



How Catholics Pray



Section 8:

Prayer



To Luke E. Hart, exemplary evangelizer and Supreme Knight from 1953-64, the Knights of Columbus dedicates this Series with affection and gratitude.

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

PRAYER

PART TWO • SECTION EIGHT OF CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

*by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith.

PART II: HOW CATHOLICS PRAY (WORSHIP)

SECTION 8: PRAYER

1. *What is prayer?*

Prayer is extremely simple: it is just communication with God, conversation with God, communing with God.

Prayer can be either *private or public*, individual or communal. We need both kinds.

Prayer can be either *informal or formal*, in our own words or in the words of the saints from the many centuries of the Church's tradition. We need both kinds.

Prayer can be either *vocal or silent*, with words or without words. We need both kinds.

Prayer can be either *active or receptive*, speaking to God or listening to God (just being in his presence, waiting in love, open to his will). We need both kinds.

2. *The most important thing about prayer*

The most important thing about prayer is not *how* we do it, but *that* we do it. The single most important answer to the question "How to pray?" is: "Begin! Just do it." We learn to do it by doing it, not by merely reading or thinking about doing it.

Prayer is work, a "co-operative" work of ourselves and God. We can't do it without God and God won't do it without us.

“Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort” (CCC 2725).*

“[P]rayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God” (CCC 2725). The battle of prayer is therefore more important – *infinitely* more important – than any battle in military history.

3. *Is prayer necessary?*

Yes. One simply cannot be a Christian without prayer, any more than one can be a Christian without faith or good works. What communication is to our marriage relationship with our spouse, prayer is to our relationship with God. If we say we love God but do not pray, we lie. For love is intimacy, and intimacy is communication, and communication with God is prayer.

If God is necessary, prayer is necessary, for prayer is our spiritual lifeline to God. In prayer, we “plug in to God,” the source of all good, we “charge our spiritual batteries,” we feed our souls. Without prayer our souls starve.

4. *Prayer and Heaven*

Prayer is preparation for Heaven, as courtship is preparation for marriage. If Christ had to define eternal life in one word, he would probably say “prayer.” For what he actually said was: “This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God” (John 7:17). And we know God best by prayer.

We know God better by one moment of prayer – of praise or thanks or contrition – than by a thousand books. When we

*CCC = *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

only talk *about* him, we only know *about* him; when we talk *to* him, we get to know *him*.

Job got a foretaste of Heaven, seeing God “face to face,” because he spoke *to* God, while his three friends only spoke *about* him. Though God gave Job no explanations for his mysterious trials, Job was satisfied because he had something infinitely better than any answer: the Answerer. He said to God: “I had heard of you with the hearing of the ear [second hand], but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:4). This is what Heaven is: seeing God. Prayer is its appetizer.

5. *The first prerequisite for prayer: humility*

The *Catechism* speaks of three necessary prerequisites for prayer. These do not include experience or wisdom or saintliness. Prayer is for beginners and fools and sinners. But not for those devoid of humility, of love, or of faith. These are the prerequisites for prayer.

The *Catechism* speaks of humility as “the foundation of prayer” (CCC 2559). The greatest master of prayer in the Old Testament was probably Moses. God said of Moses, ““With him I speak face to face, clearly, not in riddles,”” *because* ““Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth””²² (Numbers 13:3, 7-8; CCC 2576).

The human reason for humility in prayer is simply the truth that “[m]an is a beggar before God”⁶ (Saint Augustine; CCC 2559). We should not be reluctant to confess this truth in all its force, for unless our hands are empty, God finds no place to put his gifts. When we are nothing before him, we can become everything through him.

The divine reason for humility in prayer is the truth that all our prayers, as well as their answers, are God's gifts. "*God calls man first....* God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response" (CCC 2567). God is the First Cause of every good prayer and even of our very *desire* to pray. Our feeble desire for him is a tiny tongue of flame kindled by the infinite bonfire of his burning desire for us. *We cannot imagine* "... the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him"⁸ (CCC 2560).

