

# Lord, Teach Us To Pray



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# Lord, Teach Us to Pray

The What, Why, and How of Prayer

BY

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## WHAT IS PRAYER? • WHY SHOULD I PRAY?

**T**o answer the question “What is prayer,” we must realize that our search leads, not to an activity, but to a way of being. Prayer is less a function and more a disposition. Indeed, prayer, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) tells us, is “a vital and personal relationship with the living God...the living relationship of the children of God with their Father” (nn. 2558, 2565). To understand the meaning of prayer, we must be willing to be consumed by God’s unbounded gift of divine love. Like Mary at the Annunciation, we must be eager to respond personally to that utter self-giving with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Accordingly, prayer means standing before God and raising up our mind and heart to him with reverent attention and devotion. Prayer is the graced way that we enter into the unceasing pulse of God’s living truth and ineffable goodness.

Prayer is the devout offer of the whole of ourselves in the Holy Spirit to the Father through Jesus Christ.

Since prayer engages and expresses our relationship with God, the essence of prayer is communication. For the way that persons in love deepen their bond of charity with each other is through the sharing of their interior lives in an authentic and generous exchange of words, gestures, and feelings. The conversation of prayer deepens our intimacy with God by drawing us into the communication with him that leads to ultimate communion. It serves as an inspired act of love by which we become deeply united to God. In the process, prayer conforms us to the Lord we love so that, as Saint Teresa of Avila says, “the will becomes united in some way with the will of God.”

The mysterious encounter of prayer takes five basic forms:

- Adoration
- Petition
- Intercession
- Thanksgiving
- Praise

*Adoration* exalts the greatness of God, the Creator and Sustainer, in the spirit of humility and homage. The gracious generosity of God compels us to bless the One who remains the source of every blessing in our life. The prayer of *petition* acknowledges our dependence on God the Father, especially as it prompts us to turn back to him in a spirit of repentance and contrition, asking for forgiveness. Through the prayer of *intercession* we entrust ourselves to God’s mercy, especially by placing before the Father the concerns of others in need. The prayer of *thanksgiving* gives voice to the gratitude that befits every mature and honest person, especially as it calls to mind the

redeeming deeds of Jesus that save us and set us free. Finally, as the *Catechism* explains, the prayer of *praise* “lauds God for his own sake and gives him glory, quite beyond what he does, but simply because he is” (n. 2639).

In short, these five different forms of prayer enable us to love God for what he has created, to love God for his compassionate mercy, to love God for his presence and assistance in our lives, to love God for his redemptive tenderness, and to love God for himself.

But why should we pray? We need prayer in order to be mindful of God and his vital importance in our life. As Saint Gregory of Nazianzus observes: “We must remember God more often than we breathe.” Just as we cannot stay alive without breath, so do we tempt death without prayer. Prayer safeguards our solid, life-giving relationship with God, whose Spirit saves us from ever falling into the slavery of sin. Prayer insures that our most cherished treasure is our friendship with Jesus. As our Lord reminded us: “Where your treasure is, there is your heart also” (Matthew 6:21). We need to remember that prayer does not keep God “up-to-date” regarding our life. As the *Catechism* reminds us, “Our Father knows what we need before we ask him, but he awaits our petition because the dignity of his children lies in their freedom” (n. 2736). We need to pray in order to exercise our free will in a way that reveals that our ultimate desire is to be one with God. In prayer we discover our truest dignity, for “God put us in the world to know, to love, and to serve him, and so to come to paradise” (n. 1721). Prayer keeps us realistic about our limitations and powerlessness. As Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, the “Little Flower” attests: “It is prayer, it is sacrifice that gives me all my strength; these are the invincible weapons which Jesus has given me.”

Prayer purifies and refines our life as it filters out the distractions, the deceptions, and the delusions of the world. Prayer provides a firm foundation for building and shaping all the other relationships in our life. Prayer alerts us that we are not alone in our life of faith. For prayer not only draws us close to God, but it unites us to every other holy one who loves God as we do. Prayer gently reminds us that God can never be reached by thoughts alone. It is only through lived love that God can be reached. We need the embrace of prayer to find the truth and happiness for which we never stop searching.

