

Prayer 101 – Session 1. Suggestions to Help Prepare for Prayer

When we come to pray it is important that we prepare ourselves so that we may hear God leading us and guiding us. How we pray is very personal, but there are some suggestions which can help all of us to pray.

1. **Pick a time to pray that suits you.** If you're a morning person, then praying in the morning might come easier to you. If you're a parent, it might be when the children are at crèche or at school. If you're a worker, it might be during your lunchbreak. What's important is that we pick a time when we won't be disturbed and when we won't be too stressed about other things.
2. **Be faithful to that time.** If we are in love, we want to be in contact with that person all the time, so if we want to deepen our relationship with God, we need to set aside time every day to do this.
3. **Pray at the same time every day.** If possible, pray at the same time every day (they say that it takes about 21 days to develop a habit!). If you pray at the same time every day, it will help prayer to become second nature to you. It will also help you when prayer is not so easy if you have committed to give a certain amount of time to God each day.
4. **Prepare yourself for prayer.** Our lives can be quite hectic. Very often we are running from one thing to another or we have a hundred and one things to think about at the same time. It's important that when we come to pray that we prepare ourselves – that we have a little time of dis-engagement from whatever we were doing before we come to prayer. If you are praying at home, it might be helpful to have a space that is only used for prayer. If you don't have the space to have a permanent sacred space, try to make a prayer space each time you come to pray. Decorate your prayer space with sacred items that help to connect you with God. It might be a crucifix or your favourite image of Jesus. It might be a statue or some combination of the above. The environment in which we pray has a big effect on how we pray.

We can also perhaps prepare to pray through singing or listening to music. I find that listening to some soft music or singing my favourite hymn begins to settle me and prepare me to meet God in prayer. Silence is also a good way to start to prepare to pray. Turn off your mobile phone, or put it in airplane mode if you are using it for Scripture or prayer apps. Ensure insofar as you can that you won't be disturbed. Begin by breathing deeply a few times just to slow ourselves down. You might like to slowly pray the verse of Psalm 46:11: "Be still, know that I am God": Be still and know that I am God. Be Still and know that I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be.

5. **Begin with the Sign of the Cross.** We often underestimate the power of this prayer. Make the Sign of the Cross reverently, taking your time to think about what you are doing.

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Romano Guardini, in *Sacred Signs*, says this about the Sign of the Cross:

“Let us make a large unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us, our thoughts, our attitudes, our body and soul, every part of us at once, how it consecrates and sanctifies us. It does so because it is the Sign of the universe and the sign of our redemption. On the cross Christ redeemed mankind. By the cross he sanctifies man to the last shred and fibre of his being. We make the sign of the cross before we pray to collect and compose ourselves and to fix our minds and hearts and wills upon God. We make it when we finish praying in order that we may hold fast the gift we have received from God. In temptations we sign ourselves to be strengthened; in dangers, to be protected.”¹

When we make the Sign of the Cross with holy water, we also remind ourselves of our Baptism and how God was not content to let us be mere creatures, but loved us so much that he wanted us to become His children.

6. **Light a candle.** If it is possible and safe to do so, light a candle and ask the Holy Spirit to help you to pray. St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, reminds us that:

“²⁶ The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us, without words, as if with groans. ²⁷ And he, who sees inner secrets, knows the desires of the Spirit, for he asks for the holy ones, what is pleasing to God.” (Romans 8:26-27)

The candle also reminds us of our baptismal candle and how we can truly speak to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

7. **Get comfortable.** I know that sounds strange, but again we pray with our whole person. We are not just spiritual creatures. The human being is body and soul. For some people, kneeling is their preferred way of posture during prayer, because it acknowledges God’s divinity and our humility before God. For others, kneeling isn’t possible so it might be a case of sitting with our feet firmly on the floor, knees hip width apart and back straight so that we can enter into our prayer without fidgeting too much.
8. **Keep a piece of paper and a pen beside you.** Distractions happen in prayer. Sometimes we might spend the whole of our prayer time thinking about something that we have to remember to do afterwards. If it is important, take a moment to jot it down so that you don’t have to focus on it and return to your prayer. If your distractions are not something you have to remember, just acknowledge them and gently return to prayer.
9. **Begin by praising God.** When Jesus was asked by his disciples how to pray, He gave them a model of prayer, the Lord’s Prayer or the Our Father.

¹ R. Guardini, 1955, *Sacred Signs*. Available Online: <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/sacred-signs-11190>

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The first three petitions of the Our Father are about praising God: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

Let us spend a little time at the beginning of each prayer time praising the Giver of the gifts and thanking Him for answering our prayers. Look at how Jesus begins His prayer to the Father before raising Lazarus from the dead:

⁴¹ *Jesus raised his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you, for you have heard me.*
⁴² *I knew that you hear me always; but my prayer was for the sake of these people, that they may believe that you sent me.”* (John 11:41-42)

So, we thank God for already hearing us. God knows us and knows our needs. He loves us and desires the very best for us. We acknowledge this as we come to pray.

10. **There are many ways to pray.** There are as many ways to pray as there are people in the world. You might like to pray with scripture, or set prayers like the rosary. Your prayers may be spontaneous. You may not use words at all. You may be praying in front of the Blessed Sacrament and just look in love at the Lord. Remember that prayer is simple. It is a cry of recognition and love as St. Thérèse of Lisieux said.
11. **The importance of silence.** If you are reading scripture or a spiritual book or if you are using set prayers, remember to include periods of silence so that the Lord can respond to you. Prayer is a dialogue and the Lord wants to speak to you too.
12. **Thanksgiving.** Just as it is important to begin our prayer with a time of praise and thanksgiving so too it is important to finish with thanksgiving. Giving thanks acknowledges that God is not just a divine vending machine, but that we have spent time in the company of Three Persons who love us and know us and want the very best for us. We can sum up our thanksgiving by slowly praying the Glory Be: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

As we extinguish the candle, we ask the Holy Spirit to accompany us and enlighten our path as our Teacher and Guide. We make the Sign of the Cross entrusting ourselves and our families, friends and colleagues and indeed the whole world to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If the Lord revealed something to you in prayer, some little insight, or if a piece of scripture really struck you, then treasure it and ponder it in your heart as Our Lady did. You may want to start a prayer journal to keep a note of these insights so that you can see how God is leading and guiding you.