

# 1.

## PRAYING WITH THE CHURCH IN THE LITURGY

Do this in memory of me.

—Luke 22:19

### WHAT IS THIS FORM OF PRAYER?

For the baptized Christian, the life of prayer exists at both the individual and the communal level. Although we pursue ways to cultivate our individual relationship with God through different forms of personal prayer, we never do so apart from our fundamental identity as members of the Body of Christ. Thus, the life of Christian prayer is lived out in the context of the Church, and the liturgy is how the Church prays together. As Romano Guardini affirms in his classic, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, “The liturgy does not say ‘I,’ but ‘We.’ . . . The liturgy is not celebrated by the individual, but by the body of the faithful” (36). In the liturgical celebration—in which the Church gathers in Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit to worship the Father in spirit and in truth—the individual prays as part of a community that is far greater than the sum of its members. The individual prays as part of the Body of Christ—as part of

a profound unity that cannot be understood on human terms, but can only be accepted in faith, hope, and love.

For this reason, the liturgy cannot be something that each Christian creates for himself or herself; it can only be received as gift, and that gift can only be received in humility. When we enter into the liturgical prayer of the Church, we receive from the Church the words and gestures and postures by which we offer our worship to God together. The words may differ from our usual discourse, the gestures and postures may only be used in this particular context, yet this is all for the greater purpose of conforming us to the mystery we celebrate. And the mystery we celebrate is the Paschal Mystery of Christ: his life, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, offered to the Father in love for the life of the world, and made present now by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the liturgy, we participate in the saving work of Jesus Christ, and by the graces we receive in that participation, we are empowered to continue Christ's work of building up the kingdom of God in our daily lives. We are caught up in the divine life and love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We are united in Christ with our Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world and even across time, including all who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, the angels, and the saints. In the liturgy, we experience on earth a foretaste of the eternal wedding feast of heaven. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council teaches that "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the source [font] from which all her power flows" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10). In the end, the ultimate purpose of all of our personal prayer, whatever form it may take, is to help us enter more and more fully into the liturgical celebration, to drink more and more deeply from this wellspring of salvation. Personal prayer cannot flourish apart from liturgical prayer. Our personal practices of prayer

must be rooted in consistent participation in the liturgical life of the Church; otherwise, they will be like a blossom that has been plucked from its root. They may last for a little while, but eventually, they will wither away. *There is no form of prayer in the Christian life more important than liturgical prayer.*

## WHY MIGHT A PERSON PRAY THIS WAY?

Some Christians struggle with the liturgy. Many, in fact. On one level, this struggle is understandable. The celebration of Sunday Mass in one's parish may include a hundred different distractions that one would never have to deal with in one's own private prayer, such as having to wrangle an uncooperative toddler, sing a least-favorite hymn led by a well-intentioned but mediocre cantor, listen to an uninspiring homily, or extend the Sign of Peace to the person who stole your spot in the parking lot. It may also include prayers with complicated structure and syntax, words that sound strange to a modern ear, or scripture passages that are challenging to understand or accept. Such difficulties may tempt Christians to ask why they cannot simply pray at home or out in the beauty of nature on a Sunday. This question reveals a deeper issue. The surface struggles many Christians face around the liturgy and its prayers, readings, postures, gestures, and even settings are in reality manifestations of a deeper, perhaps unnamed desire to pray *only* in the way one wishes to pray—to exert control over one's spiritual life and, by extension, over God. However, the liturgy invites, even demands, a letting go of any desire for control. Its objective realities (the givenness of its prayers, its readings, its feasts and seasons, etc.) insist and necessitate that the faithful conform themselves to the liturgy, not the other way around. This is indeed a challenge, especially in a culture that prizes

independence and autonomy above all things. But for those who are able to set aside their individual preferences and enter humbly into the prayer of the Church, even if it is celebrated less-than-beautifully in its externals, the liturgy becomes God's greatest gift on the pilgrim journey of faith, because it imparts to the faithful God's very life through grace.

This primacy of the liturgy is affirmed in the *Catechism*, which teaches that "in the liturgy, all Christian prayer finds its source and goal" (CCC 1073). This means that the liturgy is not one pathway of prayer among several, another option to be chosen as an expression of personal prayer; rather, *liturgical prayer is the bedrock of every path of personal prayer*. Without the graces of the liturgical life, no matter how many hours we may spend in private prayer each day, our relationship with God will ultimately languish, because we have neglected to nourish our relationship with him at its source. In reality, our entire life of prayer should flow forth from and lead back to our participation in the liturgy, for it is there that we are fed by the hand of the Lord himself, nourished as branches of the True Vine. In the liturgy, we offer prayer "not just for ourselves and all who are dear to us" (see Eucharistic Prayer I), but for those who suffer, those who persecute us, those who do not believe. In the liturgy, we learn to see all of creation and our brothers and sisters not as objects to be exploited but as gifts from God to be received in reverence and offered back in thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). In the liturgy, we live most fully into our identity as sons and daughters of God, for in it we participate in the prayer of Christ himself: "Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen."

