

Chances are, you pray, at least when you are in trouble and perhaps even daily. Now in your journey of faith you might be ready to broaden your repertoire of prayer styles and explore other Catholic prayer forms. The Catholic Church has a rich treasury of formula prayers ranging from the Hail Mary to the prayers at the Eucharist. Numerous saints have given us prayers they composed. But beyond these set prayers, there are many different ways of praying, such as informal prayers from the heart and mental prayer. Contemplation, which is simply resting in God, is the highest form of prayer. It is not meant only for canonized saints but for all of us children of God.

In this booklet you will find information and inspiration to jumpstart your prayer life. May it be only the beginning of an exciting adventure as you walk more closely in the footsteps of the greatest pray-er, Jesus Christ, who leads us to the Father through the Holy Spirit.

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THE BASICS

Like all good Jews, the apostles prayed the daily Jewish prayers. They prayed in their synagogues and in the Temple in Jerusalem. But after meeting Jesus, the apostles were drawn to deepen their prayer. Here was a holy man who enjoyed intimate union with God and who even spent whole nights rapt in prayer. No wonder the apostles begged Jesus, “Teach us how to pray.”

That is when he gave us the Our Father prayer, the model for all prayer. Along with the Hail Mary, it was probably one of the first prayers you and I learned by heart. From reciting formula prayers, we graduated to mental prayer. St. Teresa of Ávila, a master teacher of prayer, advocated spending an hour at a time praying the Our Father, mining and savoring each phrase.

The Our Father

The Our Father, also known as the Lord's Prayer, has seven petitions. Three of them refer to God, and four to people. Here is an explanation of the words:

Our Father—We dare to address God as Jesus did, familiarly, as our Father. Because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one, we are addressing the whole Trinity. The “our” signifies our communion with all other believers.

who art in heaven—Where God is, there is justice and perfect happiness. Heaven is our homeland and already exists in the hearts of the just.

hallowed be thy name—*Hallowed* means holy or blessed. A person's name stands for the person himself or herself. In this statement, we glorify God and ask that everyone live in a way that hallows God.

Thy kingdom come—God's kingdom or “reign” is one of peace, justice, and love. We pray that it will spread throughout the world. We pray for the final coming of Christ and the fullness of the kingdom.

Thy will be done—We pray that people will follow God's all-wise plan.

on earth as it is in heaven—In heaven angels and saints constantly do what is pleasing to God.

Give us this day our daily bread—Bread stands for what we need to live. We depend on the good God for all of our necessities. This bread can also signify the Eucharist.

And forgive us our trespasses—We ask God to forgive our sins and failings.

as we forgive those who trespass against us—This is a dangerous petition because we are asking God to forgive us to the extent that we forgive others.

And lead us not into temptation—We ask God to help us discern what is wrong and to keep us safe from whatever may lead us to sin.

But deliver us from evil—We petition God to protect us from evil, or the Evil One.

CONNECTING TO GOD

The main goal of all prayer is union with God. We came from God's hands, and our destiny is to live with our Triune God forever. While on earth, we yearn for God. Incredibly, God also longs to be with us. God, the almighty maker of the universe, loves us with a powerful, unconditional love. His love is so tremendous that in order for us to be with him eternally, he stooped to become a human being like us. Then, as the God-man Jesus Christ, God actually underwent death. His resurrection confirmed his promise that we too would rise someday. We will see God face-to-face.

In this life, we can come in contact with this good God through prayer, traditionally defined as "the lifting of the mind and heart to God." Whenever we think of or speak with God, we are praying. It is said that most people pray more and better than they think they do.

St. Teresa of Ávila defined prayer as “a conversation with one who you know loves you.” It involves both speaking and listening. Just as communication is key in the development of a human love relationship, prayer is essential if we wish to intensify our relationship with God. God doesn’t need our prayer, but we do!

