

# CATHOLIC SPIRITUAL PRACTICES



A TREASURY OF OLD & NEW

EDITED BY COLLEEN M. GRIFFITH  
& THOMAS H. GROOME



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KEEP ON PRACTICING,  
YOU'LL GET BETTER AT IT

Thomas H. Groome

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# CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY

## IN PRACTICE

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Colleen M. Griffith

**S**PIRITUALITY IS A BUZZWORD in our time, one that generates much positive reception. Spiritual seekers abound, and there are myriad resources available to draw upon that bear the name “spiritual practice.” Spiritual materials in bookstores and on the Internet continue to multiply at a staggering pace, as people from all walks of life and religious persuasions identify “becoming spiritual” as a primary life goal.

The term *spirituality* may carry star power here at the start of the twenty-first century, but there is much confusion about what it actually means. It is perplexing, for example, to sort through everything that presents itself as a spiritual practice. The task becomes all the more challenging when set against the backdrop of a growing popular assumption that spirituality and religion are separate entities.

Scholars in the study of spirituality raise substantial concern about the widening gulf perceived between spirituality and religious traditions. One wonders if spirituality is becoming a new commodity in this consumerist culture of ours. Sadly, it sometimes seems so. Too often, spirituality is being presented or sold as the new substitute for religion. A split between spirituality and religious tradition ensues, a split rife with dangers, and one that this book aims to address.

### *Spirituality and Religion*

Walk across any college campus these days and you are likely to hear some version of the comment, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” The utterance usually suggests more than unfamiliarity with one’s religious tradition of origin. It points often to dissatisfaction with a particular expression of a religious institution. Sometimes it signals a perception of religion as anemic and staid, as being more concerned with right beliefs than with life-orienting practices.

Claims for being “spiritual” but “not religious” deserve probing. Without doubt, religious institutions, ever human, need to engage in more substantive dialogue, self-critique, renewal, and reform. And yes, more attention must be placed on spiritual practices as central



to the “content” of the faith handed down. But one can’t afford to view spirituality as a substitute for religion.

A spirituality that is disconnected from religious tradition is bereft of both community and history; it has no recourse to the benefits of a larger body of discourse and practice, and it lacks accountability. Such spirituality quickly becomes privatized and rootless, something directly opposite to the Christian understanding of “life in the Spirit.”

### *Christian Spirituality*

From a Christian perspective, spirituality can be traced back to the letters of St. Paul in which he uses the Greek term *pneuma*, meaning “breath,” “spirit,” or “soul,” to signal a life lived in alignment with God. Christian spirituality presumes, through God’s grace, a human desire and capacity for growing in union with the triune God. It encompasses the dynamic character of human life lived in conscious relationship with God in Christ through the Spirit, as experienced within a community of believers. To live a Christian spirituality is to attend to what is of God and to deepen in a life of conversion that has discipleship as its goal. Christian spirituality exists in its finest expression in the living out of one’s baptismal promises. At the heart of these

promises stands the rejection of everything that is not of God and a decision to live in accord with the energies and ways of the triune God. Renewed commitment to our baptismal promises is made possible by God's grace, sustained by Christian community, and supported through engagement in meaningful spiritual practices.

This book seeks to present an array of Christian spiritual practices that have nurtured the lives of generations of Catholic Christians past and present. The practices included have long roots in the Catholic tradition. They have stood the test of time, demonstrating adaptability in multiple sociocultural contexts. One finds "practices of prayer," "practices of care," and "practices of growth" assembled here, as Catholic Christian spirituality has historically emphasized a strong connection between prayer and praxis and a need for development in faith. The practices included reflect a Catholic understanding of the person, a Catholic theology of revelation, and a Catholic sense of sacramentality. "Drawing from the storeroom both the old and the new" (Matt. 13:52), this collection offers readers lively entry into the shape and character of Catholic spiritual practice today.

