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Learning How to Pray

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

In the Gospel of Luke, we learn that Jesus' disciples came to him one day and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1) Jesus responded by teaching them what we today call the Our Father or the Lord's Prayer. The powerful words of this traditional prayer, as expressed in Matthew 6:9-13, have been handed on from generation to generation.

It is important to know that not only was Jesus teaching words for prayer with the Our Father, but he was also teaching an attitude for prayer. In teaching the words of this prayer, Jesus teaches us to approach God as we would approach someone with whom we have an intimate relationship. Jesus teaches us to approach God in prayer with an attitude of praise and gratitude, of trust and surrender, and of sincere sorrow for our wrongdoings. With this attitude in mind, we can respond to God in prayer in a variety of ways.

Traditional Prayers

It's always good to start with what we are most familiar. Most likely you learned traditional prayers in your childhood: the Our Father, the Hail Mary, grace before and after meals, hymns, and so on. These prayers are like family heirlooms, passed from generation to generation. When you pray with these words, you join your voice to the countless voices past and present that have prayed and continue to pray them to respond to God's call to grow in our relationship with him. Traditional prayers are the basic vocabulary of our prayer life. As with all prayer, traditional prayers can be used at any time. You may want to use traditional prayers to help you begin and end your day as well as to mark significant moments in your day such as meals, restful pauses, or moments of solitude. To help you recall the words of these traditional prayers, this *Catholic Prayer for Catholic Families* contains a treasury of traditional Catholic prayers and devotions (page 25).

With Your Child

The last part of this book (beginning on page 25) will assist you in your efforts to help your child take to heart the words of traditional Catholic prayers and devotions. Use this section to talk with your child about and review the prayers he or she is learning. Help your child learn not only the words but also the meanings of these traditional prayers and devotions.

The more a family consciously gathers in prayer, the more children will see prayer as an important part of their lives.

Praying in Your Own Words

Praying in your own words may seem somewhat intimidating at first. If you remember to “keep it simple,” however, and talk to God as though you were talking to a friend, you can pray in your own words at any time and place. Don’t get hung up on trying to use long, fancy words. Talk to God about your hopes, fears, joys, dreams, desires, challenges, and worries. Remember the advice the dad gave to his daughter in the story from Part One of this resource:

- ◇ thank God for all the blessings you have and for all the good that you’ve experienced recently;
- ◇ tell God what your needs are;
- ◇ tell God that you are sorry for the times that you haven’t acted the way he would want you to;
- ◇ pray for the needs of others;
- ◇ pray with praise and adoration, recognizing the depth of God’s goodness.

With Your Child

Praying in your own words can be done silently or aloud. By occasionally praying in your own words aloud, you can teach your child this valuable habit. Encourage your child to stop while you are outside enjoying nature together to thank God for the beautiful flowers, the sunny day, the songbirds in the trees, or other aspects of creation. When beginning a school project together, include God by asking his help to do a good job.

The Mass

Of all the ways of praying as a Catholic, you are probably most familiar with the Mass. Yes, the Mass is a form of prayer. In fact it is the most important way that we pray as Catholics because it brings us together as a community to hear God's Word and to receive Jesus in the Eucharist.

Because prayer is the time we spend aware of God's presence, there is no more powerful way to pray than the Mass. We sometimes forget that the Mass is a form of prayer—something we need to consciously and actively participate in rather than passively attend. Regardless of whether the music, preaching, and environment are of the highest quality or leave something to be desired, the fact remains that the Mass is an opportunity to hear God's invitation and to respond in thanksgiving for the many ways that he fills our lives with blessings.

With Your Child

Help your child to appreciate the mystery of the presence of the risen Jesus in his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Depending on your child's age, help him or her to prepare for receiving Jesus in Holy Communion. Going to Mass with your child is one of the greatest gifts you can offer because you are bringing him or her to encounter Jesus in the most profound way possible—in the Eucharist. Help your child to pray by arriving early, by taking time to quiet yourselves, and by participating in the songs and prayers of the Mass. Work together to learn some familiar hymns so that he or she can more fully participate in the Mass.

Prayerfully Reviewing Your Day

Part of the rich tradition of the Catholic Church is recognizing the need to reflect on the day's activities—to remember God's invitation and our response or lack of response. Saint Ignatius of Loyola developed a simple method by which you can review each day in a way that will help you grow in self-understanding and free you to follow God's will. This practice is often called the Daily Examen. Many people choose to practice this prayerful review of their day before going to bed at night by following the five steps below.

Stillness: Recalling God's Presence

Relax in God's presence in your favorite prayer place and posture. Be aware of how God shows his love for you in all his gifts to you. Be thankful as you think of God the Father's love, the love of his Son, Jesus, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to come into your heart and to help you to look honestly at your actions this day and how you have responded in different situations. With the Spirit's inspiration, you can recognize what draws you close to God as well as what pulls you away from God.

