



## **What is prayer? What is the best way to pray? And why do Catholics pray to Mary and the saints?**

Prayer is our communication with God. Every significant relationship in our lives, for example, marriage or deep friendships, needs communication. Communication supports relationships, deepens them, and enables them to grow. This is also true of prayer, our communication and connection with God.

There are different forms of prayer, just as there are different forms of human communication. With friends or a spouse, communication may be rote or ritual: "How are you today?" or "I love you." It may be from the heart and crafted from deliberately chosen words and expressions. It may mean staying with the other person in silence, a silence that is receptive, accepting, supportive, or affirming. It may be a communication that we share with others, for example, the collective rituals that surround birthday parties or weddings. All these various forms of human communication have an echo in our communication with God in prayer.

There are spoken prayers—some of which we may have learned from a very early age, such as the sign of the cross, the Our Father, and the Hail Mary. There are prayers that come from heart, the desires, needs, and feelings that we want to bring to the Lord. They may be connected with our meditation or reflection on Sacred Scripture or on important life experiences. There is a whole dimension of prayer which is frequently called "contemplative" that stays in silence with the Lord. Saint Teresa had this mind when she wrote her description of prayer: "It is a matter of taking time frequently to be alone with the one we know who loves us." The essential elements are: taking time, frequency, solitude, and a knowledge of being loved by God. The collective prayer or communication with God takes on two particular forms—the liturgy, that is, the celebration of the sacraments and the Liturgy of the Hours (a cycle of prayer drawn principally from the Psalms that marks the hours of the day), and devotions, that is, heartfelt and popular expressions of piety and faith that vary from culture to culture. We know collective prayer at its highpoint in the Mass or Eucharist. We experience devotions often in relationship to Mary and the saints, for example, the traditions surrounding Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Is there a best way to pray? Not really. We need all the forms of prayer—spoken or memorized prayer, reflective prayer of the heart, quiet prayer, devotional prayer, and liturgical prayer. At different moments of our lives, we might rely more on one form or another. We do acknowledge a primacy accorded to the Eucharist or the Mass. The Church has identified the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of the Christian life, and various forms of prayer may draw from the Eucharist or, alternately, lead us to it.

It is essential that we bring ourselves as we are to the Lord in prayer. It is also essential, in words of advice given by a wise priest, that we pray as we can, not as we can't. In the course of praying, we also need to recognize that distractions will come our way. They ought not to



discourage us. They can remind us of our need to re-focus our attention and to purify our hearts. Sometimes, they can even become the subject of our prayer.

Two classic definitions or descriptions of prayer are: talking with God, and raising the mind and heart to God. In either case, as we have seen, the central focus is our open and loving communication with God who has loved us first.

Devotion and prayers to Mary and the saints are important markers in the spiritual lives of Catholic people. What does all this mean? Do these prayers and devotions displace Jesus? How do they fit into an overall vision of faith?

Let's begin with Mary. She belongs to us. She is a part of the human family. At a most decisive moment in our salvation history, she stood for all of humanity and said "Yes" to receiving the Savior into the world. Her mission and her privileges are unique. Still, she belongs to us as part of the human family and as a fellow disciple of her Son, Jesus. Because of her special position in the story of our salvation, Mary merits our admiration and veneration. Because of her shared discipleship, we can find in her a model for our own following of Jesus Christ. Because she is the mother of the Lord and the mother of all disciples, including us, she stands in a privileged position to intercede with the Lord on our behalf. Far from diverting us from Jesus, prayer and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary leads us to attach ourselves more closely to her Son, Jesus.

The saints are the friends of God. They are the men and women who lived their discipleship of Jesus Christ on earth to the fullest extent possible. Some of the saints were heroic witnesses who gave their lives in testimony to their faith as martyrs. Some were remarkable teachers and missionaries and helpers of the poor. Some lived very ordinary lives with extraordinary love and faith. The saints offer us a wide range of possibilities for living out our discipleship of Jesus and the Gospel message. They were men and women and children. They were rich, poor, highly educated, uneducated, racially diverse, married, unmarried, laity, religious, priests, bishops, and popes. This great diversity tells us today that no matter our situation or circumstances, the call to holiness and to be a friend of God is open to all of us. They are models of possibilities for living the Christian life. Because they now stand before God and because they are not only the friends of God but our friends as well, we call on them to intercede for us before the Lord. Finally, we see in Mary and the saints a sign of hope. We hope to join them one day and be gathered together around the throne of God.