



An Introduction to Prayer

GOD'S UNIVERSAL CALL TO PRAYER

"For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy."

—CCC, no. 2558, citing *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Manuscrits Autobiographiques, C 25r*

Descriptions of prayer are abundant throughout Christian history. "True prayer," wrote St. Augustine, "is nothing but love." Prayer should arise from the heart. "Prayer," said St. John Vianney, "is the inner bath of love into which the soul plunges itself." "Everyone of us needs half an hour of prayer each day," remarked St. Francis de Sales, "except when we are busy—then we need an hour." Definitions of prayer are important, but insufficient. There is a huge difference between knowing about prayer and praying. On this issue, the Rule of St. Benedict is clear: "If a man wants to pray, let him go and pray."

St. John Damascene gave a classic definition of prayer: "**Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God**" (CCC, no. 2559, citing St. John Damascene, *De Fide Orth.* 3, 24).

The Catechism clearly defines prayer as a "**vital and personal relationship with the living and true God**" (CCC, no. 2558). Prayer is Christian "insofar as it is communion with Christ" (CCC, no. 2565), and a "covenant relationship between God and man in Christ" (CCC, no. 2564).

It is important to remember that all of Part Two of the Catechism also deals with prayer as it is found in the celebration of the Sacraments and in the Liturgy of the Hours. Liturgical prayer, which is the action of the Church, joins us to Christ, interceding with the Father—in the Holy Spirit—on behalf of our salvation.

SCRIPTURE

Scripture reveals the relationship between God and his people as a dialogue of prayer. He constantly searches for us. Our restless hearts seek him, though sin often masks and frustrates this desire. God always begins the process. The point where his call and our response intersect is prayer. The event is always grace-filled and a gift.

Old Testament People at Prayer

The Role of Faith in Prayer

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob witnessed the role of faith in prayer. God's call came first. These patriarchs responded in faith, but not without a struggle. Essential to their prayer was trust in God's fidelity to his promises. Centuries later, God called Moses to be his instrument for the salvation of Israel from slavery. Moses dramatized the value of intercessory prayer as he vigorously begged God for mercy and guidance for the people making their journey to the Promised Land.

After the people had settled in the Promised Land, there were many powerful witnesses to the importance of faith in prayer. One example is the holy woman Hannah, who longed for a child. Year after year, she made a pilgrimage to the shrine at Shiloh, where she prayed to the Lord and made him a vow that if he would give her a child, she would dedicate the child to God. The Lord answered her prayer, and she conceived and bore a son, whom she called Samuel. He grew up to be a prophet and a judge, a religious leader of God's people. Her song of joy at the dedication of her son to God is a canticle of praise.

My heart exults in the Lord, . . .

*The Lord makes poor and makes rich,
he humbles, he also exalts.*

*He raises the needy from the dust;
from the ash heap he lifts up the poor, . . .*

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's. (1 Sm 2:1, 7-8)

Examples of Prayer

The People of God learned how to pray at the shrine of God's presence, before the Ark of the Covenant in the temple. God raised up priests, kings, and prophets to lead the people in prayer. The people assimilated the prayerful attitudes of awe, wonder, and adoration of God at the celebration of the various feasts and liturgies. The books of the Prophets in particular show them praising God in prayer, seeking his help, and crying out to him in times of opposition and persecution.

The Book of Esther is the story of a woman of faith who was an example for her people of the importance of relying on God in prayer. A prominent official in the Persian Empire conspired to destroy in a single day all the Jews in the empire. At the same time, a Jewish woman, Esther, was the queen. She sought the help of God, praying, "My Lord, our King, you alone are God. Help me, who am alone and have no help but you" (Est C:14).

With courage, she explained the plot to her husband the king: "I ask that my life be spared, and I beg that you spare the lives of my people" (Est 7:3). He heard her plea, canceled the massacre, and executed the official. The people praised God that their sorrow was turned into joy.

Esther's actions are remembered by the annual observance of the Feast of Purim. The feast celebrates God's providential care of his people in response to Queen Esther's prayers.

