

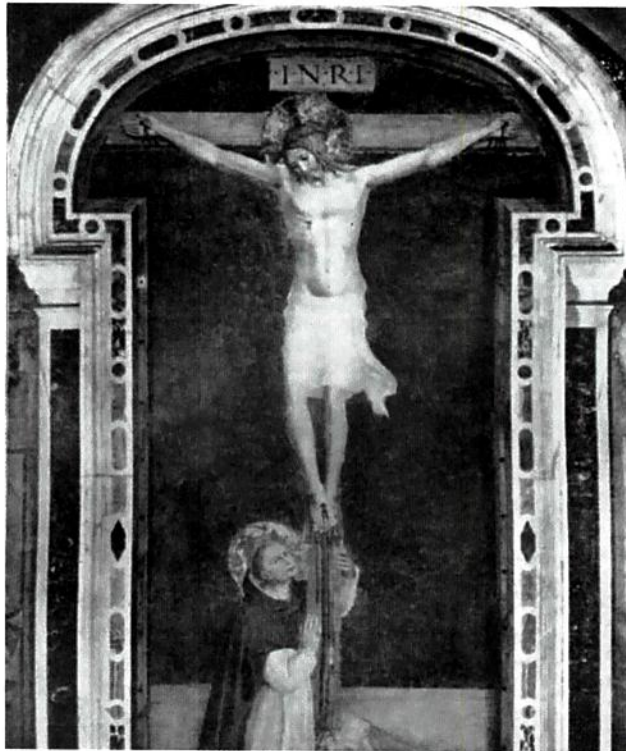
# The Battle of Prayer

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ~ Romans 8:26*

**P**RAYER is the raising of one's mind and heart to God<sup>1</sup> (CCC 2559). Prayer is our way of establishing a relationship with God, and this relationship with him is unique and personal for each of us. If we love someone, we look forward to being with, and creating opportunities to communicate with, the beloved. It is the same with God. The initial invitation comes from God as a gift, a grace bestowed on us by a loving God. He looks for ways and occasions to be available to us.

We, out of love for him, should look for times and ways to respond to him. Jesus tells us that we *"ought always to pray"* (Lk 18:1). He emphasizes that, apart from him, we *"can do nothing"* (Jn 15:5), but a lifting up in response to God's prompting requires a conscious effort on our part. Since God has given us free will, without us, *he* will do nothing.

We must first be aware of our own nothingness: we are totally dependent upon God. We must know that he, and he alone, can make Heaven possible for us. Yet Satan stands between us and God, and will do everything possible to keep us from even communicating with God. Life is truly a battle; we par-



*The Crucifixion with St. Dominic, by Fra Angelico, 1387-1455*

***"No matter what form our prayer may take, we contend with obstacles placed in our way by Satan and the weaknesses of our own fallen nature."***

## Distraction

Anyone who prays becomes aware of our proneness to distraction. The devil is surely at work and, if we have any true self-awareness, we know that our own human weakness is evident, for we *"do not do what [we] want"* (Rom 7:15) and we know that *"the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Mt 26:41). While these wanderings of the mind cannot be excluded, we must counteract distractions as soon as

participate in the conflict between God and the powers of Hell. In this combat, prayer is a major weapon. Spending more time with God makes us more aware of his presence, strengthens us in virtue, and helps us avoid sin and its consequence, subjection to Satan.

Because prayer requires our own efforts, it is not always easy. We must truly work at prayer. No matter what form our prayer may take, be it vocal prayer such as saying the Rosary, liturgical prayer such as assisting at Holy Mass, or meditative prayer, we contend with obstacles placed in our way by Satan and the weaknesses of our own fallen nature. These difficulties include distraction, dryness, lack of faith, and discouragement.

<sup>1</sup> St. John Damascene, *De fide orth.* 3, 24 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 94, 1089C (Paris, 1857-1866)

we notice them, immediately re-concentrating on our prayers. In dealing with distraction, it is our *effort* that counts; the *willingness* to pray is the paramount disposition of the soul. Willfully entertaining distractions is not a way to manage or eliminate them, and so they must constantly be rejected, without however becoming distressed. Even if our whole time of prayer is one continuous struggle to stay focused on God, it is pleasing to him, for we have been in combat with Satan and did not willingly surrender.

To gain skill in lessening the intrusion of distractions, it helps to consciously develop a sense of solitude to accompany our times of prayer. This sense of solitude is an attitude of mind established over time that, in conjunction with a sense of silence, helps us to become more aware of the presence of God. The sense of solitude and silence reduces the inroads of distraction.

In addition, by making a conscious effort to detach ourselves from worldly things, thoughts, and desires, our prayer time with the eternal love of our life is improved. Practicing the wholesome exercise of self-denial, or mortification, is the best way to accomplish this detachment. Deliberately denying ourselves legitimate pleasures allows us to gain an extraordinary ability to control our desires for the non-legitimate pleasures to which our fallen nature is inclined. Perseverance through everyday efforts in little steps of self-denial, which no one but God need ever know about — simple things such as one spoonful of sugar rather than two in a cup of coffee, or two beers at a party instead of three — can work wonders in giving us self-mastery. This control makes us more confident and competent

in handling difficulties in prayer. In the sixth century, St. John Climacus said: “Fasting makes for purity of prayer.” In this regard, as in so many other matters of skill development, practice makes perfect.