## **WHEN AND WHERE CAN ONE PRACTICE THIS FORM OF PRAYER?**

While most Christians immediately think of the Mass when they hear the word “liturgy,” the eucharistic celebration is not the only form of liturgical prayer in the life of the Church. The other sacraments, too, constitute liturgical prayer, as well as the Liturgy of the Hours, a rich form of prayer in which certain psalms and readings designated by the Church are prayed at certain times throughout the day. Given that the sacramental forms of liturgical prayer require a priest (or a deacon in some cases), one can only participate in them either according to schedules set forth by parishes or dioceses or by appointment, and, in general, the sacramental forms of liturgical prayer are celebrated in a church or chapel, although there are exceptions to this (for example, a patient receiving the Anointing of the Sick in the hospital).

The restrictions around the sacramental forms of liturgical prayer do not apply to the Liturgy of the Hours, however, which makes it a beautiful way for lay men and women to participate in liturgical prayer in their daily lives. The Liturgy of the Hours (often referred to simply as “the Hours” or “the Divine Office”) developed centuries ago in monastic communities. Today, it is still prayed by clergy and religious, as well as many laypeople. The Hours can be prayed by either communities or individuals, and it can be offered anywhere, whether in a chapel or church, a home, an office, or even an airplane. Because this prayer is liturgical, even if one prays it as an individual, one is never praying alone—he or she is united by the grace of the Holy Spirit to other members of the Body of Christ who are also praying a particular Hour at a particular time. In the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayer is still “we” and not “I”; thus, it is a powerful prayer of solidarity that can be offered on others’ behalf.

Scripture forms the heart of the Liturgy of the Hours, especially the book of Psalms, which is often called the prayer book or hymn book of the Church (since the psalms are meant to be sung). As the *Catechism* affirms, “Prayed by Christ and fulfilled in him, the Psalms remain essential to the prayer of the Church” (CCC 2586). In these poetic prayers, which are “inseparably personal and communal” (CCC 2586), the entire breadth of the human experience is represented: joy, sorrow, frustration, fear, hope, longing, confusion—nothing is omitted. When we cannot find a way to express to God what we are going through, no matter what we are going through, the psalms give us words to pray, both for ourselves and for others. The more we pray the Liturgy of the Hours, the more we are steeped in the language of scripture, and the more we learn to receive and respond to the events of our lives through the words inspired by God and prayed by God himself in Christ.

The Liturgy of the Hours consists of specific times for prayer throughout the day; through it, the Church “prays without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Each time for prayer is known as an Hour, but this simply refers to the name “Liturgy of the Hours”—it does not indicate the length of time required to pray it! Each Hour of the Divine Office really only takes ten to twenty minutes, depending on which Hour is being prayed. There are five Hours in the Divine Office: Morning Prayer, Daytime Prayer (three options, which can be prayed at Midmorning, Midday, or Midafternoon), Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer, along with the Office of Readings, which can be prayed at any time. Clergy and religious commit to praying all five Hours daily, while many laypeople choose from Morning, Evening, or Night Prayer, praying the Hour or Hours most feasible for their schedules.

## HOW DOES ONE PRAY THIS WAY IN PRACTICE?

All liturgical prayer utilizes specific texts and books prepared and promulgated by those in highest authority in the Church. For example, the *Roman Missal* and the *Lectionary* contain the prayers and readings used in the Mass, and there are similar ritual books for the other sacraments. The texts and prayers for the Liturgy of the Hours have also been prepared and provided by the Vatican, and these texts *must* be used in this form of prayer. The full *Liturgy of the Hours* (all five Hours for every day of the liturgical year) is available in four volumes, but for the layperson looking for an introduction, a single volume titled *Christian Prayer* contains Morning, Evening, and Night Prayer for the whole liturgical year, and an abbreviated version entitled *Shorter Christian Prayer* contains those same Hours, but includes only one week's worth of prayers for seasons such as Advent or Lent, and only certain major feast days. There are also a number of apps available that offer the Liturgy of the Hours. These are especially helpful for those who travel or commute, and they can also be useful learning tools, but it is well worth using the actual books to pray rather than looking at a screen.

