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4 Prayer

worshiping in word,
in act, and in silence

... your presence brings peace

A person wearing a light-colored button-down shirt, dark jeans, and a cap is captured mid-jump against a bright blue sky filled with soft, white clouds. The person is barefoot and has their arms tucked in, conveying a sense of freedom and joy.

... show me the way

Word of God,

teach me silence.
Lead me to that inner place
where your presence brings peace.
From there, make all of my life a prayer—
my thinking, feeling, sharing;
even my hesitating, doubting, and fearing.
May the spirit of prayer
always find a home
in my heart.

Amen.

As we discussed in chapter 3, not all rituals are forms of worship. As simple religious rituals, however, prayers clearly are worship. This chapter offers information both on prayer itself and on specific ways of praying. Using a variety of prayer forms can give us much-needed islands

in the swirling river of daily life—time-outs to appreciate the mystery of God's presence in our life.

To get an idea of the different ways some young people pray, reflect on the following personal sketches:

islands in the river of life

Steve is sixteen

years old. His main interest right now is getting a license to drive. He receives average grades in school, which is fine with him. He has a nice family, a crowd to do things with, and no particular plans for the future.

If Steve was asked about his prayer life, he would probably roll his eyes and look embarrassed. Steve was an altar boy for a number of years, a service he enjoyed. He believes that was prayer for him. He also appreciates the occasional times when classes stop and the school day is given over to prayer; these are times for a breather, and he enjoys the peace they bring in a hectic day.

When Steve does stop and look inside himself, he often finds that he is carrying around many worries that burden him. At those times he usually thinks of God and says a simple "Help!" as a prayer. On other occasions he feels very grateful for his life, his family, and his friends. The words "Thank you, God" sometimes come to his mind. For the most part, though, Steve would have to say that prayer doesn't much fit into his life. He's all for it, but somehow it has gotten lost in other concerns.

* * *

Since she was eleven years old, Rachel, now fifteen, has kept a diary. When she was younger, she filled it with accounts of what she had done all day, which friends she had walked home from school with, whether she had passed a test, and


so on. As she has grown older, her diary entries have become more reflective. Now Rachel does more than just describe things that happened; she finds herself pouring out her feelings in her diary, which she now calls her journal. Whether she is hurt by a friend's remark, thrilled at a favorite team's victory, or torn in two directions by a difficult choice, Rachel spills out her experiences on paper every night. It's remarkable how this process has helped her sort out some dilemmas, and it even seems to help her communicate better with her friends.

One night Rachel has an argument with her mother. She feels awful about it, and she's mad at her mother and herself and confused about what she should do next. She sits down to pour out her troubles on paper. Ordinarily, she doesn't think of herself as a praying person, but to her surprise, she finds herself beginning the entry, "Dear God . . ."

* * *

Joshua feels a lot of stress trying to balance the pressures of tough courses, basketball practices, and a part-time job. When Joshua feels really hassled, sometimes he just has to get away from it all and take a long walk by himself. These times alone help him clear his head and take away the sense of being overwhelmed by **pressures.**


Do these sketches remind you of yourself at times, or of how you pray? Almost all teenagers pray at least occasionally, but many may not recognize what they are doing as prayer. Like Steve they may have had some positive experiences with prayer but seldom take the time to pray intentionally, except in a pinch. Or, as happened with Rachel, they may discover that what they had been doing all along—writing out their thoughts and feelings to themselves—was really a way of talking to God. Joshua is like a great many teenagers who may not recognize that taking time and space for solitude that renews them is actually a form of praying.


Thirty or more years ago, most Catholics had a fairly restricted notion of prayer. They believed they were praying only when they were at Mass, when they recited formal prayers such as the rosary, or when they simply talked to God during quiet moments. Today Catholics understand prayer in a broader sense, recognizing that it occurs in many diverse ways of responding to God's gift of love. 

Prayer is a wholehearted faith response to God, who loves us without conditions and is with us in every moment of our life. Because God is in every aspect of our life, we could offer our very living as a prayer, as a response to God. But there is something more intentional and conscious about the kind of wholehearted response that can be termed prayer. Suppose you had a friend whom you considered very important to you. Certainly you would not always need to be talking with or thinking of that friend in order for the friendship to be real. But if you never made contact with your friend or thought of him or her, the relationship would eventually wither. You need to intentionally nurture a relationship if it is to become a real friendship.

