

# **THE *OUR FATHER***

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

# THE ESSENCE OF PRAYER



Among all created things, angels and humans are uniquely “persons,” made in the image and likeness of God. Because of this, they have the capacity for personal relationships, both with each other and with God. *Living out* a personal relationship with God is the essence of prayer.

Apart from grace, we could become aware of God’s existence and turn to Him with our thoughts and words. However, because of grace, we are now able to relate to God in a new way: not only as creatures seeking to do Him homage, but now as beloved sons and daughters of God, belonging to God and praying to God our Father from the heart of His beloved Son, in and with the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

We have spoken about the intimate relationship of total love that the Son of God has with the Father in eternity, and of how, in becoming man, the Son now expresses this intimate relationship with His Father *in and through His humanity*. One of the reasons the Son of God became man was to invite us into the loving relationship He has with the Father in and through His humanity, so that *we* might love the Father as Christ loves the Father, in and through Christ, as St. Paul explains:

**But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” —Gal 4:4-6**

This is why Jesus is always speaking to or about the Father, and why He taught us to pray to the Father in the words of the *Our Father*:

**And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray then like this: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* —Mt 6:7-13**

The Holy Spirit is essential in all this as well. It is the Holy Spirit Who unites us to the mystery of Christ, enabling us to pray to the Father through Christ, as St. Paul explains:

**Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And He Who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. —Rom 8:26-27**

This intimate relationship with the Trinity through grace is begun in us in Baptism. We are called to grow in this loving relationship all our life, until it is perfected in the eternal love of heaven. The life of prayer, then, is a life in which we seek to grow in our relationship with God in love. In prayer, we come to know and love Him Who knows and loves us unceasingly. In every moment, God draws close to us and moves us into relationship with Him. In prayer, we complete the relationship by returning His love through our mind, heart, and life.

When we sin, we compromise and diminish our relationship with God. This is why when Adam and Eve sin, they are depicted as hiding, as covering themselves, as turning away from God (Gen 3:8-12). Indeed, sin is the opposite of prayer. We cannot sin and pray (truly) at the same time. Love, humility, and turning away from sin are intrinsic qualities to authentic prayer. This is why, at times, God is depicted as turning His face from us and refusing to hear us until we are repentant (Is 1:15-18; Jer 11:11; Ezk 8:18; Ps 66:18). In reality, it is we who are not really turning to God, since we are more oriented toward ourselves than toward God, even as we might think we are praying to God.

In the Old Testament, we see how human beings were created in a harmonious relationship with God, how they fell away from that relationship through sin, but also how God was ever calling them back into relationship with Him. Through Noah, God taught His people the importance of obedience and righteousness (Gen 7:1). Through Abraham, God called His people to “walk before me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1). Through Isaac, God drew His people to meditate on His ways (Gen 24:63). Through Jacob, God taught His people about His presence in their midst (Gen 28:10-17), and to bring their struggles to Him (Gen 32:22-32). Through Joseph, God taught His people patience and how to forgive and to trust in God’s providence (Gen 50:15-21). God taught Moses to “stand in the breach” (Ps 106:23) and intercede for the people (Ex 32:11-14), and to love Him with all their hearts (Dt 6:4-9). Through David, God taught His people to

seek forgiveness and make amends (2 Sam 11-12; 24; Ps 51). The *Psalms*, which is a book of 150 prayers, depicts the various facets of our relationship with God, including many of our inner struggles. Through the prophets, God taught His people to repent, to attend to righteousness and the needs of the poor, and to trust in His deliverance (Is 1; Jer 25; 27).

In the New Testament, with Jesus, we are given a picture of the kind of relationship with God we are meant to have. Jesus prays in the Temple as a twelve-year-old child (Lk 2:49). In His public ministry, Jesus spends long hours in prayer before the break of day, often in a “lonely place,” on a “mountain,” or in the “wilderness” (Mk 1:35; 6:46; Lk 5:16; 6:12). He frequently makes exclamations to the Father (Mt 11:25; 26:39, 42; Mk 14:36; Lk 10:21-22; 22:42; 23:34, 46). Jesus rejoices in the Holy Spirit (Lk 10:21). He prays before His Baptism (Lk 3:21), the choosing of the apostles (Lk 6:12), and His Transfiguration (Lk 9:28). He also prays with His disciples at the Last Supper in what is known as His High Priestly Prayer (Jn 17), in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk 22:41-44; Mt 26:36-46; Mk 14:32-42), and on the Cross (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34; Lk 23:34, 46; Jn 19:30). His example teaches us how to pray.

