

Written  
on my heart

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Classic Prayers  
in the Modern World

**Michael Swan**

 TWENTY-THIRD  
PUBLICATIONS

  
NOVALIS

The photographs found throughout this book were taken on black-and-white Ilford 400 film and developed and printed in the bathroom of my basement apartment over a year that stretched from 2001 into 2002. That year spent documenting how people pray in Toronto resulted in an exhibition, a calendar book and a weekly feature in *The Catholic Register* called “Cityscape of Desire: Toronto at Prayer.”

SAMPLE-THIRD  
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Publications

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Brazilian immigrant members of Shalom, an international Catholic lay movement, meet in the basement of St. Brigid's Catholic Church in Toronto's east end for faith sharing, prayer and song.

# Prayer Life

To be clear, I'm not selling anything here. I have no formula for a better life, no guarantees of faith, no assurances that everything will be all right. Nor am I in any way to be trusted. I am not an expert, a master or guide.

This is not some false humility. It is a warning. Buyer beware. Further down the shelf you will find self-help books, formulas, instructions and guarantees of a better life, whether that life be measured by spiritual, sexual, financial or social standards. Cookbooks for the soul are available all over the bookstore.

I am writing about prayer only because I think it matters. I'm writing about the prayers I know and pray every day only because I have no right to approach the prayers of others.

My problem is that writing is thinking. And thinking is what goes on inside your head all day and all night. Like you, like anyone, I can't always sleep. I lie in bed with my prayers, fears, regrets, wants and even hopes. We struggle in a thousand ways, so why should it vex us to find out we struggle with words and with prayers? However clearly or obscurely God is present in our days, we struggle to speak clearly to him or in response to what we know of him. It's difficult even to talk about God, let alone to him. When we can't find the words, prayer becomes doubtful.

Memorized prayers – the subject of this book – are not a simple fix to that problem, though it might at first appear so. After all, if you're having trouble coming up with words, trouble directing your thoughts, memory can provide a package of words to plug that hole. But there's nothing simple about memory.

These last few years, my mother has been losing her memory; now she is losing her life. Dementia has her and cancer is waiting in her bowels to take her. She wants to speak, but can't remember the words. She's full of anger against this betrayal by her once beautiful and nimble mind. She mourns her lost words in sentences that crash into blank walls. However, as she claws at this nothingness she finds it is bigger than anything she can overcome.

I know her struggle because I struggle as I pray. I fight to remember. Sometimes I finish an Our Father and can't be sure I said it all. I don't remember if a second ago I just stopped after "forgive us our trespasses," or whether I left out "thy kingdom come." Sometimes I'm saying the Benedictus and that next line dissolves in my mind just as I am about to say it. I will say "as he promised by the lips of holy men," and then nothing. I start again, and get as far as "promised by the lips of holy men...."

This book is about the fight to hang onto words – not just to remember them, but to know, cherish, understand and ponder them. To know something or someone is more than remembering. Knowing is more than just hanging onto the past. We carry the people, places and experiences we truly know with us and we continue to know them by sharing with them daily our own existence.

A remembered and recited prayer cannot be a mechanical exercise of pronouncing words in a set order. The words are a token of love and a manifestation of the history we share with God and with one another.

Marriage is the analogy that clarifies this. You know your love when you know what she will say and what she will do and how you will be together as time rolls out in front of you. You know it before either of you speaks a word. This doesn't happen all at once, by magic. Love is a process of learning, of struggle to remember. The struggle creates knowledge within us.

Either by learning or by loving – but actually, they are the same – we become something more. To pray and to remember a prayer – to know the prayer – is to learn what it can mean as we

pray it. If we know the prayer at all, we can only know it in that moment, among the people we pray it with and within ourselves. We have to discover the words and keep on discovering them.

All of this – the words we have memorized and our intention to speak them and our ability to know them – happens inside of time, which is huge. It is bigger than us, like the ocean is bigger than the lonely swimmer. Sometimes all we know is that time goes on and on, that it carries us, that we are in it. But we are not the ocean and we will not go on and on.

We cannot hold onto the ocean, only be in it. The ocean carries everything. It takes us places we may never understand on tides and currents we cannot see. To pray is to be in the ocean and to be of the ocean. It is to trust the water that holds us up for a time, but into which we will one day sink. Until then, that next remembered prayer is the next stroke as we swim to a distant shore.

