

# *INTRODUCTION*

Praying together as a family before meals has been one of the greatest joys of being a parent. As we gather around each meal—whether made from scratch, micro-waved from a box, or fetched from the supermarket—I am reminded that everything we have is a gift from God. This daily ritual has become a natural way for me as a parent to pray with my children and to model for them that I am a person who prays. Practically speaking, it has become our formal way to begin a meal together: at the table, with everyone present, the television off, and all devices set aside.

Naturally, everyone does not always participate wholeheartedly or cheerfully, and the meal that follows the prayer often has a fair share of raucous behavior, teasing, spilt milk, and frayed tempers. Nevertheless, that moment of calm at the beginning sets a tone of gratitude and calls us to think, albeit briefly, about the person whose hand is in ours as we pray.

I still recall an experience that occurred years ago. We were at a friend's house for dinner. While I sat waiting for a signal to begin the meal, our two-year-old daughter reached out and took the hand of the child next to her. When the child asked why she had done that, we explained it was our family custom to say grace. Then we all joined hands and prayed the familiar words, "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for this food." As smiles of embarrassment

broke out around the table, I marveled at the way my daughter, who was not yet old enough to know the words of the prayer, had helped us let down our guard and open up to God's presence in one another.

Jesus' presence at meals seems to have had the same effect. All the gospels record how frequently Jesus took the opportunity of a shared meal to teach, challenge, comfort, and forgive. But even more importantly, all of Jesus' meals were opportunities for his companions to open their hearts to him, to recognize him as did the two disciples on the road to Emmaus when he broke bread with them.

This was true regardless of whom his dining companions were. Outcasts such as Zacchaeus the tax collector, powerful people such as Simon the Pharisee, or friends and disciples such as Martha and Mary, all experienced meals with Jesus that brought about important changes in their lives. I imagine that if we could ask people who actually knew Jesus about their most memorable moment with him, many would say, "It was that time when we were eating and he. . . ." Perhaps that is part of the reason why Jesus left us the sacrament of sharing bread and wine in the Eucharist as the best way to remember him, saying, "Do this in memory of me."

We can remember him not only at the eucharistic table of the altar but also at our family tables. While every one of our family meals won't have the same dramatic effect as the meals Jesus shared with people such as Zacchaeus or Martha, they will certainly make a difference over the long run. The regular practice of saying grace helps create an atmosphere where

gratitude to God, respect for one another, and concern for those in need can grow. At the very least, prioritizing prayer as a family sends a message to our children and ourselves that God is at the center of our lives and family.

Grace before meals is also a practical way to acknowledge and celebrate special family occasions. Including in family prayer our birthdays, anniversaries, family visits, school plays, and big games helps children recognize that God is present in all of these moments. They are opportunities to thank God for the love and care our family has shown us as well as to celebrate the gifts and talents that God has given us. All of these occasions can be moments of grace. I have included prayers for these celebrations in the “Special Occasions” section of this book.

One of my family’s favorite prayers in this book is the prayer for a child’s birthday. When they were young, my children loved it when their siblings would name a good quality of theirs or point out certain things that they did for which they were grateful. As they grew into adults, they introduced this practice to their friends and loved ones. We still use it today, often modifying the prayer to use with our adult friends who are with us on their birthdays.

Of course, everyone likes to hear nice things about themselves, and that’s a fine gift to give someone on their birthday. But these prayers are more than that. They are expressions of the fact that these good qualities are gifts of God. God has graced each of us with particular abilities and dispositions and called us to use those gifts for others. Naming these qualities and

gifts acknowledges that God is their source and that we are grateful for the ways that our family members and friends have shared those gifts with us.

It's hard to pull off family meals these days with family members' different schedules. There are school, work, and activities calendars. The four seasons come and go with holidays and special events. And yet the Church's calendar is not just one more calendar to worry about. Many of the days that our society celebrates have Christian roots—for example, Halloween, Valentine's Day, or Mardi Gras. But more broadly, the Church year, or liturgical year, permeates all of our calendars. The seasons of Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, and Ordinary Time lead us to follow the life of Jesus throughout the year. Advent prayers remind us that preparation for Christmas is more than shopping and decorating. Observing the season of Christmas helps us remember the many rich aspects of the story of Christ's birth. Lenten prayers help us realize that Lent is more than giving up something; it's about doing something for others, especially the poor. Keeping Easter not just as a day but as a season provides an opportunity to explore the many dimensions of the Resurrection. Celebrating these seasons at our family meals helps us recognize Christ's presence and action in our lives. Whether it's the Advent wreath or a rice bowl, praying and observing seasonal traditions can form a lasting pattern of moving through the year that will accompany our children as they grow. You'll find these prayers included in "The Church Year" section.