Jesus also verbally teaches us many things about prayer. Specifically, He teaches us:

- To relate to God as our Father, and to pray the *Our Father* (Mt 6:9-15; Lk 11:1-4);
- To pray and ask things from God in the name of Jesus (Jn 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-26);
- To ask God for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:13);
- Not to pray in order to be seen (Mt 6:5);
- To go into our room and pray to our Father in secret (Mt 6:6);
- Not to heap up many empty phrases, thinking we can manipulate God through formulaic repetition (Mt 6:7);
- That God knows what we need before we ask Him (Mt 6:8);
- To glorify God, seek His kingdom and will, ask for what we need, seek His forgiveness, forgive others, and ask for help in temptation and deliverance from evil (Mt 6:9-13)—all elements summarized in the *Our Father*;
- To seek God’s forgiveness whenever we pray, and to forgive others as a precondition for God forgiving us (Mt 6:12; 14-15);
- To confidently seek the things we need from God, to “ask”, “seek”, and “knock” (Mt 7:7-12; Lk 11:9-11);
- To pray always and not lose heart (Lk 18:1);
- To be persistent in what we ask for in prayer (Lk 18:1-8; Lk 11:5-13);
- To be repentant and humble in prayer (Lk 18:9-14);
- To pray and celebrate the Eucharist together (Mt 18:20; 1 Cor 11:24-25; Lk 22:19);
- To keep vigilant in prayer, ever ready for the second coming of Christ (Mt 25:13; Mk 13:37).



## WHEN TO PRAY



Time is a gift of God leading to eternity. We are called to make the most of the gift of time (Eph 5:16; Col 4:5), doing all that we do in love (1 Cor 16:14) and in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col 3:17), glorifying God with our deeds (1 Pt 2:12; 4:16), growing in holiness (1 Th 4:1, 3; 5:23), and serving our neighbor in charity (Jn 13:34). Our time on earth is naturally divided into days, months, and years. God has also willed that the week be a marked unit of several days for us, beginning with Sunday, the first day of the week, the day on which the world was created, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, the day on which the Holy Spirit came upon the Church on the feast of Pentecost, and a day of worship and rest for us.

Sunday is the preeminent day of the week for worship, therefore. And the Mass is the greatest prayer, since it is a celebration of the offering of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. The Mass and the Eucharist, then, stand at the center of the life and week for the Christian.

There are other important times to pray, of course, especially each day. The Scriptures speak of the morning (Ps 5:3; 57:7-10; 59:16; 63:6; 90:14; 119:147; 143:8; Is 33:2; Mk 1:35), the evening (Ps 141:2; Mt 14:23), and night (Lk 6:12; Gen 32:24; 1 Sam 15:11; Ps 4:4, 8; 30:5; 42:8; 63:6; 119:55, 62, 148; 134:1; Lam 2:19; 2 Sam 12:16; Joel 1:13; Acts 16:25; Ps 22:2) as privileged times to pray. We also see the early disciples in Acts praying at different times in the middle of the day, such as when Peter prays on a housetop at 12pm (Acts 10:9), or when Peter and John go up to the Temple to pray at 3pm, the hour when Jesus died (Acts 3:1; 10:30).

## *When to Pray*

***The Morning:*** It is important to pray at the beginning of the day, so that one is rooted in God—and in His strength and peace—as one goes into the day. It is good to dedicate each day to God, and ask for the grace to do His will throughout the day. Many Catholics traditionally do this through a *Morning Offering*. There are different versions. One can always do this in his or her own way as well. It is also helpful to begin and end each day with the Sign of the Cross, so that the day itself can be seen as a prayer in which one seeks to offer up everything for the glory of God. Time for quiet prayer is recommended in the morning, although some prefer the evening for this. It is good to start with shorter times, such as 5-10 minutes, and to work up to more time, such as 30 minutes, or even an hour.