## HOW AND WHAT TO PRAY

**H**ow do we begin to pray if we have never prayed before? Even before exploring the methods of various prayer forms, we must first embrace a fundamental truth about prayer that the *Catechism* makes clear: “In prayer, the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response. As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call” (n. 2567). Our chief responsibility in prayer, therefore, is to become able and eager to respond to God’s offer of self-giving, image-perfecting love.

We dispose ourselves to be people of prayer by making the truth of God’s love for us the governing force of our lives. In this way, all prayer remains essentially a dynamic of receiving divine love and of responding to that gift by making our own act of love to God. It is that constant act of love to Jesus which remains essential to all good prayer, no matter what form it takes. Since a prayerful act of love to God thankfully acknowledges his love for us, it lifts us up out of ourselves by directing our energy to the

divine Persons of the Trinity. So praying isn't merely "thinking" about God. Yet, whenever we are not actually considering God's love, we are not actually loving him. Therefore, we pray by making a constant active offering of our heart that takes us out of ourselves, and into the Sacred Heart of our Beloved.

Our unceasing act of love keeps us living, not in ourselves, but in Jesus. As Saint Paul reminds us: "the life I live now is not my own, but Christ is living in me" (Galatians 2:20). As soon as we give up our act of love, we are drawn back dangerously into ourselves. Our selfishness and unholy desires begin to assert themselves; our fears dominate us; we become tempted to trust our own ideas and willfulness instead of God. In order to be happy in this life and prepare ourselves for eternal life, we must pray.

The way to begin to pray, then, is to turn all those troublesome things right over to God with the humility, dependence, and confidence of the tax collector in the temple who prayed: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). That is the indispensable foundation for all authentic prayer, as the famous Christian of *The Way of the Pilgrim* discovered. This nameless 19th century peasant walked across Russia and entered into a state of great holiness simply by reciting the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." In learning to pray, it is crucial for us to follow in his footsteps.

The Holy Name of Jesus remains the God-given key to all true Christian prayer. For "to pray 'Jesus' is to invoke him and to call him within us.... 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 2666, 2664). And the *Catechism* assures us that everyone can pray in this way always: "This prayer is possible 'at



all times' because it is not one occupation among others but the only occupation: that of loving God, which animates and transfigures every action in Christ Jesus" (n. 2668).

Practically, then, how do we do this? First, set aside at least 15 or 20 minutes of your day when you are not overwhelmed by distractions, interruptions, or other obligations. Find a quiet, secluded place, and consecrate it to prayer by placing there a crucifix, icon, statue, holy card, etc. Settle yourself in a chair that is comfortable...but not too comfortable. Place your feet flat on the floor and your hands loosely in your lap. Relax...breathe slowly and deeply. Close your eyes. Then begin to recite softly — or just in your heart — the Jesus Prayer.

Don't be surprised at what might happen. For example, your heart might start racing, making you nervous or agitated. Or, thousands of disturbing distractions might come thundering. Or perhaps you will feel absolutely nothing at all. It doesn't matter. Keep your heart and your mind peacefully fixed on the Name of Jesus. And stay there, in his arms, until the 20 minutes are up. Yet, if we get cut short, there is no need to worry. For as the pilgrim assures us, "one short minute of calling on the Name of Jesus Christ outweighs many hours lost in slothfulness." Then, as we go about our business, we should continue to say the Name of Jesus to ourselves silently, no matter where we are or what we are doing, until we get the chance to meditate again.

The unceasing act of love becomes perfected as we learn the sacred traditional prayers of the Church. Every Catholic should memorize these: the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Glory be, the *Gloria* and the Profession of Faith of the Mass, the Apostles' Creed, Come Holy Spirit, the Divine Praises, the *Te Deum*, O Sacred Banquet, the Act of Contrition, grace before and after

meals, the *Magnificat*, the *Angelus*, the *Regina Coeli*, Hail Holy Queen, the *Memorare*, the Fatima Prayer. There are many fine books available that contain these prayers (including our booklet *Prayer Time*, #309) as well as instructions on how to pray the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, litanies and novenas.

In short, praying is as easy as breathing. As the author of *The Way of the Pilgrim* reminds us:

Really to pray means to direct our heart and mind to constant remembrance of God, to walk in his divine presence, to arouse in oneself the love of God by means of meditation, and to say the Name of Jesus in harmony with one's breathing and the beating of one's heart.

