

How Shall We Pray?

30 Steps to Prayer

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INTRODUCTION

INTEREST in spirituality has increased dramatically in the last few years. In a variety of forms and expressions, spiritual concepts have been applied to corporations, recovery programs, self-help groups, personal finances, and even advertising. People go to great lengths to feel “spiritual” and can end up doing some pretty weird stuff “to get the feeling.” Spirituality has become a buzzword, a fad that people do, pretty much the same way they “do lunch.”

There is the mistaken notion that a genuinely spiritual life can exist apart from religion, community, and faith. In the modern mindset, spirituality is a stand-alone activity in which one occasionally engages as a medicinal remedy for the soul. Although some might consider this to be a head-clearing, revitalizing tonic, a truly spiritual way of life is much more. It transforms and changes the whole person, touching the core of our humanity—our souls. It requires change, sacrifice, discipline, and thought. Like an artist’s chisel to granite, the soul slowly yields to the small chippings that come from God’s call to holiness. Bit by bit, we are formed in His image and likeness. Spirituality has a goal and purpose, one that carries us from this life to the next.

This book provides some thoughts and suggestions for developing and enhancing our prayer life. It does require some thought so that we make the most of the spiritual exercises we choose to do to best address the needs of our souls. They are not meant to be used all at once. Some might be used regularly, some periodically, others when we need a boost. Some might be used just when we struggle with a difficult time, a challenging stage of growth or the need to be closer to God.

We are a praying community. In sharing that bond, we pray for and with each other as we journey the road of faith together. As Christians, we have both a particular dignity and destiny that are ours by virtue of our Baptism. We are called to follow the Lord, to be living witnesses of His love. As such, our lives have a meaning and purpose greater than ourselves, greater than our work, greater than life itself. That purpose, that mission is to be one with God. Simply stated, we are to journey through this life to Heaven.

Prayer is the foretaste of Heaven. When we pray, we unite ourselves to God. We follow the mandate of Jesus to die to self and simply come into the Presence of God. Prayer is life giving. It is life sustaining. It is essential. When we pray, we renew our commitment to God; we renew ourselves and our determination to continue the journey, to “pick up the cross” and follow the Lord. Without prayer, we wander. We lose our sense of pur-

pose, of direction, of mission. In fact, in a very real way, we lose ourselves, our true selves. We die.

How do you begin to pray? Only one thing is necessary: We simply become aware of the Presence of God and be still. Even for just a few moments a day. We leave behind all concerns, all worries and anxieties, all fears and simply focus on God. Nothing more. Believe it or not, God will guide and direct us. Bit by bit, we will want to spend more time in prayer—not only want to, but need to. Once aware of God's Presence, then we can present all our needs, our fears and our innermost thoughts. Give them to God and then, once again, be still. Give the Lord time to respond, time to speak to our heart. The grace and strength we need will be ours.

At times, we will feel empty. Unconnected. Lost. These are not negative things. In all things, God can work to draw us closer to Him, to increase our desire for Him, to strengthen our faith like "gold that's tested in fire." At these moments, we must persevere and trust God. Perhaps there is something in our life that we need to examine. Or we are too preoccupied to really pray. Or too tired. Or worried. Or uncertain. In those moments, rely on memorized prayers, or Scripture readings, or uplifting memories of past experiences of the Lord. God can and does work through memory and imagination and emotions. He will use any means possible to reach us, to love us, to share Himself with us.

We are that important to Him. Prayer helps us make Him that important to us.

It is very important to consult people of experience; for otherwise you will imagine that you are doing yourselves great harm by pursuing your necessary occupations. But, provided we do not abandon our prayer, the Lord will turn everything we do to our profit, even though we may find no one to teach us.

—St. Teresa of Avila

If you have a favorite method of prayer and would like to share it with us and our readers, please write the author, c/o Resurrection Press, 77 West End Rd., Totowa, NJ 07512. Please feel free to include your address and phone number.

STEP ONE

Pray with a Crucifix

RELIGIOUS objects and art play a significant role in spirituality. But perhaps none is more important or more recognized than the crucifix. Many Catholic families have a crucifix hanging in their homes, displayed in a prominent place, a succinct reminder of the central mystery of our faith that gives life meaning and purpose. In addition to being a symbol of faith, the crucifix can also be a focal point of prayer.

Many people gaze upon a crucifix while praying. But we can try holding a crucifix while praying. The symbol itself will speak to us and inspire our prayer. The physical touch will help us to focus and concentrate our attention. The enormity of the mystery will draw us in and give our prayer depth and dimension.

The crucifix itself does not have to be elaborate. We can use the one that hangs in a room at home. The key is to make it readily accessible when praying, a regular part of devotion and prayer. The occasional use of the crucifix will add dimension and variety to our prayer life; regular use will add depth and increase our devotion to the mystery of the redemptive suffering of Jesus.

Begin with the Prayer Before a Crucifix. We often pray it at the end of the Stations of the Cross during Lent.

**Look down upon me, good and gentle Jesus
while before Your face I humbly kneel and, with
burning soul,
pray and beseech You to fix deep in my heart live-
ly sentiments
of faith, hope, and charity; true contrition for my
sins,
and a firm purpose of amendment.
While I contemplate, with great love and tender
pity,
Your five most precious wounds, pondering over
them within me
and calling to mind the words which David, Your
prophet, said to You, my Jesus:
"They have pierced My hands and My feet, they
have numbered all My bones."**

During the day, we could carry a small cross in pocket or purse and be reminded frequently of the Lord's Presence in everyday life. Or we can consider displaying the crucifix in a more prominent place at home. Even at work, we might keep a crucifix or cross on our desk or in our work area or vehicle. That simple symbol will help us to frequently turn our attention during

our busy days to the Lord, much like the monks who permeate their day with prayer and meditation.

Finally, hymns that refer to the cross, such as “Lift High The Cross” or the traditional “That Old Rugged Cross,” as well as the Scripture accounts of the Passion, are great sources of inspiration and reflection.

Carry the cross patiently and with perfect submission and in the end it shall carry you.

—Thomas à Kempis

