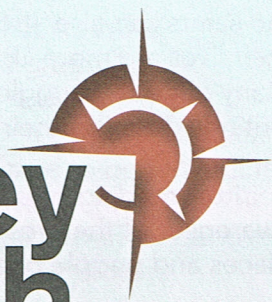


Journey of Faith



In Short:

- Prayer is talking with God.
- Prayer can be personal or done as part of a group.
- Prayer can be done in a variety of ways.



Your Prayer Life

Let's be honest. We don't always like to pray. There may be times we love to pray or feel invigorated by it, but we get distracted at Mass or in the middle of a rosary. We start to think about all the things we need to do—or all those things we'd rather be doing.

Does that mean we don't love God? No, but it does mean our love for God is immature. We have to discover the right way to pray for ourselves. Once we know that, it's easier to let God in to nourish our souls directly.

- *How do you feel about your prayer life?*
- *What about it would you change?*



School of Prayer

Prayer has a pretty broad definition. It's really anything we do that brings us into conversation with God. It can be a conversation, a common prayer like the Our Father, or any experience that

makes you feel closer to God. We can pray to God when we want to praise him, we can petition God when we need something, we can give thanks to God for something good, and we can pray to God through the saints who intercede for us.

The following lessons aren't rules for prayer, they're more like guidelines to get you started. Explore and figure out what works best for you.

Lesson 1: It's OK to be Human

We may not feel thrilled every time we pray because feelings are as changeable as the weather. Prayer is precious not only because God touches our heart when we pray, but also because the quality of our prayer experience will not always be the same. How can we make our prayer life come alive?

Lesson 2: Give More, Not Less

When something bores us, we tend to put less and less time and energy into it. As we start to withdraw ourselves, it becomes even less interesting. We've probably all experienced this at school with a subject we don't particularly like.

One way to help prayer become more interesting is to throw ourselves into it anew, devoting more energy to it than before. We may speak to God more intimately and tell God straight out what we are thinking and feeling. We might try including prayer in all our activities—mowing the lawn, walking to school, preparing for tests....This will draw God and us together.

Lesson 3: Notice When You Feel Like Praying

It's true that discipline and duty have their place. But when we're trying to make our prayer come alive, it is wise to notice when we feel like praying.

We should pray during those times and not push ourselves into it at other times. If we ask God to teach us to enjoy prayer, the Holy Spirit will plant the desire for prayer in our hearts. If we pay attention to the smallest desire and honor it by praying—maybe for only a few seconds—we will be drawn more and more to God.

God is faithful. God will not drive us or force us into prayer. God gently calls us. Our relationship with God is mutual, and that means we have to be faithful, too. While God won't force us to pray, we do need to answer in prayer when we feel God call.

Lesson 4: Pray Spontaneously

This means speaking to God or thinking about God without preparation, just as we speak to and think about one another. Sometimes, without meaning to, we separate ourselves from God because we attempt to put words together in just the right way or we try to think too profoundly about God. Praying spontaneously means sharing the little moments of our life with God. It means sharing our hearts with God when we are feeling sad about a troubled relationship or feeling the hurt of rejection. It means telling God about our anxiety moments before a big test or about our confusion when we are faced with difficult decisions.

Praying spontaneously means that we might say things to God that are more honest than nice or pleasant. Remember, God knows our hearts long before we can even find words to describe what we think and feel.

"Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God."

Philippians 4:6

Lesson 5: Practice Regular Spiritual Reading

Our study of the Bible helps us know the Lord. Sometimes praying is like trying to communicate with a stranger. Knowledge of sacred Scripture turns that stranger into an acquaintance, then a friend, and finally a loved Father.

Reading Scripture slowly and seeking to understand it in small bits will empower our prayer. Often the very words of the Bible suddenly take on life, and we experience oneness with our Creator. The writings of

the saints can also strengthen our prayer. Sometimes their lives are more like our own than we imagined. Many of them struggled with prayer, and their writings describe their personal faith journeys.

Spiritual reading gives us understanding and an awareness of the presence of God in the everyday places and people of our world.

Lesson 6: When Life Hurts, Say So

Practice talking to God any time, any place, and without a reason—just as you do with a best friend. When something bad (or good) happens in your life, who's the first person you call? Do you hesitate to complain or vent to your best friend? When your best friend does something that upsets you, do you let her or him know? Try thinking of God in the same way. When life doesn't go your way, when you're hurt and upset, tell God.