The Psalms: Prayers of the Assembly

Poets like King David and many other holy authors over a number of years composed the masterpiece of prayer known as the Psalms. These incomparable prayers nourished the people both personally and communally. They embraced every age of history, while being rooted in each moment of time. They were sung at the Temple, in local synagogues, in family settings, on pilgrimages, and in the solitude of personal prayer. They formed the basis of the prayer of Jesus and, as such, can be used to draw us into his prayer as well. The Psalms are part of every celebration of Mass. They also form the heart and soul of the Liturgy of the Hours, that public daily prayer of the Church, which prolongs the Eucharistic celebration and gives praise to God.

The Canticle of Judith belongs to the genre of psalms and memorializes the vivid story of how God delivered his people through the leadership of the valiant woman Judith. The Book of Judith cites her example as a way to help God's people trust in the divine presence among them. Despite all the troubles the people of ancient Israel faced, they had trusted in him as the Lord of history.

This book describes how the Assyrian army besieged the Jewish people. Judith developed a successful plan to defeat the Assyrians. The emphasis in the narrative is on God's intervention to save his people. Judith led her people in a prayer of praise that has many features of the Psalms and was meant to be a prayer of the whole assembly:

***Strike up the instruments,
a song to my God. . . .
A new hymn I will sing to my God.
O Lord, great are you and glorious,
wonderful in power and unsurpassable.
Let your every creature serve you,
for you spoke, and they were made. (Jdt 16:1, 13-14)***

Prayer in the New Testament

The Prayer of Jesus

As a child, Jesus first learned to pray from Mary and Joseph. As he grew in age, he also joined in prayer at the synagogue and at the Temple. But he also had his heavenly Father as the source of his prayer. It was a filial prayer he revealed when he was twelve: "I must be in my Father's house" (Lk 2:49). Jesus addressed his Father by the name "Abba," which in the language of his day was used by children to speak to their fathers.

The Gospels also describe the numerous times Jesus went away from the crowds and his disciples to pray by himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed in agony to the Father knowing the Cross that awaited him, but also praying with acceptance of and obedience to the mission the Father had given him.

Jesus also taught his disciples to pray. In the Gospel of Matthew, for example, he instructed them to pray with simplicity of words and confidence in the Father (cf. Mt 6:5-15; 7:7-11).

The Different types of Prayer

At Pentecost, after nine days of prayer in the Upper Room, the disciples experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit for the manifestation of the Church. The first community of believers in Jerusalem devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to prayers (cf. Acts 2:42). The infant Church was born in prayer, lived in prayer, and thrived in prayer. The Holy Spirit taught

the Church the life of prayer and led her to deeper insights into basic ways of praying: adoration, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise.

Adoration

This form of prayer flows from an attitude that acknowledges we are creatures in the presence of our Creator. It is an act by which we glorify the God who made us. We adore God from whom all blessings flow.

Petition

This is a prayer that takes many forms: to ask, to implore, to plead, to cry out. In each case, it acknowledges how much we depend on God for our needs, including forgiveness and persistence in seeking him. We need to practice the prayer of petition, remembering Christ's call to ask in order to receive, to seek in order to find, and to knock in order that the door may be opened (cf. Mt 7:7).

The first movement of the prayer of petition is asking forgiveness of our sins as did the tax collector in the parable where he was compared to the Pharisee whose prayer lacked humility (cf. CCC, no. 2631). The tax collector begins his prayer with the words, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk 18:13). Humility and repentance characterize a prayer that returns us to communion with Christ.

Intercession

This is the prayer that we make on behalf of the needs of others. Jesus Christ himself, our great High Priest, incessantly intercedes for us. God calls us also to intercede for each other and even for our enemies. Intercessions for others' needs are part of the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours.

Thanksgiving

This form of prayer flows from the Church's greatest prayer, the celebration of the Eucharist. Every moment or event can become a thanksgiving offering. We are called to thank God for all the gifts we have received, including our joys and sorrows, all of which, through love, work towards our benefit.

Praise

"Praise is the form of prayer which recognizes most immediately that God is God. . . . It shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory" (CCC, no. 2639). Scripture is filled with outpourings of praise for God. When we exult in him with simplicity and an open heart, we obtain a glimpse of the joy of the angels and saints who glory in the ways of God.