### Dryness

Dryness is a term describing a loss of desire or taste for spiritual things. It occurs most often in contemplative prayer (see handout on The Heights of Prayer: Contemplation). Those who reach the level of contemplative prayer best cope with dryness under the guidance of a spiritual director who is competent to help the prayerful soul through these dreadful periods in its spiritual growth. Periods of dryness, however, may occur in anyone’s life of prayer, depriving us of the warmth and comfort we expect when

spending time in union with God. This kind of dryness may be mood-induced and often disappears when we persevere in prayer.

### Lack of Faith

Sometimes our prayer life is afflicted with problems that result from a lack of faith. One thing we must never overlook in our prayers is what Jesus expected of those he healed. He seemed always to say, “[Y]our faith has made you well” (Mk 10:52). Faith must be the foundation of all our prayers, and this means concentrating not on the gifts but on the Giver (see CCC 2740). We must be convinced of our dependence upon God, and that the ultimate purpose of our existence is to know, love, and serve him alone. Without these convictions, the devil can tempt us to believe that there is no use for



*The temptation of Christ, by Domenico Mastroragni, 1876-1962*

***“It is our effort that counts;  
the willingness to pray is the  
paramount disposition of the soul.”***

prayer, that it is not important enough to take time from other pressing responsibilities.

As we search the Gospels, we are captivated by Jesus' promises: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Lk 11:9), and again: "[I]f you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name" (Jn 16:23). We are attracted by the stories of Jesus' healings — the woman who touched the hem of his garment (see Mk 5:25-34), the healing from afar of the centurion's servant (see Mt 8:5-13), the woman willing to accept like a dog the crumbs from the Master's table so that her daughter could be healed (see Mt 15:21-28), the return from death of the daughter of Jairus (see Lk 8:41-42, 49-56).

But the Gospel stories also make us pause to think about the time that Jesus said that a blind man was not sin-afflicted but bore his sufferings so that, when Jesus came along, the glory of God would be made manifest when he was healed (see Jn 9:2-3), or when Jesus said much the same thing before he raised his beloved friend Lazarus from the dead after he had allowed him to die rather than hurry to cure him of his illness (see Jn 11:1-44). Even more thought-provoking for us might be Jesus' inability to heal in his native city because his friends and neighbors could not believe he was other than an ordinary carpenter (see Mk 6:1-6). Another time, he seemed so exasperated with their unwillingness to trust in God's providence that he exclaimed, "O men of little faith!" (Lk 12:28). In our own lives, it is helpful to keep a journal of answered prayers, which will show us our own list of small and large miracles of God's providential responses to our prayers. *Faith* is the root of our life and of our prayers. We must believe in *him*, trust in *him*, not in the vehemence or frequency of our prayers. We cannot ever escape the need to believe that he is God, and he is not only the possessor of all good but he is also the one who knows what is *for* our good. He knows best, and we must consciously allow his will to prevail in our lives and in all our prayers.

### Discouragement

Discouragement is a difficulty closely linked to lack of faith. Discouragement will often cause us to think that our prayers are not heard and not answered. One might say to oneself: "I've prayed and prayed, I've asked and asked, but I still do not have a

good job, or my child is still sick, or I have yet to win the lottery. My prayers are not heard; God does not answer them." These thoughts may be prompted by Satan, but they are also normal issues that confront us in the honest pursuit of our prayer life.

Jesus gave us a story that shows his awareness of this kind of problem: "And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, "Vindicate me against my adversary." For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming."'" And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?'" (Lk 18:1-8).

The message of Jesus in the Gospels is clear and emphatic. He was blunt in his speech, and though his sayings were hard to accept, he neither altered nor diluted their significance. He let us know that God's "thoughts are not [our] thoughts, neither are [our] ways [his] ways" (Is 55:8) by his parable of the householder hiring laborers for his vineyard (see Mt 20:1-16). He told us plainly that, when we pray, we must be mindful that our "Father knows what [we] need before [we] ask him" (Mt 6:8).

In the prayer he himself taught us, the Our Father, Jesus gave us guidelines for our own prayer life (see Mt 6:9-13). God the Father is paramount; we must seek *first* the Kingdom of God, and then all that we *need* will be given to us besides (see Mt 6:33). "Need" must be understood from God's viewpoint, not our own. The Father's will, and reverence and glorification of his name, must guide our lives. Our Savior's prayer at the Last Supper and in Gethsemane centered on the Father so strongly (see Jn 14-17; Mk 14:32-39) as to make us mindful that, in our own prayers, we must see the Father, to whom all prayers are ultimately directed, as God the almighty one and not just as an "instrument" to be "used" to secure our own desires. In a state of true dependence and humility, we must truly ask for what *he* wants for his purposes and for us. This is usually not easy.

