

Lessons on prayer from Pope Francis

For many people who visit the Vatican, seeing the Holy Father is the highlight of the trip. Yet, hearing the pope might be the greater and more life-changing event for those who are fortunate enough to attend one of his weekly audiences. At every Wednesday morning audience, Pope Francis offers a powerful teaching. Sadly, the media does not often cover these wise talks. Instead, they highlight people who receive a special greeting from the pope or issues for which he asks us to pray. They miss the main message – the catechesis that can change our lives.

For a year now, Pope Francis has regularly been using his weekly audience to teach us about prayer. He has offered more than 30 fresh and inspiring reflections, opening our eyes to some new and beautiful ideas about prayer. Below is just a very brief summary of those talks, so far.

Note: At the time of publication, Pope Francis had delivered 33 reflections on the topic of prayer. A sidebar below has been provided with the names and dates of each talk, and each is numbered for easy reference throughout this In Focus.

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Feel the power of prayer

“We are fragile beings, but we know how to pray; this is our greatest dignity and it is also our strength” (24).

Prayer is powerful. It is the power that the Holy Spirit brings into our lives for “one cannot pray without the guidance of the Holy Spirit” ([31](#)). Pope Francis stresses this often in his talks on prayer. We may think that our prayer should be soft and gentle. Yet, the Holy Father says the more

life-changing prayer might often be hard and difficult. He uses the example of Jacob wrestling with the angel (cf. Gn 32:23-32). He says we all have times when we will wrestle with God. He calls these times “appointments with God in the night” (6). These prayers of struggle are the ones that “will change our hearts” (6).

Prayer can transform us because “prayer is what opens the door to the Holy Spirit” (29). When we let the Holy Spirit into our lives, amazing things can happen. One of the many examples Pope Francis cites is how prayer has the power to dissolve personal differences. When we pray for someone with whom we disagree, we may be surprised to see how the conflict comes to an end.

We also find power in prayer because we never pray alone. “Each time we join our hands and open our hearts to God, we find ourselves in the company of anonymous saints and recognized saints who pray with us and who intercede for us as older brothers and sisters who have preceded us on this same human adventure” (28). This is a force we should never ignore.

A Schedule of the Holy Father’s Catechesis on Prayer

1. The Mystery of Prayer – [May 6, 2020](#)
2. The Prayer of a Christian – [May 13, 2020](#)
3. The Mystery of Creation – [May 20, 2020](#)
4. The Prayer of the Righteous – [May 27, 2020](#)
5. The Prayer of Abraham – [June 3, 2020](#)
6. The Prayer of Jacob – [June 10, 2020](#)
7. The Prayer of Moses – [June 17, 2020](#)
8. The Prayer of David – [June 24, 2020](#)
9. Elijah's Prayer – [Oct. 7, 2020](#)
10. The Prayer of the Psalms, No. 1 – [Oct. 14, 2020](#)
11. The Prayer of the Psalms, No. 2 – [Oct. 21, 2020](#)
12. Jesus, Man of Prayer – [Oct. 28, 2020](#)
13. Jesus, Teacher of Prayer – [Nov. 4, 2020](#)
14. The Persevering Prayer – [Nov. 11, 2020](#)
15. The Virgin Mary, Prayerful Woman – [Nov. 18, 2020](#)
16. The Prayer of the Nascent Church – [Nov. 25, 2020](#)
17. The Blessing – [Dec. 2, 2020](#)
18. The Prayer of Petition – [Dec. 9, 2020](#)
19. The Prayer of Intercession – [Dec. 16, 2020](#)
20. The Prayer of Thanksgiving – [Dec. 30, 2020](#)
21. The Prayer of Praise – [Jan. 13, 2021](#)
22. The Prayer with Sacred Scripture – [Jan. 27, 2021](#)
23. Praying in the Liturgy – [Feb. 3, 2021](#)
24. Prayer in Daily Life – [Feb. 10, 2021](#)
25. Prayer and the Trinity, No. 1 – [March 3, 2021](#)
26. Prayer and the Trinity, No. 2 – [March 17, 2021](#)
27. Praying in Communion with Mary – [March 24, 2021](#)
28. Praying in Communion with the Saints – [April 7, 2021](#)
29. The Church, Teacher of Prayer – [April 14, 2021](#)
30. The Vocal Prayer – [April 21, 2021](#)
31. The Meditation – [April 28, 2021](#)
32. Contemplative Prayer – [May 5, 2021](#)
33. The Struggle of Prayer – [May 12, 2021](#)

You can read transcripts of these papal audience teachings at www.vatican.va and watch videos of the pope's most recent audience talks at www.vaticannews.va.