***The Evening:*** The evening is a good time to wind down and reflect, to give thanks for the blessings of the day, to ask forgiveness for one's faults, and to pray for others.

***During the Day:*** During breaks, it is a good practice to pray to God, even if only briefly.

***Before Meals:*** Before one eats a meal, it is fitting to give thanks to God for the gift of nourishment, to ask His blessing upon the food and the meal (perhaps with others), and to pray for those who go without. Don't do it for show, but also don't be afraid to make the Sign of the Cross and pray when eating in public. Some Catholics also pray briefly at the end of each meal, thanking God for the meal and praying for the faithful departed.

***Other Times:*** If it is natural to mark each week with the prayer of Sunday Mass, and each day with prayer at the beginning and end of the day, it is also fitting to mark each month in some way, especially by going to confession. Some people have a day each month in which they take extra time to pray and be spiritually renewed. Some also make an annual retreat of a few days or even a week. More regularly, some make the practice of going to daily Mass, and/or a weekly prayer group. Lastly, like Jesus, it is important to pray before important events in our lives.

### **SCRIPTURAL READINGS**

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” —Heb 13:8

“But I call upon God; and the LORD will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and He will hear my voice.” —Ps 55:16-17

“He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.” —Ps 91:4-6

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” —Col 3:17

# PRAY ALWAYS

The Christian is called not only to pray regularly at marked times, but also to “pray always”:

**And He told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. —Lk 18:1**

**Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. —1 Th 5:17-18**

**I keep the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. —Ps 16:8**

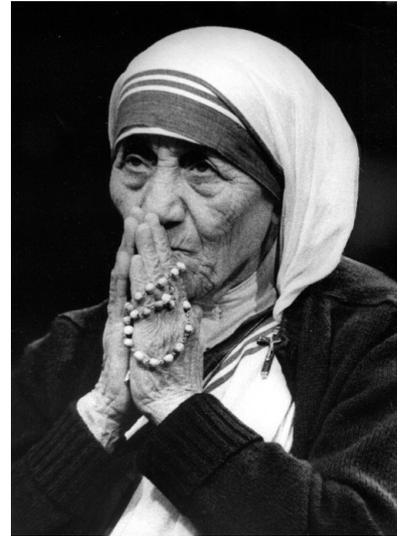
**My eyes are ever toward the LORD. —Ps 25:15**

**In Him we live and move and have our being. —Acts 17:28**

God is always loving us. We are called to become increasingly aware of His presence at all times, to love Him in return, and to direct everything we do to Him and His glory. It is true that we cannot always give our full attention to God, as when we take time to pray more directly. However, we can cultivate the practice of becoming aware of His presence throughout the day. We traditionally call this practice *Recollection*. One’s day and life becomes much deeper and more meaningful when recollection is practiced. Helpful ways to remember God’s presence and to “pray always” are:

- Sending up little prayers of love (“effusions” or “aspirations,” as it were) throughout the day. This can be thought of as regularly feeding the fire of prayer with kindling.
- Pausing within yourself to become aware of God’s presence. People in the East often do this through relaxing, mindfulness, and breath-awareness.
- Using holy images to remind you of the reality of God and His angels and saints.
- Glancing at natural things, such as trees, or the sky, or a plant in one’s office, to remind you of the Creator.
- Looking for the image of God within people.
- Seeing everything good, true, and beautiful as a reflection of God.
- Reflecting on how God is speaking to you through other people and events.

# WHERE TO PRAY



Insofar as we are called to “pray always,” every place becomes a place of prayer. When we take time to pray in a more focused way, however, there are certain places that are more ideal:

**One’s Room:** In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret; and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:6). The idea here is to find a personal place of solitude where you can be alone with God and come to know and love Him personally and intimately. It can be any room, but one’s own dwelling is meant to be a place sanctified by prayer and a place to find God.

