

Prayer Digital Download

Chapter on Prayer
and
Collection of Prayers





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Prayer has always been part of the rhythm of learning at Kolbe Academy. Before meetings begin, before classes start, and before students sit down to study or take an exam, our community pauses to pray together.

As part of the release of *Mystery & Grace: The Sacramental Life* by Nicholas Senz, we are pleased to share a selection from the book on the topic of prayer, along with a small collection of prayers often used within the Kolbe community.

These are prayers our students, teachers, and staff return to regularly. They help orient our work toward God and remind us that all learning is sustained by His grace.

We believe there is real power in praying together as a community. We hope this small collection of some of our favorites at Kolbe will be a blessing to your family, classroom, or study time.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Introduction to Prayer



ON PERSONAL PRAYER

*I*n the sacraments, God gives us a share in the gift of His own life through physical signs instituted by Christ. In the other liturgical acts of the Church, we join with the whole People of God in seeking union with the Lord. In the use of sacramentals and devotions, we participate in rites and forms either instituted or approved by the Church.

Yet each of us also desires to meet God personally, in the quiet of our own hearts. When we celebrate the sacraments or practice devotional prayers, we are indeed praying, because we engage our minds and wills in this act we are joining into. But our personal prayer is something that is our own. It is you connecting with God.

There is a reciprocal relationship between sacramental and personal prayer. Sacraments and devotions feed and sustain our personal prayer, while our personal prayer calls us to join with all of God's people back to the sacramental table where we receive God's grace. It is akin to the relationship between diet and activity: we eat so that we can do work, and doing work builds up our appetite to eat again. The sacraments are our nourishment, but prayer is the everyday activity of our spiritual lives.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

Perhaps the simplest definition of prayer comes from St. John Damascene: "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God."⁴⁶¹ When we pray, we seek communion with God. We reach out to Him because He has called us to Himself. C.S. Lewis expresses this idea well in *The Silver Chair*, when Aslan says to Jill, "You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you." It is God's invitation to us that stirs up in us the desire to pray.

God has made us to be with Him, and only He can satisfy that desire. As St. Augustine famously wrote, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."⁴⁶² In our life here on earth, we begin to form that relationship with God which we hope to enter into completely in heaven, "to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God."⁴⁶³ Our purpose then is to develop our spiritual lives so that we live out our days prayerfully, in communion with God, aware of His presence. This is what St. Paul means when

461 St. John Damascene, *On the Orthodox Faith*, III, 24.

462 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1, 5.

463 Ephesians 3:19.

he exhorts us to “pray constantly”⁴⁶⁴— not that we should be continuously saying prayers, but that we should live our lives always “raising our hearts and minds to God.”

Still, in order to pray always, we must pray sometimes—that is, we must have certain times set aside when we are not doing other activities but are simply praying. So, how do we do that? What do we do when we pray?

FIVE PURPOSES OF PRAYER

What do we pray for, or pray about, or pray on when we pray? We could divide the prayers we make into five kinds: blessing and adoration, thanksgiving, intercession, petition, and praise.

BLESSING AND ADORATION

We have discussed the idea of blessing as a sacramental, but it is also a fundamental type of prayer: a prayer that “speaks well” (Latin *benedicere*) of God. When we raise our hearts and minds to God, we speak blessing of Him, and find in return that He blesses us. We find God’s blessings, His grace and mercy and favor offered to us, and we in return “speak well” of Him for this, blessing Him.

In adoration, we recognize God’s glory and majesty and take joy in it. We recognize that God is God, and we are not, and that is a good thing! Adoration is the attitude of the creature bowing before his Creator—not because God gains anything from it, but because we do. We find joy in acknowledging our Creator and Father and Savior.

464 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

THANKSGIVING

Everything that we have—from the world that we inhabit, to our gifts and talents, to our very existence—is a gift from God. We should take the time to thank God for all that we have. Too often “the gifts are often worshiped and the Giver is ignored.”⁴⁶⁵

The Psalms say we should make an offering of thanksgiving to God.⁴⁶⁶ The most profound way we do this as Christians is in the Eucharist, but we should live our whole lives in a way that gives thanks to God for what He has given us. We should “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”⁴⁶⁷

INTERCESSION

In the Old Testament, we see many instances of people interceding with God for others. Just as Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah, and Moses interceded for the Israelites in the desert, so we will go to God on others’ behalf to ask for good things for them. This is an expression of love and charity on our part: if to love is to will the good of the other, we express that love by asking for good things for others from God.