Begin each day with prayer

“A day lived without prayer risks being transformed into a bothersome or tedious experience” ([11](#)).



Pope Francis blesses a child as he greets people with disabilities during a visit to the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh, Iraq, on March 7. CNS photo/Vatican Media via Reuters

Pope Francis tells us to make prayer a daily habit. He says, “Every day God passes and sows a seed in the soil of our lives” ([22](#)). If we are not in the habit of regular prayer, we will miss that seed.

The best way to maintain any habit is to do it at the same time each day. The Holy Father recommends we pray at the beginning of the day, since when we pray at dawn, we are inviting God to be with us every step of that day. Pope Francis says: “It is prayer that transforms this day into grace, or better, that transforms us: it quells anger, sustains love, multiplies joy, instills the strength to forgive” ([24](#)). How could we not want to start each day with all this grace in our hearts? Even the problems we face do not seem to be as large when we pray. They do not take away our

joy, because we are strengthened by prayer. If we can get in the habit of starting each day with prayer, Pope Francis promises we will be “more courageous, freer and even happier” (24).

“Each time we join our hands and open our hearts to God, we find ourselves in the company of anonymous saints and recognized saints who pray with us and who intercede for us as older brothers and sisters who have preceded us on this same human adventure.”

– Pope Francis, April 7, 2021

Pray for all people

“To pray for others is the first way to love them” (28).



Pope Francis prays the Rosary in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on May 1. The pope began a monthlong Rosary marathon praying for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. CNS photo/Paul Haring

Our prayer for others is what Pope Francis calls a true prayer, a prayer of love and mercy. God smiles down upon the prayers we say for those who are suffering because our God is

“the Lord of compassion, of nearness and of tenderness” ([24](#)).

However, we must not pick and choose for whom we pray. The Holy Father says: “When believers, moved by the Holy Spirit, pray for sinners, no selection is made, no judgement or condemnation is uttered. They pray for everyone” ([19](#)). The love of God demands that we pray for all the world. Pope Francis warns that even if we pray many Rosaries every day, our prayer is false if we hate others, gossip against them and hold grudges. Instead, he encourages us to remember that “everyone belongs to God. The worst sinner, the most wicked people, the most corrupt leaders, are children of God” ([7](#)). The Holy Father tells us that rather than condemning anyone, we should pray for all those who seem to be far from God.

The pope also asks us to pray in a special way for unhappy people, for those who weep alone, for those who have lost hope, for those who are lonely, for the poor and for our enemies. He urges us to develop in our prayer “a compassionate heart which does not exclude anyone” ([19](#)). Pope Francis calls those who pray for others “the great intercessors. ... They are the oaks that from year to year spread their branches to offer shade to the greatest number of people” ([30](#)). Let us strive to offer that kind of shade with our prayer.

Seek solitude

“If your ears are filled with other noise, you will not hear the call of the Lord” ([31](#)).

Pope Francis warns us, “We are not made to run all the time, we have an inner life that cannot always be neglected” ([31](#)). The Holy Father is worried that our busy, noisy lives may prevent us from hearing God when he knocks on our door. We may let the Holy One walk by.

the pope suggests we find our own special space where we can be alone and wait for God. He asks us to consider the story of

Elijah, who went to find God on the mountaintop (cf. 1 Kgs 19:9-13). We are told that God was not in the storm, the earthquake or the fire. God was, and always is, in the still small voice that we often miss if we are not quiet. With just a gentle breeze, God brought peace and calm into Elijah's heart. God will do the same for us when we seek him in silence.

One of the best places to be still with God is in nature. Nature is a special place of prayer for us because this is where God first walked with man. As Pope Francis reminds us, "The beauty and the mystery of Creation create in the human heart the first impulse that evokes prayer" (3). He asks us to remember that as a young shepherd, King David was often alone in the hills, surrounded only by the stars in the quiet night sky. It was there that the future king learned to talk with God. It was that time alone with God that prepared him to be a great king. And it was there that David learned to pray in a way that led to some of the most beautiful Psalms we have today. Pope Francis calls those Psalms of David the greatest prayers of all time. We should take time to learn them.

Don't be afraid to ask

"God always responds. Always" (14).