THE SOURCES AND MANNER OF PRAYING

We must do more than rely on an impulse for our prayer life. St. Paul calls us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes 5:17). The will to pray in a daily, sustained, and structured manner is essential for becoming a prayerful person. The Holy Spirit guides the Church at prayer through her reading of Scripture, her celebration of the liturgy, and the practice of faith, hope, and love.

Daily familiarity with Scripture is a rich source of prayer. We need to do more than read or study Scripture; we should also converse with God, whose Spirit lies within the text and who draws us to appreciate "the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:8).

By our active participation in the liturgy, the prayer of the Church, we encounter the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who impart to us the gifts of salvation. Spiritual writers tell us our heart can be an altar of adoration and praise. **Prayer internalizes the liturgy both during and after its celebration** (cf. CCC, no. 2655).

Faith puts vitality in prayer because it brings us to a personal relationship with Christ. Hope carries our prayer to our final goal of permanent union with God. Love, poured into our heart by the Holy Spirit, is the source and destiny of prayer.

St. John Vianney (1786-1859) wrote: “My God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love you, I want my heart to repeat it to you as often as I draw breath” (CCC, no. 2658, citing Prayer). “Because God blesses the human heart, it can in return bless him who is the source of every blessing” (CCC, no. 2645).

Christian prayer is always Trinitarian. The sweep of our prayer should direct us toward the Father. But access to the Father is through Jesus Christ. Therefore, we also address our prayer to Christ and can do so using titles of Jesus found in the New Testament: Son of God, Word of God, Lamb of God, Son of the Virgin, Lord and Savior, etc. Christ is the door to God.

We must never tire of praying to Jesus. Yet it is the Holy Spirit who helps us to draw near to Jesus. ***“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). The Church invites us to invoke the Holy Spirit as the interior Teacher of Christian prayer. (CCC, no. 2681)***

EXPRESSIONS OF PRAYER

At Mass when the reading of the Gospel begins, we place the sign of the Cross on our foreheads, lips, and hearts and pray, “May the Lord be in our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts.” Lips, minds, and hearts—these symbolize three kinds of prayer: vocal, meditative, and contemplative. These modes of prayer include formal and informal paths, personal and communal expressions, popular piety, and the liturgical prayer of the Church.

Vocal Prayer

The disciples were drawn to Jesus’ own prayer. He taught them a vocal prayer, the Our Father. Jesus prayed aloud in the synagogues and the Temple and “raised his voice to express” personal prayers such as his surrender to the Father’s will in Gethsemane. The seventeenth chapter of John’s Gospel records a lengthy vocal prayer of Jesus, revealing the depth of his intimacy with his Father and his loving concern for his disciples (cf. CCC, no. 2701).

Since we are body as well as spirit, we need to express ourselves orally. Spoken and sung prayers arise from our souls; they can be complemented by bodily gestures such as the Sign of the Cross, genuflection, kneeling, and bowing. When we become inwardly aware of God, to whom we speak, our vocal prayer can become an initial step toward contemplative prayer.

Meditative Prayer

“Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking” (CCC, no. 2705). In meditative prayer, we use our minds to ponder the will of God in his plan for our lives. What does God ask of us? The Church provides many aids for meditation: “the Sacred Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts of the day or season, writings of the spiritual fathers . . . the great book of creation, and that of history—the page on which the ‘today’ of God is written” (CCC, no. 2705). “Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire” (CCC, no. 2708). It is meant to deepen our faith in Christ, to convert our hearts, and to strengthen us to do God’s will.

“There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters” (CCC, no. 2707). Most prominent among these are the *Lectio Divina* of St. Benedict, the radical simplicity of

Franciscan spirituality, and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. These spiritualities also include guidance for contemplation.

Contemplative Prayer

“Contemplative prayer . . . is a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus, an attentiveness to the Word of God, a silent love” (CCC, no. 2724). Like all prayer, this form requires a regular time each day. When one gives God time for prayer, he will give time for one’s other responsibilities. Contemplative prayer is a gift to which we dispose ourselves by resting attentively before Christ. It involves hearing and obeying God’s Word. It is a time of silent listening and love.

The Battle of Prayer

The catechism reminds us that prayer is a battle.

1. A battle against the “flesh”- with our laziness, distractions, and busy-ness.
2. A battle against the lies of the “world” which questions the efficacy of prayer.
3. A battle against internal struggle, which confronts disappointment and lack of faith.