To love is to give ourselves to the water, the salt and the unseen currents. It is to believe we will open our eyes on blue sky and open our mouths to a gulp of good air.

So as I write this book full of words about the words I call up from memory each day, I am sharing the struggle to remember and to know prayers – some of which my mother taught me. This struggle with words is the only way to fight against those blank walls that will inevitably come and cut off all our sentences.

# HOW

Perhaps your cat or pet budgerigar prays. It can't be proved one way or another. I would contend that prayer is uniquely human. This is not because the cat isn't praying over there in her ray of sunshine, but because prayer is one commitment that helps us to be a little more human – more human than we would otherwise be, both collectively and individually.

Over time I have devised a prayer routine I sometimes think of as my peculiar equivalent of the rosary. It's not the whole of my prayer life, but a part that I think of as devotional, disciplined (sometimes) and necessary.

Now the worst sort of writer is the one who starts ordering the reader around, insisting the reader must submit to rules of interpretation or agree to some discipline or other in connection with a book. A book is not a government pamphlet or regulations. Any book that promises particular results – a better prayer life, a better sex life, more friends and influence – is just a con job between covers.

Read this book any way you like. It contains prayers and my evolving understanding of those prayers. But it is a book about a particular practice of prayer. So it may be that some of you are looking for a discipline or practice you could weave into your own life. If so, I hope this helps.

In one sense, there's no secret to what I do. First I memorized the prayers and now I say them in the morning. But there's more to how we pray than the mechanics of breathing, relaxing, concentrating, reading, reciting or any of the other techniques from all the books up and down the spirituality shelf. There's a



spirit in which things are done. My purpose here is not to lay down rules or instruct. It is to share that spirit.

My prayer discipline works best for me early in the morning, as I walk to the gym – but I employ it at other times of the day and on the many, many days I don't make it to the gym.

It consists of a list of memorized prayers I say almost always in the same order. When I am alone, I will say them out loud or just under my breath. Physically saying the words, even sotto voce, enhances my awareness that I am praying, and of the prayers themselves. But even if I am only reciting the prayers in my mind, I imagine the words spoken – their cadence and rhythm, a tone of voice, the emphasis on one word or another within a sentence.

If I have watched an English movie the night before, the prayers might sound in my mind in a British accent. When I have been talking with someone with a distinct and persuasive voice, I will hear the prayer in that voice.

Each prayer is a kind of drama – words that properly belong to a story, a situation and a character who speaks them. Many of these prayers are the arias in the opera of Scripture, or soliloquies that build a drama around them. This is most obvious in the prayers that are directly scriptural, such as the Our Father. But it applies even to prayers that at first seem a declaration of abstract theological maxims.

To say the words in these prayers, even if only in your head, is to become aware of the drama they enact. Of course there is an immediate negative connotation to prayer as an exercise in acting, but that is only if you imagine acting is to indulge in falseness – a game of pretend.

Real acting, like any other art, aims for truth. Actors playing Lady Macbeth or Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* speak truthfully, honestly as themselves, but from within the situation and the history of the character. They also stick to the script, because those particular words mattered enough to be written down and shared again and again over time.

I am no actor, but I try to pray in that spirit. It's me saying the words, embodying this address to God. I am aware that the words did not originate with me: I must fit them to my days and my days to the prayers.

Like acting, prayer requires us to aim for truth – for emotional honesty. If, while praying the Hail Mary, you have cast yourself in the role of the angel Gabriel, then the given sequence of words will carry the truth of their dramatic situation. With a little help from your imagination and from the script, you will be that angel and stranger bringing strange news to a girl on the edge of becoming a woman.

In the chapters that follow I will do my best to place each of my memorized prayers in their dramatic and narrative setting. None of what I write here is advanced scriptural scholarship or historical theology, though I am indebted to theologians I have met and read over the years. What I hope to do is find the story, the drama and the character behind the words.

In order, my 10 prayers are:

- \* Hail Mary
- \* Our Father
- \* Soul of Christ
- \* Peace Prayer of St. Francis
- \* Canticle of Zechariah
- \* Magnificat
- \* Glory Be
- \* Prayer for Generosity
- \* Take Lord, and Receive
- \* Bless Us, O Lord

Most of them I have had to memorize as an adult. Only the Hail Mary and Our Father were given to me in childhood. Memorizing the Canticle of Zechariah took time and effort. Often over the course of a Lenten season, I would write a prayer down in longhand and carry the scrap of paper around in my

pocket. When learning a prayer I would test myself, as if studying for an exam.

