

I've tried prayer, but what do I pray about?

Great question. One of the primary battles many people face when it comes to prayer is the assumption that they aren't "doing it right". Our Catholic tradition is filled with many "formula" prayers that Christians have used to help them pray over the centuries.

I have run into people who seem to look down on formula prayers. They will claim that they don't need them. I don't think that this is a very good idea. For starters, some formula prayers are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Psalms, Canticles, the Our Father, and portions of the Hail Mary are all from the Bible. What is more, Jesus prayed formula prayers. As a Jew, Jesus would have regularly prayed the Psalms throughout his entire life. In addition, holier men and women than you or I have prayed with formula prayers on a regular basis. Both Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Pope John Paul II prayed the Rosary multiple times every day of their lives. Lastly, the greatest prayer in the Universe (the Mass) is a formula prayer.

So I'm not sure we really know what we are talking about if we claim not to need formula prayers; are we saying that we are greater pray-ers than Jesus?

At the same time, there is a danger in thinking that "saying your prayers" is the same thing as "praying". If we thought that prayer was simply running through a formula, we would be no better than the pagans. The formula exists to help us, but the formula is not the goal. God is the goal. The formula provides us with some helps to reach the goal. For example, the formula gives us a structure and it gives us the words when we can't find the words. Think of the Psalms. There is something in the Psalms for virtually every trial or joy that a person could go through. We may experience some sorrow and wonder how we could ever express it. The Psalms can provide the words for the pain without words.

And yet, even when praying with the Bible or in the Mass, we have to remind ourselves constantly that we are actually talking to Someone Else. We aren't daydreaming. We are talking to ourselves. There is Another with whom we are being drawn into relationship. I know that that might sound huge, but that is only because it is.

Here are a few suggestions for going beyond "saying our prayers". First, look up. We do this more interiorly than with our literal eyes. Sometimes we can feel like our nose is stuck in our prayer book. Look up at the One with whom you are speaking. Realize (and you can do this at Mass too!) that we have a Father in Heaven who is not only listening to our prayers, but drawing us more closely to Him.

Try this as an exercise the next time you are at Mass: pray the same words you always do, but pray them as if you really believed that God is real. Of course, God is real, but how often do we lapse into "lordhearourprayer" during the

intercessions without really becoming aware that we are asking Someone to hear and answer our prayers? How about trying to pray certain portions of the Eucharistic Prayer? While the priest is praying out loud, we can be praying those same words in the quiet interior of our hearts. Again, when praying: look up and talk to Him.

But what do I say? If we wander away from formula prayers, we may find ourselves saying things that don't seem very "prayerful". Too often, we make a judgment on our thoughts during prayer. We were tempted to nurse a grudge, tempted toward an impure thought, or maybe tempted to think about work or family issues. Sometimes, people will become angry with themselves for thinking these thoughts. They might put themselves down and "firmly resolve" to not think about such things. Granted, there may be times when we are called to flee from temptation, but automatically condemning our thoughts might only help us hide from what is going on inside of us.

Why do we think that our prayer needs to be filled with noble, holy thoughts? Why not talk with God about what is really going on in our lives? I would guess that your thoughts in prayer will turn most often to the things that are most important to you. If we put a judgment on those things before we address why they are there, we potentially cripple the growth God is calling us to.

Here is an invitation for your next prayer time: instead of seeing your tiredness, anger, or wandering mind as an obstacle to talking with God, why not use them as stepping stones? Talk to God about what is most important to you. If your work keeps creeping in, talk with God about it. If anger keeps popping up, talk to God about why. Pray about what is most important to you, and you will soon realize that God is even there.