

How to pray your way through social media intentions

It may be a new calling in the Christian life, one our ancestors didn't face: People you don't know at all ask you for your prayers and reasonably expect you'll do it. It's weirdly personal and impersonal at the same time. When does that happen, ever? Except on Facebook and its peers.

Facebook friendship is often artificial or fictitious, but still a relation you've accepted, so your friends have a kind of presumptive right to your Facebook time. What else are you going to do, anyway? Read more Facebook posts? Reading Facebook is an indulgence (not the religious kind, definitely not) and you can't object to giving up time you're spending on an indulgence.

Here's what I do, in case it's helpful. I use the traditional combination of an Our Father and a Hail Mary. I say them slowly, trying to concentrate on each word. Otherwise, I'd start racing through the prayers in an OurFatherwhoartinheaven way, and my mind would wander to whatever I'd been thinking about already. These people deserve my full attention. It's a gift I can give them.

Then I "like" the post so the friend knows someone has responded. I rarely comment, unless the friend is a real life friend who'd like to know I prayed for him. I'll DM or email him if I think he'd appreciate an even more personal word.

Several friends said they do something similar. "I say a slow 'Lord have mercy,'" says Sarah Lenora Gingrich. "If it's a big need, I'll write it down to add to our evening prayer list."

Timothy Jones usually prays quickly for the specific intentions of people he knows and crosses himself and commends to God those he doesn't know. He likes or comments on their

post so they'll know he's praying for them. He explains that when he doesn't know someone, "it's difficult to know how best to pray for them, or what to pray for, since their situation comes to me second hand (or third hand, or fourth, etc.)."

Christopher Altieri does the same thing as me, but in Latin: "I stop over each one I see, and say a prayer. It could be a Requiem and a Sub tuum praesidium if that is called for. It could be an Ave, occasionally a Pater, Ave, Gloria. I'll like the post if I know the poster and/or suspect that the poster would appreciate it."

My rule works for me, because I don't use Facebook in a way that brings me more than a few requests each day. Friends who use social media differently get a lot more requests and have different methods.

Rachel Lu also prays more for people she knows; they get an Our Father and Hail Mary, others the Ave. She includes as friends people she "Facebook-knows."

She's part of lists of Catholic women, some with hundreds of members, "and they ask for prayers a lot," she says. "Often it's just 'Please pray for one of my children/neighbors/colleagues who has a problem I can't fully disclose.' I still respond to the request. But if I don't know any of the people involved, an Ave seems like enough."

Some people bundle the requests. "Frequently I say the Sacred Heart prayers for all the intentions I've seen and all friends who need prayer whether I know it or not," writes Paul Deming.

Peach Smith can get up to 100 requests from just one of her groups. "Most of them go under the daily Rosary group requests. Any cases I've been following or get to know well get prayers specific to their situation."

Some get an even more intense response. "For some cases I offer up parts of my day, and they may or may not know that.

And then there's a small group that needs urgent prayers, who gets separate time and their requests sent to my mother's convent, too."

Many of us feel our inadequacy in this small apostolate of prayer, especially for "friends" who are really strangers. Peach says: "On too many days, though, I just give up and say to God, 'You know ... all of them, and please bless me, too.'"

Paul says the same thing: "It's not a virtue that I do so. I am terrible at tracking intentions and felt guilty for not really developing any system or discipline, but it works great for social media."

I know the feeling. I set the rule for myself because I'd skip some people, especially if I didn't know them or was just being selfish or lazy. Even though it's a little thing, a minute or so from my life, I'd really rather keep doing what I'm doing. I recommend, if you feel you should do this, setting a personal Facebook prayer discipline. Who knows, in God's providence, what your prayer may do. Even for "friends" who are strangers.

David Mills writes from Pennsylvania.