The sort of concentration and intensity necessary to memorize a prayer is an effort which is its own reward. To work at it, to be frustrated with it, to stumble over the words does no harm. The job of memorizing, working that muscle around the words, makes the prayer important and therefore valuable. In effect, to memorize a prayer is to love it. If you don't love a prayer there can be no possible reason for reciting it every day.

Whether you know these prayers already or intend to learn one or two of them, I hope you enjoy thinking about the meaning of these words I and millions of others have memorized.



Eighteen-year-old Andrea McMillan prays with her three-week-old daughter Shyanna McMillan-Baker using a Bible Andrea's mother gave her when she was 13. Homeless, single and unemployed, Andrea relied on Rosalie Hall in Scarborough, Ontario, for refuge during her second pregnancy. Prayer helps take the pressure off an uncertain and stressful situation, she said.

# Hail Mary

My mother is very likely responsible for the first theological idea that ever settled in my brain. At some very early moment, my mother explained that we prayed the Hail Mary first because Mary could go to Jesus on our behalf, carrying with her our prayers. I did not question why this might be necessary, but viewed it as a very good thing. Having someone on your side seems helpful.

There are ways in which this idea might go wrong. It would be wrong to think of Jesus as a severe and fearsome judge who may only be approached by some favoured, irreproachable, unthreatening and beloved relative. Jesus is not the school vice principal in charge of discipline, who must be begged for leniency – as if God had not already given himself to us, to all creation, to humanity. It's hard to reconstruct now, but I think cowering at a safe distance from God was a mistake I made in my childhood.

At the same time, Mary is not that meek, obsequious relative. Faced with an angel, she asked questions. At the wedding in Cana, she ordered Jesus into action. With the power of the Roman empire descending on her family, she followed Jesus up the hill and stood at the foot of his cross.

What I think I got right, even in childhood, was the idea of intercession – of people praying for each other. By entrusting our prayers to others we bind ourselves to God and one another. My first notion of this essential communion came via Mary, a mother to us all – someone whom I knew because I knew my own mother.

Mary is for us, all of us Catholics, the first link in the chain of communion. She is that first candle in the dark used to light the next candle and gradually every other candle until we have lit up the whole church with the communion of the saints. So I have always said this prayer first, in complete confidence that Mary really would pray for me now and at the hour of my death.

As a boy, to invoke the hour of my death meant little more than to invoke in high seriousness something awesome. By mentioning our own death and the deaths of every person (we are, after all, all sinners), we approach God in fear, shielded by a brave mother. I think that was how I saw the prayer in my first decade of life.

I would not say I have transcended this understanding as years and decades have passed. Death and its mystery have not been revealed to me now because I'm old, because my eyesight has weakened, my joints have stiffened and sciatica slows me down. But my focus in praying to Mary has shifted to Mary herself and the circumstances of those lines quoted from the Gospel of Luke.

Here (Luke 1:28) the angel Gabriel approaches a girl, not yet married but old enough. Following this, an older woman – older perhaps than the girl's own mother – praises Mary (Luke 1:42-48) and the fruit of her womb.

Once we get talking about wombs we are certainly on very intimate terms with the woman we are addressing. This close and secret, whispered and tender sharing of a few words about how Mary's womb will bring us a saviour seems to me to be the heart of the prayer. It is the crucial turning point – the crisis – of this prayer's drama. As we begin to pray, we go quickly from greeting a stranger ("Hail, Mary") to this moment of closeness with a caring, understanding girl who knows love is the stuff life is made from.

I was a graduate student when I learned how the mob in Constantinople attached the title "Theotokos" (God-carrier) to Mary, and the Christological reasons for it. At the Council of Ephesus in 431, the argument wasn't really about Mary. It was

about whether Christ really was human, whether Jesus really was divine and whether the name (Jesus) and the title (Christ) applied to one and the same being.

While the bishops of the world (mostly the eastern end of the Mediterranean) advanced theories inside the Church of Mary (a big church in what was then the Roman Empire's second-biggest city, now mostly buried under olive groves in southwest Turkey), the crowd fought it out in the streets. Some did side with the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, who said it was all right to call Mary "Christotokos" or "Christ-carrier," but not "Theotokos." A woman could give birth to a human being, could carry a human in her womb, but she could not be the God-bearer. The divine was too much and too different to be contained in any human vessel.

