

A *Give Us This Day* Book published by Liturgical Press

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Teach Us to Pray: An Introduction

ne day, according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' disciples caught sight of their teacher praying. "Lord, teach us to pray," they said (Lk 11:1).

This vignette shows us not only Jesus' prayerful life, but what must have been the powerful appeal of what he was doing. It's something like a child seeing a friend engaged in something enjoyable, like skipping rope, and saying, "Show me how to do that!"

Jesus responded by teaching his friends the Our Father, often called the "perfect prayer." But even afterward, his followers probably continued to wonder about what it meant to pray.

Even for those who know the Our Father, the disciples' request remains a timeless one. Many Catholics, indeed many believers, doubt that they pray the "right" way. In this collection of brief essays drawn from my monthly column in *Give Us This Day*, together we will explore many ways to pray—in all seasons and for all reasons.

What is the "right" way to pray? The Rosary? Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament? Reading Scripture? Imaginative prayer? Well, as far as I'm concerned, the right way is whatever works best for you in your particular time and place. For God meets you where you are. And the fact that you are holding this book in your hand means you are already open to that encounter.

Like the disciples, we continue to ask God to teach us to pray, trusting that we will be answered in ways that will help us, move us—and even surprise us.

James Martin, SJ New York City

A Rich Tradition

Praying the Our Father

ord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). It is the simple request of a disciple who wants to learn from his Master. John the Baptist, it seems, had taught his disciples to pray. And Jesus' followers had seen him "withdraw" to pray, many times. Indeed, Jesus prays so frequently in Luke's Gospel it is sometimes called the "Gospel of Prayer." And Jesus is happy to teach his disciples: "When you pray, say 'Father, hallowed be your name."

One of the most surprising aspects of the Our Father is that much of it is petitionary. I mention this because petitionary prayer sometimes gets a bad rap in spiritual circles. Many people have told me that they feel they shouldn't ask for things in prayer: it's too selfish, they say.

Yet Jesus asks us to ask. He is confident before the Father in prayer, and he encourages us to ask for what we need: our daily bread, of course, but also deliverance from evil and temptation.

And whom are we asking? Not some far-off, impersonal God, but our Father. Now, the very word "Father" can be difficult for some people. Some have, or had, fathers who were cruel, judgmental, or even abusive. Also, the language can seem sexist—after all, God has no gender. But Jesus' father is the tenderhearted *Abba*, an Aramaic word roughly translated as "Dad." A few years ago in Jerusalem, I saw a young girl running to catch up with her father, shouting, "Abba! Abba!" It is to this loving parent that we turn when we pray the Our Father.

So ask away, and remember that you're asking your Abba.

Praying the Hail Mary

he first prayer I learned as a boy was the Hail Mary. (Don't ask me why it wasn't the Our Father: maybe it had something to do with not attending a Catholic school!) Sometimes when I wanted help from God, I would pray the Hail Mary on the way to school, my feet hitting the sidewalk in sync with the prayer's cadence: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . ."

Mainly I used the prayer as a kind of "payment" for what I wanted from God. The bigger the favor from God, the more Hail Marys I would say.

Not until I was a Jesuit novice was I able to appreciate the underlying beauty of the prayer, and was able to see it as a twofold prayer, of Scripture and tradition. The first part of the prayer is taken almost directly from the greeting of the angel Gabriel to Mary in the Gospel of Luke. The second part of the prayer is a brief compendium of Marian tradition, which invokes one of her traditional titles, "Mother of God," and asks for her prayers.

Some of us (myself included) recite the Hail Mary almost as if in a trance—for example, when we say the Rosary—perhaps without pausing to reflect on the beauty of the individual words. But that's okay, as long as this ancient prayer reminds us that we are asking for the aid of someone who has long been listening to human hopes and desires.

Whether we are a child asking for help at school or a sick or elderly person "at the hour of our death," Mary hears our prayer. And prays for us.

Praying the Rosary

he Rosary, one of the oldest forms of Catholic prayer, has been a popular devotion in the Catholic Church since roughly the fifteenth century. Originally this circlet of beads enabled laypeople to pray along with monastic communities. (The 150 individual prayers mirror the 150 psalms. There are 10 Hail Marys in each "decade" of the Rosary, and there are five decades each for the sorrowful, joyful, and glorious "mysteries." That is: $10 \times 5 \times 3 = 150$.)

Briefly put, one begins the Rosary with the Apostles' Creed, and then prays a Hail Mary for each of the small beads and an Our Father for each of the larger ones. Along the way, one meditates on various events (mysteries) in the lives of Mary and Jesus.