***"We must truly ask  
for what he wants for his  
purposes and for us.  
This is usually not easy."***

If we are faced with the troublesome thought that our prayers are not heard, we must not blame God.

In our relationship with him, he cannot be at fault. He is God; there is nothing wrong with him. If, therefore, our relationship with him has a problem, the trouble must be in us. Unwittingly, our prayer may be a problem of selfishness: Lord, give me this, give me that. We think we seek first the Kingdom of God and his will, but we are really more focused on ourselves and our needs as we see them, rather than wanting what God knows is for our good. We are, as St. James says, “*men of double mind*” (Jas 4:8).

When our prayers are burdened with our own self-centered petitions, when we seek some good that we deem important, as we see things, in the eyes of God, we may be asking for the wrong things; our concerns may reveal a woeful lack of understanding of the “*one thing ... needful*” (Lk 10:42). There is some likelihood that our problem with prayer is really a problem of our failure to understand our priorities — that is, that God and the things of God are first. It is helpful to keep in mind the anecdote told of the child who, when asked whether God had answered her prayer, said simply: “Yes. He said No.”

### The Transformative Power of Prayer

When we pray in faith, if we persevere and not lose hope or give up, the answer may, and often does, come in the form of our own transformation of heart. God works in us, deepening our faith and

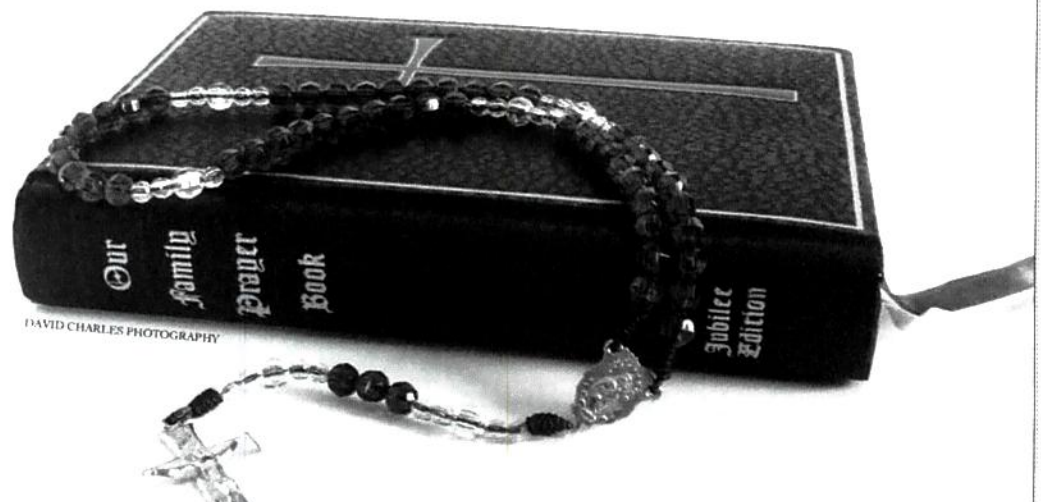
***“The real purpose of our prayers is to make us holy.”***

leading us to admit our dependence on him more clearly and to long for him more urgently. Prayer, it

must be remembered, is a holy thing that is available to us as a means of communicating with an eternal God. It is wrapped in mystery. St. Augustine tells us that “our heart is restless until it rests in [God]”<sup>2</sup> (CCC 30); he is the final answer to all our prayers.

The more we pray, the more we will be able to pray, and as we become more skilled at prayer we can more easily overcome the obstacles to prayer. The real purpose of our prayers, as members of the Church struggling to attain Heaven, is to make us holy. We must strive valiantly to gain eternal life. Nothing else really matters or makes sense. We must bring all our thoughts, words, and deeds into harmony with the will of God. The more we pray, the better we will pray. Through continued prayer, we are led by greater faith to see our life on earth as only a prelude to eternal joy with God. The more pleasing we are to God, the more we will find him entering our lives and taking care of our needs and those of our loved ones with an infinite, paternal solicitude. Faith, real faith, is itself the fruit of earnest prayer, as the man knew who encountered Jesus crying passionately: “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” (Mk 9:24). We can then rest peacefully in the arms of a God of love who loves us first and always. “Love only me,” he seems to say, “and I will love all of thee.”

(CCC 30, 2559, 2725-2726, 2728-2742, 2745)



<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* 32, 659-661 (Paris: 1841-1855)

# Aspects of Prayer

*And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith. ~ Matthew 21:22*

**T**HE LORD'S PRAYER, more commonly referred to as "The Our Father," is a masterpiece of the Gospel and is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. In it the Lord brings together the essential aspects of prayer that are found throughout the Scriptures. It is the most revered prayer among Catholics and is recited every time the Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharist.