Even though Emperor Theodosius II and his wife Aelia Eudocia backed Nestorius, most people found it difficult to imagine that the divine Christ, second person of the Trinity, and Jesus who was resurrected were somehow two different entities. Let the theologians launch their theories, but for most people Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is the saviour of the world and the second person of the Trinity – the Christ. Therefore Mary was Theotokos – the God-bearer.

While I don't pray the Hail Mary as if it were an exercise in theology, the idea of a God-carrying girl, alive and open to everything, is essential to the way this prayer plays out. While the title "Theotokos" is no longer specifically part of the Catholic version of the prayer, as it is for the Orthodox, it is implicit in the drama of these two encounters between Mary and the angel and between Mary and Elizabeth.

In my earliest experience of the Hail Mary, Mary was the only character in the drama. This wise and vulnerable girl with no one to defend her was the only person who mattered in the prayer. It was her womb that was essential to everything else happening in the story. As I have somehow become a man old enough to be Mary's father, and perhaps now her grandfather, the angel Gabriel and Elizabeth have emerged to play their roles.

While the age of angels seems like a meaningless category, it seems right to picture Gabriel as a figure of authority, older than Mary. Perhaps God might have sent his angel in the form of a child to announce pregnancy to Mary, but I know of no painting of the annunciation that pictures it that way. In my conventional imagination, I also picture Gabriel as a man with the attributes of authority, but also the tenderness of a father who cares for this daughter and sees the future in front of her.

At my age, Gabriel's words and attitude of tender concern come naturally. As I pray, I play the part of Gabriel as myself. His words are spoken in my own voice and mood, whether I am tired or anxious or hopeful or bored or wistful or content.

But Gabriel is only there for two sentences. It might seem, then, that the almost immediate shift to Elizabeth presents a problem. How can I be a father for five words and then suddenly an older, wiser woman for the next sentence? Again, I play Elizabeth as myself. As we reach this late middle age, ridiculously denying that we are old, men and women unite in a sympathy forged in our shared years and our observation of each other. Age becomes more important than gender. We see life from a certain vantage point. Which is not to say that our gender has been erased, or that men and women suddenly agree on everything beginning on our 55th birthdays. But Elizabeth is not strange to me. Elizabeth's greetings to her young cousin and to the fruit of her womb are not impossible words when they are shaped in my male voice.

To imagine I cannot act the part of Elizabeth as I pray her words would be as offensive as suggesting a woman could not adopt the words of Gabriel as her own. Through the centuries, in monasteries, churches and ordinary kitchens, millions have.

The sentence which follows Elizabeth's mention of Mary's womb does not come from the Gospel of Luke. These words may well have been composed by one of the founding Jesuits, Peter Canisius, in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, the middle of the 16th century. However this third address to Mary ("Holy Mary, Mother of God...") came to be attached to the prayer,



the words themselves assume that we, as we pray, are still in this same drama – an encounter with an expectant young mother, who for now faces the world and her pregnancy alone. It is we who are humbled by her courage and we who are called to share with her in expecting this child, God, the saviour of the world.

By the end of the prayer the identity of Mary's child, the crucial necessity of her child, turns the whole situation upside down. We begin as older and wiser counsellors who bring Mary news of her pregnancy. We end by admitting we are sinners fearful of death who need her help. This is the drama of the prayer – this sudden twist in the plot where ambassadors with the authority of their years and positions are transformed into people whose whole lives depend upon what this helpless teenage girl may do for us.

By the end, we need at least some small part of the grace that fills her.

On pilgrimage in Northern Ontario, hitchhiking from the U.S. border at the western end of Lake Superior to the Fort William First Nation and its Jesuit community, I dreamed the Hail Mary. The image in my mind as I woke was of the encounter between Mary and Gabriel. The dream simply merged my surroundings with the prayer.

I saw a young Indigenous woman walking in front of an Esso station on a stretch of two-lane highway as it came over a swell of land and headed toward another curve, surrounded by jack pine and balsam. The traffic on the road is sparse, half of it transport trucks. She walks from the pumps toward a half-moon of grass in between the gas station and the highway and sits there at a picnic table with the wind blowing her loose black hair in front of her face. I come from the other side of the road and sit across from her at the table. The words "full of grace" are there in the dream, though no one seems to speak them. She stands up and leaves the picnic table less worried, more at peace. I leave as well.

Out there on the Trans-Canada, as I watch her rise from the picnic table to go down the road and face her challenge, the only words I can offer are these:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou among women  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.