

# Part 1

## *The Ways Catholics Pray*

Every family has traditions for celebrating special events such as birthdays, holidays, new beginnings, and significant accomplishments. These traditions are passed from one generation to the next, usually with adaptations along the way. For people of faith, family traditions include ways of praying. These too are handed down from grandparents and parents to younger generations.

When Teri and I married, we brought to our relationship prayer traditions from both our families. One such tradition, which we incorporated into our marriage, came from Teri's maternal grandparents. They chose St. Catherine of Siena to be the patron saint for their family. A patron saint is a role model and someone to whom we pray, asking for his or her intercession on our behalf. When Teri's parents married, they kept the tradition and chose St. Martin de Porres as the patron saint for their family. They prayed to St. Martin at the end of the

blessing before meals, using the simple invocation “St. Martin, pray for us.” When Teri and I married, we chose St. John the Baptist as the patron saint for our family, and so we end our blessing before meals with the invocation “St. John, pray for us.”

Such are family traditions. In our case, when our families gather for a meal the recitation of the blessing becomes a unique experience. We all recite the same prayer in unison, but we end the prayer with each family invoking their patron saint, all at the same time. This sounds chaotic and can be confusing for the casual guest, but it is one that is certain to make God and the saints in heaven smile.

When Catholics pray, we need to remember that our prayers are always addressed to the Trinity, even when we pray to Mary or to the saints. We always pray to the Father in the name of Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit. When we direct our prayers to Mary and to the saints, we ask them to intercede on our behalf just as we might ask a friend to pray for us.

During the past two millennia, the Catholic Church has developed many ways of praying. We pray with words, with rituals, with gestures, and with sacred objects. We pray alone, we pray with others, and we pray with the whole Church when we participate in the Mass or other liturgical rites. We pray to praise God, to ask favors for ourselves or for the needs of others, and to thank God for his many gifts. Let’s look at various types of prayer that Catholics commonly use.

## Spontaneous Prayer

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Spontaneous prayer is the simplest way to approach God in private or personal prayer. The desire to reach out and communicate with the Transcendent, to talk and to listen to God, is natural for all human beings. We find this desire expressed in many of the Psalms, such as this verse from Psalm 63: “O God, you are my God—it is you I seek! For you my body yearns; for you my soul thirsts” (Psalm 63:2).

Spontaneous prayer is often an informal conversation with God that flows from the heart, often moved by joy or sadness, anxiety or fear, anger or helplessness, gratitude or a deep sense of well-being, and other intense emotions. This conversation is carried on either quietly in our hearts and minds or aloud, whether we are in the presence of others or alone.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux described prayer with these words: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy” (*Manuscrits autobiographiques*, C 25r).

At times, spontaneous prayer is expressed in simple words, phrases, or invocations, such as, “Praise the Lord!” “Thank you Lord!” “Your will be done!” Or it may be expressed in the recitation of short prayers, such as, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, pray for us.”

Spontaneous prayer is not a one-way conversation. We must also pause to listen for God’s response: his quiet

and gentle whisper or sometimes his loud and urgent call. It is through this heartfelt dialogue that we develop a personal relationship with God and grow in the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

## Scripted Prayers

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The Church also encourages us to fix regular patterns of prayer that become for us important spiritual habits. To grow closer to God, we need to make time for prayer at regular moments of our days and weeks. Likewise, we need to pray together with the people closest to us and with the wider community of the Church.

There are times when we want help expressing our thoughts and feelings and when we want to pray in unison with others. These are often times for scripted prayers. Among these prayers are the traditional formulas used for centuries by the Christian community, prayers such as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be, and others written for particular occasions. You will find many of these in part 2 of this book.

When praying these prayers alone, especially if a prayer is new to us, we find benefit in slowly saying the words aloud. Hearing the words enriches our prayer.

## Community Prayer

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Catholics believe in the Communion of Saints, a community that spans all generations of believers, living and deceased, that are part of the Body of Christ, the Church. So we never pray alone, but we join our prayer with the holy ones who have gone before us in faith as well as with all Christians living today, who by virtue of being baptized and without serious sin are considered saints.

Some time ago I (John) found a tape recorder that my family sent me from Italy when I first came to the United States in 1965. I found a reel-to-reel tape and played it, hoping it would contain good memories. To my surprise I heard the clear voices of my grandmother, my uncle, my sister, my pastor, and some neighbors who had gathered to record their news for me. It was a pleasure with a touch of sadness to listen to their voices, knowing that all those on the tape, except for my sister, have passed away. The conversations and stories went on for more than thirty minutes, and then the pastor closed the tape with a request that I pray for them and a promise that they would pray for me. Then they invited me to pray with them as the day was coming to an end.

Listening to my deceased relatives pray with me and for me reminded me of the power of prayer and the fact that we are all part of a Communion of Saints. As members of the same spiritual family in union with Christ, we constantly pray for one another. That is a unique aspect of Catholic prayer. Today I continue to pray for my deceased

relatives, confident that they are praying and interceding for me.

We will say more about the Communion of Saints throughout this prayer book because it is an integral part of understanding how Catholics pray.

## Liturgical Prayer

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Liturgical prayer is the official public prayer of the Church. It is always communal and always rooted in ritual words and actions. It has been described by theologians as a rehearsal for the Christian life because, through participating in the liturgy, we both express what we believe and receive graces necessary to live out our beliefs. Among the different forms of liturgical prayer are the celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass) and the other sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. Liturgical prayer also includes the Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine office. This is the daily prayer of the Church, prayed at regular hours of each day by priests and deacons, men and women in religious communities, and also by many laypeople. The Office consists of five Hours: the Office of Readings, Morning Prayer, Daytime Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer. Often parish communities pray a condensed version of the Hours, commonly Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer (or Vespers).

The Church's liturgy also includes other public worship services celebrated on various occasions, such as the dedication of a church or altar and the rites contained within the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA), the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, and the *Order of Christian Funerals*.



When we participate in liturgical prayer, we pray as a spiritual family—the Mystical Body of Christ, the Communion of Saints, which includes those believers who are living, those who have died and are in purgatory, and those who are in heaven. During the liturgy it is Christ himself, the high priest, who offers worship to the Father. We are joined to him by the power of the Holy Spirit and are made holy by the graces we receive. When we participate in the Mass, we join not only our fellow Catholics in worshiping the Father but also Christ and all the angels and saints.