So our *motive* for praying, our right answer to the question, "Why should I pray?" is first of all: "Because God wants it." We need it, but that's why God wants it. Even when we are conscious of no desire in us for God, we should pray to satisfy *God's* desire for us. Baby should eat her spinach because she needs it, but above all because Mommy wants her to. Even if Baby does not feel she needs it, she should do what Mommy says because she loves and trusts her Mommy.

Is this comparison demeaning and insulting? No, it is far too flattering. The gap between Baby's wisdom and Mommy's, which requires this blind faith and trust, is nothing compared with the gap between our wisdom and God's. That is why prayer demands humility.

6. *The second prerequisite for prayer: love*

"Love is the source of prayer" (CCC 2658). The attitude of "trust and obey" described above (in paragraph 5) is what *love* does.

Abraham is the Old Testament model of this obedient, trusting love. "When God calls him, Abraham goes forth 'as the Lord had told him';⁸ Abraham's heart is entirely submissive to

the Word and so he obeys. Such attentiveness of the heart, whose decisions are made according to God's will, is essential to prayer, while the words used count only in relation to it. Abraham's prayer is expressed first by deeds" (CCC 2570).

The New Testament models of this love that submits and obeys are Christ and his mother. "His exclamation, 'Yes, Father!' expresses the depth of his heart, his adherence to the Father's 'good pleasure,' echoing in his mother's *Fiat* ['Yes, let it be done to me according to your word' – Luke 1:38] at the time of his conception..."⁴⁹ (CCC 2603). In this single word Yes to God is the heart of Christian prayer and the secret of sanctity.

The surest test of love is sacrifice. To love someone is to put the beloved's good before our own. To pray is always a sacrifice – of our time, at least, and of all the other things we could be doing during the time we pray. A sure test of your love for your spouse, your child, or your God is how much you give them of your time – that is, your life-time, your life.

7. *Prayer from the heart*

"Where does prayer come from? Whether prayer is expressed in words or gestures, it is the whole man who prays. But in naming the source of prayer, Scripture speaks sometimes of the soul or the spirit, but most often of the heart (more than a thousand times)" (CCC 2562). "Heart" means something far deeper than feeling or sentiment. It means the center of my identity. "The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live.... The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision...where we choose life or death" (CCC 2563).

Prayer comes from our heart and God's heart, our spirit and God's Spirit: "Christian prayer...is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves..." (CCC 2564).

God moving us to pray does not take away our freedom because God moves us from within ourselves, not from without; by his Spirit within us, at the heart of our own heart. He acts on us to *perfect* our freedom (for he *created* it!), not to remove it.

8. *The third precondition for prayer: faith and hope*

"One enters into prayer...by the narrow gate of *faith*" (CCC 2656) and by hope.

But how could finite, mortal, sinful man dare to hope that the infinite, eternal, perfect God should pay attention to his prayers? It would seem far stranger than some great king caring about the lives of lice or the wishes of fishes. Yet prayer is "the union of the entire holy and royal Trinity ...with the whole human spirit."¹² ...[P]rayer is...being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him" (CCC 2565). It is truly "amazing grace."

Who let us into that divine throne room? Christ. "This communion of life is always possible because through Baptism we have already been united with Christ"¹³ (CCC 2565). Christ's death on the Cross tore apart the curtain (Matthew 27:51) that had closed off the "holy of holies." This was the holiest part of the temple, and symbolized God's own dwelling place. No man was allowed to enter it except the High Priest once a year to make atonement for sin with the blood of the sacrificial lamb. Christ's death gave each one of us complete access to the highest throne room of the Trinity. He thus opened up a *radically new reality* for

us and for our prayer. We could always pray, of course, and God had always loved and heard us, but *sin* separated us from God until Christ's death made atonement ("at-one-ment"). This "Gospel" or "good news" means something good and something new about prayer too. "What is new is to 'ask *in his name*.'" ⁷⁸ Faith in the Son introduces the disciples into the knowledge of the Father because Jesus is 'the way....' ⁷⁹ (John 14:6; CCC 2614).