God doesn't mind if we pray to him when we're angry. In fact, he wants to know what's going on in our lives. God wants us to come to him in prayer no matter what we're feeling. God wants to listen to us just like our best friend does. As you start to think about God as someone to pray to, prayer will begin to seep into every part of your life. You don't have to reserve prayer for times when you're thankful or times when you need something; you can pray to God any time, no matter what you're feeling.

Lesson 7: Be Aware of God's Responses

While we may find ourselves able to speak comfortably to our Lord with a little effort and practice, it is quite another thing to develop the ability to listen to the Lord's responses. At one time or another, most of us have probably felt that God doesn't talk to us. It takes a long time to see that God always responds to us—we just usually miss the reply. To recognize God's answers to our prayers, we have to stretch inside.

The first stretch is giving up our expectations of what we think God will or should say. God doesn't communicate with us in ways we expect.

Listening to God doesn't mean that we'll get an immediate and obvious answer in words, visions, or directions. Listening sometimes means just opening our minds and hearts. It means *noticing* God's presence in our world and *recognizing* the Holy Spirit's activity.

Lesson 8: Don't Expect Quick Results

We need to remain very alert to gradual inner changes. Often the Holy Spirit works within our hearts, but changes don't happen overnight. When we come to God in prayer, we have to be patient. It can take a long time for our prayer to even feel like something spiritual, and it can take even longer to recognize God responding to those prayers.

We may find ourselves laughing at something that once really bothered us. Or we may feel an unexplainable gentleness or understanding toward someone we never liked. Compassion or peace may spring unexpectedly from our restless hearts. Old fears may melt away. These are the slow, subtle changes God works in our hearts as we pray.

New Forms of Prayer

Prayer doesn't have to be done the same way every time, and we don't have to pray the same way as someone else. Try some of the types of prayer below and find the one that works best for you.

Pray with your body. Our bodies often reflect what we feel inside. Think about what our body does when we run to greet a loved one we haven't seen for a long time. Think about how a mother cradles her child. What do the skipping feet of a child tell you about what she feels?

Try looking inside yourself. Imagine the feeling you want to express to God. Then allow your body to move as it will and offer this movement to God. You may even end up dancing before the Lord as King David did (2 Samuel 6:21). Dancing our prayer opens us even more to the Spirit within us.

Sing your prayer. Saint Augustine encourages us: "The one who sings prays twice." You may sing to the Lord familiar songs you know and love. Or you may spontaneously use your own words and melody. God doesn't care about beautiful voices. God cares about the heart. If singing to God enlivens your heart, then do it!

Write or draw your prayer. Many people pray through their journals. This can be a very effective expression of your thoughts and feelings to God. Your journal can be a completely private collection of letters to God, or it can be something you share with trusted friends or faith-sharing groups.

If you love to express yourself through art, try illustrating your journal prayers. Or use artwork alone to pray. Sometimes it is best to show God how we feel through our drawings, paintings, or sculptures.

Pray the news. Pray for and about the people and situations in the news, giving thanks for the good and asking for help for those who are suffering. Besides countering the negative feelings brought on by stories in the news media, this prayer relates the world to God and binds our own hearts to the compassionate Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Offer yourself as prayer. You can offer yourself to God without words by serving others or bearing burdens graciously. Practice offering yourself, not only in special times of prayer, but a thousand times a day in the midst of anything and everything. Soon you are living in God's presence most of the time and offering your very self to God in almost everything you do. What a great way to keep yourself on the right path!

Pray with nature. As you pray with nature, become aware of what seems to be the simplest miracles—a flower, the moon, a stream. Admire it, marvel at it, rejoice in its beauty. It will tell you of the magnificence of God the Creator.

Pray your gratitude. Make thankfulness the centerpiece of all your prayer. At the end of every day, try thanking the Lord for one thing you have never thanked God for before. When we practice gratitude, we become more aware of God's gifts. Then not only our prayer but also our entire lives become filled with amazement and praise.

Create a prayer, by yourself or with a partner, that expresses one of the following emotions: JOY, SORROW, THANKS, FEAR. Use any of the prayer styles given.

Of the different forms of prayer described here, which, if any, are you excited (or just willing) to try? Have you found other ways to pray that are especially meaningful for you?



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