To win the battle we must:

1. We must freely choose to pray and trust that God will answer our prayers as he knows best.
2. We must persevere, even when we doubt.
3. We must pray without ceasing, in humility.

The “facts of faith” about prayer:

1. *It is possible to pray, regardless of where you are or what you are doing (CCC 2743).*
2. *Prayer is a vital necessity...”If we do not allow the Spirit to lead us we fall back into the slavery of sin (Gal 5:16-25). Those who pray are certainly saved, those who do not pray are certainly damned” (CCC 2744).*
3. *“Prayer and the Christian life are inseparable,” (CCC 2745).*

Prayers most often said by the Church:

1. The “Our Father”
 - a. A summary of the whole Gospel
 - b. Included in both the Mass and the Divine Offices
2. The “Hail Mary”
 - a. The Church loves to pray in communion with the Virgin Mary.
 - b. It magnifies the great things the Lord has done for her.
 - c. It entrusts supplications and praises to her.
3. The Divine Offices or Liturgy of the Hours
 - a. Is the daily prayer of the Church, marking the hours of each day and sanctifying the day with prayer. The Hours are a meditative dialogue on the mystery of Christ, using scripture and prayer.
 - b. At times the dialogue is between the Church or individual soul and God; at times it is a dialogue among the members of the Church; and at times it is even between the Church and the world.
 - c. The Divine Office “is truly the voice of the Bride herself addressed to her Bridegroom. It is the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father.” (SC

84) The dialogue is always held, however, in the presence of God and using the words and wisdom of God.

- d. Each of the five canonical Hours includes selections from the Psalms that culminate in a scriptural proclamation.
- e. The two most important or hinge Hours are Morning and Evening Prayer. These each include a Gospel canticle: the Canticle of Zechariah from Luke 1:68-79 for Morning Prayer (known as the *Benedictus*), and the Canticle of Mary from Luke 1:46-55 for Evening Prayer (known as the *Magnificat*). The Gospel canticle acts as a kind of meditative extension of the scriptural proclamation in light of the Christ event. Morning and Evening Prayer also include intercessions that flow from the scriptural proclamation just as the Psalms prepare for it.
- f. In the Hours, the royal priesthood of the baptized is exercised, and this sacrifice of praise is thus connected to the sacrifice of the Eucharist, both preparing for and flowing from the Mass.

g. Morning Prayer

- i. "Celebrated as it is as the light of a new day is dawning, this hour also recalls the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the true light enlightening all people (see Jn 1:9) and "the sun of justice" (Mal 4:2), "rising from on high" (Lk 1:78). Hence, we can well understand the advice of St. Cyprian: "There should be prayer in the morning so that the resurrection of the Lord may thus be celebrated" (GILH, no. 38).

h. Daytime Prayer

- i. (can be prayed at Midmorning, Midday, or Midafternoon)

i. Evening Prayer

- i. "When evening approaches and the day is already far spent, evening prayer is celebrated in order that 'we may give thanks for what has been given us, or what we have done well, during the day.'

j. Night Prayer

- i. "Night prayer is the last prayer of the day, said before retiring, even if that is after midnight" (GILH, no. 84). The Psalms that are chosen for Night Prayer are full of confidence in the Lord.

4. The Catholic Mass

- a. "The center of the whole of Christian life" (General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM], no. 16), is initiated not by us but by God acting in and through the Church as the Body of the risen Christ.
- b. The Liturgy is designed to bring about in all those who make up the worshiping assembly a "participation of the faithful, namely in body and in mind, a participation fervent with faith, hope, and charity" (GIRM, no. 18).
- c. To the extent that we are able to participate in this way, the work of redemption becomes personally effective for each of us.
- d. By such participation we make the actions and prayers of the Liturgy our own; we enter more fully into our personal communion with Christ's redeeming act and perfect worship.
- e. "In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people of God's own possession and a royal Priesthood, so that they may give thanks to God and offer the unblemished sacrificial Victim not only by means of the hands of the Priest but also together with him and so that they may learn to offer their very selves.

- f. They should, moreover, take care to show this by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration. . . . Moreover, they are to form one body, whether in hearing the word of God, or in taking part in the prayers and in the singing, or above all by the common offering of the Sacrifice and by participating together at the Lord's table" (GIRM, nos. 95, 96).