Not *a* way but *the* way. "There is no other way of Christian prayer than Christ. Whether our prayer is communal or personal, vocal or interior, it has access to the Father only if we pray 'in the name' of Jesus" (CCC 2664), by his authority, by the right his death has given us to enter God's presence.

Christian prayer is as Christocentric as everything else in the Christian life. Prayer is thrice Christocentric, for Christ

"... 'prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head, and is prayed to by us as our God....'" ⁸⁷ (Saint Augustine; CCC 2616).

9. *Five purposes of prayer*

But what should we say to God, now that we have full access to him in Christ? The Church's Tradition, based on her Jewish roots, the revealed examples of masters of prayer in Scripture, and two millennia of the wisdom of the saints, give us five themes or purposes of prayer:

- 1) adoration,
- 2) thanksgiving,
- 3) repentance,
- 4) intercession,
- 5) petition.

The beginner can remember them by the acronym A TRIP. Prayer is the greatest of all trips we can take: a trip to Heaven. Our spirit is already present in Heaven before God when we pray. There is no distance, no separation.

10. *Adoration and praise*

“*Adoration* is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator” (CCC 2628). To adore is to acknowledge what truly is, to live in reality. We do not know God truly until we adore him. For if we know the true God, we will adore him and humble ourselves. Throughout Scripture, whenever man meets God – the real God – he describes it in words like these: “I fell at his feet as one dead” (Revelation 1:17). He does not “chat” with God, he adores. For, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel says, “God is not an uncle; God is an earthquake.”

This does not contradict what was said before about intimacy and access through Christ. We are intimate with God, but we are intimate with *God*. It is precisely God’s greatness and holiness that makes our intimacy with him so staggering. Christ’s incarnation and death did not take away God’s holiness, it took away our sin. It did not make God less adorable, but us more adoring.

11. *Thanksgiving*

“The evangelists have preserved two...explicit prayers offered by Christ during his public ministry [Matthew 11:25-27 and John 11:41-42]. Each begins with thanksgiving” (CCC 2603).

It is always healing to our spirits to “count our blessings” and thank God for everything that is good. It is also realistic, or honest to reality. For whatever means he uses – nature, family,

friends, our own talents – it is God who is the First Cause of all life and goodness (and *not* of death and sin). In the poorest life there are always immeasurable riches to thank God for. Everyone’s “blessing list” should include at least:

- 1) life itself, and time, and family, and friends, and our own mental and spiritual powers, and the many little pleasures that are always available in this world;
- 2) our very existence; for the birth of each one of us was designed and willed from eternity by the Creator (our parents were only our “pro-creators”);
- 3) salvation from sin and the hope of Heaven; that is, infinite and unimaginable joy in intimate union with God for ever;
- 4) God’s patient daily grace in making us holy and good and able to enjoy him more in eternity. Even when we have few earthly gifts, we have God (sometimes, only then!). And “the Giver is more precious than the gift” (CCC 2604).

Our gratitude too should be Christocentric. If we do not *feel* grateful, we should turn again to the crucifix. *That* is what God did for us. We should practice giving thanks especially when we do not feel thankful, for that is when we need it most. “Give thanks in *all* circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

12. *Repentance*

“Asking forgiveness is the prerequisite for both the Eucharistic liturgy and personal prayer” (CCC 2631). We can come into God’s presence only on our knees.

We should examine our conscience and confess our sins privately each day and sacramentally at least each month, if possible, for the same reason we offer adoration and thanksgiving: a just and proper admission of reality, of truth. In the presence of other sinful men, we may seem to be “O.K.”; but in the presence of the all-holy God, honesty compels repentance, a continual “conversion” or “turning” of heart and life from our habitual self-centeredness.