The Church also celebrates the saints throughout the year. Remembering the saints reminds us that we

are part of a Church that has a long history and has reached every corner of the world. Celebrating the saints takes us back to the beginning of the Church, to Jesus' followers and friends who left their ordinary lives behind to follow him. It places us with the martyrs in the Roman Colosseum and with the earliest monks in the desert. It takes us with the missionaries to explore unknown lands, from China and Japan to the Americas. It brings us to the universities, monasteries, and convents where theologians and mystics spent their lives in study and prayer. It also brings us to the poorest places in the world where saints selflessly gave their lives caring for the poor and the sick—the people whom society ignores and sometimes despises. What an exciting world to introduce to our children! These are the real superheroes who have changed and rescued our world.

In this book, I have tried to select those saints who would be most interesting to children: St. Thomas Aquinas was mocked by his classmates as a dumb ox; St. Damien of Molokai left a comfortable life in Belgium to work among lepers on the remote island of Molokai; and St. Isaac Jogues, who preached the Gospel to the Iroquois and Hurons, was tortured and killed by them. So many of these saints overcame incredible obstacles and hardships—some were orphans, slaves, or prisoners; some were poor and uneducated; and some lived selfish, pampered lives before they converted. Their stories are condensed here so as not to let the dinner get cold, but you may want to read more about them (there are lots of great websites) and tell their stories in

full over dinner. You'll find these prayers included in "Holidays and Saints' Days through the Year" section.

A friend who encouraged me for years to publish this book recently told me that what she appreciated most about it was that the prayers so often call to mind the poor and the hungry. Gratitude for our blessings should make us aware of those who are not so fortunate. Praying for the hungry and the homeless, for refugees and victims of war, can lead us to look for ways to help them. As one of the Beatitudes reminds us, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Mt 5:6). As we nourish our families with food and drink, we should also nurture in them an awareness and desire to help those in need. Children are naturally God-centered, if properly guided. When exposed, but not coercively, to the devotional life of the Church, children spontaneously show their innate capacity for prayer and service. Speak often with your children about your faith, the saints, and the sacraments. Pray together whenever you think of it. These are the kinds of memories that children never forget.

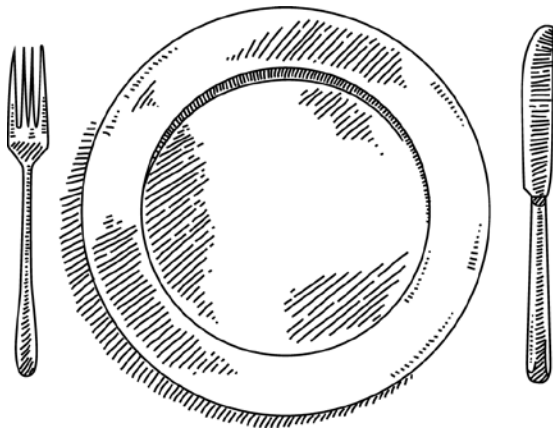
In this book, I offer prayers in both English and a second language. The Church today, especially in the United States, is blessed to be composed of people from all over the world. In many parishes and dioceses, Mass is celebrated in a number of languages. To help families celebrate the traditions and saints of their native lands, I have included prayers in Spanish, Korean, and Vietnamese for a number of such days.

Some suggestions for using this book:

- Keep it handy, on or near the kitchen table.
- Have the children lead the prayers as they are able.
- Be alert to words or terms that younger children may not understand. Ask an older child to explain or do so yourself.
- Ask open-ended questions that arise from the particular day or the prayer. For example, on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes you might ask, “How do you think Bernadette felt when no one believed that she had seen Mary?” Or on the Feast of St. Catherine of Siena, “What do you think about Catherine giving away her family’s food and clothing without asking?” Read the short biographies in advance and consider how you might make them a basis for family conversation.
- Dinner is not the only time you can use these prayers. A friend has used them at breakfast, the beginning of her homeschool day. They might also be used in a classroom as a grace before lunchtime.