## *The Nature and Purpose of Spiritual Practice*

Spiritual practices are concrete and specific. They are consciously chosen, intentional actions that give practical purpose to faith. Situated between life as we know it and life in its hoped-for fullness, spiritual practices are imbued with a sense of our relatedness to God, others, and the earth. Influencing our dispositions and outlooks on the world, spiritual practices render us more open and responsive to the dynamic activity of God's grace, and they move us toward greater spiritual maturity.

You, our reader, may have a particular concern for the practical steps involved in specific practices. In the pages that follow, you will hopefully discover that these authors directly address the "how-to" questions, making it possible for you to learn about and engage in a spiritual practice for the first time. Emphasis is put on the purpose and relevance of specific practices.

Why practice? We engage in spiritual practices because we seek a *way of life*, an embodied faith that touches us and changes us. We opt in spiritual practice for a "knowing" that springs from the heart's core, the *lev*, spoken about in the Hebrew Scriptures as the center of our affections (Ps. 4:7), the source of our reflection (Isa. 6:10), and the foundation of our will (1 Sam. 24:5).

The point of spiritual practice is never mastery, but rather deeper relational life, a kind of living that makes a rich appropriation of one's faith all the more possible.

Catholic Christianity is indeed a tradition abundant in practice. It is our hope that you will discover here a treasury of formative practices that will vivify and nurture your spiritual life. In the vast storeroom of Catholic Christian tradition, you can find all kinds of gemstones, practices to be received, lived into, and reshaped in time and place for generations to come. It is for that reason that we are here.

PART ONE

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# PRACTICES *of* PRAYER



# THE LORD'S PRAYER

PRAYING THE OUR FATHER

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N. T. Wright

**S**IMPLE YET PROFOUND, ancient yet always fresh; deeply Jewish yet available to all, the Lord's Prayer offers the central message of Jesus in the form best suited to its appropriation. Jesus did not come, after all, merely to teach true doctrine and ethics, but to bring about God's kingdom; within that sovereign and saving rule, human beings are caught up with the challenge and invitation to corporate and personal renewal, as deep as the human heart, as wide as the world. To pray this prayer with full attention and intention is to partake in this renewal.

The prayer occurs in Matthew 6:9–13, within the Sermon on the Mount; in Luke 11:2–4, answering the disciples' request for a prayer; and in Didache 8:2, which instructs that the prayer be used three times daily. Luke's text is shorter, with some changes in the Greek; Matthew's is the one that has become widespread in the church, with

some traditions also adding Didache 10:5 (“remember, Lord, your church . . .”). The doxology (“yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever”) is probably not original, but became part of the prayer very early on in the life of the church. The prayer clearly stems from an Aramaic original, and it is virtually certain that it represents what Jesus taught.

The prayer is rooted, in shape and content, in older Jewish traditions. But the particular combination of elements marks it out as belonging within Jesus’s aim of inaugurating God’s kingdom, and his invitation to live by this kingdom in advance of its full appearing. It divides into two parts, the first (in the longer form) containing three petitions about God’s purposes and glory, and the second three petitions for human need.

The address, “Our Father,” expresses the intimate trust which characterizes Christian prayer. It evokes the Jewish belief that Israel, God’s people, was his firstborn son (Exod. 4:22; Isa. 63:16; 64:8). The Aramaic word *Abba*, “Father,” expresses Jesus’ own intimate sense of sonship (e.g., Mk. 14:36) and the early church’s sense of sharing that sonship through the Spirit (Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6, where the Lord’s Prayer may well be in mind).

The first three petitions pray that God’s glory and purpose may come to birth throughout creation. God’s



name is sanctified, held in honor, when his world is ruled by his wisdom and power, and his image-bearing human creatures worship him and reflect his glory in the world. His kingdom comes through Jesus's death and resurrection and his final victory over death itself (1 Cor. 15:24–28), and through every intermediate victory of his love over the powers of the world. The prayer for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven indicates, despite centuries of misunderstanding, that Christianity is not about escaping earth and going to heaven instead, but rather that God wills to renew both heaven and earth and bring them into ultimate unity (Rev. 21).