We may feel that there is no reason for us to tell God what we want or need because God already knows all things. However, Pope Francis says coming to God with our pleas helps to build trust and hope in our hearts. When the Apostles asked Jesus how to pray, he taught them to ask for what they needed. The Our Father includes four petitions for our own personal needs: give us our daily bread; forgive us our trespasses; lead us not into temptation; and deliver us from evil. Pope Francis promises, "Everything is there, in that prayer" (30). It is a prayer we should say often.

Our Pope tells us: "One should not be ashamed to pray and to

say: 'Lord, I need this. Lord, I am in difficulty. Help me!'" (18). When we ask God to help us, we admit our limitations. This is a humbling but healing thing. We should never be too proud or embarrassed to ask God for what we need. "He always answers. God listens to the cry of those who invoke him" (18). Pope Francis says it is especially healing for us to cry out to God in our pain and suffering. He warns: "Pain is dangerous if it stays hidden, closed within us. Pain that is closed within us ... can poison the soul" (30). Prayer releases this pain. No matter what time of day or night, God is always there for us when we cry out.

Short Prayers Suggested by Pope Francis

One way to make prayer a constant part of our day is to call out to God with quick little prayers. Here are a few that Pope Francis suggests.

- "Where are you, Lord?" (24).
- "Lord, I am in difficulty. Help me!" (18).
- "Lord, what you want, when you want, how you want"(15).
- "God, please save me from myself, from my ambitions, from my passions" (4).
- "Jesus have mercy on me. Jesus, have mercy on me" (1).
- "Blessed are you, O Lord" (21).

Gather together in prayer

"A Christianity without a liturgy, I dare say, is perhaps a Christianity without Christ" (23).

Pope Francis has great concern over the modern temptation to think that praying alone is all we need to do. He wants us to "recognize the spiritual importance of public liturgical rites" (23). He insists that participation in the sacramental life of the Church is vital to our prayer and faith life. He goes so far as to tell us: "Every time we celebrate a baptism, or consecrate the bread and wine in the Eucharist, or anoint the body of a sick person with holy oil, Christ is here! It is

he who acts and is present just as he was when he healed the weak limbs of a sick person, or when he delivered his testament for the salvation of the world at the Last Supper” (23).

The Holy Father says Mass is not just something to watch. It must be celebrated by us as well as by the priest. We must participate with full and prayerful hearts. We don't just go to listen when we are at Mass. We go to pray with Christ and with a community. This is also true when we celebrate any of the other sacraments of the Church. All sacraments are beautiful forms of prayer and we are called to pray them with others, not to watch them like we would a movie.

Hear God's voice in Scripture

“The Holy Scriptures are an inexhaustible treasure. May the Lord grant us all to draw ever more from them, through prayer” (22).

It is no surprise that our Holy Father sees Scripture as a critical part of any prayer life. If we think of prayer as communicating with God, then we must realize all good communication goes two ways. One talks and another listens. Then the other talks and the first listens. God talks to us through Scripture and we must listen. We cannot read the Bible like we would a novel. It must be read as prayer. It opens the door for a conversation with God. Pope Francis says, “The words of Sacred Scripture were not written to remain imprisoned on papyrus, parchment or paper, but to be received by a person who prays, making them blossom in his or her heart” (22).

Those who read the Bible daily as prayer will often find, as Pope Francis does, that “a passage from Scripture, heard many times already, unexpectedly speaks to me one day and enlightens a situation that I am living. But it is necessary that I be present on that day for that appointment with the

Word” (22). The Holy Father strongly recommends that we embrace Scripture meditation, such as *lectio divina* (“divine reading”), as a good and inspirational way to pray. He says: “Through prayer, the Word of God comes to abide in us and we abide in it. ... (It) gives us strength and serenity and even when it challenges us, it gives us peace” (22).

“The words of Sacred Scripture were not written to remain imprisoned on papyrus, parchment or paper, but to be received by a person who prays, making them blossom in his or her heart.”

– Pope Francis, Jan. 27, 2021

Never stop praising and adoring God

“We must recapture this sense of adoration. ... The prayer of adoration is the prayer that makes us recognize God as the beginning and the end of all of history” (16).

It is easy to offer God a prayer of praise or adoration when our lives are good and our hearts are full of joy. However, Pope Francis tells us we must praise God “in difficult moments, in moments of darkness when the path becomes an uphill climb” (21). He says: “Giving praise is like breathing pure oxygen; it purifies the soul, it makes you look far ahead, it does not leave you imprisoned in the difficult and the dark moment of hardship” (21).