## HOW TO DEVELOP A DEEPER PRAYER LIFE

**T**o ask the question "How do I develop a deeper prayer life?" is really to inquire "How can I love God more?" One of the most important treatises of all time on prayer is the anonymous little 14th century book entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In its early pages, it warns against anyone's reading it unless he is deeply committed to following Christ perfectly. Growth in prayer and the love of God is not for "gossips, fault-finders, busy-bodies, or the plainly curious." Rather, advancement in the spiritual life requires a devotion and self-donation worthy of the divine.

That is to say, in order to give ourselves more to God in love and prayer we must recognize that it is God himself who first moves us to ask him for a more profound life of faith. That yearning in us is a reflection of God's own desire. It is God himself who prompts us to want to pray more meaningfully and to love him more authentically. In everything that we do to seek

God's love, we are motivated by the love of the three divine Persons for each other and for us. In order to love God more, we must be disposed to receive God's love more.

Therefore, to deepen our prayer life, we must pray for the grace. That means deliberately and directly asking Jesus to love us, because only his love can make us worthy of his love. Saint Columban once prayed: "Loving Savior, inspire in us the depth of love that is fitting for you to receive as God. So may your love pervade our whole being, possess us completely, and fill all our senses, that we may know no other love but love for you who are everlasting."

At the same time, we must be willing to accept the mystery of God's Providence infallibly at work in our life. Maturity in the spiritual life remains the fruit of holy detachment by which we abandon ourselves to God's will, moment by moment, with the confidence and the peace that come to us from the Resurrection. We pray better and refine our relationship with the Lord the more we surrender ourselves to the truth that God alone provides what we need to love him deeply in this life. We are willing then to accept whatever the Lord provides, no matter what form it takes...even the cross.

Such a sanctified disposition enables us to progress from meditative to a more contemplative form of prayer. In meditation, we allow the Holy Spirit to illumine our minds so that we might prayerfully ponder various truths, mysteries, propositions, events, challenges, and other aspects of the faith. In contemplation, even our mind becomes stilled and at rest. Contemplation is a time simply to be with the Beloved in loving communion and silence.

Unfortunately, it is not so easy for us just to shut off our thoughts. And so, the author of *The Cloud* suggests that we, who have entrusted ourselves to the guidance and protection of God's Providence, simply confide all our distractions, memories, temptations, anxieties, and concerns over to God. Contemplation calls us to let go of them...to be still and to know that God is God. We cannot enter into contemplative prayer without confessing that God — not we — is in charge. And so *The Cloud* instructs us to dispel our obsessions “by turning to Jesus with loving desire.”

Only then does contemplative serenity become possible. Then we are free to center our love on God and to rest in the awareness of his enveloping presence. However, the author warns us that it is not unusual in the beginning to feel nothing but a kind of darkness around our minds. We may seem to know and to feel nothing but a fervent intent toward God in the depths of our being. And authentic contemplation is content with that.

At the same time, the devotion and self-donation required of spiritual maturity compel us to put our contemplation into action by sharing with others the fruit of our contemplation. Saint John writes: “The way we came to understand love was that Jesus laid down his life for us; we too must lay down our lives for our brothers. I ask you, how can God's love survive in a man who has enough of this world's goods yet closes his heart to his brother when he sees him in need?” (1 John 3:16-17) An admirer of Gerard Manley Hopkins once asked the great Jesuit poet how he might come to love God with the same ardor that Hopkins' poetry so eloquently expressed. Father Hopkins replied simply: “Give alms.” In other words, if we want to love God more, we must generously share with others in need the love he has already given us.

To conclude, the desire to deepen our prayer life is a confirmatory sign that we have grasped the truest meaning of life. For, as Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection tells us, the ultimate goal and highest vocation of the human person is “to become the most perfect adorers of God we possibly can.”

## HOW TO INTEGRATE PERSONAL PRAYER WITH THE MASS

**T**he *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the liturgy of the Church “engages the faithful in the new life of the community and involves the conscious, active, and fruitful participation of everyone” (n. 1071). One important way that we fulfill this call to participate is through a fervent life of prayer, which proceeds from the liturgy. The *Catechism* teaches that “in the liturgy, all Christian prayer finds its source and goal. Through the liturgy the inner man is rooted and grounded in the great love with which the Father loved us in his beloved Son. It is the same marvelous work of God that is lived and internalized by all prayer” (n. 1073).

