

Types of Prayer

How We Pray

There are many types of prayer both in the public prayer or worship of the Church and in the private life of each Christian. We can pray to God alone or in a group, out loud or silently, reciting memorized prayers or praying in words that spontaneously come from the heart. In whatever way we pray, prayer is a communion with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As the Church makes present the mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit in every age through its liturgical prayer, so the praying heart of the believer is linked to the Church's prayer.

Generally, there are three ways to pray: vocal prayer, meditative prayer, and contemplative prayer (see also handouts entitled "Christian Meditation" and "The Heights of Prayer: Contemplation"). **Vocal prayer** is the easiest to understand and practice. It is the first kind of prayer that we teach our children. It is especially suitable for prayer in groups, and therefore is also the sublime public prayer of the Church in its liturgies. For this reason, vocal prayer should not be looked down on as something we do only if we can't "do better." When the apostles asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus taught them the most perfect of all prayers, the Our Father (see Mt. 6:9-13; Lk. 11:1-4). Jesus prayed not only silently, but also vocally (see Mt. 11:25-26; Mk. 14:36; Jn. 17:1-26). We are not purely spiritual beings, but material as well, and vocal prayer turns our voices as well as our minds and spirits, our bodies as well as our souls, our entire being, in love to the One who made us. Yet, like all prayer, vocal

prayer must be an action of the heart seeking God, not merely repetition of words.

Why We Pray

One way to think about the types of prayer is to use the acronym ACTS—for *adoration*, *contrition*, *thanksgiving*, and *supplication*. All of them together define and help to foster that personal relationship with God we have in prayer.

Adoration represents that kind of prayer that is offered to God alone. He is the creator and saviour of the world. In adoration, we exalt the greatness of God who made us and his almighty power which saves us. He alone is the "Lord of hosts... [and] King of glory" (Ps. 24:10). By adoring him, we are humbled and reminded of our own insignificance compared to his greatness and of our constant need to place all our trust in him because everything—every business transaction, every hope, every choice, and every event of human history—depends on him.

The prayer of **contrition** can be considered the first step in the general prayer of supplication. We cannot approach God to ask for our own needs, however, without first begging for his mercy on us as sinners. The prayer of contrition is one of humility and sorrow before a loving Father whose justice requires that we acknowledge our sinfulness, and whose abundant mercy is then poured upon us. Forgiveness of those who wrong us is all a vital ingredient in genuine prayer.

A third type of prayer is **thanksgiving**. Thanksgiving is at the heart of the Church's life; the Eucharist, which is the greatest

sacrament of the Church, is an action of thanksgiving to God. The spirit of thanksgiving at the heart of the Mass is meant to pervade all aspects of life and prayer. With Baptism, we have been inserted into Christ, and so all our thoughts, words, and deeds can be offered in thanksgiving back to God. Thanking God in all circumstances, even during times of trial and suffering, strengthens our faith and hope in his power, and leads us into a deeper communion of love with his Son Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving is incomplete if it is not also linked **with praise**. Praise, as the Catechism explains, “is the form of prayer which recognizes most immediately that God is God” (CCC 2639). We praise God not for what he can give us or do for us, but for who he is. In his vision of Heaven, St. John describes the kind of praise that should be on our lips: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8); or “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 7:12). This is true praise and should be part of our daily prayer.

The most common prayer is that of **supplication** (also called petition or intercession). Having recognized God’s lordship over us and over all creation, it is quite natural to place our needs and petitions before him. There is simply no one else to turn to. Christ promises that “whatever you ask in my name, I will do it” (Jn. 14:13). This may seem too good to be true, so to dissolve all doubt, he repeats himself more forcefully: “if you ask anything in my name, I will do it” (Jn. 14:14). We may feel that we should bring only the “big things” to God—prayers for peace, prayers for righting the wrongs of the world, prayers

for the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth—but Jesus instructs us to pray as little children, bringing to him even our smallest needs and most humble events of the day.

A special type of petition is the **prayer of intercession**. It is a prayer for someone else, or asking someone else to pray for us. Speaking about the Church and all those who draw near to God, Scripture says “[Christ] lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). He is the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5). However, his power of mediation is shared with the Holy Spirit, who also intercedes for us, and with all of us who share in the communion of his Body, the Church. Since our power to intercede for one another is a participation in Christ’s intercession, it is not limited by time or space. Therefore, the Church encourages intercessory prayer not only for the living but also for the dead, and not only for each other here on earth but also seeking the intercession of those nearest the throne of God, his saints in Heaven. The greatest intercessor we can have, of course, is the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose maternal care extends to all her children (see Rev. 12:17) in the same way she interceded with Jesus at the wedding feast in Cana (see Jn. 2:1-10).

(CCC 223-224, 227, 2577, 2625-2643, 2655, 2660, 2699-2704)