The Lord's Prayer

The Central Prayer of Scripture

The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers. . . . In it we ask, not only for all the things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. This prayer not only teaches us to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them. —CCC, no. 2763, citing St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II-II. 83, 9

The Our Father is called the "Lord's Prayer" because Jesus, our Lord and model of prayer, is its author. There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospels. St. Luke's account of the event contains five petitions. St. Matthew's lists seven. The Church's liturgy follows Matthew's version. St. Augustine wrote seven commentaries on the Our Father. So moved was he by its depth that he wrote, "Run through all the words of holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think you will find anything in them that is not contained in the Lord's Prayer" (Letter, 130, 12, 22). The Our Father is an integral part of sacramental liturgies (Baptism, Confirmation, and the Anointing of the Sick) and of the Eucharist itself. At Mass, it comes after the Eucharistic Prayer, summing up the intercessions of that prayer and preparing us for Holy Communion when we receive Jesus Christ, who is the Bread of Life. It is at the heart of every individual and communal prayer (cf. CCC, no. 2776).

We Address the Father

Before we make our own this first exclamation of the Lord's Prayer, we must humbly cleanse our hearts of certain false images drawn "from this world." Humility makes us recognize that "no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son." . . . The purification of our hearts has to do with paternal or maternal images, stemming from our personal and cultural history, and influencing our relationship with God. God our Father transcends the categories of the created world. . . . To pray to the Father is to enter into his mystery as he is and as the Son has revealed him to us. —CCC, no. 2779, citing Mt 11:27

Our Father

We call God "Father" only because Jesus, the Son of God made man, revealed him as such. Because of our union with Jesus through Baptism, we are given the grace of an adopted, filial relationship with the Father. This begets in us a new self-understanding due to this extraordinary intimacy with the Father and the Son. A term that our Lord uses for Father is "Abba!" This implies that Jesus is saying that a relationship with God should be like that of a child, very close, personal, and dependent.

While we recognize that there is no gender in God, we will be inclined to draw upon our experiences with our earthly fathers when thinking of this title for God. The image of a human father is

generally a positive one, and this helps us to draw near to God as Father. Yet, sadly, there are cases of fathers who have fallen short of the responsibilities of fatherhood.

An understanding of God as Father is already evident in the Old Testament, where God describes himself as being in a special relationship of providential care for the people of Israel and in particular for their king. Jesus' revelation of God as his Father flows from a profound awareness not only of that same providential care but also of an indescribable intimacy (cf., e.g., Jn 14). "As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Gal 4:6).

When we say "Our," we recognize that we are a people bound together by the New Covenant that God has made with us through his Son in the Holy Spirit. While we are indeed individual persons, we are also persons in communion with each other because we have been baptized into communion with the Holy Trinity. The Our Father is a prayer of the Church, hence we pray with the Church when we recite these words, together calling God our Father.

Who Art in Heaven

"Who art in heaven" does not refer to a place but to God's majesty and his presence in the hearts of the just. Heaven, the Father's house, is the true homeland toward which we are heading and to which, already, we belong. —CCC, no. 2802

Heaven is the culmination of our relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit begun in Baptism.

The Seven Petitions

In the Our Father, the object of the first three petitions is the glory of the Father: the sanctification of his name, the coming of the kingdom, and the fulfillment of his will. The four others present our wants to him: they ask that our lives be nourished, healed of sin, and made victorious in the struggle of good over evil. —CCC, no. 2857

Hallowed Be Thy Name

Hallowed means "to be made holy." We do not make God's name holy; God is the source of his own holiness that is his perfection and glory. But we give witness to his holiness by doing his will, being people of prayer, and establishing the earthly conditions by which his holiness is manifested.

God gradually revealed his name. First of all he revealed it to Moses, through whom he tells us that he is "I Am," a person who chooses to be close to us yet remains mysterious. As salvation history unfolded, the people of Israel developed other names they used to refer to God, such as Lord, Shepherd of Israel, and King.

But God's definitive revelation of who he is was through Jesus Christ, who taught us that God is his Father and he is the Son. Through Christ's salvation and the Sacrament of Baptism, we become adopted children of God by grace. Hence we can legitimately call God "Father."

