

UNDERSTANDING
PRAYER

The image features a central glowing cross held within two dark silhouettes of hands. The background is a warm, bokeh-style gradient of orange, yellow, and red, with numerous out-of-focus light circles. The overall composition is centered and evokes a sense of spiritual light and prayer.

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PRAYER: ONGOING COMMUNION WITH GOD

Prayer is our daily attempt to maintain and deepen our relationship with God. Since every relationship depends on communication to keep communion alive and flourishing, so our relationship with God needs



these times that we set aside to celebrate God's presence and relationship with us.

The main goal of prayer is to be more and more united with God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the same time to become more deeply involved with those around us whom we now recognize to be God's children like us—our brothers and sisters (1 Jn 3:2). Being in communion with Christ is the desire and the ongoing reality that distinguishes us as Christians and prayer is the way we maintain this communion.

GOD PRESENT WITH US FOR A RELATIONSHIP

The foundation and origin of prayer is God's hidden personal mystery that is known only because God freely reveals it to us through Jesus of Nazareth, God's messiah or Christ, through God's words, gathered together

in the Bible, and through God's loving actions in relationship to us. We call this revelation *salvation history* since it tells the ups and downs of how humans have tried to realize God's desire to have a relationship with God in a covenant community that would live the way God always wanted from the beginning of creation.

Salvation history also reveals the threefold work of God as Father, the loving creator who brings into existence and cares for everything that exists; as Jesus, the crucified liberator who was sent from God to show us how to live as God's children; and as the Holy Spirit, who transforms and sanctifies everything through God's power now at work in our world.

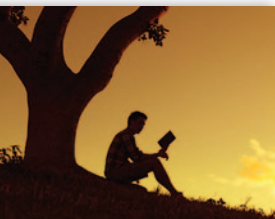


GOD WANTS TO LOVE US

If we wonder why God reveals God's divine hidden self to us, the answer is that God wants to love us and be in a relationship with us. When we discover someone with whom we want to be in a relationship, we entrust our self to them through our words and our actions. So likewise, everything God says and does is aimed at entering into a relationship with us, then maintaining and nurturing that relationship by being with us and acting for us.

WE RESPOND TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER

Prayer is the communication with God that leads to greater friendship. It is the way we keep the relationship going and try to make it better. Every relationship depends on communication. We need to spend time listening and talking with one another to discover who we are and who our friend is. Prayer is our time to listen to God and learn about God. We do this by reading God's Word in the Bible and making God's message and the example of Jesus the guideline for our lives.



Prayer is also the time when we respond to God's goodness and love. Our prayer takes on all of the characteristics of good communication: attentive listening, patient

understanding, then properly responding with praise, thanks, petitions and intercessions. The goal is to bring our whole self into the relationship with God.

Like a good conversation partner, God is also attentive to us as we pray, even offering God's own Holy Spirit to help us pray when we might not know how. There is no magic formula for prayer, just as there is none for a relationship. The goal is just to do it, to bring our whole self into the relationship and let the relationship grow through daily contact.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PRAYER

“The Holy Spirit, the artisan of God’s works, is the master of prayer” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], #741*). Prayer includes everything that we do to communicate with God in order to maintain and enhance our relationship. The Holy Spirit, who always empowers us for greater life and bonds us with others through love, is thus constantly at work whenever we pray.

The Holy Spirit bonds us with God the Trinity. “In the Holy Spirit, Christian prayer is a communion of love with the Father, not only through Christ but also in him” (*CCC, #2615*). Through the Holy Spirit, we grow in our knowledge of God and learn to express our love for God and for others in appropriate words, gestures and actions.

“The Holy Spirit, whose anointing permeates our whole being, is the interior Master of Christian prayer. To be sure, there are as many paths of prayer as there are persons who pray, but it is the same Spirit acting in all and with all. It is in the communion of the Holy Spirit that Christian prayer is prayer in the Church” (*CCC, #2672*). We trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us on our personal path to holiness and a fuller life with God.



OLD TESTAMENT PRAYER: THE PSALMS

Old Testament prayer embodies the way that the people carry on their covenant relationship with God. This is particularly evident in the Book of Psalms, a collection of 150 songs used for Jewish worship.

The psalms illustrate the whole spectrum of the Jewish religious experience of being in relationship with God—orientation to God (hymns of praise, well-being in God's presence), disorientation from God (songs of lament, loss), and reorientation to God (hymns of thanks and of restoration).



Different types of hymns arise when the covenant relationship is going well. Hymns of praise declare our wonder and joy at God's mighty deeds whether in history or in creation. Psalms of trust formulate our commitment to God and to our relationship with God. Psalms of thanks recognize God's gifts.