We should not *linger* here, in contemplating our sin, or let our spirit sink into despondency or despair, but turn again and again to Christ and his Blood as the more-than-sufficient divine answer to our sins. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20).

13. *Intercession*

“Since Abraham, intercession – asking on behalf of another – has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God’s mercy. In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ’s, as an expression of the communion of saints” (CCC 2635).

It is good to keep a “prayer list” of people to intercede for daily. We should also ask others to pray for us, as well as praying for them. All men on earth need each other’s help, spiritually as well as materially, especially those in authority in Church, state, and families.

The saints in Heaven no longer need our intercession, but we need theirs, and God loves to answer our prayers by glorifying his intermediaries. “We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world” (CCC 2683). Their bodies are gone from the earth *but not their love*. They are the “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) who surround us like spectators in a

stadium. The “Church Triumphant” in Heaven, “the Church Suffering” in Purgatory, and “the Church Militant” on earth are one Body in three places, united in prayer through the Communion of Saints.

14. *Petition*

Petition (asking) should not be the whole of our prayer; there are four other essential purposes. Nor should it habitually be first in time; for if it is prefaced and surrounded by adoration, thanksgiving, repentance, and intercession, it gets a place and perspective more in tune with reality.

Nevertheless, we should not try to be “high minded” and scorn this obvious and popular purpose of prayer; for we do need many things, and God does want us to ask for them. In fact, he often withholds good things from us until we pray (petition) for them, because he sees that what we need first and most is to pray. We need to petition for the same reason we need to adore, to thank, to repent, and to intercede: to be honest to reality, to live in the truth of humility instead of the illusion of pride. For to petition is to admit what we are: beggars. “[B]y prayer of petition we express awareness of our relationship with God. We are creatures who are not our own beginning, not the masters of adversity, not our own last end. We are sinners who as Christians know that we have turned away from our Father” (CCC 2629). Petition is not the highest kind of prayer, but precisely because it is not, it is humble and honest, and thus pleasing to God.

In all five kinds of prayer, including petition, we should ask the Holy Spirit to help us to pray, for Scripture says that he “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”¹⁰⁴ (Romans 8:26; CCC 2630).

“[E]very need can become the object of petition” (CCC 2633), for “my God will supply *every* need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). Saint Francis of Assisi asks: “Which do you think is the more ready: God to give or we to ask?”

“To pray” *means* in ordinary language primarily “to petition,” to ask. Thus, when Catholics “pray to” saints, they do not adore or worship them, as Protestants often charge, but merely petition them to intercede with God for us, as we would petition any living friend on earth to do the same.

15. *When to pray?*

There are four answers: at important times, at all times, at special times, and at this time.

- 1) We should pray before the important things we do – usual things (such as getting up, sleeping, eating, and receiving the sacraments) as well as unusual things. In the Gospels, “Jesus prays *before* the decisive moments of his mission” (e.g., Luke 3:21; 9:28; 22:41-44; CCC 2600).
- 2) We should pray at *all* times. Saint Paul writes, “Pray constantly” (1 Thessalonians 5:17 – one of the shortest verses in the Bible, only two words). “*It is always possible to pray....* ‘It is possible to offer fervent prayer even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop,...while buying or selling,...or even while cooking’”³⁷ (CCC 2743). All of one’s daily work can be offered as a prayer.

- 3) But if we do not also make *special* times for prayer, we will *not* remember to pray at all times. Our lives require rhythms, structures, schedules. “Prayer...ought to animate us at every moment. But we tend to forget him who is our life and our all.... ‘We must remember God more often than we draw breath’¹ [Saint Gregory Nazianzus]. But we cannot ‘pray at all times’ if we do not pray at specific times, consciously willing it” (CCC 2697).