**A Church:** In the Old Testament, God instructed His people to build a “Tabernacle” or “Tent of Meeting,” which was a kind of portable Temple. This was but provisional and prepared in time for a permanent Temple in Jerusalem. God made Himself present and accessible to His people in a privileged way in His Temple. The Temple is called a “house of prayer for all peoples” (Is 56:7; Jer 7:11; 1 Macc 7:37; Mk 11:17; Mt 21:13; Lk 19:46). The Temple in turn is a sign of a greater reality, Jesus Himself, Who is God-among-us (Mt 1:23) and God’s true Temple on earth (Jn 1:14; 2:21). Christian Churches are a symbol of Jesus, the Temple of God. They also house the Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, within our Tabernacles. So, because Catholic churches are blessed, and graced with the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, they become an ideal place of prayer for the community, both during and outside of Mass. They are also a sign of the Temple in the eternal Jerusalem, heaven itself (Rev 21:22).

**Outdoors:** Like Isaac who meditated while walking in a field (Gen 24:63), or Moses and Elijah who prayed on mountains and in caves (Ex 24:15-18; 34:28; 1 Kgs 19:8), Jesus often prayed on a “mountain” (Mk 6:46), in the “wilderness” (Lk 5:16), in “a lonely place” (Mk 1:35), or “in a garden” (Jn 18:1; Mk 14:32-42). To pray outdoors, and especially in nature, can be refreshing and uplifting to our minds and hearts, since we are surrounded by things that reflect the beauty of the Creator.

# HOW TO PRAY



How are we to pray? Most importantly, *with the heart!* God doesn't want us to mouth words to Him when we are thinking about something else, or when we are not really sincere, or when we are not really repentant. Prayer, above all, is a directing of the mind and heart to God. It is the grace of the Holy Spirit moving us interiorly to know and love God our Father in Christ. To pray with the heart, certain dispositions are necessary and fundamental:

- **Faith:** Faith moves us to believe in and surrender to the God Who reveals Himself to us in love.
- **Humility:** Humility acknowledges that God is infinitely greater than we are, and that we stand before Him weak and sinful.
- **Repentance:** Repentance is genuinely turning away from our sins, versus denying, justifying, settling for, or making excuses for our sins. It is a grace-inspired act of reform and intention of betterment.
- **Hope:** Hope trusts in God and His grace, confident in His love for us.
- **Love:** God's love beckons us to love Him in return.
- **Obedience:** In prayer, we are always called to say, "Thy will be done," not "My will be done." We seek to submit to God.
- **Reverence:** It is only fitting that we acknowledge God's greatness and come before Him with the greatest reverence for His infinite mystery, with "the fear of the Lord."
- **Thanksgiving:** Since God has given us everything, we are called to be ever thankful for His love and mercy, and for all that He has given to—and done for—us.
- **Perseverance:** While it is important to have all these dispositions when we pray, it is equally important to persevere in the practice of regular prayer. Prayer is to the soul what water is to a plant. When a plant stops being watered, it withers and dies. When a person stops praying, he spiritually withers and dies. Prayer also brings depth to life. Without prayer, we remain on the surface, and everything becomes superficial. It is crucial, then, to continue in—and not to fall away from—the practice of prayer. God calls us to persevere in the practice of prayer even when it is difficult.

Since we as human beings are both individual and social in our nature, it is also fitting that we worship God both personally (individually) and socially (with others).

In the following sections, we will also explore various dimensions of prayer.

# POSTURES OF PRAYER



When we pray, it is the whole of ourselves that prays. While the core of prayer is the heart, it is fitting that we also express prayer through our bodies. The following postures are traditional prayer postures:

***Prostrating:*** Prostrating—or praying while laying face down—is a gesture of radical humility, need, and surrender to God (Gen 17:3; Ex 20:6; Jos 7:6; Lk 5:12).

***Kneeling:*** Kneeling is a posture of reverence and humility (Lk 22:41; Acts 9:40; 20:36; 21:5).

***Sitting:*** Sitting is a symbol of relaxation, peace, listening, and attentiveness.

***Standing:*** Standing is a symbol of readiness (Neh 8:5), of strength (Mk 11:25; Jn 19:25), of confidence (1 Sam 1:26), of sharing in the victory of the Resurrection, and of awaiting the second coming of Christ (Lk 21:36).

***Orans (praying with hands uplifted / facing East):*** Often standing is accompanied with the lifting up of one's hands, which is a gesture of praise (Neh 8:7; Ps 141:2), blessing (Luke 24:50), peace (1 Tim 2:8), confidence (Ps 63:4), transcendence, intercession (Ex 17:8-13), of reaching out to God (Ps 134:2), and of the Cross and/or Resurrection. Early Christian iconography depicts figures praying with uplifted hands. Early Christians also prayed toward the direction of the East, since the sun was seen as a symbol of Christ, the light of the world (Jn 8:12), and in expectation of the second coming of Christ (Rev 22:20).

