

How to Pray

When I was young I was taught to pray in a certain way. Perhaps you were, too. The prayers either were standard ones, steeped in the tradition of the Church, or prayers of supplication, asking the Lord to fill some need in my life. For me, the things pleaded for in prayer were happiness for my parents, rescue from a difficult problem ("Please, Lord, tell my sister to stop being mean to me!"), maybe some snow to release me from school (a rare treat!).

Part of the whole process of prayer was getting it right, so that even to embark on prayer evoked a sense of mission, a drive to achieve the task. It did not occur to me then that this whole approach to prayer was not necessarily universal or even desirable. As I struggled with saying the words with just the right oomph, with the acutest sense of holy drama, the gentle advice of saints such as [St. Francis De Sales](#) and [St. Peter Julian Eymard](#) was unknown to me. How they might have smiled at the awkward belief that prayer was a matter of me doing it right!

[St. Peter Eymard](#) instructs the soul to stay with any closeness to the Lord, rising up in emotion, that comes through prayer. Forget the words and just rest in the moment with the Lord. [St. Francis De Sales](#) says something similar when he tells us to not fret about formulas and to not start over again when, in the midst of our prayers, we get off track and want to berate ourselves for being distracted. Both these saints remind us that prayer is not so much driven by us, but is a response to the Lord's ever-present invitation to live in Him, to have, as Saint Paul says, our very being in the Lord. Prayer is meeting the Lord and being with Him.

These wise instructions would have been a revelation to me as a ten year old, striving to get all the words out in just the right order. Prayer as an invitation to the greatest freedom, rather than struggling to make your innermost yearnings fit a certain well-defined structure, would have been a very novel idea! But that is prayer, after all – a union with the Lord. It is in prayer that we can share in a grace so joyous, so unbound by human strictures, so radically divergent from the world-lust for things that fizzle. It is also in prayer that we can find the strength to return everyday to cleaning the latrines of sin and sloppiness and suffering that often overwhelm us.

So, how to pray? That's a question that's at once very easy and very difficult to answer. One standard response is that prayer is talking to the Lord, so, just talk! Speak right up and seize every moment to remind Him of your presence (or vice versa). That's one easy answer. A more difficult one recognizes that there are so many different ways of praying, ways that are not equally suitable to each of us. There are active ways of praying in which we do seize the moment. There are also ways of praying in which we relax and the constraints of the will fall away and the Lord shares Himself with us according to His way.

You can pray in silence. [St. Vincent de Paul](#) said that the best form of prayer is when we run out of

things to say and are simply silent before our God. You can also pray in the loudest of songs. [St. Augustine](#) opined that to sing is to pray twice. You can even pray in doggerel, as this poem shows:

you can pray in a tree
you can pray on bended knee
you can pray in a car
and not go very far

you can pray at a meal
and after if you please
you can pray at a game
when your team's in a deep freeze

you can pray in church
and be holy in the pew
you can pray in the lurch
when your honey's forsaken you

you can pray everywhere
you can pray without care
because when you pray
it's the Lord who shows the way

That poem might seem silly, but it illustrates that our prayers don't have to fit a rigid image or occur in only certain places. There is no one formula for prayer, no one size fits all.* For some people, prayers such as the rosary are indispensable; for others the rosary may be an obstacle (even [Saint Therese](#) is reported to have had little natural affinity for praying the rosary!). For some people, frequent long meditations come naturally.

You might say that you are easily distracted during prayer. In the midst of some holy exercise you find yourself thinking of what you're going to eat for dinner or some annoying habit your Uncle Ed has. Maybe the lady in the next pew is rattling her bags so loudly that you get off track. Good advice from the saints is to include these annoyances and distractions in your prayer, like this: "Dear Lord, help me overcome my attachment to food," or "Help Uncle Ed deal with the temptations in his life" or "Lord, I know you brought this bag lady to my attention for a reason; fill her with your love and console her in her trials." The important thing is to persevere, and to let your prayers encompass everything that enters into your consciousness while you open yourself to God's Spirit. While you think you're off track, maybe the Lord is simply showing you that He is the one who is the director, with you the actor in His play. His grace often comes in mysterious forms.

Whatever the form your prayer takes, [St. Francis De Sales](#) advises you to avoid judging yourself harshly and wasting time in assessing your progress in prayer. Just do it! Just pray! You'll probably find that the journey of prayer leads you in different directions at various times in your life. But if you pray with sincerity and love and a true thirst for union with God, all your prayers will lead to Him.



The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection,

trans. Sr. Benedicta Ward, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975.

The brethren also asked Abba Agathon, "Amongst all good works, which is the virtue which requires the greatest effort?" He answered, "Forgive me, but I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath."



Saint Teresa of Avila

When I see certain souls very diligent and attentive in prayer, their heads bowed, evidently afraid to move even the slightest bit or let their thoughts waver for a moment lest they lose anything of the sensible delight and devotion they have experienced, I realize how little they understand the way to achieve union. They think that their whole care must be to concentrate on nothing but this. No! No! God wants deeds. When you are given something to do for obedience or charity toward your neighbor, do not worry about losing that devotion, that thought and enjoyment of God. Giving Him pleasure by doing these other things will lead you much faster to that holy union.