Since our lives have daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms, so does our prayer. “The Tradition of the Church proposes to the faithful certain rhythms of praying intended to nourish continual prayer. Some are daily, such as morning and evening prayer, grace before and after meals, and the Liturgy of the Hours. Sundays, centered on the Eucharist, are kept holy primarily by prayer. The cycle of the liturgical year and its great feasts are also basic rhythms of the Christian’s life of prayer” (CCC 2698).

All Muslims pray five times a day. Most Christians pray less than that. Perhaps that is why Islam, in many places, is growing faster than Christianity.

- 4) The very best answer to “When to pray?” is: NOW. “Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). The present is the only time there is, for the past is the time that is no longer, and the future is the time that is not yet. We should learn to pray “in the events of *each day*...[for] it is in the present that we encounter him, not yesterday nor tomorrow, but today: ‘O that *today* you would hearken to his voice!...’¹³ (Psalm 95:7; CCC 2659). “Pay later” may be wise, but “pray later” is not.

And we should pray *here* as well as now, and *about* the here and now, not only about large, faraway, abstract things. “It is right and good to pray so that the coming of the Kingdom of justice and peace may influence the march of history, but it is just as important to bring the help of prayer into humble, everyday situations...”¹⁴ (CCC 2660). Not one of the saints fell into what Charles Dickens (in *Bleak House*) called “telescopic philanthropy”: ignoring nearby needs to focus on those far away. God is no specialist in big, faraway abstractions. We meet him, as we meet our family, mostly in concrete little things.

16. *Using formal prayers*

Do we need set prayers at all? Shouldn't we just be spontaneous and use our own words instead of words composed by others?

We should do both. As we need other people's works, we need their words – as in music and literature, so in prayer. It is as natural to pray others' prayers as to sing others' songs. For when we do, we make them our own. We should not merely *recite* these prayers, we *pray* them. We do not “say our prayers,” we *pray*.

We need others' prayers for the same reason we needed the help of walkers when we were infants learning to walk. We are only spiritual infants. “Religion is a crutch,” indeed, and we need it because we are cripples. Others' beautiful prayers are beautiful crutches to help us walk.

17. *Praying the Psalms*

The Psalms are our first and foremost treasure house of prayers. They are the only whole book of prayers in Scripture, the

only book of prayers we know are inspired by the Spirit of God and given to us by the providence of God. There are Psalms for every person, every mood, every situation, every time, and every need. Jews and Christians have used them continuously since David's time, over 3000 years ago, and will continue to use them until the end of time.

The Psalms too are Christocentric because they are both “[p]rayered by Christ and fulfilled in him [since they include many Messianic prophecies]” (CCC 2586).

“Their prayer is inseparably personal and communal” (CCC 2586), private and public, individual and liturgical.

18. *Praying Scripture*

Lectio divina, “divine reading,” is a method of private prayer used and recommended by the Church since ancient times, for clergy and laity alike, both sinners and saints. It is simply reading Scripture as prayer, reading Scripture in God's presence, praying verse by verse, sentence by sentence, or word by word, slowly and thoughtfully, letting the words of Scripture suggest themes of prayer. This is one of the very best ways of praying *and* one of the best ways of reading Scripture, especially the Psalms and the Gospels. “The Church ‘forcefully and specially exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn “the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures.... Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man....’”⁴ (CCC 2653).

19. *Christocentric prayer*

What is the best way to pray? Christianity gives fewer detailed methods of prayer than do most other religions, because

it shows us instead something far better: the final and definitive answer to the question of the way to pray. The way is not a “what” or a “how,” but a “who”: the One who said, “I AM the Way...no one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). “There is no other way of Christian prayer than Christ. Whether our prayer is communal or personal, vocal or interior, it has access to the Father only if we pray ‘in the name’ of Jesus” (CCC 2664).

“The name ‘Jesus’ contains all: God and man and the whole economy of creation and salvation. To pray ‘Jesus’ is to invoke him and call him within us” (CCC 2666). The simplest of all Christian prayers is this one word. “The invocation of the holy name of Jesus is the simplest way of praying always” (CCC 2668).

