

# *Praying with Fire*

Learning to Pray the Catholic Way



Peter Darcy

# Praying with Fire: Learning to Pray the Catholic Way

**By Peter Darcy**

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## Chapter 3: The Church is a House of Prayer

Just about everyone has an idea of what a Gothic cathedral is. Europe is full of them, and our own country has quite a few impressive ones from the Gothic Revival era of the mid-to-late 1800s. Though Gothic architecture originated in France (starting in the 1100s), its magnificent structures and styles have been reproduced in many countries throughout the world in the following centuries. They are the most wonderful architectural creations in history.

Perhaps one wouldn't think of a majestic cathedral as a place to find a fire burning, but that's because the Church's fire is an invisible one. It is the fire of prayer that rises continually from her sacred corridors. In fact, the Church itself is a *bonfire* of prayer!

### **A spiritual edifice of worship**

First and foremost, a cathedral, like any church, is a place where people pray, a temple of worship. In the incident where Christ drives the money changers out of the Temple in Jerusalem, He quotes the words of the Prophet Isaiah to explain His actions: "*It is written: 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you are making it a den of thieves*" (Matthew 21:13). If the Jewish Temple was the dwelling place of God and a place uniquely suited for prayer, all the more so is a Catholic cathedral: it holds the very Presence of God, the resurrected Jesus Himself, the One to whom we pray.

The first images of a Gothic cathedral that usually come to mind are its soaring pointed towers that reach to Heaven. Some of the spires of these churches can be more than 300 feet high!

In other words, the architecture itself literally points to the focus of our prayer: it directs our minds and hearts *upwards* to the place of our eternal destiny. Likewise, the ornate façades (fronts) of these churches are usually full of statues of saints and angels looking down on us (as if from Heaven), reminding us of those who have gone before us and who continue to assist us on our spiritual journey.

The elaborate doors in the façades are called *portals*, which means they are more than just doors. These majestic entranceways (usually three of them in the front) are flanked by statues of saints and angels whose purpose is to welcome us into the Church

and exhort us to prepare ourselves to leave the secular world and enter a sacred space. The amazing collections of statues and figures above the doors are a foretaste of the companionship we will experience in heaven.

As we enter the church proper, we cannot help but notice the long central aisle and pointed arches which rise above us. Some have described the image of these arches metaphorically as *praying hands* that point heavenward, further reinforcing the idea that the cathedral is a place of prayer.

Letting our eyes adjust to the dim light for a moment, we look around and notice long, graceful columns reaching upward on either side of the aisle as well as colorful windows in between them that let in the sun's light. We hear singing or chanting coming from the front of the Church and smell the sweet aroma of incense as we take in the atmosphere. There is silence and beauty all around. It *looks, smells, and feels like* a sacred environment as these elements of holiness impact our senses.

The vast space is a curious contrast of darkness and light while the hushed voices of visitors, the various smells, colors, and structures all add to the mystery of the holy place. We can see statues of saints strategically placed in niches, as well as paintings and mosaics on the walls. As we cast our gaze around the periphery of the church, we also notice monuments and side chapels, even the tombs of important people set in various places.

In essence, the entire building serves some fundamental need of our nature: human beings need a space to worship in order to nurture our spiritual lives. A Gothic cathedral is a house of prayer in every sense of the word. In fact, it has no other function.

This brings me to another relevant point: the cathedral is *a symbol of the Catholic Church herself*. (It is customary to speak of the Church as feminine since St. Paul and St. John describe her as Christ's bride; see Ephesians 5: 25-27; Revelation 19:7-9, among other passages.) The Church's function, her mission in this world, is to draw people into the life of God on this earth and to lead their souls to heaven. The Church herself is thus a house of prayer in a symbolic sense and a teacher of prayer in a literal sense.

Having set the stage with a mental picture of a Gothic cathedral, I can now take you on a virtual tour of the many types of prayer that the Catholic Church offers. Let us proceed.

“Individual praying is like straw scattered over a field. If you set a straw alight, the flame is small. But if you gather up all the bits of straw the flame fills out, rising high up in the sky, and it’s the same with communal prayer.”