Emboldened by this trust in God and his kingdom, the last three petitions express the basic needs of those who live between Jesus's initial victory and his final triumph. Bread for today (Matthew) and every day (Luke) symbolizes our constant dependence on the creator. Forgiveness, both of sin and of material debt, is the central blessing of the new covenant (Jer. 31:34; Matt. 26:28), obtained through Jesus's death. The church here commits itself in turn to forgive (emphasized in Matt. 6:15; 18:21–35). Those who claim the new covenant blessing must live as new covenant people; the heart renewed by God's forgiveness cannot but offer forgiveness to others. The final petition for rescue from danger and

evil has two branches. First, we pray to be spared the ultimate test, whether that of fierce temptation or, more specifically, the “tribulation,” the “time of trial,” which in early Judaism was believed to be coming upon the world (compare Matt. 26:41, where it seems that Jesus will face this “tribulation” alone). Then we pray to be delivered both from evil in general and from “the evil one”; the original wording could be taken either way, and both may be in view.

From very early, the Lord’s Prayer has been at the center of Christian devotion and liturgy, not least at the Eucharist. Most of the great spiritual writers have expounded it and drawn on it. Alongside its regular use as a straightforward prayer, some have employed it as a framework, allowing other concerns to cluster around its various petitions. Others have used it, like the “Jesus prayer,” as a steady, rhythmic subterranean flow, beneath the bustle of ordinary life. It is, above all, a prayer which unites Christians of every background and tradition. It could energize and sustain fresh growth in shared ecumenical witness and life.

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All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who  
trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Priest: Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in  
our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect  
us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the  
coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

All: For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now  
and forever.

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# PRAYING WITH THE SAINTS

PRACTICES OF HOPEFUL REMEMBRANCE

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Elizabeth A. Johnson, csj

IN ITS PLENITUDE, the symbol of the communion of saints signifies that those who seek the face of the living God today belong to a great historical company, an intergenerational band of the friends of God and prophets that includes the living and the dead, joined in community with the cosmic world, all connected in the gracious, compassionate love of Holy Wisdom who, in the midst of historical struggle, sin, and defeat, continuously renews her gift of saving, healing grace. How does this doctrinal symbol appear concretely in prayer and piety to nourish the vitality of the *ekklesia*? One fire kindles another—but how are the sparks to fly? What practices can release the liberating power of the heritage of all saints to stir the affections and motivate action?

Under the traditional patronage model of the saints, a vast set of devotions grew up known collectively as the *cultus sanctorum*, or cult of the saints. Living persons established relations with the holy ones in heaven in numerous ways such as pilgrimages, novenas, veneration of relics, the use of medals, and many other devotional practices designed to facilitate protection and help in the trials of life. It is this pattern of veneration that has so diminished in postconciliar, postcritical culture, with its realignment of the Counter-Reformation religious paradigm on the one hand and its anonymous social pressures that destroy society's feeling of community with the dead on the other. But as Scripture and the early age of the martyrs show, a patronage model is not the only possibility available for the practice of the communion of saints. A companionship model calls forth its own concrete expressions, many still in the process of being shaped in the current age as different groups devise forms of keeping memory.

"Remembering the dead," writes theologian Karl Rahner, "becomes a prayer even if it does not contain a specific petition to the 'saints,' a plea for their intercession," for it ultimately leads the mind and heart into the mystery of God. In modern and postmodern culture, such prayer through acts of remembrance and

hope awakens consciousness and revitalizes the spirit. It contributes to building the church into a living community of memory and hope with “habits of the heart” that make the life of discipleship an attractive option. In its cultural setting, hopeful remembrance in fact is an act of resistance to banality, to debasement of persons and the earth, to consumerism, to individual isolation, to personal drift and apathy, to hopelessness and resignation.

### *Prayer of Praise and Lament in a Companionship Model*

Instead of the prayer of petition which has had pride of place in traditional devotion to the saints, the prayer of praise and thanks to God and the prayer of lament characterize a companionship model. It is not that explicit petition is never made, but such asking assumes a different character when set within a relationship of mutuality rather than a structure of elitism. Prayer for help also diminishes in importance in the context of the larger impulses of imbibing encouragement from the saints’ witness and praying in profound gratitude for their lives and in lament over their destruction. While thanking God for the witness of the saints is part of the liturgical heritage, complaint to God over the historical

treatment suffered by many of them has not customarily been associated with this symbol. Both forms flow today in practices of hopeful remembrance.