Growth in Prayer

The progression of prayer can be compared to the stages of communication between people involved in a love relationship. At first the two talk a lot: face-to-face, on the phone, by e-mail, or text messaging. They wish to learn as much as possible about each other and in turn to reveal information, even secrets, about themselves. As the relationship deepens, talking is not that necessary. The couple can read each other’s minds and communicate just by a glance. Over time, two people in love are content simply to be in each other’s presence wordlessly. Similarly, we begin speaking to God and eventually may enjoy contemplation (wordless prayer) and union with God. In the words of the thirteenth-century mystic Juliana of Norwich, “Prayer one-eth the soul to God.”

Fortunately, communication with God can be instant. First of all, God is everywhere and on call 24/7. God knows our very thoughts and sees our every action. As St. Paul preached, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). In addition, we enjoy the mystery of the divine indwelling: God dwells within our very being. God tugs at our hearts for attention. At any time we can sink down into the cave of our hearts for an encounter with God.

As you advance in the spiritual life, your prayer preferences will change. You may be content to pray formula prayers or to speak to God simply and spontaneously, and then suddenly you find that you relish reflecting on Scripture instead, or even just sitting in silence, aware of God’s presence. The basic rule for prayer is pray as you can, not as you can’t. In the end, prayer is a gift from God!

FIVE FORMS OF PRAYER

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the following five basic forms of prayer. These forms, or themes, differentiate prayers, but some prayers are a combination of two or more forms.

1. Blessing/Adoration

God blesses us, that is, gives us good gifts. In return we bless, or adore, God, which means we acknowledge and celebrate God's greatness. Adoration is the primary stance of human beings before God, who is our creator, our savior, and the master of the universe. Who can gaze at the ocean, a sunset, or a newborn baby and not respond with awe and adoration for God?

Catholics adore God alone. This adoration of the divine is called *latria*. We do not adore the Blessed Virgin Mary and the other saints who, though holy, are still merely human beings. The honor or veneration we give to the saints is called *dulia*; the honor we give to Mary, the Mother of God, is called *hyperdulia*.

2. Petition

Jesus advised us to ask the Father in his name for what we need. The main thing we stand in need of is forgiveness. Therefore, we express our contrition and we petition the Father to forgive us. We also ask God that his kingdom of peace and justice come. We can request God to give us anything else for ourselves, even trivial things, confident that God will hear us. A prayer of petition is an act of faith.

3. Intercession

All members of the church are interdependent. When others are in need, we turn trustingly to our good God with prayers of supplication for them. In this way we imitate Jesus, who is constantly interceding for us.

Catholics pray for the deceased. We believe that if they are in purgatory, our prayers will hasten their purification process. We have the custom of sending the grieving family a Mass card informing them that we have arranged to have a Mass celebrated for the repose of the soul of their loved one. We can make a donation to have this Mass offered at a parish or by a religious congregation.

A spiritual bouquet is a gift of prayers and good deeds offered for the recipient and his or her intentions. We list our promises in a card, for example, “I offer three Hail Marys, three Our Fathers, and three acts of charity.” These gifts can be creative, such as “five extra minutes of prayer each day for a week” or “working two days in a soup kitchen.”

4. Thanksgiving

When we receive gifts, graces, and favors, it's only common courtesy to express our gratitude to God with prayers of thanksgiving. Jesus shows that he values this form of prayer when he expresses disappointment that out of ten cured lepers, only one is thoughtful enough to thank him. Meister Eckhart, a mystic of the Middle Ages, commented, “If the only prayer you say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.”

5. Praise

When someone exhibits an admirable quality or achieves something, our response is to acknowledge this with a compliment. Likewise, moved by God's power, goodness, or love, we praise him. Glorifying God because he is God

is the chief occupation of the angels and saints in heaven. Incidentally, the word *alleluia* means “praise God.” (*Hallel* is Hebrew for praise, and *yah* is the first syllable of Yahweh, God’s personal name.) And *amen*, the word we use to conclude prayers, means “Yes, it is true!”

The Heart of All Prayer Is Love

Sometimes we are so taken with God and God’s love and mercy that we pray prayers of sheer love. Edward Farrell wrote a book entitled *Prayer Is a Hunger*. This title is a good description of prayer. It is a longing to be with God, the object of our love. In a real love relationship, neither person is concerned about getting something out of it. Each one desires not to receive, but to give. The same is true for our relationship with God. We spend time with God because we know it pleases God. And in prayer we let God love us.