The Liturgy of the Church makes present and communicates the mystery of salvation. That experience of mystery “is continued in the heart that prays.... Prayer internalizes and assimilates the liturgy during and after its celebration” (n. 2655). But how do we move from participation in the Mass to the practice of private prayer in a way that promotes continuity, balance, and spiritual integration?

The answer appears in the very plan of the Mass. As we meditate on the Order of the Mass we discover a remedy for the upheaval, confusion, and disorder of our lives. The structure of

the Mass reveals the rhythm, pattern, and flow appropriate to every rectified Christian life. The form of the Mass we celebrate informs the way we pray on our own. As we consider the parts of the Mass in their proper sequence, we see how, taken as a whole, they present a complete and organic model for our life of prayer.

The way we begin the Mass serves as the foundation for all prayer. As we bless ourselves with the sign of the cross we assert — even in the outward physical gesture — that we are personally united to the Passion of Christ. The blessing with which we begin signifies that the cross of Jesus remains the source of every blessing in our lives. At the same time, by corporeally imaging Christ’s cross, we affirm that our prayer is a sharing in Christ’s sacrifice. It is our privilege to enter into that sacrifice with all our spirit, soul, and body.

As we mark our bodies with the cross of Jesus, we speak the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Catechism* reminds us that a name expresses a person’s essence, identity, and the meaning of his life (n. 203). We begin to pray, not in our own name, but in the Name of the Blessed Trinity in whom we find our truest identity and the authentic meaning of our life. This action gives fervent assent to the truth that God has manifested his holiness by giving us his Name “in order to restore man to the image of his Creator” (n. 2809).

That honor fills us with utter confidence in the mercy of Jesus, which leads us next to lay before the Lord all of our sins in a prayer for forgiveness. Such a posture of humble self-knowledge remains the foundation of all authentic prayer. For a healthy sense of sin that keeps us mindful of our own imperfection and nothingness also recalls how every impulse to prayer remains an invitation to renew our trust in the tenderness and compassion of

God. As in the *Gloria*, we prayerfully carry on our praise of God for his redemptive grace.

Just as the penitential rite leads us to the liturgy of the Word, so does our prefatory prayer of contrition dispose us for *lectio divina*: a reverent reading of and reflection upon sacred texts. When Holy Scripture is read in the Church, Christ himself is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks (CCC, n. 1088). Through our attentiveness to the dynamic presence of the Lord in the word of God, we hear Jesus encouraging, guiding, and consoling us in our prayer. We rely on God's word to deepen our faith through our docility and receptivity.

Our ardent meditation on the Good News bears fruit in our prayer of intercession. The more we ponder divine truth, the more zealously do we ask for the good of God to touch the lives of all, especially those most in need. Mature faith expresses the benefits of contemplation in charitable actions, principally prayer. Intercessory prayer lifts us up out of our willfulness and self-centeredness. Prayer of petition voices a loving concern that our neighbors may profit from the same graces we have received.

Such progress in prayer gently turns our focus from God's abundant gifts to what we ourselves might offer in faith. At Mass, the bread and wine are presented with the prayer: "Lord, we ask you to receive us and to be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts." The love of God that has filled our hearts now moves us in private prayer also to make a pleasing offering of ourselves to God.

Then, in contemplative stillness and love, we remain silently united with the Beloved, delighting in his intimacy and peace. With deep thankfulness, we remember the many favors and blessings that have transformed our lives. And in silent

communion, we give ourselves in consecration to our Savior so that he might more and more fashion us in his divine image. Our utterance of the Lord's Prayer signals just how much we have been perfected in the image of the Son.

In short, whenever we need guidance in our prayer life, we need only look to the worship of the Mass to refresh the key elements of prayer, to restore the priorities of our life, and to show us the way to deeper union with God. For as we prayerfully devote ourselves to the sacred exemplar of the Mass, we become more firmly grounded in the Father's love through our internalization of the Church's Liturgy.

#### HOW TO DIVIDE INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY PRAYER WITHIN FAMILY LIFE

**T**he *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes the importance of family prayer:

“The Christian family is the first place of education in prayer. Based on the sacrament of marriage, the family is the ‘domestic church’ where God’s children learn to pray ‘as the Church’ and to persevere in prayer. For young children in particular, daily family prayer is the first witness of the Church’s living memory as awakened patiently by the Holy Spirit” (n. 2685).