Thy Kingdom Come

In this petition, we pray that the Kingdom promised us by God will come—the Kingdom already present in Christ's Passion, death, and Resurrection. In Matthew's Gospel, there is an extensive revelation of the many aspects of what Christ's Kingdom means in moral and spiritual terms as well as its

relationship to the Church. It is a Kingdom of love, justice, and mercy, where sins are forgiven, the sick are made whole, enemies are reconciled, captives are freed, and the needs of the poor are met.

It is all these things and more, for ultimately the Kingdom is Jesus Christ and all he means for us. The Kingdom is already here because of the redemption of Jesus Christ. But in another sense, it is “not yet” here, since Christ’s final transformation of individuals, society, and culture has yet to happen in its fullness. This is why we need to pray this petition every day and work for its coming.

Thy Will Be Done on Earth as It Is in Heaven

In the third petition, we ask our Father to unite our will to that of Jesus so as to fulfill the plan of salvation in the world. We need God’s help and protection to make this possible (cf. CCC, no. 2860).

Jesus gave us an example of this when he was in Gethsemane on the eve of his Passion and death. He first asked that the cup of suffering might pass from him but also prayed, “Not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42).

What is God’s will? In creating us, God established a plan for how to live in a fully human and spiritual manner. Jesus came to us to show us exactly what that means. The Lord Jesus asks us to be his disciples and shape our lives by faith. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that “the disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ . . . to understand the truth received from him, faithfully to proclaim it and vigorously to defend it” (Declaration on Religious Liberty [Dignitatis Humanae], no. 14).

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

“Our daily bread’ refers to the earthly nourishment necessary to everyone for subsistence, and also to the Bread of Life: the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (CCC, no. 2861). We draw our life from the Eucharist each time we receive Holy Communion.

Just before he left this earth, the Lord Jesus promised to be with us every day. In a remarkable manner, Jesus is present to us in the Divine Sacrament, because he is himself the Bread of Life available to us. The Church’s contemplation always centers itself on the Lord in this Sacrament, which contains the whole treasure of the Church, Jesus Christ.

At the same time, we ask for our material needs. While we seek what we need for our own maintenance and development, we must never forget the poor of the world, who so often lack daily bread. We are called to have solidarity with them and work for their physical and spiritual welfare. We pray for our “daily” bread, implying that we pray for what we need for today and will pray again each day for the needs of that day.

Forgive Us Our Trespasses as We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us

The fifth petition begs God’s mercy for our offences, mercy which can penetrate our hearts only if we have learned to forgive our enemies, with the example and help of Christ. —CCC, no. 2862

The best way to obtain mercy is to be merciful. As Jesus taught us, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Mt 5:7). Failure to forgive others is a major human problem. Holding grudges is common. Failure to forgive routinely tears apart families, neighborhoods, and even nations. Jesus stressed mercy and forgiveness in numerous ways such as when he asked the Father to forgive those who crucified him (cf. Lk 23:34). We pray to God that we may be able to forgive as much as we are forgiven.

And Lead Us Not into Temptation

God wants to set us free from evil; he tempts no one (cf. CCC, no. 2846).

When we say “lead us not into temptation” we are asking God not to allow us to take the path that leads to sin. This petition implores the Spirit of discernment and strength; it requests the grace of vigilance and final perseverance. (CCC, no. 2863)

We know that preventive medicine is desirable so that curative medicine may not be needed. Preventing the possibility of sin is preferable to sinning with its negative impact on our lives. Traditionally we have been taught to avoid the occasions of sin, that is, persons or situations that may lead us to sin. Virtue grows stronger with its practice. In this petition, we entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit to keep us alert to the dangers of sin and give us the grace to resist temptation. A meditation on how Christ resisted temptation in the desert is a fruitful and inspiring example of how we should conduct ourselves in the face of temptation (cf. Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4: 1-12). “It is by his prayer that Jesus vanquishes the tempter, both at the outset of his public mission and in the ultimate struggle of his agony” (CCC, no. 2849).