While Jesus is indeed the one mediator between God and man,⁴⁶⁸ we too can be mediators to God for one another. This is because when we intercede with God for one another, we are not doing that in competition with Jesus; rather, we do so *in* Him. We intercede as Christians, as part of His Body, the

465 *Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross* paragraph 45.

466 Psalm 116:17.

467 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

468 1 Timothy 2:5.

Church. We make our prayers “through Christ Our Lord.” As we read about in our discussion of the Mass, Jesus eternally intercedes with the Father for us. When we intercede for each other, whether in the Mass or in our personal prayer, we join our prayer to His.

PETITION

While intercession is prayer on others’ behalf, petition is prayer made on our own behalf. Precisely because we recognize that all things come from God’s providence, we ask for the things we need and want from God. We trust in Him as children trust their parents, knowing that God knows what is good for us.

The first kind of petition we make is asking forgiveness for our sins. This is because the first thing we desire of God, the most important, is to be in right relationship with Him. Jesus teaches us this: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”⁴⁶⁹

It is crucial to understand that when we make petitions or intercessions, we are not bargaining with God or trying to change His mind. This does not make our prayers useless. Rather, God’s eternal will takes into account our prayers. Our expression of our will for our good and the good of others is an expression of love, which is a reflection of God’s love. Our prayer is indeed effective, not as cajoling God into doing what we want, but as our participation in the bringing about of God’s divine plan. And sharing our desires with God opens us up to having our hearts transformed by Him, to bring our wills into alignment with His. All of our prayers of petition and intercession should be followed with an implicit acknowledgement of “thy will be done,” an expression of trust in God’s plan.

469 Matthew 6:33.

PRAISE

Imagine that you saw your favorite actor or sports hero on the street. If you worked up the courage to speak to them, you would probably gush with praise for them: “Oh my goodness, you’re just the best, I’ve seen all your movies, I’ve watched all your games, I’m your biggest fan!” We wouldn’t be able to help ourselves!

Prayers of praise of God are no different. When we recognize who God is and all that He has done for us, we cannot help but praise Him. God is not an egomaniac. He is not somehow fed by our praises of Him. Rather, we are fed by it. As with prayers of blessing and adoration, we rejoice in praising God for who He is and what He has done for us.

THREE EXPRESSIONS OF PRAYER

We refer to three “expressions” of prayer because these are three approaches to take, three angles at which to come at praying. They engage our hearts in different ways. They are different ways in which we express our desire to pray.

VOCAL

Vocal prayer might also be called “verbal” prayer. Human beings think and communicate through signs, letters, and sounds that represent our thoughts and feelings. We express our thoughts and feelings, both to others and to ourselves, through these signs called words. Vocal prayer then is praying with words, forming sentences addressed to God.

Vocal prayer can include both rote and extemporaneous prayers. We might pray in words that we have learned, such as the Our Father, Hail Mary, or Glory Be; or we might pray in our own words, expressing our thoughts and feelings, speaking

to God as we would speak to a friend or parent. Rote prayers are useful especially in those times when we do not know what to say, or how to put it in words. They are also beneficial for us in that in many cases they derive from Scripture, so that we are praying to God in words God has given us.

Sometimes we do not feel comfortable praying in our own words. This can be especially true when we are unhappy or even angry with God. We might think, “Can I really say that to God?” But we should bring all our joy, fear, delight, sadness, wonder, anger, and questions to God in prayer. Scripture is filled with figures like Abraham, Moses, David, Job, and others having frank conversations with God: challenging Him, debating with Him, crying out to Him, complaining to Him. God knows what we think and feel, so we need not try to hide it from Him; and it is only when we hand over our thoughts and feelings to God that we allow Him to work with them, to respond to or answer them.

MEDITATIVE

While vocal prayer might be said to be more related to the intellect, meditation is a form of prayer that engages other parts of our souls: the emotions, the imagination, the heart of us. In meditation, we set something in our hearts and ask God to speak to us through it. We might meditate on a truth of the faith or a part of the life of Christ (as we do in the rosary), a verse from a hymn, or an event in our lives. We spend time “thinking on” that thing, making it the focus of our attention, and await the voice of the Holy Spirit to speak in our hearts.

