

Kathleen Glavich writes for average people trying to live out their Christianity in their daily lives. So when she tries to teach us how to pray, even when we are running on empty, we should pay attention. The classic prayers in this book are alone worth the price of admission.

◆ **GREGORY F. AUGUSTINE PIERCE**, *President and Publisher,
ACTA Publications*

Gerard Manley Hopkins ends one of his poems with the plea, “O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.” In her exceedingly helpful book, Kathleen Glavich shows us how to long for God like parched earth and how to receive the grace of quenching prayer.

◆ **STEPHEN J. BINZ**, *author of *Threshold Bible Study**

Praying on Empty is a wise, upbeat, and practical guide for anyone who experiences difficulties at prayer (and who doesn’t?). The book is chock-full of bright suggestions that will jump-start your prayer life.

◆ **BERT GHEZZI**, *author of *The Power of Daily Prayer**

Praying on Empty reminds us that the object of our prayers is also the font of them. God is with us when we are on fire. God is with us to help set us on fire. And God is with us when our prayers are like the gray ashes of yesterday’s fire. Inspiring reading for every prayer warrior—hot or cold.

◆ **DEACON TOM FOX**, *author and co-originator
of the Catholic Vitamins Podcast*

I am grateful to Mary Kathleen Glavich for having created a resource that belongs in the home of any person of faith. With warm prayers and invitational reflection prompts, Sister Kathleen has created a retreat for anyone who struggles with finding peaceful, fruitful prayer amidst life’s chaos and confusion. Highly recommended!

◆ **LISA M. HENDEY**

Sr. Kathleen has created a resource grounded in the everyday person's spiritual experience. The book addresses our struggles to maintain an active prayer life with many practical suggestions and inspiring insights. The book is an easy read, but do not be fooled: this is not spiritual "fluff" but true wisdom delivered in digestible portions.

- ◆ **BRIAN SINGER-TOWNS**, author of *The Catholic Faith Handbook for Youth and Biblical Literacy Made Easy*, Director of Content Department, Saint Mary's Press
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Amid our busyness, worries, and discouragements, many of us often find ourselves depleted, scattered, or wandering. Kathleen Glavich reassures us that God is Emmanuel—always with us—even (perhaps especially) in our empty times. Her stories of people's everyday experiences, prayers from our rich tradition, and life-giving suggestions for our own prayer during the challenging times make this a have-to-have resource for all of us on the journey of faith-filled prayer.

- ◆ **JANET SCHAEFFLER, OP**, retreat and workshop presenter; author of *The Spirituality of the Catechist*; *The Creed: Understanding and Sharing What We Believe*; and *Hope: An Anchor in Today's World*
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Approaching prayer "on empty" is a real and common experience for many people. Sr. Kathleen Glavich's book offers rich wisdom and practical advice for those who are seeking to understand and embrace how the grace of God may be working in their lives during these times. Drawing on the Scriptures, the teachings of great saints and mystics, and the experiences of ordinary, contemporary Christians, *Praying on Empty* provides helpful insights, sound guidance, and meaningful suggestions for reflection that will encourage and support those whose prayer has become a desert journey.

- ◆ **FR. MICHAEL G. WOOST**, Assistant Professor of Sacramental and Liturgical Theology at St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology, Diocese of Cleveland, OH

PRAYING
on EMPTY

*A Guide to Rediscovering
Your Prayerful Self*



MARY KATHLEEN GLAVICH, SND



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INTRODUCTION



fat mother groundhog lives in the spacious backyard of my convent home. The other day I glanced out my window and thought I saw her standing like a statue. But no. It was an enormous bird! I grabbed my camera and dashed out the back door. Too late—the exotic creature flew off and disappeared. This experience is the perfect image for the subject of this book. God is sometimes as elusive as that bird. We yearn to come close to him, yet we can't. Either God hides for some unfathomable reason, or we don't have the knack of capturing him—not for a photo but for a heart-to-heart talk.

If the title of this book, *Praying on Empty*, has seized your attention, you probably know what I'm talking about. You used to like to pray. You felt connected to God and enveloped by divine love. Sometimes you had a flash of insight about

God, life in general, or your own life. A Scripture passage spoke to you with a new and personal meaning. Praying and singing gathered together with other Christians at Mass made your heart swell with joy. Prayer filled you with peace and seemed to empower you with the strength to face any trials. You felt good...and even holy.

All of a sudden your prayer dried up! You lost the sense of God's presence, could hardly wait until prayer was finished, and maybe stopped praying entirely. It was as though you were in a desert and your car came to a sputtering halt with no gas station in sight. If this describes your prayer life right now—or will sometime in the future—don't panic!