“This simple invocation of faith developed in the tradition of prayer under many forms in East and West. The most usual formulation, transmitted by the spiritual writers of the Sinai, Syria, and Mount Athos, is the invocation, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners’” (CCC 2667).

This one “Word of God,” Christ, also gave us just one word-prayer, the “Lord’s prayer,” or the “Our Father,” which contains everything we need (see Part II, Section 9).

20. *Vocal prayer*

“Christian tradition has retained three major expressions of prayer: vocal [aloud], meditative [silent, but discursive], and contemplative [wordless]” (CCC 2699).

Vocal prayer is the most obvious, and the most popular. It is also the easiest, for words reinforce thought, and keep us from distraction.

“Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life” (CCC 2701). Jesus, the Word made flesh, fittingly taught us a vocal prayer, the “Our Father,” for “by words, mental or vocal, our prayer takes flesh” (CCC 2700). “The need to involve the senses in...prayer corresponds to a requirement of our human nature. We are body and spirit, and we...must pray with our whole being...”(CCC 2702).

21. *Meditation*

Meditation is silent prayer, without external words but with “internal words” or themes, that serve the same purpose as external words: to help keep the mind on target. It is also called “mental prayer,” but it is not only intellectual: “[m]editation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire” (CCC 2708).

Christian meditation does not consist in emptying the mind of all objects, as in Buddhism. “Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ....” (CCC 2708)

“The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain. We are usually helped by books, and Christians do not want for them: [1] the Sacred Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, [2] holy icons, [3] liturgical texts of the day or season, [4] writings of the spiritual fathers, works of spirituality...” [(5) sacred music,] [6] “the great book of creation [the sea, the stars, the sun, mountains, rivers, gardens – no substitute for Church but very powerful aids], and [7] that of history – the pages on which the ‘today’ of God is written” (CCC 2705).

Each event in our lives can become a thing to pray about, vocally or silently, for each event is a “lesson,” a sign deliberately planned by God for our greatest good (Romans 8:28). In Christ we have a perfect “guru” or guide or spiritual master, who never sleeps,

never errs, and who meets us in every thing and event in our lives, as he promised: “Lo, I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

22. *Contemplation*

Of the three kinds of prayer (vocal, meditative, contemplative) this is the most interior. It is wordless. However, it is not objectless. “In this inner prayer...our attention is fixed on the Lord himself” (CCC 2709).

Contemplative prayer is hard precisely because it is so simple. “Contemplation is a *gaze* of faith, fixed on Jesus. ‘I look at him and he looks at me:’ this is what a certain peasant of Ars in the time of his holy curé used to say while praying before the tabernacle” (CCC 2715). This simple and childlike “method” is really the highest form of Christian contemplative prayer. “Contemplative prayer is...‘silent love’”¹³ (CCC 2717).

A form of contemplative prayer that has brought deep and lasting transformation to parishes and individuals that have initiated it is Eucharistic adoration.

In contemplative prayer there is a forgetting of self awareness and a renunciation of self will. What replaces self is not nothingness but Jesus. “This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self” (CCC 2715) – not of the *reality* of the self (it is not an *illusion*) or of the *value* of the self (it is the image of God), but of its habitual turning-in-on-itself, a renunciation of self-consciousness and self-will. It is a training for and a foretaste of our future Heavenly “ecstasy” (the word means “standing-outside-oneself”), for it is a sharing in the very life of God. Each Person of the Trinity is in eternal ecstasy precisely because he loves and focuses on the others.

Contemplative prayer is not an “elitist” form of prayer, something only for monks and mystics. Everyone can do it, and everyone should. But most Christians refuse God’s invitation to this Heavenly kind of prayer because they feel it “wastes time” – nothing seems to *happen*: we simply rest lovingly in his presence. It is foolish to *measure* here. This contact with eternity cannot be measured by earthly time standards. Therefore, “[o]ne does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has the time: one makes time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dryness one may encounter” (CCC 2710). The secret of succeeding at contemplative prayer is not technique or natural gifts but Churchillian determination. (The shortest commencement speech in history was Churchill’s: “Never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never give up!”) For Satan will always find an excuse for us to avoid this prayer, which he greatly fears.