The same is true about our relationship with God. Although all living can be praying, moments of praying—intentional, conscious moments—give substance to prayer as a wholehearted faith response to God.



 Write a one-page essay using either of the following titles as your topic: "The History of My Prayer Life" or "The Importance of Prayer in My Life Today."

 Student art:
Photo by Vanessa Navarro, Talent Unlimited High School, New York, New York



Finding Sacred Time and Space

Reminded of God's Presence

Certain prayer rituals may be quite familiar to us:

- Classes in Catholic schools often begin with a prayer.
- Many people and families say grace before meals.
- Athletic contests, meetings, or ceremonial events often begin with a prayer.

What is the purpose of such ritual prayers? Even though everyone's attention is not necessarily focused on the words of the prayer, these little rituals can remind us of God's constant presence with us. All of life is holy, and God is never truly absent from us. But we need to carve out the time and space to make ourselves conscious of God-with-us, or we are like friends who never take the time to notice each other.

Just as the innings and the playing field remind us when and where we are in a softball game, so prayer reminds us that we are living in God's time and space—that is, all of time and all of creation. Even our briefest prayers, then, can enhance our sense of being in a sacred place at a sacred time.

A Time and a Place for Prayer: Essential to a Life of Love

A number of modern-day Catholics known for their commitment to justice for poor people have emphasized the need to have sacred time and space.

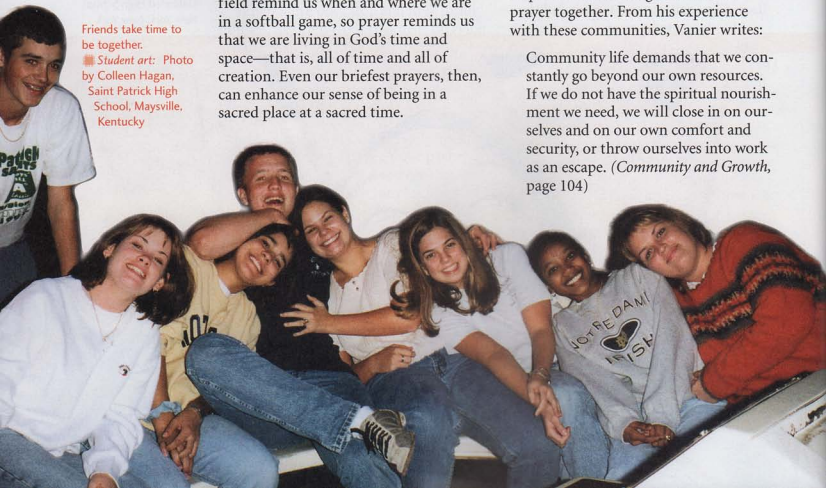
Dorothy Day, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, often gave this advice to anyone who wanted to help provide shelter for poor people: Always leave room in the house for a place of prayer. Dorothy Day's houses of hospitality continue to provide shelter, food, and care to homeless people in many cities. And those who run Catholic Worker houses still see to it that prayer remains a vital part of their life together.

The L'Arche communities, founded by Jean Vanier and dedicated to caring for mentally handicapped adults, find their inspiration and strength in a life of prayer together. From his experience with these communities, Vanier writes:

Community life demands that we constantly go beyond our own resources. If we do not have the spiritual nourishment we need, we will close in on ourselves and on our own comfort and security, or throw ourselves into work as an escape. (*Community and Growth*, page 104)

Friends take time to be together.


■ Student art: Photo by Colleen Hagan, Saint Patrick High School, Maysville, Kentucky





an abundant and unending love of mankind

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India, always had her Missionaries of Charity begin their day with Mass and end it with adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. They have continued this practice since her death. During the day the sisters care for destitute poor and dying people, hoping to communicate God's love to them through their own tender concern. Mother Teresa knew that beginning and ending the day in prayer creates the sense of sacred time by which the whole day becomes prayer.

In each of these examples, a certain time and place are designated as sacred, creating the awareness that other times and places are also sacred. Mother Teresa would not have said, "I take time out to pray and then I go to work." To her, taking time out allowed the rest of her day to be prayer as well as work. 

In the same way, morning prayer can be taking time out to welcome the day,

the entire day. And it can help us be more welcoming throughout the day. Saying grace before a meal reminds us of God's presence during the entire meal. Praying before a game is taking time out to ask God to be with us for the entire game. Taking time out to pray in specific situations can create a sense of prayer in all aspects of our life.