## *Thanks*

With the belief that every good gift comes from the generous hand of the One who creates and saves the world, hearty thanks to the Giver characterizes Jewish and Christian prayer from the beginning. People bless God for the wonders of creation, the gift of a plentiful harvest, safe delivery in childbirth, relationships healed, peace established, justice attained, health recovered, and for the transforming gifts of divine mercy and redeeming grace. Indeed, the whole orientation of liturgical prayer is in this direction. The subversive memory of the cloud of witnesses leads in this same direction of gratitude and praise when their historical reality is appreciated in light of its deepest truth, their ever so individual response to amazing grace. As an example of the prayer of thanks, the *Oxford Book of Prayer* cites the following:

We thank thee, O God, for the saints of all ages; for those who in times of darkness kept the lamp of faith burning; for the great souls who saw visions of larger truth and dared to declare it; for the multitude of quiet

and gracious souls whose presence has purified and sanctified the world; and for those known and loved by us, who have passed from this earthly fellowship into the fuller light of life with thee.<sup>1</sup>

Profound gratitude to God for these women and men who are our honor recognizes that what makes them remarkable, both those known and those unknown, stems from the power of the Spirit who has had a greening effect on their lives, to use Hildegard of Bingen's metaphor, keeping them from being dried out sticks and filling them with the juice of life. The prayer also implies that the community today is similarly gifted. People still keep faith burning in the darkness, speak truth to power, and live gracefully in this world; loved ones still die and go forth with our hope clinging to them. Thanking God for these lives is a theocentric way of expressing the phenomenon of connectedness in the Spirit.

### *Lament*

Reclaiming the communion of saints as all saints brings yet another aspect to the fore: the senseless, terrified, anonymous, tragic deaths of too many whose destruction does not even have the saving grace of



witnessing to a cause which they held dear. Human death by famine, torture, war, genocide, and one-on-one violence and the death of living creatures and earth's life systems by human cruelty and greed disrupt the harmony of one generation's witness to the next. Such victimization introduces unmitigated evil into the picture. It cries to heaven for justice, for relief, at least for explanation, which is never forthcoming. The ancient prayer of lament, flung in outrage and grief to God, arises from remembrance of these things. Well attested by the psalms, Hagar's complaint, Jeremiah's lamentations, the tears of the companions of the daughter of Jephthah, Job's challenge to heaven, and Jesus's godforsaken cry from the cross, lament is curiously lacking from Christian practices of prayer, especially liturgical prayer. But the powerful memory of those who died senseless deaths deprived of dignity demands that the praise of God be suffused with their tragedy. In the process, as we gather them into our common memory and hope, they become something more than faceless, forgotten individuals but enter into a living history.

When the tragically dead are remembered in the context of Christian faith, the cross of Jesus introduces a hope that transforms these raw depths of unreason and suffering into doxology, only now the praise is

forever imbued with the knowledge of unimaginable pain and the darkness of hope against hope. That which is remembered in grief can be redeemed, made whole, through the promise of the Spirit's new creation. And so we affirm a future for all the nameless dead in the hands of the living God.

The challenge of the prayer of lament is not simply to commend the victims of murderous death to heavenly blessedness, however, but to give their memory a place in the making of a just society and a compassionate world here and now. The disorientation of lament has a critical edge. By the way the church remembers, it allows the past of all the dead to function as raw material for a future of promise. It commits itself to seeing, as theologian David Power writes, "that out of their lives on earth, out of the apparent absurdity of their death, a future comes that belongs to the realization of covenant justice here on earth."<sup>2</sup> The prayer of lament—unreserved protest, sadness, impassioned questioning, strong cry against suffering, and tenderness for the defeated—becomes a social force confronting unjust ideologies and structures. It calls us out of passivity into active engagement against all premature death caused by human beings. Along with the prayer of praise, it shifts our responsibility to praxis.