

"Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God" (St. Therese of Lisieux, CCC 2559). God invites us into a relationship with Him that is both personal and communal. He speaks to us through His Son, Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh. Prayer is our response to God who is already speaking or, better yet, revealing Himself to us. Therefore, prayer is not merely an exchange of words, but it engages the whole person in a relationship with God the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is like breathing for the soul. Did you ever try to stop breathing for a few days? What would happen to your body in that case happens to your Christian life when you stop praying.

Imagine trying to build and deepen a friendship without communicating or spending time with your friend. In the same way, how can we let God fill our life with joy, light, strength, and purpose if we don't spend time with him, get to know him, enter into a dynamic, personal relationship with him in prayer? St Paul urges us: "Pray without ceasing." (1Thess 5:17) Christ himself admonishes us: "Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." (Mark 14:38) St Theresa of Avila, a Doctor of the Church, makes it potently clear: "He who neglects mental prayer needs not a devil to carry him to hell, but he brings himself there with

his own hands." (Quoted by St Alphonsus Liguori in *The Great Means of Salvation and Perfection.*)

Here's how the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it in number 2558: "Great is the mystery of the faith!" The Church professes this mystery in the Apostles' Creed and celebrates it in the sacramental liturgy, so that the life of the faithful may be conformed to Christ in the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father. This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, *and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer.* (emphasis added)

How do I pray?

The Church recognizes many different kinds of prayer, which can be grouped together under three general categories: vocal prayer, mental prayer, and contemplative prayer.

Vocal prayer consists in reciting, either out loud or to oneself, the words of previously composed prayers, and aligning one's thoughts and desires to their meanings.

Mental prayer (meditation) combines personal reflection on a text from the Bible or from some other spiritual work with words of one's own, spoken to God in a heart-to-heart conversation.

Contemplative prayer brings the soul into more direct contact with God, often without words or ideas; it is the prayer of being in the presence of God, loving him and knowing you are loved by him.

Prayer has as its ultimate goal to praise God and to receive his grace, to deepen our personal communion with God and strengthen the Church. The time we spend in prayer should awaken in our hearts attitudes of adoration, wonder, gratitude, petition, and contrition.

What is meditation?

Meditation is a Christian practice of prayer dating back to the early Church. As the Catechism states: "*Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking.*" By meditating on the Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts, spiritual writings, or "the great book of creation," we come to make our own that which is God's. "To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are able to discern them. It is a question of acting truthfully in order to come into the light: "Lord, what do you want me to do?" (CCC 2705-2706).

Meditation is an essential form of Christian prayer, especially for those who are seeking to answer the vocational question, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

Meditating on Sacred Scripture

Spiritual reading of Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, is an important form of meditation. This spiritual reading is traditionally called "lectio divina" or divine reading. Lectio divina is prayer over the Scriptures.

How do we pray over the Sacred Scriptures?

1. The first element of this type of prayer is reading (lectio): you take a short passage from the Bible, preferably a Gospel passage and read it carefully, perhaps three or more times. Let it really soak-in.
2. The second element is mediation (meditatio). By using your imagination enter into the Biblical scene in order to "see" the setting, the people, and the unfolding action. It is through this mediation that you encounter the text and discover its meaning for your life.
3. The next element is prayer (oratio) or your personal response to the text: asking for graces, offering praise or thanksgiving, seeking healing or forgiveness. In this prayerful engagement with the text, you open yourself up to the possibility of contemplation.

4. Contemplation is our gaze turned toward Christ and the things of God. By God's action of grace, you may be raised above meditation to a state of seeing or experiencing the text as mystery and reality. In contemplation, you come into an experiential contact with the One behind and beyond the text.

How to Pray

We learn to pray by praying. The single most important factor in our life of prayer is our decision to make prayer an integral part of our life. If God matters to me, I will make time for prayer. If he doesn't, I won't.

Prayer, conversation with God, should accompany us throughout our entire day. We should invite God to be a part of all our joys and sorrows, our struggles and concerns, our projects and decisions. He is a loving Father who longs to be "let in" to his children's lives.

Nevertheless, the hectic pace of life requires us to set aside some time to be alone with God. We need to "tune in" to him frequently each day, so that our activities don't end up crowding him out, so that we recognize his action in our daily lives, and so we never impede the grace that he wants to give others through us.

To maintain a healthy prayer life, and therefore a healthy relationship with God, experience has shown the following prayer commitments to be helpful:

- Starting the day with a morning offering
- Ending the day with a brief prayerful reflection on how the day went
- Dedicating 10-15 minutes each day to mental prayer
- Praying the Angelus
- Praying a decade of the rosary sometime during the day
- Regular confession (every month or every two weeks)
- Going to Mass during the week in addition to Sundays
- Praying before meals
- Visiting Christ in the Eucharist
- Be faithful to your prayers and prayer time. A Protestant friend of mine described how he stayed faithful to his prayers with this plan of action: No Bible no breakfast, No Bible no bed. Establish a schedule for yourself that includes time for prayer and stick to it!

No webpage, prayer book or article, however, can pray for you. God will never force his way into our lives; what kind of friend would? Each one of us has to decide, every day, how much God matters to us, and pray accordingly.