SCRIPTURE

In the *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, the church states: “In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them.” If prayer is communing with God, what better way is there to enter into it than through God’s word? In the Bible, God speaks directly to us in a personal way, revealing himself as a loving God. Reading Scripture, then, is listening to God and thereby coming to know and love God. We can use any verses as a launching pad to God by savoring the words and letting them penetrate our hearts. Furthermore, the Bible, especially the four gospels, helps us to know Jesus. Reading the Bible puts us in touch with Jesus himself, who is the Word of God.

Reading the Bible

When reading the Bible, it helps to refer to the footnotes as well as commentaries, which are books that explain Scripture verses. Here are various ways to read the Bible:

- *Bit-by-bit* Read only one or two lines and sink into them.
- *Book-by-book* Read a book straight through.
- *One track* Read according to a theme such as prayer, faith, forgiveness, or justice. Use a concordance (a book or online listing of words in the Bible and where they occur) or another index to find references.
- *Methodical* Read the Bible from beginning to end.
- *Liturgical* Read the readings for the day's eucharistic celebration.
- *First Opening* (also called the lucky dip or Bible roulette) Open the Bible at random and read.
- *Father David Knight's method* Keep the Bible on your pillow and every night read just one verse. Some nights you might read more. Before you know it, you'll have read an entire book.

Prayers in Scripture

The Bible is a gold mine of ready-made prayers

that we can adopt. There is Moses' prayer; Daniel's prayer; prayer of Jabez (1 Chronicles 4:10); the canticles of Zechariah, Mary, and Simeon in Luke's gospel; the Lord's Prayer; lines like the words of the father asking for his son's healing: "I believe; help my unbelief"; and prayers in the letters of Paul. Of course, there is also the book of Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible.

THE PSALMS

These one hundred and fifty prayers were originally sung, usually on the way to or in the Temple. Jesus and Mary, like all Jews, prayed them every day. Today quite a few favorite hymns are psalm verses in musical settings. There are so many song versions of the psalms not only because they are beautiful prayers but because we sing a responsorial psalm at every Mass.

Psalms express all the feelings of our heart: praise, thanksgiving, contrition, lament, and love. Because the psalms are poetry, they are chock-full of colorful figurative language, especially metaphors and similes. (For example, God is a mountain, he collects tears in a bottle, and enemies are like bees.) However, where our

poetry has sound rhyme, the psalms have idea rhyme. A second line in a psalm may echo an idea from the first line in almost identical, opposite, or elaborating words.

Ways to Pray the Psalms

- Pray the psalm aloud.
- Visualize each image in the psalm.
- After each line pause for a count of four.
- Pray a psalm from a Christian perspective: Jerusalem stands for the church or for heaven, while the king is Jesus.
- Sing psalm-based hymns.
- Choose a psalm to fit your particular situation or emotion.
- When a psalm doesn't fit your situation, pray on behalf of someone whom it fits.
- For psalms that express hate and vengeance against enemies, pray about your spiritual enemies: your own sins, Satan, evils in the world, or sickness.
- Use the psalms as a springboard for conver-

sation, as in this example:

The Lord is my shepherd
*(How grateful I am that you kept me
from falling on the ice the other day,
Lord.)*

I shall not want.
*(Thank you for all your gifts—in
particular these days, a warm house.
Please give me a heart that likes to
share with others.)*

Reflecting on Scripture

St. Teresa of Ávila said, “We have such a great God that a single of his words contains thousands of secrets.” To pray over just one verse of Scripture, consider the literal meaning of each main word, reflect on its meaning for you, and then speak to God about it. Here is an example of a reflection on one word:

“A lamp to my feet is your word”

(PSALM 119:105)

*Lamp...*A lamp gives light and enables us to see so that we can carry on our normal activities when

it is dark. A flick of the switch floods a room with light. Streetlights guide traffic in the dark; lights guide airplanes and ships. Thank you, God, for the gift of light and the light of your word. May you always be my light. May I walk in the light of your word, and may I be a light for others.