In order to understand how to divide individual and family prayer within family life, we might consider three key aspects of family life: relationships, time, and change.

The combination of diverse relationships within the family affects the way the members pray both individually and as a family, beginning with the relationship between parents and children. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that, in



the beginning, children cannot distinguish between absolute, divine goodness and the creaturely goodness they encounter in their parents. As a result, children at first cannot differentiate between parental love and God's love. This difference must be taught tenderly through the witness of the parents' own humility, prayer, and dependency upon God.

For this reason, *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) stresses the fundamental and irreplaceable role of the concrete, living example of parents in educating their children to pray. "Only by praying together with their children can a father and a mother (exercising their royal priesthood) penetrate the innermost depths of their children's hearts and leave an impression that the future events in their lives will not be able to efface" (FC, 60).

Moreover, in this regard, parents "must be convinced that the first vocation of the Christian is to follow Jesus.... Parents should respect this call and encourage their children to follow it" (CCC, n. 2232).

As a result, the excellence of a family's prayer life very much flows from each individual member's relationship with the Lord. For this reason, if possible, parents — and godparents — should provide their children with the religious articles that foster an intimate personal relationship with God, especially a Bible, a crucifix, a rosary, an image of the Blessed Mother, a missal, a collection of devotional prayers, etc. Every member of the family should be encouraged to make time each day to be alone with God in prayer.

At the same time, devotion to the communion of saints should be explained and cultivated, especially by introducing children to the lives of their own patrons and of the patron saints

of the entire family. Litanies and lives of the saints — read privately or as a family — further this interest.

With a missal, each member of the family might be encouraged to meditate privately on the Scripture readings for the coming Sunday, especially the Gospel. That meditation might be guided by the question: What is Jesus saying to me in these readings? After that, a certain time might be set aside each week before Sunday Mass to share these reflections together. Such discussion serves to deepen each person's appreciation of the Scripture and of the active presence of the Lord. At the same time, shared reflection of this sort draws the family more deeply together in God's love and truth, and prepares them to participate more fully in the Liturgy.

In a unique way, the rosary prayed as a family helps to define and strengthen family relationships. For in that prayer we recall the Incarnation of Jesus, particularly as his life is revealed through the mystery of the Holy Family, which the Christian family seeks to image. We meditate on the life of the Son of God by calling on the heavenly Father as well as the Mother of God. Thus, "the rosary should be considered as one of the best and most efficacious prayers in common that the Christian family is invited to recite.... When the family gathering becomes a time of prayer the rosary is a frequent and favored manner of praying.... Generous imitation of the Blessed Virgin's interior spiritual attitude constitutes a special instrument for nourishing loving communion in the family and for developing conjugal and family spirituality" (*FC*, 61).

The wonder of time also presents a golden opportunity for family prayer and spiritual growth. A simple morning prayer offered together gives each day a God-centered focus, and

provides a habitual reminder to impressionable young people about the real priorities in life. In the same way, night prayers said together form a lasting attitude of hopefulness in which gratitude for the day and longing for the next morning make us mindful of eternal life, for which our earthly sojourn is a preparation. Mealtime also is a prime occasion for family prayer that reinforces the importance of unfailing thankfulness and constant, humble dependency upon the grace of God.

Liturgical time is also replete with occasions for special family prayer. The rituals and special customs attendant to Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Eastertide bless the family with a sanctified way of accounting the passing of time. A reverent commemoration of the Church's holy days, especially by praying novenas in preparation, enables children to grasp the right way to celebrate holidays.

Family life is filled with constant change that prayer should consecrate. "Joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments, births and birthday celebrations, wedding anniversaries of the parents, departures, separations and homecomings, important and far-reaching decisions, the death of those who are dear, etc. — all of these mark God's loving intervention in the family's history. They should be seen as suitable moments for thanksgiving, for petition, for trusting abandonment of the family into the hands of their common Father in heaven" (*FC*, 59).

In a special way, family prayer should predominate as family members prepare for the sacraments — Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, First Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony and the Anointing of the Sick. The sacraments signal holy changes that sanctify, drawing all of us closer to God.

Such a program of family prayer approximates the time-tested pattern of prayer observed by many religious communities in the Church. It complements private meditation and liturgical prayer so that the Christian family can “assume and comply fully with all its responsibilities as the primary and fundamental cell of human society” (*FC*, 62).