***Walking:*** Walking while praying is a gesture of pilgrimage (Ps 122), meditation (Gen 24:63), and divine accompaniment (Lk 24:15). Processions are often a part of liturgy (entrance procession, offertory procession, Communion procession at Mass, or Eucharistic processions as on Holy Thursday and Corpus Christi).

The idea here is that there are different ways to pray, and the different prayer postures can bring a refreshing variety in prayer, which can be helpful for keeping one's attention directed toward God. Postures, again, involve the body, and therefore the whole person, in prayer.

# EXPRESSIONS OF PRAYER

In our relationships, we speak to others in various ways. Sometimes we praise and affirm them. Sometimes we thank them. Sometimes we apologize to them. Sometimes we ask them questions and seek something from them, either for ourselves or for others. We relate to God in all of these ways as well. In English, a popular way of summarizing these different ways is by using the acronym “ACTS,” standing for “Adoration”, “Contrition”, “Thanksgiving”, and “Supplication”:

**Adoration:** It is only “right and just” to praise God for His love and goodness, since He is our Creator, our Redeemer, our Savior, our Sanctifier, and the One who will glorify us eternally in Heaven. We use different words to express our total praise of God: “praise”, “adore”, “bless”, “worship”, “give homage”, “bow down to”, etc. The Scriptures are full of these kinds of expressions of praise. At its heart, the act of adoring or praising God should be an act of total love toward the One Who has loved us totally: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Dt 6:4-5). Jesus invites us to pray, “Hallowed be Thy Name” (Mt 6:9).

**Contrition:** When we sin in any way, we offend God, the Source of all goodness. We should be ever asking for His pardon for our sins: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your merciful love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” (Ps 51:1-2). “Forgive us our trespasses as we have forgiven those who trespass against us” (Mt 6:12).

**Thanksgiving:** Since God has given us so much, it is only right that we give thanks to Him: “Give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Th 5:18) . . . “always and for everything” (Eph 5:20).

**Supplication:** In supplication, we petition God for our needs: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Mt 6:11). We can ask for anything, as long as it is according to God’s will (Jas 4:3; 1 Jn 5:14): “Thy will be done” (Mt 6:10). Although God knows what we need before we ask Him (Mt 6:8), it is His will to give us gifts through our asking (Mt 7:7-12). Praying for others is called *Intercession*: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men. . . this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:1-4). We are called to constantly pray for the physical and spiritual needs of others.

We find all of these elements expressed in the *Our Father*. These elements and different expressions can also guide our spontaneous prayer in which we seek to praise and thank God, ask for His forgiveness, and ask for what we—and others—need.

# THREE WAYS TO PRAY

There are three ways we can communicate with God: we can speak to Him in love, we can ponder His mystery and His works and words, or we can just be with Him in contemplative union. We call these three ways *Vocal Prayer*, *Meditation*, and *Contemplation*:

***Vocal Prayer:*** In vocal prayer, we speak to God from our hearts. We can do this through already-composed, or formulaic, prayers, like the *Our Father*, *Hail Mary*, or the countless beautiful prayers in Christian tradition. Or we can pray spontaneously, from our hearts. Composed prayers help give us the right sentiments to express toward God, especially when it is hard to find the right words to say. They also facilitate praying the same prayers together in a group. Spontaneous prayers in turn are more natural to what we want to personally express to God in the moment. They also work well when someone leads prayer in a group. As Catholics, we should be comfortable praying both ways.

***Meditation:*** Meditation goes beyond words: It is a pondering over the mystery of God, or over the words or working of God. Reading the Scriptures, pondering the mysteries of the Rosary, contemplating God's beauty as reflected in nature, and meditating on both the various facets of our Faith and the working of God in the events of our lives are all good sources for meditation. Just as Vocal Prayer draws our words to God, meditation draws our imagination and wonder toward the mystery of God.