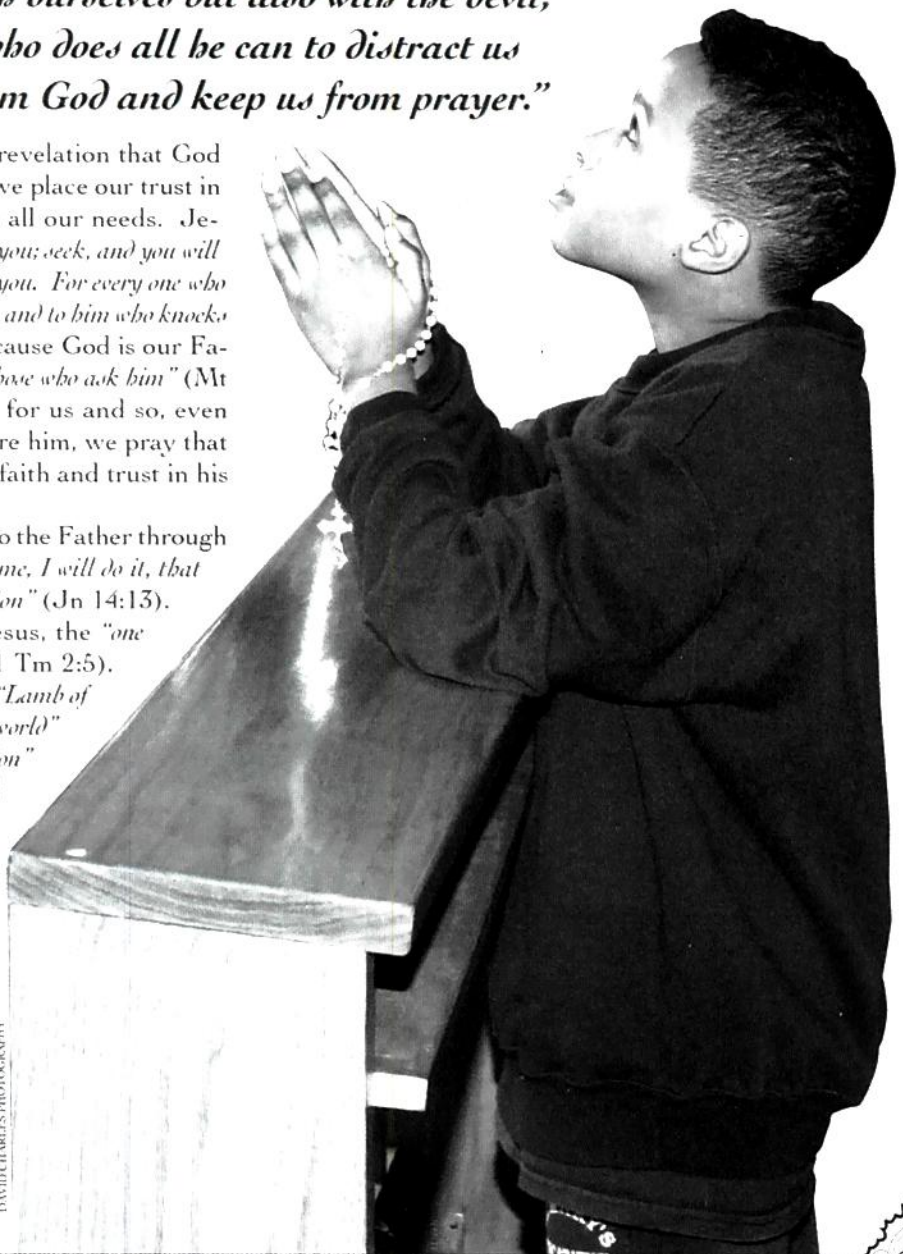
The prayer begins with the revelation that God is our Father. As his children, we place our trust in him and come before him with all our needs. Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Mt 7:7-8). Because God is our Father he will give "good things to those who ask him" (Mt 7:11). He knows what is best for us and so, even before we place our needs before him, we pray that his will be done to express our faith and trust in his Providence.

Jesus also taught us to pray to the Father through him: "whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (Jn 14:13). For this reason, we pray to Jesus, the "one mediator between God and men" (1 Tm 2:5). He is our Lord and Savior, the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29), the Father's "beloved Son" (Mk 9:7; Lk 3:22), and our Good Shepherd (see Jn 10:11). We invoke the name of Jesus — which means "God saves" — and, by keeping his name on our lips, make our lives a constant prayer. We beg his mercy in the traditional sinner's prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (see Mk 10:47; Lk 18:13).

Another aspect of prayer is the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Spirit that has been sent into our hearts who teaches us to recognize God as Father (see Gal 4:6). Scripture says, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).