But Deliver Us from Evil

In the last petition, “but deliver us from evil,” Christians pray to God with the Church to show forth the victory, already won by Christ, over the “ruler of this world,” Satan, the angel personally opposed to God and to his plan of salvation. —CCC, no. 2864

As always throughout this prayer, we are reminded that we pray with the Church. We do not pray alone but in union with the community of believers around the world—all of us bound by our union with Jesus in the Spirit and with an adoptive filial relationship to the Father.

The Catechism emphasizes that we ask God to deliver us from the Evil One—Satan, the devil (cf. Jn 17:15). The evil we confront is not just an abstract idea, but an evil, fallen angel who wants to prevent our salvation. We entrust ourselves to God so that the devil may not lead us into sin.

“One who entrusts himself to God does not dread the devil. ‘If God is for us, who is against us?’” (CCC, no. 2852, citing St. Ambrose, *On the Sacraments*, 5, 4, 30; cf. Rom 8:31). We ask God to deliver us from all evils—past, present, and future—of which Satan is the author or instigator.

Doxology

There is a final doxology which was added by the early Church: “For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever” (cf. *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles [Didache] 8, 2; Apostolic Constitutions, 7, 24*). It is recited by Latin Catholics after the prayer which follows the recitation of the Our Father during Mass. These words of praise echo the first three petitions, and we use them as words of adoration in union with the liturgy of heaven.

Amen

We conclude with the “Amen,” which means, “So be it.” We joyfully ratify the words that Jesus has taught us (cf. CCC, no. 2856).

The Hail Mary

Along with the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary is one of the most widely used prayers in the Catholic Church. The first half of the Hail Mary comes from Luke’s Gospel accounts of the Angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary that she was called to be the Mother of God’s Son (Lk 1:26-56). The second half is an intercessory prayer developed in the Church’s tradition.

- “Hail Mary, full of grace.” This is the greeting the Angel Gabriel spoke to Mary of Nazareth. Gabriel proclaims that Mary is full of grace, meaning that she is a sinless woman, blessed with a deep union with God, who had come to dwell in her.
- “The Lord is with thee.” Mary has been chosen by God for this great privilege. He is with her, having already preserved her from sin and filled her with grace. This does not mean that Mary is deprived of her freedom. She lives in graced friendship with God and freely offers him her undivided heart.
- “Blessed art thou among women.” This was the greeting given Mary by her cousin Elizabeth when Mary came to visit and help Elizabeth with the birth of her forthcoming child (Lk 1:42). As Scripture points out, Mary holds a singular place among all God’s chosen ones in the history of salvation. Mary is the world’s most honored woman.
- “Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” This is another beatitude or blessing uttered by Elizabeth, who spoke these words after her child, John the Baptist, leaped in her womb at the moment she hears the greeting of Mary. Elizabeth is inspired by the Holy Spirit to bless Mary for believing the message of Gabriel. Elizabeth acknowledges the presence of God in Mary’s womb: “How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:43). This is the first time in Scripture that Mary’s faith is praised.
- “Holy Mary, Mother of God.” Sometime in the Middle Ages, the second half of the Hail Mary, which begins by invoking her title of Mother of God, was composed. This title comes from the earliest days of Christian faith. Mary is the Mother of God, because she is the mother of Jesus who is true God and true man, as defined by the Council of Ephesus in AD 431. The Eastern Churches call Mary Theotokos, or “Birth-giver of God” (sometimes translated as “Godbearer”). Mary’s response to God engages her in the plan of human salvation through motherhood of Jesus.
- “Pray for us sinners.” We have noted that intercessory prayer concerns the needs and hopes of others. Jesus Christ, our High Priest, always intercedes for us before the Father, and he calls us to intercede for others as well. The saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary continue this prayer of intercession in heaven. As Mother of the Church, Mary continues to pray with a mother’s care for the Body of her Son on earth. At Cana, Mary interceded with Jesus on behalf of the couple who had run out of wine. Jesus heard her prayer and turned water into wine. Mary’s last words in Scripture are spoken to us: “Do whatever he [Jesus] tells you” (Jn 2:5). Our holy Mother always brings us to Jesus.
- “Now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” In her life, Mary walked a pilgrimage of faith. Even with all the grace she received from God, she encountered the mysterious ways of God and profound suffering, especially at the death of her Son. She knows what a journey of faith entails, and she accompanies us with prayer as we make our journey to God throughout our lives and at death.