## TEENAGERS AND PRAYER

Not long ago, the president of New York’s Covenant House, Daughter of Charity Sister Mary Rose McGeady, gave a talk in which she described three powerful drives in children today. She noted that young people have a need for attachment to a parental figure. They need also to learn to tame and to diffuse inherent aggression. And they have a need for sufficient and ongoing stimulation so that their cognitive and communication skills develop along with their capacity to relate to others.

A healthy life of prayer responds powerfully to each of these needs in teenagers by giving them a satisfying sense of being children of the Father, by imbuing them with divine peace, and by energizing and enriching their heart, soul, mind, and strength so as to foster a fervent relationship with God and with other people. The question remains: how can we present prayer to teenagers in a way that makes it meaningful and attractive to them? The particular struggles in a teenager’s life demand a specialized strategy for introducing and fostering prayer. That is to say, for prayer to make sense in the confusion and turbulence of a teenager’s life, it must zero in on the values for which young people yearn and with which they struggle. For the teenager,

prayer must address two crucial questions: “What matters most in my life?” and “What do I want?”

And it must answer those questions in the very way that Jesus himself responds to them. For the key to teenage prayer is an active, vital relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ. Whatever particular shape it takes, the prayer life of the teenager should strive to strengthen the convictions that best form and mold the life of the young Christian. That is why teenage spirituality does well to focus deeply on chapters 14 through 17 of the Gospel according to John — Jesus’ Last Discourse. For there the Lord profoundly reveals in the most tender of words the answer to the unsurety regarding meaning, value, and desire in life.

Teenagers cannot pray without first resolving the nagging nihilism that infects their life. So much of what they encounter seems so aimless, arbitrary, empty, and futile. The too prevalent tragedy of teenage suicide reveals this grim fact. And the sometimes beleaguering experience of school studies offers little consolation. How can the abstract axioms and proofs of geometry, or the memorized episodes of distant history speak to the personal, urgent longings teenagers experience moment by moment?

Teenagers crave the truth that sets them free from such despondency. And that central, essential truth, as the *Catechism* makes clear (n. 27), is that the desire for God is written in the human heart. We are created by God and for God, and God never ceases to draw us to himself. Only in God will we find the truth and the happiness that we never stop searching for. In fact, we cannot live fully unless we freely acknowledge that love and entrust ourselves to the Creator.

That is why the centerpiece of all teenage meditation must be the assurance of Jesus: “It was not you who chose me, it was I who

chose you” (John 15:16). God tirelessly seeks us out and carries us back to himself, like the good shepherd in search of the lost lamb. In our straying, we become the Lord’s priority. For this reason, Jesus insists over and over again in his Last Discourse that he is leading us to the Father, that we are in the Father, that we are loved by the Father, and that the Father’s name protects us. These words must be repeated again and again to teenagers trying to pray. For that attachment to the Father — despite possible antagonism with parents at home — informs teenagers’ faith and fills their life with authentic meaning and freedom.

At the same time, teenagers frequently grapple with the agonizing anxiety of not knowing how they fit in. They need to know that their life is important...that they are called personally to make a contribution that makes a difference. It is difficult for them to find purpose in a world in which so few strive for excellence...where so many have compromised ideals and integrity.

Teenagers must be consoled with the encouraging words of Jesus who proclaims: “I am the vine, you are the branches.... You will do the works I do and greater by far than these.... Go forth and bear fruit.” In the hopefulness of such Good News, teenagers are able to give assent to true Christian peace, which means having confidence that the providence and will of God are at work in our lives at every moment as the sure means to perfect happiness.

In this way, the restlessness and aggression that otherwise express teenage angst get pacified. Rather, the truth of God’s love and election moves teenagers to actions and choices that quicken their sense of vocation and personal responsibility. By their vibrant, personal union with Jesus, the teenager comes to embrace what the *Catechism* professes: “Human freedom attains its perfection when directed toward God.... The more one does

what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just” (nn. 1731, 1733).

