

What is prayer?

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Prayer is a form of communication, a way of talking to God or to the saints. Prayer may formal or informal. While formal prayer is an important element of Christian worship, prayer itself is not synonymous with worship or adoration.



THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM

The word *pray* is first found in Middle English, meaning to "ask earnestly." It comes from the Old French *preier*, which is derived from the Latin word *precari*, which simply means to entreat or ask.

In fact, although *pray* is not often used this way anymore, it can simply mean "please," as in "pray continue your story."

TALKING TO GOD

While we often think of prayer primarily as asking God for something, prayer, properly understood, is a conversation with God or with the saints. Just as we cannot hold a conversation with another person unless he can hear us, the very act of praying is an implicit recognition of the presence of God or the saints here with us. And in praying, we strengthen that recognition of the presence of God, which draws us closer to Him. That is why the Church recommends that we pray frequently and make prayer an important part of our daily lives.

TALKING WITH THE SAINTS

Many people (Catholics included) find it odd to speak of "praying to the saints." But if we understand what prayer truly means, we should recognize that there is no problem with this phrase. The trouble is that many Christians confuse prayer with worship, and they understand quite rightly that worship belongs to God alone, and not to the saints.

But while Christian worship always includes prayer, and many prayers are written as a form of worship, not all prayer is worship. Indeed, prayers of adoration or worship are only one of the five types of prayer.

HOW SHOULD I PRAY?

How one prays depends on the purpose of one's prayer. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in discussing the five types of prayer in paragraphs 2626 through 2643, provides examples and pointers on how to engage in each type of prayer.

Most people find it easier to begin praying by making use the traditional prayers of the Church. Structured prayer helps us focus our thoughts and reminds us of the way in which to pray.

But as our prayer life deepens, we should advance beyond written prayer to a personal conversation with God. While written prayers or prayers that we have memorized will always be a part of our prayer life—after all, the Sign of the Cross, with which Catholics begin most of their prayers, is itself a prayer—over time we should learn to speak with God and with the saints as we would with our fellow men and women (though always, of course, maintaining a proper reverence).

The Five Types of Prayer

Prayer Is More Than Just Asking for Something

"Prayer," St. John Damascene wrote, "is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God." At an even more basic level, prayer is a form of communication, a way of talking to God or to the saints, just as we talk to family or friends.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes, however, not all prayers are the same. In Paragraphs 2626-2643, the Catechism describes five basic types of prayer. Here are brief descriptions of each type of prayer, with examples of each.

Blessing and Adoration (Worship)

In prayers of adoration or worship, we exalt the greatness of God, and we acknowledge our dependence on Him in all things. The Mass and the other liturgies of the Church are full of prayers of adoration or worship, such as the Gloria (the Glory to God). Among private prayers, the Act of Faith is a prayer of adoration. In extolling the greatness of God, we also acknowledge our own humility; a good example of such a prayer is Cardinal Merry del Val's Litany of Humility.

Petition

Outside of the Mass, prayers of petition are the type of prayer with which we are most familiar. In them, we ask God for things we need—primarily spiritual needs, but physical ones as well. Our prayers of petition should always include a statement of our willingness to accept God's Will, whether He directly answers our prayer or not. The Our Father is a good example of a prayer of petition, and the line "Thy will be done" shows that, in the end, we acknowledge that God's plans for us are more important than what we desire. Prayers of expiation, in which we express sorrow for our sins, are one form of prayers of petition—in fact, the first form, because before we ask for anything, we should acknowledge our sinfulness and ask God for His forgiveness and mercy. The Confiteor or Penitential Rite at the beginning of Mass, and the Agnus Dei (or Lamb of God) before Communion, are prayers of expiation, as is the Act of Contrition.

Intercession

Prayers of intercession are another form of prayers of petition, but they are important enough to be considered their own type of prayer. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes (Para. 2634), "Intercession is a prayer of petition which leads us to pray as Jesus did." In a prayer of intercession, we're not concerned with our needs but with the needs of others. Just as we ask the saints to intercede for us (see *Why Do Catholics Pray to Saints?*), we, in turn, intercede through our prayers for our fellow Christians, asking God to shower His mercy on them by answering their requests. A Prayer of Parents for Their Children and these Weekly Prayers for the Faithful Departed are good examples of prayers of intercession for the needs of others.

Thanksgiving

Perhaps the most neglected type of prayer is prayer of thanksgiving. While Grace Before Meals is a good example of a prayer of thanksgiving, we should get into the habit of thanking God throughout the day for the good things that happen to us and to others. Adding the Grace After Meals to our regular prayers is a good way to start.

Praise

Prayers of praise acknowledge God for what He is. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Para. 2639) notes, praise "lauds God for his own sake and gives him glory, quite beyond what he does, but simply because HE IS. It shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory." The Psalms are perhaps the best-known example of prayers of praise. Prayers of love or charity are another form of prayers of praise—expressions of our love for God, the source and object of all love. The Act of Charity, a common morning prayer, is good example of a prayer of praise.