Silence as Inner Space

Besides needing actual time and physical space in which to pray, people need another kind of space—inner space, or the space within a person's consciousness that makes room for God. Such inner space can be cultivated by allowing silence into one's life.

Filling Up with Noise

We live in a world in which silence is a stranger. Our human habitat is filled

A prayerful heart is essential for the Missionaries of Charity, who care for destitute people who are sick and dying.


 Write a brief essay about someone—either a public figure or a person in your life—who is a prayerful person. Explain what difference prayer seems to make in the life of that person.



listen to God

☑ Spend five minutes in silence trying to listen actively to God. Describe the experience in a brief written report.

with noise; silence can be a rarity in our life. And though we may complain about a noisy environment, the truth is that given a choice, we often seek out the noise. Rather than enjoy a bit of silence when we have it, we may turn on the television, call a friend, or busy ourselves with activities that fill up our awareness.

Unfortunately by running from silence and solitude, we deprive ourselves of the inner space needed for God to enter our awareness. It is important to ask ourselves, "Am I running away from myself, or am I moving toward greater intimacy with myself?" Because God is at the core of our true self, in the depths of our being, running away from ourselves through constant noise or activity is really running away from God.

A Way of Listening to God

Silence draws us inward. It enables us to listen to God, that is, to be attuned to what is going on inside us so that we can discover how God is present in our life at any given moment. "Listening to God" does not mean that we hear God speaking, as a voice, directing us to do this or do that. Instead, it means that we are

quiet, receptive, and able to reflect on our own experiences in such a way that we can sense how God is present with us, even in troubling times.

Although we may go on a retreat for a day or two during which we encounter silence, few of us will ever experience the life of solitude and silence found in a monastery. Nevertheless, we can seek to spend time daily alone with ourselves and with God. ☑

Both Peaceful and Disturbing

Silence will not always be peaceful. Sometimes when we become quiet, we will be uncomfortable with our memories and emotions, or we will be just plain restless. No wonder we often want to flee from silence; it can be disturbing to us.

Yet God is present with us in disturbing encounters with ourselves as well as in peaceful times. An uncomfortable solitary silence signals us to pay closer attention to what is going on inside us, to feelings and fears that deserve to be taken seriously by us, just as God takes them seriously.

silence & solitude

For Review

1. How does the textbook define prayer?
2. Why is taking time out to pray important to Jean Vanier? to Mother Teresa?
3. What other element besides time and a physical space do people need in order to pray? How can this other element be cultivated?
4. Explain how silence can be both peaceful and disturbing.

Paths to Intimacy with God

Three paths that Christians have traditionally taken to intimacy with God are vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation (the prayer of simply being with God).

Vocal Prayer: Finding Your Voice with God

Talking to God, which is termed **vocal prayer**, is an ancient prayer form. For Christians it often involves talking directly to Jesus. This sort of conversation is usually an interior kind of talk, something that anyone can do. Many believers over the centuries, whether educated in theological matters or not, have felt at home simply expressing their needs and hopes to God, through Jesus, in their own plain words.

A spiritual writer tells a story of a priest who went to visit a sick man in his home:

[The priest] noticed an empty chair at the patient's bedside and asked what it was doing there. The patient said, "I had placed Jesus on that chair and was talking to him before you arrived. . . .

For years I found it extremely difficult to pray until a friend explained to me that prayer was a matter of talking to Jesus. He told me to place an empty chair nearby, to imagine Jesus sitting on that chair, and to speak with him and listen to what he says to me in reply. I've had no difficulty praying ever since."

Some days later, so the story goes, the daughter of the patient came to the rectory to inform the priest that her father had died. She said, "I left him alone for a couple of hours. He seemed so peaceful. When I got back



■ Student art: Photo by Jason W. Chan, La Salle High School, Pasadena, California



☐ Think of a situation, issue, or person in your life that you would like to talk with God about. Dialogue with God and write down the conversation between you two.

■ Student art: Photo by Clare Major, Saint Joseph's Academy, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

to the room I found him dead. I noticed a strange thing, though: his head was resting not on the bed but on a chair that was beside his bed.”