*In this life we are involved in a spiritual battle not only with ourselves but also with the devil, who does all he can to distract us from God and keep us from prayer."*



DAVID HUBBARD'S PHOTOGRAPHY

*“Saying the name of Jesus throughout the day  
is one form of constant prayer.”*



COURTESY OF THE ARCHDIOCESE FOR THE MILITARY SERVICES, USA

*A military priest prays over a wounded soldier during World War II*

In his encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus describes the water that only he can give as the water of the Spirit which will become in each of us *“a spring of water welling up to eternal life”* (Jn 4:14). Authentic prayer arises out of this spring and is sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture reminds us that in this life we are involved in a spiritual battle not only with ourselves but also with the devil, who does all he can to distract us from God and keep us from prayer. Jesus said to his disciples, *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”* (Mt 26:41). Many of us have complained that, with our jobs and families, we “don’t have time” for prayer. Solving this problem is more about making time than finding it. Prayer has to become a priority in our life because too much is at stake in prayer. *“Be sober; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him,*

*firm in your faith”* (1 Pt 5:8-9).

St. Paul exclaims, *“Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”* (1 Thes 5:17). The command to pray without ceasing may seem impossible, but keep in mind that it is the Holy Spirit in each of us that prays on our behalf. A “morning offering” dedicates the day. Saying the name of Jesus throughout the day is one form of constant prayer. Through this prayer, we call upon the Holy Spirit

for help and sanctify all the activities of daily life. In this way, our whole life becomes an offering in prayer to God.

Prayer at all times also means that we set aside specific times for prayer. Prayer upon awakening and just before sleep, and prayer before meals, should be part of the daily rhythm of prayer. Many people go to Mass daily. The Liturgy of the Hours (see handout of this title) is an extended form of daily prayer. Prayer at Sunday Mass helps keep the entire day and week holy, and the cycles of the liturgical year (see handout on The Liturgical Year), with its great feasts celebrating the story of our salvation and its celebration of the lives of the saints, create a seasonal rhythm that, over time, becomes embedded in the Christian’s life of prayer.

(CCC 451, 2650, 2652, 2664-2668, 2697-2698, 2725-2745, 2761-2762, 2770, 2780)

# Introduction to Prayer

*O Lord, look down from thy holy habitation, and consider us.  
Incline thy ear, O Lord, and hear. ~ Baruch 2:16*

**OUR PERSONAL** relationship with God is more important than anything else. The heart of this relationship is prayer, which is also the primary way that we foster and maintain it. Prayer, as the *Catechism* explains, "is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God"<sup>1</sup> (CCC 2559). Whether spoken or unspoken, prayer is that privileged communication which each person shares with his or her Creator.



*Praying Hands, c. 1508, by Albrecht Dürer*

## Why Pray?

God created us to know, love, and serve him in this life, and to be happy forever with him in the next (see Is 43:7; Mk 8:36; Mk 12:30; Jn 14:2). The deepest desire of the human heart is for God. Having experienced the signs of his presence in the world around us and in our own lives, in faith we seek and desire God above all else. St. Augustine, a bishop of the early Church and himself a convert, put it beautifully when he said, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

We all long to rest in God. The Father sent his Son into the world to draw us back into communion with him and to be that source of his compassion and mercy for all who are troubled and weighed down by the trials of life. Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30). The most important way of knowing this "rest" is through prayer.

## The Art and Gift of Prayer

Prayer is something that we learn and it is also a gift from God. It is a combination of our own personal effort and the work of God within us. It establishes a real communion with God that forms into the relationship intended by him for each one of us. If we begin by doing what we can and ask him for help, he will help us although sometimes in ways that we may not at first understand. Developing a prayer life can only happen if one makes time for the Lord each day. Also, the Scriptures are useful in teach-

ing us how to pray.

## Prayer from the Heart

Whether we recite formal written prayers or pray spontaneously, prayer should come from the heart. Love is the source of prayer, our response in love to the God who created us out of love. Praying from the heart also means that we are honest with ourselves and with God. Scripture says, "before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare" (Heb 4:13), so there is no way to hide even our deepest wounds and sins from him. However, he promises that, to those who come to him in prayer with a contrite heart, he will listen and offer forgiveness. Letting God into our hearts will deepen our ability to pray and make us ever mindful of his mercy and love.

## Helpful Scriptures for Prayer

Ps 27:8-9    Mt 6:6            Jn 16:23-24    1 Jn 1:9  
Ps 46:10    Mt 26:40-41    Phil 4:6-7    Jn 5:14  
Ps 62:1    Jn 15:7            1 Thes 5:16-18  
(CCC 2558-2619, 2598-2619, 2656, 2658)

***"Prayer is that privileged communication which each person shares with his or her Creator."***

<sup>1</sup> St. John Damascene, *De fide orth.* 3, 24 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 94, 1089C (Paris, 1857-1866)

# Jesus: Our Exemplar in Prayer

*In these days he went out to the mountain to pray;  
and all night he continued in prayer to God. ~ Luke 6:12*

**T**HE APOSTLES SPENT a great amount of time in the presence of Jesus. They observed what he did, heard what he said, and ever so slowly became aware of what he valued, and why and how he thought and did things. Jesus was their leader; the apostles looked to him in all things. He was their Lord; he was their model. In time, they tried to imitate him. On many occasions, they witnessed Jesus praying (see Lk 3:21; Lk 4:1; Lk 9:28; Lk 10:21; Lk 11:1; Lk 22:32; Jn 17:1-26; Heb 5:7) and, wanting to be like him, they finally asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). He gave us the essential prayer, the "Our Father" (see Mt 6:9-13; see also Lk 11:2-4). Their request of him clearly indicates that they accepted him as their exemplar in everything, prayer included.