***Contemplation:*** Contemplation goes yet beyond meditation, and beyond words and images. It is a "resting in God." It is just being in His presence. It is sometimes compared to when a married couple just spends time being with each other, without having to say anything. It is being united to God in deep love: "He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:17). It is a little taste of heaven, although we don't always necessarily "feel" so close to God. We are all called to find times to be still before God in silence: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). "For God alone my soul waits in silence" (Ps 62:1). God draws us all to contemplate His reality and His love, and, through purifying our hearts, He wants to give us the grace of *Infused Contemplation*, which is grace of almost always being aware of God's presence. It is the prayer of resting-in-God placed within us by God. Contemplation draws the whole of our person and our innermost depths to God.

When we grow spiritually, we grow in all of these dimensions of prayer: our conversation with God becomes more intimate, our meditation deeper, and our contemplation more perfect. These different ways of praying are helpful to us at different times. Sometimes when we are very distracted or grieving, vocal prayer might be the most helpful. If we have been very busy, we might need time just to be quiet with God. Sometimes we feel inspired to ponder over various thoughts in meditation.

# THE BATTLE OF PRAYER



Prayer is not easy. We avoid prayer for various reasons: busyness, distraction (our mind is busy thinking about a thousand other things), sin, temptation, attachments, thinking that prayer is boring and unproductive, being more anxious to accomplish various tasks, feeling unworthy, having a hard time sitting still, the fear of facing ourselves, the feeling of vulnerability, our preference for other things, feeling “dry,” etc. The truth is that prayer fulfills us, because God fulfills us, in prayer. It also brings depth, meaning, peace, joy, strength, and enjoyment in life. It is the spiritual “fuel” that helps us to be our best for God and others. But, it takes discipline. How can we be more faithful to prayer, given the difficulties mentioned above? The following things will be helpful:

- ***God’s grace:*** Prayer is primarily God’s work. We can’t force ourselves to pray. It is our task to let God move us to cooperate with His grace, and help us to pray. In prayer, we come as beggars, needy but fully confident that God is there and will help us in whatever state we find ourselves in the moment.
- ***Fidelity:*** If you want to be faithful to prayer, know from the outset that you will be tempted to fall away: “My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, remain in justice and fear, and prepare yourself for temptation” (Sir 2:1). Showing up is half the battle. It is crucial to make the time even when you don’t feel like it and are distracted the whole time. Don’t think about how to pray. Don’t make a million resolutions. Just do it. Just pray!

- ***Spiritual Nourishment:*** It can be hard to go from a busy day to entering into silent prayer to God for any length of time. Since we are people who look for stimulation, visuals—such as icons and other holy images—can help us focus and provide content for meditation to our minds. Reading the Bible or a spiritual book can also help inspire and nourish our prayer. Visiting a church, changing prayer postures, praying in a different place, etc., can also help. Praying in the presence of the Eucharist is especially fruitful. We should also be careful what we are putting into our minds, hearts, and bodies outside of times for prayer.
- ***Perseverance:*** You will not always feel like praying. And, like anything, the initial excitement and motivation will fade with time. Everyone experiences “dryness” (not feeling anything) in prayer. Everyone gets distracted in prayer. Everyone will be tempted to think that they are wasting their time, or not getting anything out of prayer. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Distraction is revealing: it reveals our attachments, what our heart is preoccupied by. It is often an indication of an area where we need growth, an area in which we are clinging to something too much. Dryness, likewise, is something God uses to purify our hearts, so that we learn to love Him for His own sake and not because of any consolations we might feel when we pray. As the saying goes, “What do we love more, the consolations of God or the God of consolations?” If someone lies out in the sun, she doesn’t always feel the light soaking into her skin, but the light is being absorbed. If someone goes into heart surgery and is put under anesthesia, he won’t feel anything. But the doctor is working on his heart. Something is really happening, even though the patient feels nothing. So too, God is always working on and in us when we pray. And He is present even when we don’t feel His presence, just as the sun does not cease to exist when we don’t see it when it is temporarily hidden behind clouds. God is helping us grow in pure love of Him. God is ever calling us to deeper conversion, and more perfect love. Prayer, like life, is not easy, but the practice of prayer is worth it. The way to the Resurrection is through the Cross: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:24-25). Indeed, great blessings come to us through persevering in prayer.