(De Mello, *Sadhana*, page 78)

Relating to Jesus or God as a real person who hears us, and not as an abstraction or an impersonal force, is the key to genuine vocal prayer. ☐

Vocal prayer takes numerous forms. You may be familiar with the prayer of petition, calling on God's help in time of need, because this type of prayer is part of the Mass. Prayers of praise, thanksgiving, contrition, and blessing are types of vocal prayer also found in the Mass.

The fundamental form of vocal prayer is spontaneous prayer, in which we pour out our honest feelings and deepest concerns. Sharing the most personal part of ourselves in intimate conversation with Jesus means placing our concerns in his

hands. Talking to Jesus opens the door to his saying to us, “In all things, I am with you. Do not be afraid.”

Meditation: Focusing Your Mind

The form of prayer that involves focusing your attention on an idea, a story, or a particular object is termed **meditation**. Focusing on something takes energy and concentration, so meditation does not come easily to most of us, but it can be learned. It helps to begin a time of meditation by trying to quiet the mind and the body, to become relaxed but alert. In this way the noise that tends to fill us up and scatter our attention in everyday life will recede into the background, and we can be better attuned to God's presence.

quieting
mind & body



The Christian tradition has a great history of experience with meditative prayer. Many saints, such as Teresa of Ávila and Ignatius of Loyola, have written extensively about meditation in works that have become spiritual classics. In recent decades Christianity has also learned much from other religious traditions that emphasize meditation, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufi mysticism, and Native American spirituality. Techniques like deep breathing, meditative postures, and repetitive chanting, which quiet the body and mind and thus lead to an inner experience of peace, have been integrated into Christian methods of meditation to enrich the prayer life of many Christians. □

Contemplation: The Prayer of “Being With”

There are times in a friendship between two persons when words, and even focused thoughts, are not all that necessary. Words may just get in the way. The two persons may be happy just being in each other's presence, neither one talking and neither one thinking ahead to what either will do or say next. This is like the prayer of just being with God—**contemplation**, as it is known in the Christian tradition.

A brief story illustrates this kind of prayer:

An old man would sit motionless in church for hours on end. One day a priest asked him what God talked to him about.

“God doesn't talk. He just listens,” was his reply.

“Well, then what do you talk to him about?”

“I don't talk either. I just listen.” (De Mello, *Taking Flight*, page 29)

This simple, mutual presence can be an extremely nourishing form of prayer, but it relies on a person's being receptive and open, able to quietly perceive and appreciate God's presence. For that reason, meditation, which quiets a person and allows his or her attention to be focused, can lead to the prayer of contemplation. In fact meditation and contemplation often overlap and cannot really be separated, just as vocal prayer often overlaps with meditative prayer.

The habit of engaging in contemplation tends to spill over into finding God's presence in the ordinary—in a tree, in a breeze passing over on a warm day, in a delightful time with friends, or in the hurt and loneliness of a classmate who feels like an outsider. This ability to be attuned to God's presence in all of reality is the sacramental awareness that was first discussed in chapter 1. So contemplative prayer and sacramental awareness are very much related.

The three paths to intimacy with God discussed in this chapter—vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation—can take many different forms. The next section will look at a few possibilities.

□ Research and write a brief report on the prayer traditions of a non-Christian religion or religious group.

Others' traditions

For Review

5. Identify and briefly describe three ways of praying traditionally used by Christians.



Praying “All Ways”

Saint Paul, in the Letter to the Ephesians, urges Christians to “pray in the Spirit at all times” (6:18). Of course, Paul, and Jesus before him, did not expect us to sit in silence all day. Nor did he expect us to use vocal prayer incessantly. What he did mean was that we are to pray in all the ways that we live our life: in our caring for pets, our visiting with relatives, our talking with friends and strangers, our attitude toward everything that comes our way. To pray “all ways” means to use all of ourselves—our senses and abilities—in prayer. If we limit prayer to an internal activity only, we risk missing out on the intimacy and vitality that come from seeing and celebrating God’s presence in other people or in creation. A sacramental vision that sees God present not just within ourselves but outside as well opens up many worlds and many ways of praying. The following are some prayer forms that reflect the strong sacramental character of Christianity.

Praying with Our Imagination

One popular form of meditation is the method of praying with our imagination. This kind of prayer form is also known as guided meditation, in which one’s mind is led through a scene or an incident in order to imagine an encounter with God or a similarly significant experience. The person reads the meditation quietly or listens as the meditation is read aloud to her or him, filling in the details mentally at the pauses.