My God, because You are so good, I love You with all my heart and for Your sake I love my neighbor as myself. If I love You, Lord, it is not just because of heaven, which You have promised; if I fear to offend You, it is not because hell threatens me. What draws me to You, O Lord, is Yourself alone; it is the sight of You nailed to the cross for me, Your body bruised in the pains of death. Your love so holds my heart that, if there were no heaven, I would love You still. If there were no hell, I would even still fear to offend You. I do not need Your gifts to make me love You, for even if I should have no help of hope at all of all the things I do hope for, I would still love You with that very same love. Amen.



St. Peter Julian Eymard

Go to our Lord just as you are. Be natural in your meditation, use up your own stock of piety and love before resorting to books. Cherish the inexhaustible book of a humble love. It is all very well to take a pious book with you to regain control of yourself in case the mind wanders or the senses grow drowsy; but remember that our good Master prefers the poverty of our heart to the most sublime thoughts and affections borrowed from others.

You can be sure that our Lord wants our heart and not that of someone else. He wants the thought and prayer of that heart as the genuine expression of its love for Him. It may be that we do not want to go to our Lord because we are ashamed of our misery and wretchedness: that is the fruit of subtle self-love, impatience, or cowardice. Our Lord prefers our helplessness to everything else; He is pleased with it and blesses it.

You are suffering from spiritual dryness? You can at least give glory to God's grace without which you can do nothing. Open your soul toward heaven just as a flower opens its petals at sunrise to receive the refreshing dew. You are stricken with utter powerlessness; your mind is lost in darkness; your heart is crushed with the weight of its nothingness; your body is ailing. Offer Him the adoration He should expect from one so destitute; forget your poverty and abide in our Lord. Or again, present your poverty to Him that He may make it rich; that is a masterpiece worthy of His glory.



Saint Francis de Sales

If, while the mouth prays, the heart is drawn to the prayer within, then do not resist but let your spirit glide into it silently. Even though the spoken prayer you had resolved to make is not completed, do not trouble yourself. For the devotions of the heart that you have made instead are much more pleasing to God, and more salutary for your soul.



Saint Alphonsus Liguori

In fine, if you wish to please the loving Heart of your God, try for as long a space of time as you can to converse with Him, with the greatest possible confidence; He will not fail to answer you and even to speak with you Himself. Not that He will make audible sounds strike your ears, but words that you will clearly understand in your heart, in so far as you leave conversation with creatures and try to speak with your God -- you alone with Him alone: "I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." Then will He speak to you with those inspirations, those interior lights, those manifestations of His goodness, those gentle knockings at the door of your heart, those pledges of pardon, those feelings of peace, that hope of heaven, that interior joy, the delightful sweetness of His grace, the loving union and intimate contact with Him: in short, He will speak to you with those words of love which are readily understood by the souls whom He loves and who seek nothing but Him.



Dame Julian of Norwich

So he says this: "pray inwardly, even though you find no joy in it. For it does good, even though you feel nothing, see nothing; yes, even though you think you cannot pray. When you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayers please me - though there be little enough to please you. All believing prayer is precious to me."



Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Talk to God. Just let Jesus pray in you. To be able to pray we need silence – because God speaks to us in the silence of the heart, and we reply from the fullness of the heart. God speaking in the silence of our heart, we replying in the fullness of our heart == these two together make prayer. The fruit of prayer is always deepening of Faith, and Faith cannot exist by itself ;it has to transform itself into love.

Love completes Faith. Faith completes love, When we really love, we naturally want to love others and that loving others is our love for God in action. That is why prayer is so important, even for my own Sisters and our way of life.

To be able to live a life of complete belonging to Christ, we need that continual oneness with Christ, in order to go on putting our love for Christ into action through the service of the poorest of the poor. Everything begins with prayer spending a little time on our knees.

If all the world's rulers and leaders would spend a little time on their knees before God, I believe we would have a better world. If all the world's families would spend a little time together in prayer, I believe we would have peace in the world. Just as love begins at home, so peace begins at home when a family is united through prayer.

So talk to God, let Jesus pray in you and if you really belong totally to Him, in whatever kind of life He has put you, if you just let Him pray in you live His life in you then that oneness with Christ is prayer. Prayer means talking to God. He is my Father. Jesus is my all.



Saint Therese of Lisieux

I do not understand souls who fear a Friend so tender. At times, when I am reading certain spiritual treatises in which perfection is shown through a thousand obstacles, surrounded by a crowd of illusions, my poor little mind quickly tires; I close the learned book that is breaking my head and drying up my heart, and I take up Holy Scripture. Then all seems luminous to me; a single word uncovers for my soul infinite horizons, perfection seems simple to me, I see it is sufficient to recognize one's nothingness and to abandon oneself as a child into God's arms. Leaving to great souls, to great minds the beautiful books I cannot understand, much less put into practice, I rejoice at being little since children alone and those who resemble them will be admitted to the heavenly banquet. I am very happy there are many mansions in God's kingdom, for if there were only the one whose description and road seems incomprehensible to me, I would not be able to enter there.

"Prayer is, for me, an outburst from the heart; it is a simple glance darted upwards to Heaven; it is a cry of gratitude and of love in the midst of trial as in the midst of joy!"