Such dark days are part of the natural (or supernatural) journey toward union with God. As my friend Jean remarked, "If you don't experience them, you aren't human." Prayer vacillates between periods of consolation, when we are swept up into a profound experience of the divine, and periods of desolation when we feel as though God has left us stranded. Dryness in prayer might actually be a grace in disguise, and eventually you might feel at home in the desert. In fact, you are in good company. Very holy people have suffered through dry stretches in the extreme.

Pioneers in the Desert

Nobel Peace Prize winner St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was acknowledged as a saint even before being canonized. She was known for her constant smile and love for the poorest of the poor. Yet after she died, the world was stunned to learn that

she endured decades of not sensing God's presence. One day Mother Teresa heard Jesus telling her to found the Missionaries of Charity. But from that day on until she died, she was granted only one more brief experience of God. In her torments she prayed, "Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? The child of your love—and now become as the most hated one. The one—you have thrown away as unwanted—unloved. I call, I cling, I want, and there is no one to answer."

Similarly, St. Mother Teresa's namesake, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the young Carmelite nun who promoted the popular "little way" to holiness, experienced a profound spiritual darkness. During the eighteen months preceding her exceedingly painful death from tuberculosis, she doubted the existence of eternal life with God. Although she lacked the joy of faith, she continued carrying out its works. She wanted to believe.

Then there is the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross. He was imprisoned and beaten for trying to reform his Carmelite community. During and after nine months in a dark cell, he wrote poems about a soul on the way to union with God, including *The Dark Night of the Soul*. No doubt his works were rooted in personal experience.

How could God seem to abandon these three people and others who loved him so much? How could God seem to abandon you?

This Book

In *Praying on Empty* you will explore possible reasons for experiencing aridity in prayer and acquire ways to cope with it.

I'm deeply grateful to those kind people who shared with me what it was like for them to pray on empty.

Each chapter is sprinkled with prayers for expressing your thoughts and feelings when you long for God but your prayer seems to be at a standstill. Questions to ponder are offered in the For Reflection sections.

If you are desperate, you might leapfrog ahead to the last three chapters, where there are strategies to survive praying on empty. May this book serve as a map to guide you on your way through the desert to spiritual growth and ultimately to God, our Creator, who at times plays hide-and-seek.

As you struggle with prayer, you might make this prayer your own:

*Show me, O Lord, your mercy,
and delight my heart with it.
Let me find you whom I so longingly seek.
See, here is the man [woman]
whom the robbers seized, mishandled,
and left half dead on the road to Jericho.
O kindhearted Samaritan, come to my aid!
I am the sheep who wandered into the wilderness—
seek after me, and bring me home again to your fold.
Do with me what you will,
that I may stay by you all the days of my life
and praise you with all those
who are with you in heaven for all eternity.*

⇒ **ST. JEROME**

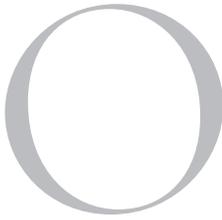
CHAPTER ONE



The
Whole Point
of Prayer

*You have made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our hearts are restless
until they rest in you.*

— **ST. AUGUSTINE**



ne *Family Circus* cartoon shows young Jeff asking his dad, “I’m going to say my prayers, Daddy. Is there anything you want?” Jeff is focused on only one aspect of prayer: petitioning. Let’s broaden the view and take a look at the larger picture.

God created us because he desired to share his life and love. The love pulsing through the three divine Persons of the Trinity overflowed and led to the creation of human persons with whom God could have a relationship. God wanted us to enjoy him and his works. We were meant to live with God as his children and love him in return. Why should we love God? St. Bernard of Clairvaux provides the answer: “The reason for loving God is God; the measure of this love is to love without measure.”

As you know, Adam and Eve threw a monkey wrench into God’s plan. Consequently, we were separated from God, banned from heaven, and deprived of perfect happiness. Now, while we are pilgrims on earth, we long to be united with God once more. He is like a powerful magnet drawing us to him. Poetically put, we all have a God-shaped hole in our heart that only God can fill. Nothing or no one else can complete or satisfy us. We have “restless hearts.”

Fortunately, our compassionate and loving God repaired the damage wreaked by the first people. He sent his divine Son, Jesus, to restore us to our original status. Thanks to our Redeemer, it is now possible for us to build a relationship with each divine Person: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How do we do this? Through prayer.

Prayer Defined

Last night my brother, Tony, who lives two thousand miles away, phoned, and we had a good chat. We agreed that we ought to call each other more often. I went to bed feeling much closer to Tony. All relationships require being present to each other and communicating. Without this connection, they wither and die.