Paradoxically, although contemplative prayer requires greater effort of will on our part, it cannot be done by our will. God does it. “It is a *gift*, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty” (CCC 2713). The words of John the Baptist about Christ describe this prayer: “He must increase, I must decrease” (John 3:30).

23. *Some mistaken ideas about prayer*

The *Catechism* mentions some typical “erroneous notions of prayer” (CCC 2726-27) which harm not only our *understanding* of prayer but also our *practice*.

- 1) “Some people view prayer as a simple psychological activity.” Psychology can help, but prayer is not psychology. Prayer is supernatural. “[P]rayer is a mystery

that overflows both our conscious and unconscious lives.”

- 2) “[O]thers [see prayer] as an effort of concentration to reach a mental void.” This may be Zen or yoga but not Christian prayer, which is essentially dialog with God in Christ. It is not alone or subjective; the Great Other is present.
- 3) “Still others reduce prayer to ritual words and postures.” But prayer is not impersonal or automatic, like magic or technology. Prayer is not a *technique*, like auto repair.
- 4) “Many Christians unconsciously regard prayer as an occupation that is incompatible with all the other things they have to do: they ‘don’t have the time’” – as if only people of leisure could pray, or as if one could not pray and work at the same time. This error is like a parent thinking he has too many things to do in the house to have time to talk to his children. “[S]ome see prayer as a flight from the world [either embracing it for this wrong reason or rejecting it for this same reason]...; but in fact, Christian prayer is neither an escape from reality nor a divorce from life.” Exactly the opposite: it is a plug-in to the Source of reality and the Heart of life.

If every Christian spent even ten minutes each day – not even fifteen, just ten – “*doing*” nothing but being open to God, in mind and will, letting God love him, then the world would be changed. If *one* person started doing it every day for the rest of his life, his life would be changed.

- 5) “Others overly prize production and profit; thus prayer, being unproductive, is useless.” By this standard, beauty and love and joy are also useless.
- 6) “Still others exalt sensuality and comfort...,” seeking joy in its earthly rivulets and ignoring its divine fountainhead.

24. *Practical obstacles to prayer*

The *Catechism* also mentions (CCC 2728) some inner attitudes of heart that may be obstacles to prayer and must be fought and overcome:

- 1) “discouragement during periods of dryness” – but God has sent or allowed these to test and strengthen us, for they are the times we grow the *most*;
- 2) “sadness that, because we have ‘great possessions,’¹⁵ we have not given all to the Lord” – but God has given us these possessions (even if they came through our own work) as things to be used for him;
- 3) “disappointment over not being heard according to our own will” – but the purpose of prayer, like life, is not to bend God’s will to ours but ours to God’s;
- 4) “wounded pride, stiffened by the indignity that is ours as sinners” – but we *are* sinners; we must kill our pride, or we will kill our souls;
- 5) “our resistance to the idea that prayer is a free and unmerited gift” – which is also from pride and the desire to control, to “play God” with God.

These are all obstacles of pride, for “the humble are not surprised by their distress...” (CCC 2733)

- 6) “The habitual difficulty in prayer is *distraction*.... To set about hunting down distractions would be to fall into their trap, when all that is necessary is to turn back to our heart: for a distraction reveals to us what we are attached to, and this humble awareness [that we love our distractions so much and God so little] should...lead us resolutely to offer him our heart to be purified.” Distractions are an opportunity for us to practice the essence of prayer: offering God our selves again and again in love. “Therein lies the battle, the choice of which master to serve”¹⁶ (CCC 2729).

Saint Columba writes: “Shame on my thoughts, how they stray...they run, they distract, they misbehave before the eyes of the great God.... One moment they follow ways of loveliness, and the next, ways of riotous shame – no lie...Rule this heart of mine, O swift God... that you may be my love and that I may do your will!”