The apostles had ample opportunities to observe the prayer life of their Master. They noted that he often withdrew from the crowds, oftentimes even from them, in order to pray (see Mt 14:23; Lk 5:16). They must have seen that Jesus was refreshed and ready for another teaching mission after having spent time in prayer. They also knew that Jesus prayed before important acts and decisions (see Mk 1:35-38; Mk 14:35; Lk 6:12) and before he worked miracles (see Jn 11:41-42). They saw that prayer was a constant background in Jesus' life.

Jesus showed his followers that prayer can be drawn from the great treasury of Scriptural prayer, or can be simple prayers in our own words. He prayed the "Hallel" Psalms (songs of praise; the

word "Alleluia" derives from "Hallelu-ya" or "praise to God") at the Last Supper (see Mt 26:30). Hanging on the cross, he used the Psalms to express his anguish of spirit — "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:45, citing Ps 22:1) — and his trust in his Father — "into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46, citing Ps 31:5). He offered prayer in

*"They saw that prayer was a  
constant background in Jesus' life."*



*Jesus going up onto a mountain to pray, by James Tissot, 1856-1902*

simple language, using "Abba" (an affectionate term similar to "Daddy") to address his Father (Mk 14:36) and to conform his human will to his Father's will: "remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk 22:42). He commended the humble man who prayed simply, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (Lk 18:13).

Jesus' closest followers could not have failed to realize that his prayer and his whole life were centered on his Father. His communion with his Father at one point prompted them to ask him to "show us the Father" (Jn 14:8). So many times, in the hearing of his apostles, Jesus prayed to and in praise of his Father (see Lk 10:21; Jn 11:41-42; Jn 12:27-28; Jn 17:4). Jesus' love for his Father, his glory, his will, his every desire was the core of his life. Before he left his apostles for his final hours on Calvary, Jesus spoke emphatically of his Father: "I shall ... tell you plainly of the Father... for the Father himself loves you.... Father... glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee.... And this is eternal life, that they know thee as the only true God.... I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do.... I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me.... Holy Father, keep them in thy name.... keep them from the evil one.... Sanctify them



*“Jesus’ closest followers could not have failed to realize that his prayer  
and his whole life were centered on his Father.”*

*in the truth ... that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee.... Father, I desire that they also ... may be with me where I am, to behold my glory.... O righteous Father, ... these know that thou hast sent me ... that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 16:25, 27 and 17:1, 3-4, 6, 11, 15, 17, 21, 24-26).*

This priestly prayer of Jesus could hardly have failed to make a tremendous impact upon the apostles and, no doubt, this was his intent, for he was about to leave them behind in a world in which they would be hated (see Jn 15:19). His prayer to the Father, in their presence, was intended also to instruct them: to emphasize for them that what was paramount in his life on earth should be the most important aspect of their own lives as his disciples. The lesson he wanted them, and us, to grasp was the central importance of his Father: that the Father was the Alpha and Omega (see Rv 21:6), the end-all and be-all of his life and, as our exemplar, of our lives as well. This Father-centeredness is unmistakably evident when Jesus’ followers asked him to teach them

to pray. It is Jesus’ Father, now our Father too, who is the heart of the matter of life as well as our heart’s desire at the moment of death.

During his life on earth, Jesus also emphasized the importance of faith in prayer. Again and again, the apostles heard that faith is the condition for answers to our prayers. Faith can move mountains, Jesus tells us, if that faith is even as small as a mustard seed (see Mt 17:20). But it must be actively present if we expect prayer to have results. “*All things are possible,*” says Jesus on one occasion, “*to him who believes.*” (Mk 9:23). “*And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith*” (Mt 21:22), he says on another.

In reading the Gospels, we become aware of Jesus’ requirement of faith in those who requested favors of him, even miracles. He was pleased with those who had faith, and rewarded it: the Roman centurion (see Mt 8:8-10), the woman with the hemorrhage (see Mt 9:21-22), the pagan Canaanite woman who drew from Jesus the joyful exclamation, “*O woman, great is your faith!*” (Mt 15:28), the blind Bartimaeus (see Mk 10:51-52). He was dismayed by evidence of lack of faith. The Evangelist Mark tells us that “*he could do no mighty work there*” and “*be marveled because of their unbelief*” (Mk 6:5-6). And he rebuked the apostles when, fearing they would die, they awakened him while he slept in their boat through a storm on the Sea of Galilee: “*Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?*” (Mt 8:26).