That said, it can be difficult to learn to pray the Liturgy of the Hours on one's own; the best way to do so is from someone who knows it well. If you are new to the Hours, consider asking a priest at your parish to help you learn the prayers and navigate the book(s). This process in itself can be a gift: we receive the faith from others, and we learn to pray from others as well. Asking someone to help you learn a new form of prayer is a profound way to grow in relationship with that person, for, as Jesus promised, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

In discerning whether or not to incorporate the Liturgy of the Hours into your prayer life, start by making an honest assessment of your current schedule. Perhaps at the moment you are truly unable to pray Morning or Evening Prayer. Or perhaps God is inviting you to create room in your day for prayer by letting go of habits or practices that are less worthy of your time. If you are unsure of where to start, Night Prayer is by far the shortest of the Hours; it can be prayed in five to ten minutes just before going to sleep and is a wonderful gateway to this rich form of prayer, through which you can consecrate the hours of your day to God and join your prayer to those of your brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world.

## 2.

# PRAYING WITH DEVOTIONS

I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart;  
I will declare all your wondrous deeds.  
I will delight and rejoice in you;  
I will sing hymns to your name, Most High.  
—Psalm 9:2–3

### WHAT IS THIS FORM OF PRAYER?

Devotional prayer has been a part of the Christian tradition since its beginning. While it is distinct from the liturgical celebration, devotional prayer at its best is always inspired by the liturgy and in a sense harmonizes with it, ultimately leading the faithful to a deeper, more reverent participation in the liturgical life of the Church. The earliest Christian communities expressed their love of Christ and the Blessed Mother through prayers and hymns. They honored the martyrs by constructing shrines and churches on the sites of their martyrdom (St. Peter's Basilica and St. Paul's Outside the Walls in Rome are examples) and by visiting these holy places on the anniversaries of their *dies natales*, or birth into eternal life.

Today, devotional prayer encompasses a vast array of prayer practices, and their purpose is indicated in the name of this category—put simply, these prayers are meant to increase one's *devotion*,

one's *love* for God. Devotional prayer practices often incorporate the most foundational elements of what it means to be human. They are often rooted in community and family; they include poetry and art and music and dance; they draw upon the rhythms of time and the seasons and celebrate the beauty of nature. Their rich simplicity allows them to become an intensely personal way of expressing one's faith, and their sheer variety allows one to take up different practices over the course of one's life. Whatever circumstances one faces, there is a devotional prayer that will help one reach out to God.

The intimate connection between the devotional life and the liturgy has already been mentioned, but it is important to note that *the liturgy always takes precedence over devotional prayer*. Any form of devotional prayer that encroaches on the liturgy or supersedes it in any way in the imagination or in practice must be avoided. For example, praying the Rosary during Mass was once a fairly common practice generations ago, but this indicates a disordered prioritization of devotional prayer over the liturgical celebration, which deserves the "full, conscious, and active participation" of the faithful (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14). Again, devotional prayer ought to lead to a more fervent participation in the liturgy, not distract from it.

In addition, the connection between the faith of one's heart and the devotional life cannot be overlooked. Devotional prayers and practices are external expressions of an interior disposition of faith; to engage in these prayers or practices without faith reduces them to empty habits, or worse, superstitious behaviors.

## WHY MIGHT A PERSON PRAY THIS WAY?

Devotional prayer offers rich possibilities for cultivating one's relationship with God in a way that deeply accords with and reflects

one's personality. The devotional life is truly the flowering forth of the graces that are received in the liturgical celebration, and just as there is practically infinite variety in the flowers that grow throughout the world, so too are there practically infinite possibilities for variety within the devotional life. One of the most central forms of devotion in Catholic tradition is prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and yet even within this one subcategory of devotional prayer, numerous possibilities exist: one might choose to pray the Rosary daily, plant a Mary garden in the backyard, reflect on the *Via Matris* (the Way of the Sorrowful Mother) during Lent, or pray at a Marian shrine.

The saints offer even more possibilities: some people may feel a particular closeness to saints whose faith in God was manifested in lives of study; others may be drawn to saints who lived the Gospel in service to the poor and sick or in ceaseless prayer. Devotion to these holy men and women can be expressed through prayer for their intercession, study of their teachings and writings, or imitation of their virtues.

Regardless of the particular shape one's devotional prayer life may take, *all* devotional prayer is ultimately directed toward cultivating one's relationship with God. When we pray to Mary or to the saints and ask their intercession, or when we participate in processions or pilgrimages, we are seeking to grow in our love for God by contemplating his action in the lives of others. When we make a visit to a church to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, we are placing ourselves in God's presence in order to grow closer to him in Christ. When we take up a devotional practice such as wearing the brown scapular or the Miraculous Medal, we are placing upon our bodies a physical reminder that we belong to God, that our lives are not our own, and that we are ever on the journey of faith back to the One who created and redeemed us. Devotional prayers and