Songs of lament arise when the covenant relationship is problematic and not going well, either because God is perceived as distant and inactive or because we recognize that our sinfulness provokes God's anger and jeopardizes the relationship.

As the poetic expression of the prayer life of Israel, the psalms offer examples of the proper attitudes,

values and theology that the community celebrated in their lives and in their Temple worship. The psalms show the right way for the people to relate to God and to others.

NEW TESTAMENT PRAYER: JESUS TEACHES US TO PRAY

The eagerness with which God wishes to come and be with us is the thread that runs throughout Jesus' teachings. Jesus stresses that God's motive is love. Jesus often speaks of and even teaches us to pray to God as our loving Father.

The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples (Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:1-4), and which Christians call the *Lord's Prayer* or the *Our Father* from its opening words, is also characterized by the reciprocal relationship and mutual obligations of fathers to their dependents as first-century persons like Jesus well-understood. The first set of petitions express our obligations as God's dependents (clients)—what we owe God—and the second set relate to God's obligations to us as our benefactor or patron (father)—what we want from God in the relationship.

Because we are dependent upon God for our life and for our continued existence, Jesus' prayer teaches



us to seek God first for our daily needs and for help and protection. Our attitudes of praise, thanks, petition and adoration remain the hallmarks of genuine prayer and so of our relationship with God. We also ask God to provide for us what we need, forgive us as we forgive others, and protect us from evil that entices us to sin and so break down our right relationships to God and others.

Jesus encourages us to imagine ourselves as children of a loving divine father and to act accordingly. The trust, simplicity and intimacy of child to parent



is a powerful new way of relating to God. Jesus also reminds us that since we all have the same divine loving Father, we are brothers and sisters to each

other. God cuts through the differences of our races, creeds and social divisions to love us all. Jesus teaches that we must love in the same way. Love for one another is the basis of all Christian action. We establish our identity as Christians by this love for one another.

THE CHURCH'S PRAYER (LITURGY): CELEBRATING OUR LIFE WITH GOD

Our primary form of Christian community prayer is called *liturgy*. Liturgy is the way that we express in our lives and show to others the mystery and mission of the Church. The word *liturgy* comes from the Greek word that means “the people’s work.” It described the various ways that the community would work together to celebrate and deepen their relationships with God and one another.

Vatican Council II, in describing our worship in the liturgy, used the images of a mountain and a stream. “The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963), #10). We gather together everything from our everyday lives and present it as our gift to God. Then our contact with God in the liturgy flows out to transform and rightly order all the rest of our lives.



THE EUCHARIST: RESPONDING TO CHRIST'S PRESENCE WITH US

The Christian life is characterized by the effective influence or presence of Jesus Christ on us. Though dead for two millennia, we believe that Jesus Christ is alive and powerful in our lives in various influential ways. In the Eucharist, our basic community prayer, we recognize and celebrate Christ's presence in the person of the minister, in the gathered assembly, in the proclamation of God's Word, in the consecrated bread and wine and in the world to which we are sent when Mass is completed (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #7).

Each form of Christ's presence leads to a distinctive type of communion or relationship with Christ. Christ's presence in the assembly invites us into communion in the community



of God's people. Christ's presence in the scriptural Word proclaimed invites us into communion through communication. Christ's presence in the

blessed bread and wine invites us into communion with his body and blood as our spiritual food and drink. And Christ's presence in others invites us into communion in the communal mission that carries on the saving work of Jesus to the waiting world.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE SACRAMENTS

Since the Holy Spirit prepares us to live more deeply in Christ and understand the mysteries of our faith, the Holy Spirit is uniquely active in the sacraments. Our sacraments are the common work of the Holy Spirit and the Christian assembly. They are outward signs that bring about what they signify—ongoing communion and new life in Christ.

Since the Holy Spirit works in and through the sacraments, they mirror in our lives the characteristic activities of the Spirit to empower us for living and bond us together by love into Christ's community. Thus we say that they confer "sanctifying grace," which is another way of describing God's free and undeserved gift of God's self by which we participate in the life of God (*CCC*, #1996–97).

Through the sacraments, the Holy Spirit draws us more and more fully into life with Christ and with the Christian community (the sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation, eucharist), sustains our



relationships (the sacraments of healing—reconciliation and anointing of the sick) and creates specially graced vocations to build the community (the sacraments at the service of communion—holy orders and matrimony). In the celebration of the sacraments, the Holy Spirit “makes the mystery of Christ present here and now” (*CCC*, #1092).