In showing us the importance of prayer and its necessity in daily life, Jesus taught and practiced two essential things. First, prayer and our whole life are centered on God the Father and the accomplishment of his will. Second, the essential means of attaining an answer to our prayers is faith.

So when we pray, we must imitate Jesus. Like him, we must lift up our hearts and minds to God (see CCC 2559), hallow his name, submit ourselves and our requests to his will, and ask that his Kingdom may come on earth as it is in Heaven. Having touched first the heart of our Father, we can then ask, seek, and knock on that heart for our own needs and, with faith — as firm a faith as possible — await his response. To each of us, our Exemplar says: “*And I tell you, ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you*” (Lk 11:9).

(CCC 520, 612, 2559, 2598-2607, 2609-2611, 2746-2751, 2759-2761)



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

# Types of Prayer

*You shall ... praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. ~ Joel 2:26*

## How We Pray

**T**HERE ARE MANY TYPES OF PRAYER both in the public prayer or worship of the Church and in the private life of each Christian. We can pray to God alone or in a group, out loud or silently, reciting memorized prayers or praying in words that spontaneously come from the heart. In whatever way we pray, prayer is a communion with God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As the Church makes present the mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit in every age through its liturgical prayer, so the praying heart of the believer is linked to the Church's prayer.

Generally, there are three ways to pray: vocal prayer, meditative prayer, and contemplative prayer (see also handouts entitled *Christian Meditation* and *The Heights of Prayer: Contemplation*). Vocal prayer is the easiest to understand and practice. It is the first kind of prayer that we teach our children. It is especially suitable for prayer in groups, and therefore is also the sublime public prayer of the Church in its liturgies. For this reason, vocal prayer should not be looked down on as something we do only if we can't "do better." When the apostles asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus taught them the most perfect of all prayers, the Our Father (see Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:1-4). Jesus prayed not only silently, but also vocally (see Mt 11:25-26; Mk 14:36; Jn 17:1-26). We are not purely spiritual beings, but material as well, and vocal prayer turns our voices as well as our minds and spirits, our bodies as well as our souls, our entire being, in love to the One who made us. Yet, like all prayer, vocal prayer must be an action of the heart seeking God, not merely repetition of words.

## Why We Pray

One way to think about the types of prayer is to use the acronym ACTS — for *adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication*. All of them together define and help to foster that personal relationship with God we have in prayer.

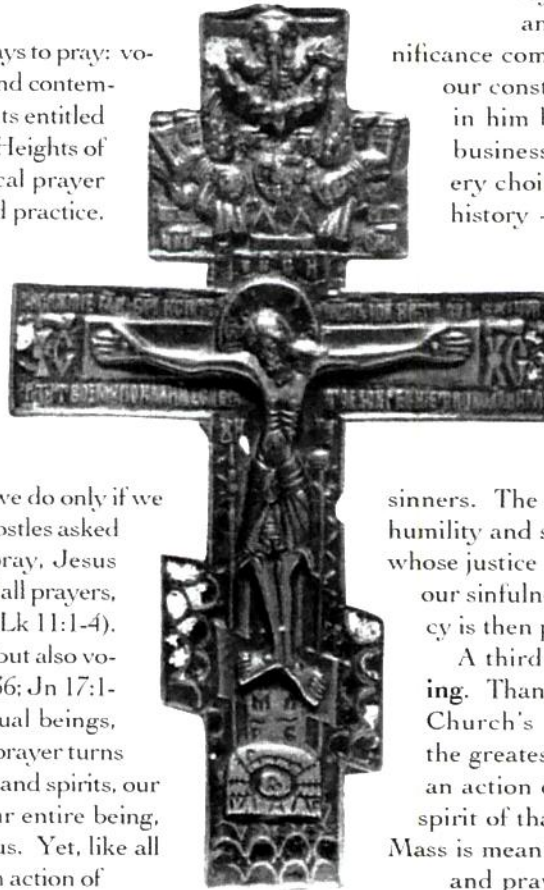
**Adoration** represents that kind of prayer that is offered to God alone. He is the creator and savior of the world. In adoration, we exalt the greatness of God who made us and his almighty power which saves us. He alone is the "*Lord of hosts ... [and] King of glory*" (Ps 24:10). By adoring him, we are humbled and reminded of our own insignificance compared to his greatness and of our constant need to place all our trust in him because everything — every business transaction, every hope, every choice, and every event of human history — depends on him.

The prayer of **contrition** can be considered the first step in the general prayer of supplication. We cannot approach God to ask for our own needs, however, without first begging for his mercy on us as

sinners. The prayer of contrition is one of humility and sorrow before a loving Father whose justice requires that we acknowledge our sinfulness, and whose abundant mercy is then poured upon us.