Here is a guided meditation to try (the pauses are indicated by ellipses, or series of periods):

Even caring for pets can be a way of praying.

■ Student art: Photo by Andrea Kohler, Lehman Catholic High School, Sidney, Ohio

■ Student art: Photo by Lindsay Van Cleave, Notre Dame Preparatory School, Towson, Maryland

Picture yourself walking in a beautiful garden. . . . As you slowly move along the path, you take time to enjoy the many flowers, berry plants, and trees in the garden. . . . You savor each one and move on to other parts of the garden. . . . Eventually, you come to another section of the garden that has clearly been neglected. It is overgrown and tangled. You decide to walk through this section of the garden anyway, spending time with the weeds, bushes, and foliage found here, just as you did with the other, well-kept area. . . .

Imagine that this garden is you. . . . How is this garden like you and your life? . . . What are the well-kept, beautiful flowers in the garden of your life? . . . What are the weeds hidden in the out-of-the-way reaches of your life? . . .

Now you see a gardener across from you, in the nice section, wanting to join you but separated by the tangled weeds. As you see the tenderness in the gardener's eyes, you realize the gardener is God. . . . What does God have to say to you about the garden of your

life, both the beautiful sections and the overgrown sections?

Guided meditation works best in a silent and calm setting, which enables us to relax enough to put imagination into the service of prayer. This activity is helpful in allowing God to touch us through the images that we create in our imagination. ☐

Praying with the Scriptures or Other Spiritual Writings


Another form of meditation uses the Scriptures or other spiritual writings as the stimulus for reflection. After reading a passage, the person can ask self-directed questions that relate the passage to his or her own life.

For instance, you might read this passage from the Gospel of Matthew:

[Jesus said:] "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

☐ Using an image other than a garden, write a guided meditation that could help you pray. If you like, draw a picture to accompany your narrative.

write your own



“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (13:44–46)

Then you might pose questions such as these to yourself for reflection:

- Is there a treasure hidden in my life that is worth the price of everything else in my life?
- What is the fine pearl in my experience, and what am I willing to give up for it?
- What is the treasure or the fine pearl that Jesus is talking about? Is it similar to what I consider to be a treasure, or is it different?
- How does Jesus’ message apply to my life here and now?

Reading and reflecting on the Scriptures allows God to speak to us through the words of the Bible, helping us understand the Bible’s meaning in our own life.

God can also speak to us through other writings, such as spiritual books written specifically for aiding prayer. Some people have found biographies, essays, poems, and fictional works to be pathways to prayer. ☑

Praying with a Pen

Recall Rachel’s use of a journal in one of the brief sketches that opened this chapter. When she wrote “Dear God” at the beginning of a journal entry, she discovered that what she had been doing all along—expressing her thoughts and feelings to herself on paper—was actually a kind of prayer. She had been engaging in vocal prayer in a written form.

If you have never kept a journal for writing down personal thoughts and reflections, try keeping one. You may notice something exciting. In the very process of writing, insights will come to you. Writing is not just a record of inner thoughts and prayers. It is an activity

that helps bring forth hidden thoughts and ideas. Taking time to write honestly and openly to ourselves is a way of entering that sacred place where we talk with God.

Praying with Our Body

Our mind and heart in particular are engaged during meditation and vocal prayer. But even more of ourselves can be engaged when we pray. Our senses and our limbs, even our whole body, can be involved in prayer. In fact contemplation—the prayer of “being with”—often happens when we get “out of our head” (in the sense of analyzing and questioning) and simply experience God present around us.

Contemplation has been called by one theologian “a long loving look at the real.” “Look” means more than simply gazing; it means taking in reality with all our senses so that, in a way, we become united with that reality. We do not look at the real as something to be analyzed but as something to be appreciated and loved:

This real I *look* at. I do not analyze or argue it, describe it or define it; I am one with it. I do not move around it; I enter into it. Lounging by a stream, I do not exclaim “Ah, H₂O!” I let the water trickle gently through my fingers. (Burghardt, “Contemplation”)


Let’s consider some ways we can pray with our body, in order to bring our whole self to God.