PRAYING WITH WORDS

Besides the Church’s communal liturgical prayer, there are many varieties of individual prayers. Just like in relationships, there are many ways that we use to keep the relationship growing and flourishing. Because our prayer is human communication with God, we naturally depend mostly on words as the way to do this. So when we recall that God is present in us and around us, we can just “talk to God” and share whatever we might want to say in praising, thanking or asking God for help. We also can rely on a number of familiar prayers like the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the rosary, St. Francis’s Peace Prayer or many, many others that express what we might want to communicate to God.

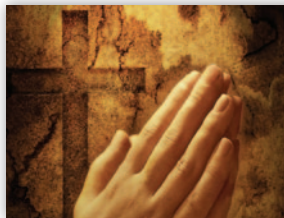


PRAYERS OF ADORATION & BLESSING

All our prayer relates to how we communicate with God in order to grow in our relationship with God and with others. Adoration and blessing are two important forms of prayer that are directly related to our human need to worship and praise God by voicing how much we value God and God's relationship with us.

In prayers of adoration, our basic human attitude as creatures prompts us to praise the greatness of God as our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer and Sanctifier. Adoration is not only practiced through words but often relies simply on our respectful silence in which we rest before the awesome mystery of God and listen attentively to the particular way that God wants to be revealed to us now.

In prayers of blessing, which are rooted in the experience of God's everyday care for us, we acknowledge that all creation is God's gift to us and that persons and material things can be consecrated by associating them with the presence and power of God for salvation. Typical blessings, whether for persons, objects or special occasions in life, include the praise and thanksgiving of God and a petition that the Holy Spirit might consecrate the object or situation for God's service.



PRAYING BEYOND WORDS

There is another type of prayer that is perhaps less common but something that we can also use. It focuses on God's presence with us and is most often called *contemplation* or sometimes the prayer of silence or of simple gaze because the aim is not to talk to God but just to rest silently in God's presence in simple recollection, just being with God the way that St. John Vianney, the Cure of Ars, described his time before the Blessed Sacrament: "I look at Him, and He looks at me."

In contemplative prayer we attempt to move beyond words to experience God as Mystery. We focus on just "being there" with our attention focused quietly on God. We let go of our need to understand, judge, defend, or evaluate, putting on the mind of Christ as St.



of Christ as St. Paul urges (Phil 2:5-11) which welcomes paradox and knows its true identity in God. During contemplation we come to be aware that there is no separation between sacred and secular, but all is merged into unity with Divine Reality.

PRAYER POSTURES AND GESTURES

Prayer can be expressed anywhere, at any time, in any circumstance. A simple, heartfelt cry to God needs no special gesture or posture, yet bodily expressions of reverence can often enhance the experience of prayer. Our Christian heritage is rich with gestures of prayer and praise, including standing, kneeling, genuflecting, bowing, raising hands and making the sign of the cross before and/or after prayer.

Standing is actually the most ancient prayer position for worship. By standing, we remind ourselves that in Christ and with Christ we have been raised up. We are no longer slaves of fear and evil, but children of God.

Kneeling in prayer can communicate repentance, humility and adoration and can be effective when we strongly experience a sense of adoration, dependence or contrition.

Prayer with open, outstretched hands visibly portrays our readiness to receive. It also symbolizes an attitude of openness and honesty; nothing is hidden from God. Finally, one who prays with open hands prays with empty hands. We have no “bargaining chips” with God when we come in prayer; we have nothing to offer and everything to receive from the One who gives all.

PRAYER CHANGES US

As we discover, real prayer begins when we dare to meet the disquieting otherness of God. Only through an encounter with God can we understand who we are and begin to live out our relationship with God. As long as our faith is focused on doctrines “about” God and not on our experience “of” God, our relationship with God runs the risk of being an intellectual faith which seldom sustains us for long. Jesus shows us what it is like to relate to God in a wholistic way—not just good ideas, but an intimate living with God who is always present not only in our churches but in our family life, in our work, in our leisure and in our prayer.

God’s presence invites us to experience a reality which always involves more than our present experience can imagine or comfortably manage. Touching the divine transforms us forever. Can we risk letting ourselves be drawn in directions we would never choose for ourselves by the divine presence that never leaves us the same? As Jeremiah the prophet warned so long ago, we dare to make the journey to meet God only because we have been called by God into this relationship, or “how else should one take the deadly risk of approaching me? says the LORD.” (Jer 30:21). But it is a risk that we must take if we want to live in relationship with God. There is no way to meet God and ever be the same again.

Understanding Prayer was written by Steve Mueller.

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