In 1995, I was privileged to have Ave Maria Press, where I worked for twenty-five years, publish *Let’s Say Grace*. This book has grown out of that one. Back then, our three children were eight, six, and three. The artist who designed the original book even included sketches of them. Time flies. Today they are all grown up. But there are new children in the family now—two young grandsons, Theodore and Charles. It is with them in mind, as well as the hope of more grandchildren one day, that I offer you this new book.

# *THE DAYS OF THE WEEK*





## *Sunday*

**Leader:** This is the day the Lord has made.

**All:** Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

GOD, OUR CREATOR,  
we thank you for this Sunday.  
We thank you for our church,  
for our home, and for the chance to rest today.  
As we share this meal, help us to recognize  
the presence of Jesus with us  
and fill us with the joy of your Holy Spirit.  
We ask this through Christ, our Lord.  
Amen.

**Leader:** This is the day the Lord has made.

**All:** Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

## *Monday*

WE THANK YOU, LORD, OUR GOD,  
for this new week that we have begun today.  
We thank you for our schools and for our work,  
and for all our friends there.  
Bless this food that we share  
and give us the strength  
to be patient and kind with one another.  
Amen.

## Tuesday

DEAR GOD,  
your love is like a mother's gentle hands  
and your care is like a father's watchful presence.  
We thank you for always being there for us  
and for giving us the gift of one another as a family.  
During this meal, help us to listen to one another  
and to appreciate each one's unique gifts.  
We ask this in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

## Wednesday

GENEROUS GOD,  
we give you thanks for this food  
and for all the good things you have given us.  
Help us to remember those who are hungry tonight.  
Teach us how we can help all those who are in need.  
We ask this through Christ, our Lord.  
Amen.

## Thursday

BLESSED ARE YOU, LORD, OUR GOD.  
You made the land, the sea, the sun, and the rain.  
You brought forth this food from nature's bounty to  
our table.  
We thank you for the farmers who grew it  
and for the many people who brought it  
from the fields to the factories to the supermarkets.  
And we thank you for *(name)* who cooked it for us.  
Amen.

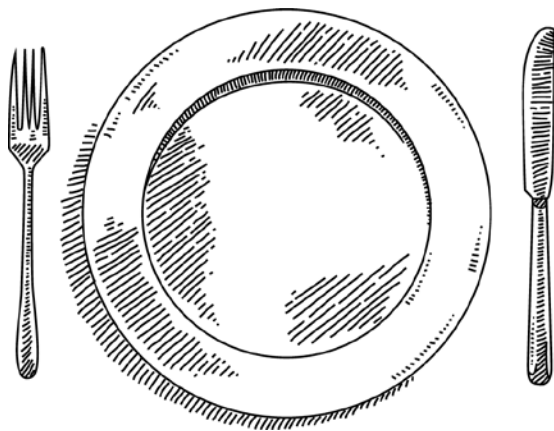
## *Friday*

FATHER,  
as we come to the end of another week of work  
and school,  
we thank you for your friendship  
and ask your forgiveness for our failings.  
Help us to be more like your Son, Jesus,  
who showed us his love on the Cross.  
And make us grateful for all your gifts  
and for this meal we now share.  
Amen.

## *Saturday*

LORD JESUS,  
you are with us always  
in our chores and in our play,  
in what we do together  
and when we are apart.  
Help us to grow in love as a family  
and to be a sign of your presence  
to our friends and neighbors.  
Thank you for this food and for this day.  
Amen.

## *SPECIAL OCCASIONS*



## Mom's Birthday

DEAR GOD,  
we thank you for Mom,  
and for the love she shows us every day.  
We are especially grateful for her today on her birthday:  
*(each person names something about Mom that he/she is  
grateful for).*  
Thank you for the many ways she takes good care of us,  
and for her patience and understanding.  
Through her love we feel your presence.  
Loving God,  
listen now to our prayers for Mom.  
Bless her and give her good health,  
and bless this meal that we share to celebrate her life.  
Amen.

## Dad's Birthday

DEAR GOD,  
we thank you for giving us such a good dad.  
As we celebrate his birthday, we thank you  
for all the ways he cares for us and helps us:  
*(each person names something about Dad that he/she is  
grateful for).*  
Loving God,  
we ask you to bless Dad with your strength  
and wisdom,  
and we thank you for this meal that we share as  
a family.  
Amen.

