memories, fears, joyful experiences, or what we're going to have for dinner. The Buddhists refer

to “the monkey mind,” which darts from idea to idea like a monkey jumping from tree to tree. Sometimes our minds are fastened on one major concern. Maybe we finish praying the rosary and realize that we’ve spent the entire time thinking about a project we have to do. It often is a struggle to focus and refocus on prayer.

There’s no need to feel guilty about distractions; they’re part of human nature and keep us humble. When a novice was grieving about her distractions, St. Thérèse of Lisieux told her, “I, too, have many, but I accept all for love of the good God, even the most extravagant thoughts that come into my head.” Not all distractions are bad. A distraction may be a grace in disguise, for example, if it’s the solution to a problem or an idea for an act of charity you can perform. Sometimes distractions during prayer are like thoughts that enter our minds while we are conversing with friends. In both cases they do not disturb our conversations.

Here are some strategies to control distractions:

- Pray at a quiet time and in a peaceful place. There will be fewer external distractions.

- At the outset, recall that you are in God's presence. Be aware of God looking at you with love, and you will be more inclined to focus on him.
- Pray before a crucifix, a picture, or a lighted candle to keep your mind on prayer.
- Write a prayer. This demands concentration and so eliminates distractions.
- Pray out loud. This forces you to pay more attention to your words.
- If your distraction is important, jot it down so you can deal with it after prayer.
- Ignore distractions, as though they were clouds passing by. Focusing on them only makes them more irritating.
- Work your distraction into your prayer. For example, if you catch yourself worrying about your mom's upcoming surgery, begin interceding for her.

Sleeping

St. Thérèse of Lisieux explained that she did not regret falling asleep during prayer. She point-

ed out that little children please their parents just as much when they sleep as when they are awake. The heavenly Father loves us as we sleep. Nevertheless, we might combat fatigue by eating a candy bar or drinking coffee.

Restlessness

Even St. Teresa of Ávila had trouble at prayer. She admitted shaking the hourglass during prayer to speed up the time. Sometimes we're tempted to cut our prayer time short, maybe because we're thinking of all the things we have to do. One man recounted that when he was tempted to end his prayer early, he forced himself to pray five minutes longer, and during those five minutes he had an extraordinary spiritual experience.

Busyness

Some days may be so jam-packed that we actually don't pray. A consoling thought then is that "the wish to pray is prayer itself" (George Bernanos).

True Prayer

The test of true prayer is not how good it makes

us feel, but whether we're doing God's will better. Prayer makes us more loving, more Christlike. The change in us may be subtle and slow, but it's there. In particular we will show the fruits of the Holy Spirit that St. Paul lists in Galatians 5:22–23—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

God's Silence

Sometimes it seems that God doesn't hear our prayers. Then it's tempting to jump to these wrong conclusions: "There is no God," "I'm not a good pray-er," or even "God doesn't love me." Instead, consider that God has several ways of answering. Sometimes God says yes, but other times God says no. Sometimes God answers in a way that we don't expect—or recognize. God may say, "Not yet" or "I have a better idea." Also, as former president Jimmy Carter pointed out, God may say, "Are you kidding?"

It's possible that what we ask of God works counter to his grand plan of salvation—even though what we ask appears good to us. Then our request cannot be fulfilled. In this case it helps to realize that through any difficulties or sufferings God will be at our side.

Remember: When frustrated or discouraged with our prayer life, we can take heart: One thing we can pray for is the grace to pray well!

Twenty-Third
Publications
Sample