- 7) “Another difficulty, especially for those who sincerely want to pray, is *dryness*.... This is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony...” (CCC 2731), when he too, on the Cross, felt no “sensible consolations” and cried out, “my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). If we offer up our dryness to God, it can become a participation in *Christ’s* “dark night of the soul.” Dryness is a test: do we choose Christ without comfort, or comfort without Christ?
- 8) The simplest obstacle is so obvious that it is the last one we usually think of. “The most common yet most hidden temptation is our *lack of faith*” (CCC 2732). This lack of

faith manifests itself in simply giving up. For “trust is tested – it proves itself – in tribulation”²² (CCC 2734).

25. *Why don't we get what we pray for?*

Regarding prayers of petition, the question is often asked: Why didn't God answer my prayer?

- 1) All prayers are answered, but often the answer is “No,” because what we ask for is not what we really want, only what we think we want. “Do not be troubled if you do not immediately receive from God what you ask him; for he desires to do something even greater for you, while you cling to him in prayer”²⁹ (CCC 2737).
- 2) Sometimes the answer is “Wait,” because God's timing is wiser than ours. God does not follow our timetable. He's a lover, not a train.
- 3) Jesus tells us that “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8), but “he awaits our petition because the dignity of his children lies in their freedom” (CCC 2736) – or, as Pascal said, “God instituted prayer to communicate to his creatures the dignity of being causes.”
- 4) He also waits for our prayer before he gives us what we pray for because he sees that what we need most of all is prayer, and patience, and conformity of our will to his. In fact, that is the very purpose of prayer: “[t]ransformation of the praying heart is the first response to our petition” (CCC 2739). Humility would answer the question, “Why don't we get what we pray for?” with another question: “Are we convinced that ‘we

do not know how to pray as we ought?”²³ (Romans 8:27; CCC 2736).

- 5) Finally, God waits with his answer in order to make us “pray without ceasing.” “This tireless fervor can come only from love” (CCC 2742). It is to elicit our love that God does everything he does. He does not need our love, but we need to love him. He plunges us into the fire of battle in order to plunge us more deeply into the fire of love. The battle is within us, not between us and God; it is a battle of love against its enemies. “Against our dullness and laziness, the battle of prayer is that of humble, trusting, and persevering *love*” (CCC 2742). Love with these three qualities is a gift of God and the most precious gift in life.

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

²² Num 12:3, 7-8.

⁶ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 56, 6, 9:PL 38, 381.

⁸ Cf. St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 64, 4: PL 40, 56.
⁸ Gen 12:4.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Eph* 1:9.

¹² St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, 16, 9: PG 35, 945.

¹³ Cf. *Rom* 6:5.

⁷⁸ *Jn* 14:13.

⁷⁹ *Jn* 14:6.

⁸⁷ St. Augustine, *En. In Ps.* 85, 1: PL 37, 1081; cf. GILH 7.

¹⁰⁴ *Rom* 8:26.

³⁷ St. John Chrysostom, *Ecloga de oratione* 2: PG 63, 585.

¹ St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat. theo.*, 27, 1, 4: PG 36, 16.

¹³ *Ps* 95:7-8.

¹⁴ Cf. *Lk* 13:20-21.

⁴ *DV* 25; cf. *Phil* 3:8; St. Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum* 1, 20, 88: PL 16, 50.

¹³ St. John of the Cross, *Maxims and Counsels*, 53 in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tr. K. Kavanaugh, OCD, and O. Rodriguez, OCD (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), 678.

¹⁵ Cf. *Mk* 10:22.

¹⁶ Cf. *Mt* 6:21, 24.

²² Cf. *Rom* 5:3-5.

²⁹ Evagrius Ponticus, *De oratione* 34: PG 79, 1173.

²³ *Rom* 8:26.

"Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response."

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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