

Prayer 101

Foundation for Faith and Formation

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Introduction

Meet Sally, a kind, compassionate, Catholic mom. While shopping for her family, she bumps into Karen at the supermarket. They exchange greetings, and then Karen talks about the struggles she is having with her young daughter, Beth. Apparently, Beth is starting to run with a bad crowd, becoming very private, and putting up a big fuss when it's time to go to Sunday Mass. Sally, a compassionate friend, feels for Karen's struggle and wants to help. She offers to pray for her friend. On her way home she questions herself: *I said I'd pray for Karen, but what does that mean? When I was a child, I know my mother would sometimes pray a rosary for her friend. I certainly don't remember how to do that or have time for it. What should I do to pray for Karen? What are my options?*

Does this sound familiar? If so, you are in the right place. It's interesting how the subject of eternity, specifically heaven and hell, is rarely discussed. People have conversations about careers, investments, retirement savings, and the like, but these only help us during our time on earth. Yet prayer, a topic that impacts eternity, often gets left by the wayside. Why? Most people are very private about their prayer life and shy away from discussing it. It is almost as if, as one author put it, we have inherited a “bashfulness gene” when it comes to prayer. One reason is that while many people love and believe in God—perhaps going so far as to attend Bible studies, learn about saints, or watch religious videos—many don't have a good vocabulary to discuss prayer. They have no common language and very little education on this crucial aspect of our life with God, meaning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, the

average person reflects a third- or fourth-grade understanding of prayer. As adults we have grown in our understanding of so much in the world—relationships, technology, health, even the Church and God—but very little on prayer. A lucky few have been fortunate to have good mentors in developing a prayer life—parents, parish priests, religious sisters or brothers. Others have taken it upon themselves to seek out information on prayer. There are many books on prayer. Most can give you a how-to on praying in one style or another. These can be helpful but often assume an understanding of the foundations of what prayer is.

Prayer 101, part of Liguori Publications' series of 101 books, will examine what it means to pray—for your own affairs, your kids, your friends, your country, anything and anyone. It begins by defining prayer, the reasons people pray, and identifying some basic divisions in prayer types and forms. The rest of the book will examine some common divisions and give examples. My hope is to help you develop a vocabulary for discussing prayer while building a framework to understand different types of prayer. With this framework, I hope you will be able to easily find ways to pray that suit you, enabling you to develop a stronger relationship with our loving God, who continually calls out to each of us to spend time with him in prayer.

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CHAPTER 1

What Is Prayer?

At every time and in every place, God draws near to each human person.

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1

What is prayer? At first glance it appears to be a simple question. One of the problems is that there is not one comprehensive definition that can truly encompass the truth of what prayer is. While teaching at a small college in New York, I asked some of my students how they would define prayer. Responses included: “When I talk to God.” “What I do when I go to church.” “Connecting with Jesus.” “Saying a rosary.” It seemed there were as many answers as there were respondents. Prayer is a very personal thing.

Oxford Languages’ dictionary defines prayer as “a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship,” “an earnest wish or hope,” and “a set order of words used in praying.” Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430), a bishop, states prayer is “a turning of the heart to God.” Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–97), a Carmelite nun, says it is “a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven.” Fr. Thomas H. Green, SJ (1932–2009), author of many books on prayer, including *Opening to God* and *Experiencing God*, defines it as “a personal encounter with God in love.” Fr. Martin Pable, OFM Cap (1931–2020), author of *Prayer: A Practical Guide*, states prayer is “any act whereby we consciously attend to the presence of God within us or around us.” The *Catechism*

of the Catholic Church defines it as “the raising of one’s mind and heart to God” (CCC 2559). Further in the *Catechism*, the definition is extended to include the first steps of prayer being about connection:

God calls man first. Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response. As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama. Through words and actions, this drama engages the heart. It unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation (CCC 2567).

God first calls man. Bishop Robert Barron, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and a prominent Catholic podcaster, in his YouTube video “Bishop Barron on Prayer,” says that “biblical religion is not primarily our quest for God. It is God’s quest for us. So, once we see the primacy of grace, prayer is God’s addressing us.” Quoting Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe, Bishop Barron goes on to say if there is anything in our prayer that is good, true, and right, that is a sign the Holy Spirit is already praying in us.

Prayer, then, is our response to the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, prayer is a positive response rather than a direct action on our part. If a mother bakes cookies and then offers one to a child, we would understand that the receiving of that cookie is the child’s response to the mother’s action. Prayer is my “child” response to God, Father. “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans

5:8). God takes the first step, we respond. Our prayer is always a response to God's outstretched arms. He tirelessly calls each person to prayer. "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself" (CCC 27).

We are hard-wired, so to speak, to be drawn to God. While humanity searches for the sense of fulfillment that can only be found in God, often we search for it in everything but God—money, power, fame. If God is the initiator, then prayer can be understood more as an opening of the mind and heart to God. God is already working to draw us in. We just need to be open to his efforts. For this book I will be using this definition of prayer: an opening of the mind and heart to God. In so doing, I recognize what we do as the response to God's action. Lifting, turning, worshiping, and other responses all suggest we are the ones initiating the prayer. But opening up to receive more clearly shows God as the initiator. We simply respond.

WHY DO WE PRAY?

In ancient times, pagans who believed in other gods would pray to keep the gods from getting angry. If they kept their gods happy, they believed they would have fertile crops and the weather would be favorable. Their prayers were actions based on fear and their hopes of getting their own needs met. One might say their "prayers" were completely self-focused.

So as Christians, why do we pray? I turned again to my students and asked them to interview their peers and family to find why they pray. Those questioned and many others I've spoken with say people generally pray to make a request. Why do we turn to God to ask for things like healing for a friend or relative, to get a job, to get things we desire? Aren't we then like the pagans? I hope not. Christians strive to have a personal re-

lationship with the one true God and recognize he is omnipresent (always present), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnibenevolent (all-good and loving). God desires only our good and cares about everything that involves each of us and all of creation. God, through Scripture, tells us directly to ask: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). This is what we do. Further commenting on prayer, Pope Francis says, “You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.”

If we ask to receive, then we hope God grants our request. If I needed a thousand dollars, would I ask my poor, elderly neighbor if he could spot me a grand? Why would I? I would not expect him to be able to do it—I wouldn’t even bother to ask. On the other hand, if I asked my wealthy uncle to lend me a thousand, I’d be asking with an expectation my request could be filled. And so it is with God. He is able to provide the help we seek. So, we ask with an open, hopeful, and expectant heart, having faith that God can and desires to do so.

If I ask the man in front of me in line at the supermarket to hand me a copy of a magazine, have I opened my heart to him? Probably not. If I ask my husband to hold me after receiving some bad news, does that involve opening my heart? Yes. What is the difference? One involves relationship and love, a level of trust, and a deep desire for the welfare and good of the other. Asking a guy at the supermarket to hand me a periodical does not. God deeply, truly, and eternally desires the best for each of us. So, as we make our requests known to God, our definition reminds us to open our mind and heart to God, to his love, to his presence.

The 101 Series from Liguori Publications

College courses numbered 101 usually are intended to give beginners an overview of a topic. The concise books in Liguori Publications' 101 series do just that. Written accessibly by scholars, each aptly titled book provides information and inspiration on the subject it covers. Read them and you'll gain a solid foundation about the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, holy Scripture, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Catholic Church history, Catholic liturgy, the Mass, and prayer.