Such rote or repetitive prayers are sometimes dismissed by "sophisticated" Catholics. Yet believers can use the Rosary in many ways: slowly meditating on the words of the beautiful prayers, pondering the lives of Mary and Jesus (one person described the Rosary as "Mary's photo album"), or using the rote prayers as a mantra to quiet oneself in order to enter more deeply into God's presence. For me, the Rosary helps when it's hard to concentrate, and the familiar prayers I've known since childhood are an unfailing comfort.

As an elderly woman once told her Jesuit son, "When I pray the Rosary, I look at God, and God looks at me."

Mary as Patron and Companion

ost Catholics are familiar with Marian devotions, especially the Rosary—even if some may misunderstand these practices.

Though Mary without question holds a most special place in the roster of saints, it is important to remember that we don't worship Mary, and we don't see her as equal to God. We venerate her under many titles: *Mother of God, Our Lady, The Blessed Mother*, among others. But worship is reserved for God. When we ask for Mary's help as a patron (someone who prays for us) we believe that she is praying *to God*.

Mary's entire life was in service to God. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord," she says to the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:38). And her last words in Scripture point to Jesus when at the Wedding at Cana she says, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). In all this she is a model of fidelity and prayer.

But the saints are not just our patrons; they are our companions. Seeing Mary as our companion means remembering that the Blessed Mother was once Miriam of Nazareth, a poor woman in an insignificant village. God chose one of the most marginal of people—indigent, young, unmarried, living in an occupied region under Roman rule—to be the mother of Jesus. She knows what it means to live on the edge. Mary dealt with surprises in life, knew suffering, and rejoiced over God's activity.

In a word, Mary was human.

So the next time you take out a rosary or say a Marian prayer like the *Memorare*, remember that it unites us not only with Our Lady enthroned in heaven but also with Miriam of Nazareth.



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Introduction

everal years ago, a little book called *In All Seasons, For All Reasons*, which collected many of my columns on prayer from *Give Us This Day*, was published by Liturgical Press. It sold surprisingly well—maybe because readers almost always like small books (they seem so manageable), maybe because of that great title (suggested by the publisher!), or most likely because everyone wants to know how to pray.

Many Christians suspect that everyone else prays better than they do. They think, sadly, that they are the only ones who close their eyes, wait for God, and then seemingly experience . . . nothing. But no one is an expert in prayer, and everyone faces dry times and times when we close our eyes and wonder, "Now what?" This is something I've learned both as a "pray-er" myself, as well as someone who has served as a spiritual director and retreat director for the last thirty or so years.

This little book is meant to be an aid to prayer, to help you learn various ways to pray, and to respond to the same request that Jesus' disciples made of him: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). In the Gospels, Jesus' response is to teach them the Our Father. But the Our Father is just one prayer and one way to pray. Jesus may have also taught them other ways to pray—his whole life, in fact, was a kind of prayer.

This second volume is organized in the same way as the first: by categories ("reasons"), but also according to the liturgical calendar ("seasons"). My suggestion is to keep this book by your favorite place to pray (like a "prayer chair") and pick it up when you feel you need a "jump-start." Or, if you're struggling with a specific need, you can

easily find a chapter that will, I hope, help you connect with God.

And if you're finding it hard to pray, always remember: Even if you don't feel anything, something is going on deep within you. Because any time spent in the presence of God is transformative.

James Martin, SJ New York City

For All Reasons

Begin Where You Are

od meets you where you are," said my first spiritual director when I was a Jesuit novice. That's one of the best pieces of advice I've ever received.

This means your spiritual house doesn't have to be perfect, or even tidy, for God to enter. Now, that doesn't mean we don't try to lead good lives, but it does mean you don't have to be a saint to pray. (And even the saints weren't perfect.) God can meet you in whatever "place" or "state" you find yourself.

It also means you don't have to be perfectly focused to pray. In my experience as a spiritual director, this is one of the greatest obstacles to prayer. People will often tell me they are too distracted, sad, confused, or overworked to pray. In response, I will pose a question: "If we were at a restaurant at dinner, and I apologized to you for being distracted, what would you say?" Usually the person responds, "I'd say that I understood and was glad you're here." Then I'll suggest that if they, with all their faults, can be present to a friend who is distracted, then God could surely be with them even when they are distracted.

God can be present to you in any state you find yourself. The subtle but insidious temptation not to pray until things are perfect just ends up preventing us from ever praying. When we realize that God meets us where we are, we also realize that wherever we are is a place to meet God.