## Child's Birthday

DEAR JESUS,

thank you for giving us *(name)* to be part of our family:  
*(each person can thank God for a special quality that the  
birthday person possesses).*

As we celebrate his/her birthday,  
we ask you to always be with him/her as a friend  
and to guide him/her as he/she grows in the  
year ahead.

Now, dear Lord, bless this meal  
that we share to celebrate *(name's)* life.  
Amen.

## Adult's Birthday

DEAR GOD,

as we celebrate *(name's)* birthday,  
we thank you for *(name)* and for his/her love  
and friendship.

Thank you for *(name's)* many wonderful qualities:  
*(each person can mention something he/she is grateful for).*

Thank you, Lord, for this opportunity to be together.  
Bless *(name)* and keep him/her always in your care.

## Grandmother's Birthday

O GOD OF LOVE,

we are so grateful for Grandma *(or whatever name the  
family may use).*

Thank you for giving her to us  
and for all the ways she shows how much she loves us.

Watch over her in the year ahead  
and keep her always in your care.  
Help us to show her our love and gratitude in all the  
ways we can.  
Bless this meal and bless everyone in our family.  
Amen.

## *Grandfather's Birthday*

O GOD OF LOVE,  
we are so grateful for Grandpa (*or whatever name the  
family may use*).  
Thank you for giving him to us  
and for all the ways he shows how much he loves us.  
Watch over him in the year ahead  
and keep him always in your care.  
Help us to show him our love and gratitude in all the  
ways we can.  
Bless this meal and bless everyone in our family.  
Amen.

## *Las Mañanitas*

*This is a traditional Mexican birthday song, sometimes sung  
to awaken a child. It is also sung on the Feast of Our Lady  
of Guadalupe in her honor.*

ESTAS SON LAS MAÑANITAS  
que cantaba el rey David.  
Hoy por ser día de tu santo,  
te las cantamos así.

Despierta, mi bien, despierta,  
mira que ya amaneció,  
ya los pajarillos cantan,  
la luna ya se metió.

Qué linda está la mañana  
en que vengo a saludarte,  
venimos todos con gusto  
y placer a felicitarte.

El día en que tu naciste,  
nacieron todas las flores,  
y en la pila del bautismo,  
cantaron los ruseñores.

Ya viene amaneciendo,  
ya la luz del día nos dio.  
Levántate de mañana,  
mira que ya amaneció.

## *Las Mañanitas*

THIS IS THE MORNING SONG  
that King David sang.  
Because today is your saint's day,  
we're singing it for you.

Wake up, my dear, wake up,  
look it is already dawn.  
The birds are already singing  
and the moon has set.

How lovely is the morning  
in which I come to greet you.  
We all came here with joy  
and pleasure to congratulate you.



The day you were born  
all the flowers were born.  
On the baptismal font  
the nightingales sang.

The morning is coming now,  
the sun is giving us its light  
Get up in the morning,  
look it is already dawn

## Baptism

FATHER,  
we thank you so much for giving us (*child's name*)  
to be a part of our family,  
and for his/her baptism that we have just celebrated.  
(*Name*) is your precious child,  
united today with Christ and as a member of his Body,  
the Church.  
May your Holy Spirit, that (*name*) has received this day,  
guide him/her always and keep him/her close to you.  
Thank you for the gift of our baptisms  
and for this meal that we share in celebration.  
Amen.

## Anniversary of a Baptism

*Place the child's baptismal candle and a photo from the baptism on the table.*

GOD, OUR CREATOR,  
thank you for the gift of (*name*)  
and for the life of Jesus that lives within him/her.

Today we remember his/her baptism,  
how through water and the Holy Spirit  
he/she became your child  
and a member of your family, the Church.  
Help (*name*) to continue to grow in your love.  
Bring him/her closer to you each day  
so he/she can make your light shine forth for all of us.  
Bless this food that we share  
in the name of Jesus, our friend and brother.  
Amen.

## *First Communion*

ALL LOVING GOD,  
you created (*name*) in your image  
and gave him/her the gift of life in our family.  
Through Baptism you welcomed (*name*) into your family,  
the Church,  
and called him/her to live as your son / daughter.  
We thank you for this day on which, for the first time,  
(*name*) received your Son, Jesus, in the Eucharist.  
May we always be nourished by your presence  
so as to grow in friendship with you.  
As we continue our celebration around this table,  
bless our food and help us to recognize Christ in  
one another.  
We ask this in Jesus' name.  
Amen.