And the teenager who is yearning for love and friendship finds deep satisfaction in the words of Saint Paul who declares that we “belong to Jesus” (Romans 1:6; Galatians 3:29, 5:24). All authentic friendship finds its source and strength in the avowal of Jesus before his death: “You are my friends. . . . I call you friends” (John 15:14-15). Teenagers must be convinced that Jesus loves them deeply just the way they are. In the laying down of one’s life — our selfishness, willfulness, and self-indulgence — the true meaning of love emerges. The passion for stimulation that teenagers so often seek in sensuality, alcohol, drugs, movies, music, and materialism gets satisfied instead in the Passion of Jesus.

The more teenagers become convinced of God’s love by experiencing how much they belong to Christ, the more that lived intimacy transforms and directs every wayward drive. The priority of the Lord to confirm his friendship with his disciples becomes the teenager’s priority as well. In this way, the teenager discovers how one becomes a fully alive person precisely by devoting oneself to another in commitment, covenant, and community.

As hope is renewed through reassurance of God’s presence and power in us, teenagers come to know Jesus the Way. As faith is strengthened through meditation on God’s unending call and invitation to grace, teenagers come to know Jesus the Truth. And as love is redefined through the personal sacrifice of Christ who goes to his death while calling us his cherished friends, teenagers come to know Jesus the Life. By their immersion in this Good News, teenagers can begin to pray.

## THE THEOLOGY OF PRAYER

**W**hat does it mean when we don't get what we ask for in prayer? To understand how prayer works we must first have a deep appreciation of the ways of friendship. A true friend always wills to bring about the desires of the one he loves. Authentic friendship, therefore, always wishes the "good" of the loved one. It is out of love that God generously responds to the desires we place before him in prayer, for God has called us to friendship with him by making us in his image and likeness.

This privilege of divine friendship also explains why some requests we make in prayer do not get granted. For example, it is not uncommon for us to want things that we think would be good for us, but which in reality are not. At times we can make our request without sufficient reflection or without serious consideration of the repercussions of our request. At other times it might be impossible for us to foresee how a request, if granted, would adversely affect our life. As a good friend, God does not grant those prayer requests that are apparent goods, but only those that are truly good for us. Moreover, since this friend is divine, he possesses the wisdom to know what is good for us when we are not sure.

A fruitful friendship depends on energetic effort, generous self-giving, and regular communication. The same is true of prayer. Sometimes requests are not granted because we fail to apply ourselves ardently and constantly to prayer. By growing lukewarm or inattentive to our petition, we may break the momentum that carries our request to its appointed end. Friends do not try to rush or hurry their friends. And fickleness remains a great enemy of friendship. In the same way, our persistence,



perseverance, and patience provide the spiritual sustenance we need to see our request answered in God's good time.

Moreover, the closer we are to our friend, and the more we are attentive and conformed to him, the easier it is to receive what we ask from that friend. In the life of faith, when we fail to approach God in heartfelt contemplation, with devout affection, and with a humble but firm intention, we should not be surprised if our request goes unanswered. It is our nearness and intimacy with God that dispose the fitting way that God fulfills the desires we place before him.

In the same way, whenever we turn away from our friends for whatever reason we forfeit any expectation that they will fulfill our requests. That turning away from God which is sin produces a similar effect in our prayer life.

But there is also a very positive reason why at times God says No to what we ask. We've had the experience of refusing something to a friend because we know that it will be harmful to him or her. We might also refuse because our experience and insight tell us that something opposite to the request would be even more helpful than what he or she is asking. Similarly, sometimes God elects not to grant the petition of those he especially loves in order to provide his friends with something all the more beneficial for their happiness and holiness. It may be something that we have never thought of...something we never thought possible. This is what led Saint Augustine to write that "the Lord often does not grant what we desire so that he may give us what we desire even more."

Our ability to be attentive and helpful to our friends brings about good effects that go far beyond the requests we make. Friendship perfects, enriches, and fulfills us. The same is true of

prayer. *The Cloud of Unknowing* observes how prayer seems to transfigure people even physically, so that even though they may not be “favored by nature,” prayer makes them appear changed and lovely to behold. Saint John Vianney explains how prayer expands our small hearts, stretching them and making them capable of loving God. And those who knew Saint Elizabeth of Hungary testify that they saw “her face shining marvelously and light coming from her eyes like the rays of the sun” when Elizabeth came from prayer. Those of us who are God’s friends can expect to experience these same wonderful graces in our prayer.

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Citations from the text can be found in the following works:

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## A B O U T   T H E   A U T H O R

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