The Holy Father says one of the most beautiful prayers of praise is “The Canticle of the Sun” written by St. Francis of Assisi. The pope recommends that we regularly pray this most famous prayer of praise. St. Francis did not write this canticle in the glory of his life. He wrote it at a time of great pain, when he was almost blind and close to death. This timeless prayer shows us that no matter what we are facing in life, we will find peace and joy in praising God for all the good he has given to us. Pope Francis assures us: “Praising

God in difficult moments (can) open us to the gates of a great road toward the Lord. ... Praise always purifies. ... In difficult and dark moments, let us have the courage to say, 'Blessed are you, O Lord.' ... This will do us much good" ([21](#)).

Say 'thank you'

"The path to happiness is the one that St. Paul described at the end of one of his letters: 'Pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances'" ([20](#)).

Saying "thank you" to God must be part of our daily prayer. Pope Francis stresses this by reminding us of the great disappointment Jesus felt in the Gospel story of the 10 lepers (cf. Lk 17:11-19). Ten were cleansed, but only one came back to thank Our Lord. Sadly, the story of the lepers shows how our world is divided between, "those who do not give thanks and those who do; those who take everything as if it is owed to them, and those who welcome everything as a gift, as grace" ([20](#)).

Our task is to make sure we are one of those who sees everything as a gift. Thanksgiving is so essential to our faith that it is the name given to our most important prayer, the Eucharist. The Greek word "Eucharist" means "thanksgiving." Pope Francis tells us we must see that our lives are a total gift from God. From the moment of birth, we are incurring an endless series of debts to God. Thus, "Thank You," must be a prayer always on our lips.

The great thing about gratitude is that it instills hope in our hearts. When we remember the good our God has done for us, we are encouraged to hope that more good will come our way. The Holy Father says: "Above all, let us not forget to thank: if we are bearers of gratitude, the world itself will become better, even if only a little bit, but it is enough to transmit a bit of hope. The world needs hope. And with gratitude, with this attitude of thanksgiving, we transmit a

bit of hope” ([20](#)).

We are not made to run all the time, we have an inner life that cannot always be neglected.”

– Pope Francis, April 28, 2021

Be the light of prayer

“The lamp of faith will always be lit on earth as long as there is the oil of prayer” ([29](#)).



Pope Francis prays in front of the “Miraculous Crucifix” from the Church of St. Marcellus in Rome during a prayer service in an empty St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican on March 27, 2020. CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Francis compares prayer to the oil that is used in lamps. He tells us: “This is the Church’s essential task: to pray and to teach how to pray. To transmit the lamp of faith and the oil of prayer from generation to generation” ([29](#)). This is the great work that is done in monasteries and convents around the world. But it also must be done in our own homes. Pope Francis warns that without prayer all the work of the Church would collapse. Prayer is what lights the way for us to show the

love of Christ to all people. Prayer provides the critical foundation that supports us as we go out to evangelize, serve the poor, or comfort those who suffer. Above all: “The first task of Christians is precisely to keep alive this flame that Jesus brought to the earth, and what is this flame? It is love. ... This is how the Spirit, in our heart, is always present like that lamp” (26). Prayer helps us to see the light, to see the truth. When we talk things over in our own minds, we come up with our own ideas. But when we talk things over in prayer with God, we see the light and the truth.

Pope Francis points out that all people in all ages have felt the longing in their heart to worship and cry out to a god. The difference for those of us who are Christians is that we know God’s name. He has entered into our world. He has brought light and love into our darkness. When we go to him, our very lives light up. When we sit with him, we know his love and we learn how to spread that love throughout the world. “It is that act of love in silent dialogue with Jesus that does so much good for the Church” (32).

More from Pope Francis

✘ In [“Prayer: The Breath of New Life”](#) (OSV, \$18.95), Pope Francis teaches that prayer is the “heartbeat of the Church” and our “yes” to an encounter with God and come to share more fully in his life. It is welcoming the Holy Spirit, who without ever growing weary pours out love and life upon all. Pope Francis imagines that personal and communal prayer is, for Christians, the heartbeat of the Church, which instills strength in the service of those who work, study and teach, which makes fruitful the knowledge of educated people and the humility of simple people. While we are not always aware of our breath, we never stop breathing, because this is the source of our physical life. Similarly, prayer is the source – the very breath – of our spiritual life.

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