Memorizing Verses

Memorized Scripture verses will come to mind when they are needed. Use these techniques to “bank prayers”:

- Reflect on the verse’s meaning. Use a dictionary for unfamiliar words.
- Post a verse of the week on a refrigerator or mirror.
- Write the verse several times.
- Sing the verse to a tune.
- Make up motions to accompany the verse.
- If the verse is long, memorize one section at a time.
- Memorize right before you go to bed. The words will stay in your mind better.

PRAYER STYLES

You might experiment with some of the following prayer styles that may be new to you.

Lectio Divina

Lectio divina is Latin for “sacred reading.” This prayer method flourished in Benedictine monasticism. However, it is not just for monks but for anyone. *Lectio divina* can be used not only with Scripture but also with spiritual books and articles, prayers, nature, and the experiences of our lives. The steps of *lectio divina* are sometimes compared to Jacob’s ladder, which in a vision Jacob saw connecting earth to heaven. Here are the four steps with their Latin names:

1. LECTIO (READING): RECEIVING

Choose a passage from Scripture. Read slowly until an idea attracts you. The words will jump out at you.

2. MEDITATIO (MEDITATING): APPROPRIATING
Stop and mull over the idea that struck you. Repeat the words over and over, letting them sink into your heart and mind. Delve into the meaning of the words and savor them. Try to discover why those particular words attracted you. When the reason dawns on you, move into the next step.

3. ORATIO (PRAYER): RESPONDING
Respond with a prayer according to how the words prompt you: a prayer of adoration, thanksgiving, sorrow for sin, petition, or love. Stay with these feelings. Let yourself desire God. Put yourself at the disposal of God's Spirit, preparing for God's action. Then you may return to the passage and continue reading, or you might be lifted into the next step.

4. CONTEMPLATIO (CONTEMPLATION): UNION
Be with God, enjoying his presence and letting him love you. Be alone with God in the great silence that is too deep for words. It may seem as though nothing is happening, but this is deceptive. Zen wisdom applies to this step: "Sitting still/doing nothing, spring comes and the grass grows by itself."

The first three steps involve doing, while the last one is simply being. The first three are our actions; the last one is God's action.

You may repeat steps several times or just do one step. When you are distracted or can't sustain the prayer, return to the passage and read it until another word strikes you.

Some people add a fifth step to *lectio divina*: *Actio* or Action. In this step we live out what we have come to learn through the process.

Meditation

Catholic meditation is the direct opposite of the practices of meditation in vogue today. While modern methods aim to empty the mind, Catholic meditation fills the mind with thoughts of God, Scripture passages, or divine truths. When meditating on a Scripture story, consider who, what, why, when, and how. This focused thinking stirs up our emotions and can lead to resolutions for a holier life. One spiritual writer advises that instead of thinking about God, it is better to think God. In other words, focus on God present to you personally and directly right now.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola taught the following form of meditation, which can be carried out using a gospel event.

1. Ask for a particular grace.
2. Use your imagination and all five senses to fill in the details of the setting, see the characters and hear them speak, and watch the action. How do you feel toward Jesus in the scene? Replay the event in your mind as if you were participating. For instance, as you meditate on the Nativity, Mary might let you hold the newborn baby. When meditating on the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, you might imagine that Jesus is kneeling to wash your feet.
3. Then discuss the event with God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, or with Mary. This is called the colloquy.
4. Draw fruit from your reflection by applying the passage to your life and making a resolution.

Another way to meditate on a gospel story is to imagine that you are one of the people in the

story, experiencing what he or she is experiencing. For example, put yourself in the place of the woman who is caught in adultery, the blind beggar Bartimaeus, who is cured, Peter, who is invited to walk on the Sea of Galilee, or a child on Jesus' lap.

Teachers of prayer recommend taking away a morsel from our meditation, a word or phrase to nibble on during the day. This will make our prayer more fruitful and keep us more mindful of God.

Using Imagination

There are different methods for using the imagination to facilitate prayer. In his journal, the poet Wordsworth recorded that when he was in a beautiful place—for instance, when he wrote his poem “Daffodils”—he often imagined Jesus next to him. Imagine Jesus with you in any of the following ways and then speak to him, even aloud, and imagine his reply.