One form of meditation using Scripture is *lectio divina*. This method of reflecting on Scripture was developed by monastic communities from the time of the ancient Church. In this form of prayer, we read a short passage of Scripture multiple times, remaining attentive to where the Spirit is leading us. We begin

by simply reading the passage (*lectio*), keeping focused for any word or phrase that might “leap out” for our attention. We then read the passage again and focus on that word or phrase, asking God to speak to us and reveal what that word or phrase might mean for us (*meditatio*). We then read the passage a third time and sit in the quiet stillness of the presence of the Holy Spirit (*contemplatio*), allowing ourselves to be receptive to what God has to say to us in the Scriptures.

CONTEMPLATIVE

The final expression of prayer is the deepest and most mysterious. Contemplation is the practice of prayer articulated by the old farmer we read about in the last chapter: “I look at Him, and He looks at me.” Contemplation is the prayer by which we “constantly seek His face.”⁴⁷⁰ Heaven is described as the Beatific Vision, the “blessed sight” of seeing God face to face. Contemplation is the form of prayer by which we aim to have a glimpse of that here and now.

This is not easy to do! Some religious orders are “contemplative” orders, whose form of life is centered around arranging for the monks or nuns to have periods of several hours to spend in contemplative prayer. We find that the more deeply we enter into the life of prayer and the spiritual life, the more the activity is on God’s part and not ours. We become more passive as He becomes more active: “He must increase, but I must decrease.”⁴⁷¹ But, counterintuitively, it takes a lot of work on our part to become so passive! Next, we will examine the challenges we face when trying to pray.

470 Psalm 105:4, NABRE translation.

471 John 3:30.

DIFFICULTIES IN PRAYER

There are many things in life that we know are good for us, but we still find difficult to do. Whether it's eating right, getting regular exercise, or spending time in prayer, we know that just because something is fulfilling and beneficial for us doesn't mean that it's easy!

DOUBT

When we try to pray, our mind can fill with doubts: Is God really there? If He is, does He really care what I have to say? Why doesn't my prayer always seem to work? These doubts can sometimes keep us from praying.

There are many reasons for these doubts. Partially they stem from the fact that because God is so far beyond us, He is always in some sense hidden from us (the *Deus absconditus*). It can be difficult for us to believe that the Creator of all things could even take notice of us. Like the Psalmist, we might ask: "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?"⁴⁷² Yet we should remember the following verses as well: "Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet"⁴⁷³ God creates us to share in His own life—of course He cares about us!

Our doubts can also derive from our all-too-human tendency to treat prayer as a transaction, as if God were a vending machine: I put in my novena, I enter my selection, and I expect to get

472 Psalm 8:3-4.

473 Psalm 8:5-6.

what I asked for. This was the pagan attitude in prayer, and it is difficult for human beings to set aside. Our connection with God is not transactional, though, but relational. God is not a conveyor belt automatically dispensing goods, but a loving Father who knows what is good for us—and what is not.

Rather than letting our doubts keep us from prayer, we can use them as fuel for prayer. When you doubt God, tell God! When you hand your doubt over to God, you allow Him to address it.

DRYNESS

Sometimes in prayer, we experience joy, consolation, a warm feeling of God's goodness—and sometimes we don't. Prayer can be a struggle. We can feel as if we're going through the motions, or like we're spinning our wheels in mud. Rather than our spiritual life blooming, it can feel as if it's shriveled up.

When we experience this dryness in prayer, it can be difficult to pray. We might think: what's the point? If I'm not getting anything out of it, then why should I do it? Dryness in prayer can be a sign to us in our spiritual life. Perhaps there are other things in our life that are getting in the way of our relationship with God. Maybe we are treating the spiritual life as a chore; maybe we have sinful habits that are blocking our relationship with God. Dryness can even be an invitation from God, in which God withdraws consolations from us in order to invite us to pursue Him further. When we experience dryness, we should examine ourselves to see what might be inhibiting us and ask God to remove our obstacles.