A third type of prayer is **thanksgiving**. Thanksgiving is at the heart of the Church's life; the Eucharist, which is the greatest sacrament of the Church, is an action of thanksgiving to God. The spirit of thanksgiving at the heart of the Mass is meant to pervade all aspects of life and prayer. With Baptism, we have been inserted into Christ, and so all our thoughts, words, and deeds can be of-

*"Prayer is a communion with God."*



*Crucifix of enameled brass from Russia, 17th or 18th century*

ferred in thanksgiving back to God. Thanking God in all circumstances, even during times of trial and suffering, strengthens our faith and hope in his power, and leads us into a deeper communion of love with his Son Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving is incomplete if it is not also linked with praise. Praise, as the *Catechism* explains, "is the form of prayer which recognizes most immediately that God is God" (CCC 2639). We praise God not for what he can give us or do for us, but for who he is. In his vision of Heaven, St. John describes the kind of praise that should be on our lips: "*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come!*" (Rv 4:8); or "*Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen*" (Rv 7:12). This is true praise and should be part of our daily prayer.

The most common prayer is that of **supplication** (also called petition or intercession). Having recognized God's lordship over us and over all creation, it is quite natural to place our needs and petitions before him. There is simply no one else to turn to. Christ promises that "*whatever you ask in my name, I will do it*" (Jn 14:13). This may seem too good to be true, so to dissolve all doubt, he repeats himself more forcefully: "*if you ask anything in my name, I will do it*" (Jn 14:14). We may feel that we should bring only the "big things" to God — prayers for peace, prayers for righting the

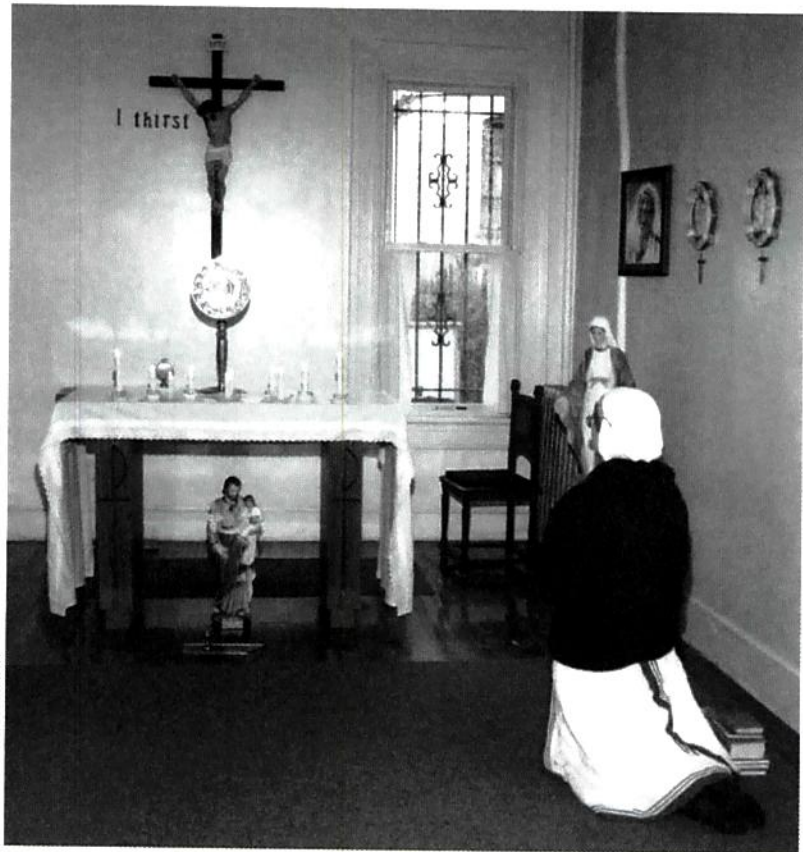
### *"Jesus instructs us to pray as little children."*

wrongs of the world, prayers for the coming of God's Kingdom on earth — but Jesus instructs us to pray as little children, bringing to him even our smallest needs and most humble events of the day. By making our petitions in the name of Christ, God the Father is glorified in his Son. Prayers of petition are certainly expressions of human needs and desires but, more importantly, they express the communion we share in God's love through Jesus Christ.

A special type of petition is the

prayer of intercession. It is a prayer for someone else, or asking someone else to pray for us. Speaking about the Church and all those who draw near to God, Scripture says "[Christ] lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25). He is the "*one mediator between God and men*" (1 Tm 2:5). However, his power of mediation is shared with the Holy Spirit, who also intercedes for us, and with all of us who share in the communion of his Body, the Church. Since our power to intercede for one another is a participation in Christ's intercession, it is not limited by time or space. Therefore, the Church encourages intercessory prayer not only for the living but also for the dead, and not only for each other here on earth but also seeking the intercession of those nearest the throne of God, his saints in Heaven. The greatest intercessor we can have, of course, is the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose maternal care extends to all her children (see Rv 12:17) in the same way she interceded with Jesus at the wedding feast in Cana (see Jn 2:1-10).

(CCC 223-224, 227, 2577, 2625-2643, 2655, 2660, 2699-2704)



*A sister of the Missionaries of Charity (MC) in adoration before the Holy Eucharist (often referred to as the Blessed Sacrament)*