- Sitting next to you
- Sitting on an empty chair in your room
- Meeting in a room mentally furnished to suit your taste

- Meeting at the seashore, in a garden, or on a mountaintop
- Sitting next to you in a boat
- Walking down a road with you
- Sitting with you in your favorite place

Writing a Conversation

Read a gospel story. Rewrite it in the first person as though you were present watching it unfold. Conclude by adding a scene where you are alone with Jesus. Write a conversation with Jesus in which you discuss what just occurred, but also refer to your own life and what you are thinking and currently experiencing.

Writing Letters

An excellent way to get rid of distractions is to write letters as prayer. First begin a letter “Dear Jesus,” and write whatever you are inspired to write. Sign the letter “Love,” and your name. Then begin another letter with “Dear” and your name. Write the letter and sign it “Love, Jesus.” As you write the second letter, do not force thoughts or imagine what Jesus would say to

you. Just let the ideas flow freely from your pen. You may be surprised.

Meditating on Art

Reflecting on a religious masterpiece or a nature scene is a good way to pray. Icons, those stylized paintings cherished by the Eastern Churches, are called windows into heaven. When Fr. Henri Nouwen couldn't pray, he sat for long hours before "The Trinity." He wrote, "I noticed how gradually my gaze became a prayer."

Praying Memories

Recall a time when you experienced God's love for you in a special way, when you felt close to God. Recall the place, the details of what happened, and how you felt. Then relive that event in your imagination. Finally, speak to God about it.

We can put to rest painful or bothersome memories by reviewing them in the presence of God. Here is the process:

- Recall that God is present, and rest in him.
- Think about how much God loves you.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you recall a past bad experience that negatively impacts your

life today.

- Let the memory come to mind.
- Relive the event, this time as though Jesus is there with you. In your imagination let Jesus act and talk to you during the experience.
- Thank Jesus for his love and healing.

Mantras: The Prayer of the Heart

A mantra is a short prayer—a word, phrase, or sentence—that is prayed repeatedly. Praying a mantra can free us from thinking so we can focus on God. When we are too tired, too weak, or too distressed to pray from a prayer book or to formulate our own prayers, we can pray a mantra. This simple way of praying has power to bring us relief and rest, to make us aware of God's consoling presence, and to open us to God. Its repetition is as soothing as the motion of a rocking chair, a swing, or waves on the shore. Gradually the mantras fall away, leaving only the presence of God.

Mantras can be prayed silently, aloud, set to a melody, or synchronized with your breathing. Some people like to keep track of mantras with

rosary beads. It is recommended that you sit relaxed with hands resting on your lap. Close your eyes and breathe deeply, letting all tension flow out of your body and mind. Focus on the Lord dwelling in you and then whisper the mantra slowly over and over, listening with love and desire. As you pray a verse, a word might change. For example, as you pray, “I love you, O Lord, my strength” (Psalm 18:1), all of a sudden you might realize that instead of praying “my strength,” you are praying “my savior.” Ponder the significance of the change.

Some mantras are reverse mantras, that is, rather than words we say to God, they are words that God is saying to us. For example, “Do not be afraid” (Matthew 28:5) is a comforting mantra before a stressful situation. Further examples are Isaiah 41:13, Isaiah 43:1, Matthew 28:20, John 11:25, John 16:33, and 2 Corinthians 12:9.

The Name Jesus

The simplest, most beautiful prayer is merely to say the name Jesus. This name contains the presence of the Son of God. It is “the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:9). The Hebrew name “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves.” By

calling on Jesus by name, we bring him to us and within us. Anthony de Mello, SJ, suggests saying Jesus as you inhale and saying a name of Jesus from Scripture or your own name for him as you exhale: Jesus, my rock; Jesus, my friend.

The Eastern Church gave us the Jesus prayer, which is repeated continuously and leads to union with God. It can be prayed inhaling on the first half and exhaling on the second half.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,
have mercy on me, a sinner.*

Taizé Prayer

The monks of an ecumenical, international community in Taizé, France, have made chanted mantras popular. Their prayer sessions combine sung mantras, Scripture, and silence. Recordings of Taizé songs are available.