DISTRACTION

We live in an age of distraction. With smartphones, social media, and a thousand other things that compete for our attention, it can be difficult to shut everything out and try to focus on the voice of God in our hearts. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said:

If I were a physician and someone asked me, ‘What do you think should be done?’ I would answer, ‘The first thing, the unconditional condition for anything to be done, consequently the very first thing that must be done is: create silence, bring about silence; God’s Word cannot be heard, and if in order to be heard in the hullabaloo it must be shouted deafeningly with noisy instruments, then it is not God’s Word; create silence!’⁴⁷⁴

He wrote this in the mid-1800s—how much noisier the world is today! Jesus knew this as well, as when He said: “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.”⁴⁷⁵ Even when we have shut out the noise of the world, we still have the noise of our own minds to face. A helpful way to prepare to enter prayer is to spend a few moments, even a few minutes, not yet trying to pray, but simply letting our minds “unspool” all our worries and concerns and various thoughts. This can create the mental quiet that is the condition of the possibility for prayer.

ACEDIA

Acedia is sometimes called “spiritual laziness,” but a better comparison would be atrophy. When you don’t use your

⁴⁷⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 47.

⁴⁷⁵ Matthew 6:6.

muscles they weaken, so that it's harder for you to do the things you used to. A runner who hasn't run in a while can't run as far when he tries to get it up again. The basketball player who hasn't been on the court for a few months will have to shake off the rust.

In a similar way, when we don't use our "spiritual muscles," when we fall out of a habit of regular prayer, it becomes harder to pray. When we find ourselves in such a state, we must remember to start slow. We might be caught up in a fervor to return to prayer and think we should dive head-first into piling on a rosary, Eucharistic adoration, and Scripture reflection into our days, but this would be like trying to take up the habit of running by starting with a marathon! A good rule of thumb is: if you feel like you're going too slow in your spiritual life, slow down. Start with something simple—a few basic prayers at night, or a few minutes of silent reflection—and build from there.



QUESTIONS

1. What is prayer? *Prayer is the raising of one's heart and mind to God, and the asking of good things from Him.*
2. How can we intercede for others if Christ is the "one mediator"? *When we intercede in prayer, we aren't competing with Jesus; rather, we are making our prayer with and in Him.*
3. What is the first kind of prayer of petition we should make? *The first petition we should make is for forgiveness of our sins, because a right relationship with God is the most important thing we should want.*
4. Should we try to keep our negative thoughts and feelings from God? *No! He knows what we are thinking and feeling. We should share them with Him so that He can heal them.*
5. What is lectio divina? *This is a form of meditative prayer where we read over a passage of Scripture several times, asking God to speak to us through the words of the Bible.*
6. How should we respond if we find ourselves in "spiritual atrophy"? *We should grow our prayer lives back slowly, starting with simple practices and building from there.*

FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 2558-2745

Romano Guardini, *The Art of Praying*

Pope Benedict XVI, *A School of Prayer: The Saints Show Us How to Pray*



Prayer before Study

Creator of all things,
true Source of light and wisdom,
lofty origin of all being,
graciously let a ray of Your brilliance
penetrate into the darkness of my understanding
and take from me the double darkness
in which I have been born,
an obscurity of both sin and ignorance.
Give me a sharp sense of understanding,
a retentive memory,
and the ability to grasp things
correctly and fundamentally.
Grant me the talent
of being exact in my explanations,
and the ability to express myself
with thoroughness and charm.
Point out the beginning,
direct the progress,
and help in completion;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

—St. Thomas Aquinas



Prayer to the Holy Spirit

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.

Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created,
and you shall renew the face of the earth.

Let us pray.

O God, who have taught the hearts of the faithful
by the light of the Holy Spirit,
grant that in the same Spirit we may be truly wise
and ever rejoice in his consolation.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.





Receive

Receive, O Lord,
all my liberty.

Accept my memory,
my understanding,
and my whole will.

Whatever I have or possess
you have given to me;
all of it I return to You
and surrender entirely to be
governed by Your will.

Give me only Your love
together with Your grace,
and I am rich enough;
I ask for nothing more.

Amen

Sucipe

Suscipe, Domine,
universam meam libertatem.

Accipe memoriam,
intellectum,
atque voluntatem omnem.

Quidquid habeo vel possideo
mihi largitus es;
id Tibi totum restituo,
ac Tuae prorsus voluntati
trado gubernandum.

Amorem Tui solum
cum gratia Tua mihi dones,
et dives sum satis,
nec aliud quidquam ultra posco.

Amen.

—St. Ignatius of Loyola