Gratitude: Expressing Thankfulness

Review your day and give thanks to God for his gifts. Try not to choose what to be thankful for but rather to see what springs to mind as you reflect. Think of the concrete details of your day—the aroma of coffee brewing, a smile from a coworker, or a beautiful rainbow. Recall the gifts that God has given you that you can share with others—your ability to help in a crisis, your sense of humor, or your patience with children. Pause and express your gratitude to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Reflection: Looking Back on Your Day

Again review the events of the day and notice how you acted in the many situations in which you found yourself. Recall your feelings and motives to see whether you considered all of the possibilities and freely followed God's will. Ask yourself when you were conscious of God's presence. Think about opportunities you had to grow in faith, hope, and charity. When we think about why we did or did not take advantage of these opportunities, we can become aware of how we might change our actions in the future. Be grateful for the occasions when you freely chose a course to help others. Perhaps you let a shopper with a small order go ahead of you in line or did not join in a conversation critical of a coworker. These are examples of responding freely as God wants us to. When we reflect on the times we did or didn't act with God's grace, we can be more sensitive to developing habits of positive responses.

Sorrow: Asking for Forgiveness

After you have asked for the Holy Spirit's guidance in recalling and reflecting on the actions of your day, spend time talking with God. Express sorrow for the times you failed to follow his direction and ask him to be with you the next time you encounter a similar situation. Give thanks to God for the grace that enabled you to follow his will freely. Feel the sorrow and gratitude in your heart as you converse with God.

Hopefulness: Resolving to Grow

Ask God to help you as you look forward to a new day tomorrow. Resolve to cooperate and trust in the loving guidance of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Conclude the day's prayerful review with the Lord's Prayer.

By prayerfully reviewing your day, you will experience the difference it can make in the way you live. If you make a habit of practicing the Daily Examen, you will grow closer to God in your thoughts and deeds and will be free to choose to follow him.

With Your Child

The practice of reviewing your day (Daily Examen) is a wonderful gift to share with your child. The simplicity of the Examen makes it a perfect fit for the prayer life of a child. With a young child, you can talk through the steps, inviting him or her to say "thank you" to God for good things; to think about the day and how he or she moved closer to God or farther away from God; to say "I'm sorry" for the times he or she did not act as God wishes; and to ask for God's help in growing closer to him tomorrow. With an older child, teaching this formula can aid the transition from the way he or she prayed as a little child into the way he or she can pray as a young adult.

Taking time for reflective prayer in your own life will allow you to help your child develop the same habits. Through reflective prayer you and your child can recognize God's presence in your daily lives.

Reflective Prayer

Despite the fact that family life can be hectic at times, you don't need to go to a monastery or search for a deserted place in the woods to pray. You simply need to make a transition of focus so that you can become more in tune with God's presence in your activities. In reflective prayer, also known as meditation, you can use your mind and imagination to engage in prayerful conversation with God and to recognize his presence in your daily life. Reflective prayer involves the following simple steps:

Find a quiet place where you can be alone for 10 or 15 minutes. Assume a comfortable position and close your eyes or focus on a religious picture or a lighted candle. If you wish, play soft background music to help establish a prayerful mood. Become aware of God's presence and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your reflection.

Take two or three minutes to practice rhythmic breathing—counting to three slowly and silently while breathing in and counting slowly to five while breathing out—to help you concentrate. If you become distracted, return to concentrating on your breathing and let the distractions go by so that you can turn your heart back to God. Likewise, you can choose a special word or phrase, such as *Jesus* or *My Lord and My God*, and repeat it when you are distracted to bring your attention back to God's presence.

Prayerfully read a brief passage from Scripture that you have selected for inspiration. If the passage is a Gospel story, imagine yourself as a participant in the story. In your imagination use your five senses to enter a setting in which you can talk with Jesus and listen to him speak to you. You can respond to what Jesus is saying or doing in the story, or you can simply talk about something that has happened to you recently or about a forthcoming event in your life.

Resolve to cooperate and trust in the loving guidance of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Conclude the day's prayerful conversation with the Lord's Prayer.

In addition to using Scripture in your reflection, you can also use writings from or about the saints as well as other inspirational literature or prayer books. Likewise, you can choose to concentrate on a sacred object such as a crucifix or reflect on a sacred image such as an icon of Jesus or a favorite saint. Take this time to talk to God as you would to a friend.

End your reflection with one or two minutes of contemplation, time to rest silently in God's presence. As adults we come to recognize more and more that God speaks to us using the language of silence. Take a few moments at the end of your reflection to enter into a few silent moments with God.

With Your Child

Reflective prayer helps children use their imaginations, along with thought, emotion, and desire, to enter into sacred time and space.

You can help your child's prayer life by taking the time to pray reflectively together. Reflective prayer can be a wonderful bedtime prayer. You can use the same steps outlined above, helping your child to get comfortable, experience some quiet, and then imagine himself or herself in a Bible story. Together imagine the setting and the characters. Ask questions of your child, such as who he or she would like to be in the story and what he or she would say to Jesus. Your guidance with questions that involve all of the senses—What can you see? What sounds do you hear? What can you feel?—will help your child to become involved in the scene. Guide your child in a conversation with Jesus and in a quiet time to listen to what Jesus wants to reveal.

Taking time for reflective prayer in your own life will allow you to help your child develop the same habits. Through reflective prayer you and your child can recognize God's presence in your daily lives.