Prayer is nothing less than communicating with God, the most important one in the world and our closest friend, who knows us inside and out. It is a dialogue. We speak to God, and we listen to what God is saying in our heart. Contacting God is a cinch because God is everywhere. Skype and cell-phones aren't necessary. The more we pray, the deeper and more solid our relationship with God becomes. The purpose of prayer is not so much to have our wishes granted as to grow in love for God.

Human love relationships are complicated and have their ups and downs. We shouldn't expect our relationship with God to be any different. Only in heaven will our prayer at last be continuous and everlasting. There we will behold God face-to-face, what is known as the Beatific Vision. We will be united with God and awash in divine love. In the meantime, we pray like this:

*Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits and blessings you have given me,
for all the pains you have borne for me.
Merciful Friend, Brother and Redeemer,*

*may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly,
day by day.*

⇒ **ST. RICHARD OF CHICHESTER**

The Need for Prayer

The omnipotent God, the great I AM, doesn't need us "mere mortals." Nor does he need our worship, praise, and thanks. On the other hand, we greatly need prayer. In fact, prayer is as vital to human beings as air. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen compared a person who never prays to a child with asthma.

The psalmist thirsts for God as a deer thirsts for streams (Psalm 42:1–2). We all have a deep-seated desire to be in touch with the source and sustainer of our being, whether we realize it or not. Everyone would agree that we are on a quest for happiness. The joy achieved in attaining wealth, fame, power, human love, and other things the world offers is only a shadow of the perfect bliss that awaits us. This ideal happiness flows from being united with God in heaven, a union that is initiated on earth through prayer. In the unique words of the mystic Juliana of Norwich, prayer "one-eth the soul to God."

Some people question why we would spend time conversing with someone we can't see. To them prayer doesn't make sense; it's a waste of time. Christian philosopher and scientist Blaise Pascal offers one answer: "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."

Not only is God invisible, but God is absolute mystery. These two facts pose a problem for communication, but they

are not insurmountable. After all, God wants us to pray, as Jesus and Scripture make crystal clear. Jesus modeled prayer, encouraged us to pray, and taught us how by giving us the Our Father as a pattern. Through St. Paul, God prescribes praying at all times and without ceasing (Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Moreover, the good God provides the grace that enables us to pray. According to the Bible, “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). Were you baptized? Then this Spirit dwells and works within you, producing a deep underground stream of life-giving water.

When We Can't Pray

In light of who God is, if you can no longer pray or think you are not praying, you are devastated. Without a relationship with God, your earthly life seems meaningless, and, what's more important, your eternal life in the next world is in jeopardy. You ask, “How could this happen to me?” One woman whose faith meant everything to her found herself struggling to pray for a few years. She said the experience left her “numb,” “shell-shocked,” and with no desire to live.

People who wish they could pray and cannot might jump to these frightening conclusions:

- I've done something to offend God that I'm not aware of.
- I must be praying the wrong way.

- God doesn't love me anymore.
- I am not worthy.
- This spiritual paralysis might never end.
- I'm having a crisis of faith.
- There isn't any God!

The truth is that while we think we are imprisoned in a spiritual vacuum, God can be at work in us, albeit in a puzzling way. Spiritual writers compare experiencing dryness in prayer to being a patient who is anesthetized while the doctor operates.

Not only can Jesus do marvelous things in you during your period of distress, but *you* can still do great things!

A Consoling Story

An incident recounted by Rabbi Abraham Heschel and others contains an important message not only for Jewish people but for Christians too:

Once, a shoemaker asked Rabbi Isaac Meir Alter what to do about his morning prayer. The shoemaker's customers were so poor that they owned only one pair of shoes. Late in the evening the shoemaker picked up any shoes to be repaired. So that the men would have their shoes in time for work, he labored over them all night and early in the morning. The shoemaker asked the rabbi, "Should I say my morning prayer quickly, or should I skip it and while hammering shoes occasionally sigh and say, 'Woe is me. I haven't prayed morning prayer'?" The rabbi answered, "Probably God values

that sigh more than the prayer.”

The following prayer echoes some of the ideas in this chapter:

PRAYER

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that, if I do this,

You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

⇒ **THOMAS MERTON, OCSO**

FOR REFLECTION

- Which divine Person do you pray to most, Father, Son, or Holy Spirit? You might try to nurture a stronger relationship with the other two Persons.
- If you made a timeline of your prayer life, where would the highest point be? The lowest? Where are you now?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your desire to pray?

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CHAPTER TWO



A
Distressing
Situation

*O my God, I cry by day,
but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.*

⇒ **PSALM 22:2**