Listening in Prayer

hat does it mean for God to "communicate" with us in prayer? What does it mean for us to "listen" to God in prayer? These are among the most confusing questions for believers. As a Jesuit novice, I would often hear my brother novices say things like, "When I was praying, I heard God say . . ." Such statements both confused and saddened me. Were they hearing voices or seeing visions? I certainly wasn't.

Over time, I learned that God communicates with us in many different ways in prayer. Let's say we're praying with the Gospel where the disciples fear they will drown in the Sea of Galilee during a raging storm (Luke 8:22-25). In our prayer we might have a sudden *insight* about the disciples, about Jesus, or about ourselves. We might experience a specific *emotion*—say, frustration that Jesus seems asleep in our lives, too, as he was on the boat that night. We might have a *memory* of a "stormy" time where we felt alone, but now, as we look back, we can see God's presence more clearly. We may have a *physical feeling* of calm as we think about Jesus stilling the storm with a word. We may notice a *desire*, perhaps to be less fearful. We may even have *words or phrases* come into our minds.

These fruits of prayer don't happen every day—sometimes our prayer seems dry indeed. But sometimes, in these ways, God speaks to us in prayer. We're not hearing voices or seeing visions, but these are privileged times when God invites us to listen. And, as my first spiritual director always said, during these times, pay attention!

Cultivating Silence

hy do we need silence in our spiritual lives? Can't God break through the noise and busyness in our lives? After all, isn't the Jesuit ideal of "finding God in all things" something we can all embrace?

Yes, God can speak to us during every moment of the day—through friends, work, nature, really anything that is good—even when we're busy and our lives are filled with noise. But anyone who has ever been on a retreat or has withdrawn from the noise of life knows that physical silence enables us to notice things we may not notice otherwise. Sometimes the recognition can be as simple as "I like being still with God."

For contemplative prayer, silence is essential. Of course, none of us lives in a hermetically sealed room free of noise. (Even monasteries can be busy and noisy!) But some measure of silence, even imperfect silence, is important because it helps us focus on what we're praying about. If we're using our imaginations to picture ourselves in a scene from the Gospel, it's harder to concentrate with the TV or radio on, and even harder if we're watching a video on our phones.

How do we cultivate silence? One of the main ways is to consciously choose it. Say to yourself: For this period, I'm going to be as silent as possible, sit in my room (or in a church or in my backyard), and just read this Gospel passage quietly. Then I'll rest with God, who will meet me, in a new way, in the silence.

Praying with Restless Hearts

t. Augustine's most famous line may be from a prayer directed toward God: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." It sums up so much about the spiritual life: We cast about aimlessly and often painfully for satisfaction and comfort, until we realize that both are found only in God.

But Augustine's line also has something specific to say about prayer. Many of us come to prayer "restless." This could be restlessness about something major in your life—an unsteady income, a tenuous job, a sudden illness. Or you could be restless in a more mundane way—distracted by a busy day, or even physically uncomfortable or "antsy."

If major concerns are causing you restlessness, instead of trying to avoid those worries, why not share them with God in prayer? God desires your honesty in prayer, so if there is something important bothering you, God wants to hear about it—like any close friend would. It will also help you feel unburdened.

If you're distracted by smaller matters or feel antsy, it sometimes helps—if you are unable to let go of the distractions—to accept them. You might try saying, "God, I'm distracted, but I'm here." Trusting that God can accompany you even when you're distracted can free you from the need to be free of all distractions—which is probably impossible anyway.

So don't worry about worrying. Don't be restless about being restless. Just rest in God, who understands your restless heart.

Praying in Times of Dryness

ne of the most comforting parts of getting older and gaining some experience (if not some wisdom) is that you learn to expect certain things with less fear. In the spiritual life, one of the most useful things I've learned over the years (not only through my own prayer, but also by being a spiritual director for others) is this: Sometimes prayer is dry.

Truly, sometimes it feels like nothing is going on! This does not mean that on a deep level there *is* nothing going on. In fact, I believe that any time spent consciously in the presence of God is worthwhile, because something is happening deep down, even if you're not aware of it.

At the same time, dryness in prayer can be very frustrating. At the end of thirty minutes or an hour of distraction or boredom, you may feel like you've wasted time. But time spent in the presence of the Divine is never a waste and is always transformative. My first spiritual director even called prayer "wasting time with God."

The key is patience. At some point, something will "happen" (an insight, feeling, memory, desire, emotion, etc.). Another key is fidelity. If you don't keep at it, then you won't be there for anything to happen. You won't be there to notice. St. Ignatius Loyola even counsels that you should pray longer when things are dry. Even if you can't do that, be faithful. God will show up again. Or, rather, God will make God's presence known in a clearer way. Just keep at it!