Our Eyes

For meditation and for inner vocal prayer, we may be accustomed to closing our eyes to quiet our mind and prevent all kinds of distractions from entering into our attempts to focus. However, some of our most profound prayer can come through our eyes. Eyes are great

☑ Search through the Scriptures and select a passage that you find insightful. Identify the passage and give it an appropriate title. Then write three questions to help you reflect on the passage. Finally, compose a prayer based on its message.

“Dear Diary”: Journal Writing as Prayer



This journal entry of a sixteen-year-old girl gives a sense of how important an activity reflective writing can be for us:

I had an awfully strange dream last night—that Mom and I were fighting. We weren't just yelling, but actually hitting each other too. We were outside in the backyard at high noon (like in one of those old Westerns); she would scream something mean, and then I would scream back. Then came the hitting. The really strange part was that the sky was clear, the birds were singing, and there was Muzak playing from somewhere. I woke up crying and went into Mom's bedroom and crawled into bed next to her.

In school today Beth told me that she had a fight with her mom. I told her that I never fight with mine and that she lets me do whatever I want. Beth said that's because I don't have a dad around to make my mom miserable and crabby. I feel sorry for Beth because she just doesn't understand.

Last weekend at Grandma's house, during Sunday dinner, Grandpa said his son married my mom only because he had to and they'd still be married if she wasn't so immoral. I was so mad I wouldn't finish my dinner or help with the dishes. He acts as if Dad is a saint. Truth is, they don't understand either, and even if I am mad at Mom, I'll never tell them. I don't know who I'll tell. I'll probably just write it down.

The thing is, I don't know why I told Beth what I did, because I do fight with Mom. The things she does make me mad; the guys she dates are losers, and she's always down at the bar. I don't know why she lowers herself that way. I think it's disgusting, and I never want to be like that. Sometimes I think I'd like her more if I didn't live with her. I told Beth's mom that, but she said I'd miss my mother, the way I miss my dad and don't really know it.

The whole thing just confuses me, which makes me angry, because I want to understand everything, and I don't want anyone to think I'm wrong. I just think the more confused I am, the more I keep writing.

In what ways can this young woman's journal entry be thought of as a prayer?

gifts of God that are meant to be instruments of prayer. We can pray by closing our eyes to gaze inward, but we can also pray by seeing God's splendor in the world around us. Try praying with your eyes:

Visit a church—if possible, an old church. Look around at the statues,

paintings, crucifix, stained-glass windows, candles. These objects can provide a rich feast for your eyes and mind, in what they communicate about the artist, about the world, and about divine realities and mysteries.

Go to one of your favorite natural spots—perhaps a park, a beach, or a

wide-open field. Take in the beauty and unite yourself to it in gratitude. Realize that you are praying with your eyes there as well as you do in the church.

Our Ears

Although silence is an important dimension of prayer, prayer sometimes involves paying attention to the sounds around us, whether the sounds are natural ones like rain beating on the ground or human-made ones like music. Attending to sounds can be a meditative and even contemplative experience, as the following story demonstrates:

When Brother Bruno was at prayer one night he was disturbed by the croaking of a bullfrog. All his attempts to disregard the sound were unsuccess-

ful so he shouted from his window, "Quiet! I'm at my prayers."

Now Brother Bruno was a saint so his command was instantly obeyed. Every living creature held its voice so as to create a silence that would be favorable to prayer.

But now another sound intruded on Bruno's worship—an inner voice that said, "Maybe God is as pleased with the croaking of that frog as with the chanting of your psalms." "What can please the ears of God in the croak of a frog?" was Bruno's scornful rejoinder. But the voice refused to give up. "Why would you think God invented the sound?"

Bruno decided to find out why. He leaned out of his window and gave the order, "Sing!" The bullfrog's measured croaking filled the air to the ludi-

■ Student art: Photo by Swen Swenson-Graham, Sacred Heart Preparatory School, Menlo Park, California

attending
to sound



crous accompaniment of all the frogs in the vicinity. And as Bruno attended to the sound, their voices ceased to jar for he discovered that, if he stopped resisting them, they actually enriched the silence of the night.

With that discovery Bruno's heart became harmonious with the universe and, for the first time in his life, he understood what it means to pray. (De Mello, *Taking Flight*, page 17)

To his amazement and delight, the monk had discovered the music of the universe.