Centering Prayer

Centering prayer opens us to the gift of contemplation. It is merely giving loving attention to God dwelling within us and letting God do his work in us. Here are the steps:

1. Decide on a word or phrase that you will use to keep focused on God. You will keep the

same word throughout the prayer period.

2. Quiet down. Sit upright so that your head is well supported by your spine. Be comfortable, but not so comfortable that you fall asleep. Keep your eyes gently closed so that energy is not wasted seeing. To relax, breathe slowly three times: exhale, take in fresh air, hold it, exhale.
3. Move toward God within you. Think only of God who is living deep within you, and ponder God's love for you. Be present to God. Let his overwhelming love and goodness attract you. Rest in God's presence.
4. Respond with your chosen prayer word or phrase. Repeat this prayer word slowly in your mind.
5. Attend to God and enjoy God's presence. When you know you are aware of things other than God, or you find yourself pestered by other thoughts, use your prayer word to gently bring you back. It functions like a tug on a kite string. Don't stop to think about how you're doing. Focus on giving God your loving attention.

6. When you are finished, pray a formula prayer like the Our Father or speak to God to ease the transition back to the world around you.

Journaling

A journal is a personal written record of thoughts, experiences, prayers, and blessings. It can be an aid to prayer or even an act of worship in itself. You don't have to be a good writer to keep a journal.

To keep a journal:

- Set aside time for it. When you don't have time to make an entry, jot down keywords on a special calendar.
- Write about the day's experiences and your reactions.
- Prime the pump by beginning with a starter question or open-ended statement.
- Let the ideas flow out of your mind and copy them. Don't try to control or edit them.
- Keep your journal private, and be honest in what you write.

- Periodically reread your journal to see how God has spoken to you and has acted in your life.

Praying with Art

Some people use drawing, painting, or sculpting as a means of prayer. The creative action stirs and helps them express their thoughts and emotions. Even doodling can be a springboard to prayer. Doodle on paper and then look for a shape and pray about it.

The Labyrinth

Not everyone could make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages, so labyrinths in cathedrals became a substitute. A labyrinth is one path that weaves around within a circle and ends at the center. People pray as they walk along the path to the center, which represents God. Then they retrace their steps going back out to the world. The path represents the journey of life as it sometimes leads away from God and sometimes has us pass other people. The prayer along the way can vary. We can walk with a Scripture verse, a mantra, a feeling, a question, a petition, or simply walk, paying attention to our thoughts

and feelings. The labyrinth can be walked slowly or even danced. Today, some labyrinths are constructed outside. Some institutions have a canvas labyrinth that can be borrowed. There are labyrinths on cloth or paper that are “walked” with the finger as well as small metal labyrinths that are traced with a metal stick. Some Web sites contain labyrinths that can be walked using the mouse!

An Examination of Conscience

Making an examination of conscience is preparation for the sacrament of penance. If you are serious about becoming more like Christ, you will try to make one every night. The Jesuit way of making a nightly examination of conscience prompts you to make better moral choices during the day because you want to give yourself a good report at night.

1. Recall God’s presence and ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten you.
2. Think of things during that day that you are grateful for, and thank God. These can be small things like a beautiful rose in your garden and the joy of going to a concert,

or large things like a good report from the doctor.

3. Replay the day like a movie in your mind's eye, looking for times when you accepted God's grace and times when you didn't cooperate with it. Perhaps you can pat yourself on the back for letting someone take the parking spot you had your eye on or for biting your tongue when tempted to make a hurtful smart remark. On the other hand, maybe you recall with regret how in the checkout line when the person ahead of you was short of cash, you thought of offering to cover it, but then didn't.
4. Ask forgiveness for your failings.
5. Ask God for grace to respond better the next day. Look ahead to situations you might face and decide on the best course of action.

Prayer, all forms, has benefits besides deepening our friendship with God. It increases grace, helping us to grow in holiness; serves as penance; and brings us peace. Perhaps the best reason to pray, though, is that God wants us to.