



How to Pray – Ask the Saints

When I was young I was taught to pray in a certain way. Perhaps you were, too. The prayers either were standard ones, steeped in the tradition of the Church, or prayers of supplication, asking the Lord to fill some need in my life. For me, the things pleaded for in prayer were happiness for my parents, rescue from a difficult problem ("Please, Lord, tell my sister to stop being mean to me!"), maybe some snow to release me from school (a rare treat!).

Part of the whole process of prayer was getting it right, so that even to embark on prayer evoked a sense of mission, a drive to achieve the task. It did not occur to me then that this whole approach to prayer was not necessarily universal or even desirable. As I struggled with saying the words with just the right oomph, with the acutest sense of holy drama, the gentle advice of saints such as Francis De Sales and Peter Julian Eymard was unknown to me. How they might have smiled at the awkward belief that prayer was a matter of me doing it right!

Saint Peter Eymard instructs the soul to stay with any closeness to the Lord, rising up in emotion, that comes through prayer. Forget the words and just rest in the moment with the Lord. Saint Francis De Sales says something similar when he tells us to not fret about formulas and to not start over again when, in the midst of our prayers, we get off track and want to berate ourselves for being distracted. Both these saints remind us that prayer is not so much driven by us, but is a response to the Lord's ever-present invitation to live in Him, to have, as Saint Paul says, our very being in the Lord. Prayer is meeting the Lord and being with Him.

These wise instructions would have been a revelation to me as a ten year old, striving to get all the words out in just the right order. Prayer as an invitation to the greatest freedom, rather than struggling to make your innermost yearnings fit a certain well-defined structure, would have been a very novel idea! But that is prayer, after all – a union with the Lord. It is in prayer that we can share in a grace so joyous, so unbound by human strictures, so radically divergent from the world-lust for things that fizzle. It is also in prayer that we can find the strength to return everyday to cleaning the latrines of sin and sloppiness and suffering that often overwhelm us.

So, how to pray? That's a question that's at once very easy and very difficult to answer. One standard response is that prayer is talking to the Lord, so, just talk! Speak right up and seize every moment to remind Him of your presence (or vice versa). That's one easy answer. A more difficult one recognizes that there are so many different ways of praying, ways that are not equally suitable to each of us. There are active ways of praying in which we do seize the moment. There are also ways of praying in which we relax and the constraints of the will fall away and the Lord shares Himself with us according to His way.

You can pray in silence. Saint Vincent de Paul said that the best form of prayer is when we run out of things to say and are simply silent before our God. Yet you can also pray in the loudest of songs. Saint Augustine opined that to sing is to pray twice.

There is no one formula for prayer, no one size fits all.* For some people, prayers such as the rosary are indispensable; for others the rosary may be an obstacle (even Saint Therese is reported to have had little natural affinity for praying the rosary!). For some people, frequent long meditations come naturally.

You might say that you are easily distracted during prayer. In the midst of some holy exercise you find yourself thinking of what you're going to eat for dinner or some annoying habit your Uncle Ed has. Maybe the lady in the next pew is rattling her bags so loudly that you get off track. Good advice from the saints is to include these annoyances and distractions in your prayer, like this: "Dear Lord, help me overcome my attachment to food," or "Help Uncle Ed deal with the temptations in his life" or "Lord, I know you brought this bag lady to my attention for a reason; fill her with your love and console her in her trials." The important thing is to persevere, and to let your prayers encompass everything that enters into your consciousness while you open yourself to God's Spirit. While you think you're off track, maybe the Lord is simply showing you that He is the one who is the director, with you the actor in His play. His grace often comes in mysterious forms.

Whatever the form your prayer takes, Saint Francis De Sales advises you to avoid judging yourself harshly and wasting time in assessing your progress in prayer. Just do it! Just pray! You'll probably find that the journey of prayer leads you in different directions at various times in your life. But if you pray with sincerity and love and a true thirst for union with God, all your prayers will lead to Him.