Music is one of the most ancient prayer forms. Indeed, Hindus believe that creation began with the music of a drum. In the Christian tradition, we have the story of the Nativity, in which Jesus' birth is accompanied by the music of angels. We also have the Book of Revelation's portrayal of the Second Coming of Jesus, in which Jesus' future return is announced by the sound of trumpets. Music can keep us in tune with the Earth—even plants, it seems, grow better to the sounds of certain music.

Perhaps you have already had some meditative experiences through listening to music, though you may not have thought of your experiences as meditation at the time. Have you ever felt an emotional release from listening to a stirring, popular song that expressed a simple truth for you? Have you ever felt uplifted from listening to one of the great classical works? Try listening to a piece of reflective music or a song with strong, positive lyrics that expresses significant values for you, and think of your listening as a way of communicating with your inner self and with God. ☐

Our Feet

"Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). With these words the Exodus account of Moses' first

encounter with God reminds us that the ancient Israelites had a sense that certain places were meant to be savored as sacred—places where God was especially present.

We people in modern, Western societies are always on the go. In our comings and goings, however, we should try to be involved travelers, or pilgrims, not simply detached tourists. When we savor special places, we can allow God to speak to us through them.

The church teaches that all Christians are pilgrims on Earth, in the sense of being people on a journey toward a destiny—both as individuals and as a community. Even in our everyday physical travels, we can think of ourselves as pilgrims searching for God. We can be somewhat like the pilgrims to the Holy Land or the people who visit shrines where Jesus' mother, Mary, is believed to have appeared. Travelers go to such places expecting to encounter God in a special way. God is present not only in the "official" holy places but everywhere in life. Our awareness of God in a certain place makes that place holy ground for us and reminds us that all the world is holy ground.

Here are some questions to consider about how you might pray "with your feet":

- Do you have any special places that you consider holy ground?
- Can you go to certain places in your neighborhood that bring back special memories?
- Do you connect certain places with people or events that you treasure?
- Are there places that hold spiritual significance for you or for your community?

If you thought of certain places in answer to any of these questions, visiting one of them could be a pilgrimage—a way of praying with your feet.

compose for sounds



☐ Compose a song, poem, or prayer that illustrates praying with our ears.



□ Reflect on ways you use your body—in athletics, in creative activities and hobbies, in helping others, or simply in communicating with body language. Try doing one of these activities in a spirit of prayer. Write down your reflections about the experience.

Our special places can be holy ground.

■ Student art: Pastel by Maureen O'Mara, Coyle-Cassidy High School, Taunton, Massachusetts

Our Whole Body

Incense, flowers, dance, and song—all of these suggest further ways of praying with the body. Our body itself is a sacrament of God's presence. Nothing could be more natural than using the sacrament we are born with to communicate with God in prayer.

The Old and New Testaments present us with wonderful images of praying with the whole body through dance and song. In one account King David, bringing the precious ark of the covenant back into Jerusalem, leads the crowd in rejoicing in worship:

David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod [apron]. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. (2 Samuel 6:14–15)

The Psalms of the Old Testament, too, give a sense of the joy, expressed through their whole bodies, with which the people of God worshiped:

Praise the Lord!
Singing to the Lord a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

.

Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

Let the faithful exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their couches.

(149:1–5)

Writing to the early Christian community at Ephesus, Saint Paul remarks on how good it is for the people to express the Spirit of God in them through their singing:

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:18–19)

Until the last couple of centuries, the arts were closely associated with praising God. So it made perfect sense to the ancient Israelites that David was praying when he “danced before the Lord with all his might.” The bodily expressions of drama and music making were used by Christians to pray since early on; these expressions were likewise part of Greek, Roman, Hindu, and Buddhist worship. Even the Oriental martial arts, often cheapened into a form of violence, traditionally were forms of bodily meditation.

If quieting our body through silence and solitude can lead to internal meditation, then using our body creatively and expressively can be thought of as external meditation. Have you ever felt especially alive and in union with your surroundings while dancing, playing music, skiing, running, painting, or creating sculpture or pottery? Activities like these, done in the right spirit, possess a meditative quality. As such they foster prayer and can themselves be prayer. □





pray
all ways

For Review

6. What does Saint Paul mean when he urges Christians to “pray in the Spirit at all times”?
7. Explain how we can put our imagination to use in prayer. Why might this activity be helpful?
8. Explain a common way of using the Scriptures or other writings in prayer.
9. Summarize four ways that we can pray with our body. Give an example of each.

 *Student art:*
Charcoal and
pastel by
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