~St. John Marie Vianney

## Devotional prayers

As we walk around the cathedral we take greater notice of the richly beautiful stained glass windows that pierce the walls and let in a kaleidoscope of colored light. During the day, the colors imprint patterns on walls like translucent drapery and seem to dance on the floor. The descending light seems to shift as the wind blows through clouds and trees outside. Without those dancing colors, the interior space of the cathedral would be rather dark and dreary.

Looking more closely, we notice that there are little *pictures* in the glass too, figures that tell biblical stories or recount tales of the marvelous lives of the saints and angels. Anyone in touch with their interior life in such a place would likely feel a sense of awe and revel in the sheer beauty of these scenes. There is a reason for that: the saints and angels fill us with reverence, which is a delight in spiritual things. They also communicate to us a sense of fraternity, belonging, and communion.

If prayer is the *inner fire* of our spiritual life, devotions are the ready kindling for that fire; they set it alight, strengthen it, and expand it to transform our lives in charity and help us touch the lives of others. We pray devotions because our hearts desire contact with the sources of spiritual fire. For this reason, devotional prayers often focus on the saints and angels—our great friends and allies in the spiritual life—as well as the mystical experiences (called apparitions or visions) that have been handed down to us through generations of praying people.

It is not possible to give a full list of all Catholic devotional prayers but, in a sense, *any* devotional prayer is worthwhile if it focuses us more keenly on the spiritual life with fidelity to the clear doctrines of the faith. Devotional prayers can be prayed in private or prayed with others. They can be vocal prayers or offered in the silence of the heart. They can be short or long (although they are usually fairly short) and can be read from books or memorized. The only cautions the Church makes about praying these prayers are the same mentioned in the last chapter: devotions must be sincere expressions of our spirituality, never hypocritical, empty, or superstitious exercises.

Probably the best aspect of devotional prayer is that it frees us from having to conjure subjective feelings and words while praying to God. We don't always have the energy or the creativity to be spontaneous in prayer! Devotions allow us to rest in the inheritance of prayer from past generations and free us of the burden of having to reinvent the wheel every time we pray. Like the streams of light flowing through the stained glass windows, devotional prayer allows us to *enter into an already flowing stream* of prayers offered ceaselessly throughout the world and history. What a gift!

### **An immense variety of devotions**

The following (partial) list of Catholic devotions lays out the main categories of traditional prayers and practices that the faithful pray just about everywhere in the Catholic Church. (I'll address a few specific devotions in Chapter 7.) As you'll see, the sheer variety boggles the mind! You will usually find these and other devotions in printed prayer books widely available to all the faithful:

- **Devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary:** Our Lady is the first and greatest disciple of Jesus and holds pride of place as our object and teacher of devotion. The main Marian devotions and prayers are the Rosary, the Memorare, the Salve Regina, and the Angelus, but there are many, many more ways the faithful have addressed Our Lady in prayer through the ages.
- **Chaplets:** These devotional prayers are prayed on beads like the Rosary and are focused on a particular apparition or event of Our Lord's life. They may also be for the purpose of asking the intercession of the saints and angels. There are several main chaplets: Divine Mercy, St. Michael the Archangel, Precious Blood, the Seven Sorrows of Mary, and the Holy Face of Jesus.
- **Novenas:** The concept of a novena (that is, nine days of prayer before a feast day) comes from the period of time the disciples prayed in the Upper Room between the Ascension of Christ and the day of Pentecost. Because they are a type of sustained, intentional prayer, novenas deepen devotion and openness to the graces that are promised on the feast day. There are several main novenas: to the Holy Spirit (leading up to Pentecost); to the Sacred Heart; to the Infant of Prague; to any saint or Church-approved apparition prior to their particular feast days.
- **Litanies:** Litanies are lists of terms that describe the varied characteristics of the Divine Persons, the Blessed Virgin Mary, or other saints. Many litanies use terms and titles from the Bible as well as from the Church's Tradition and devotional

life. The most popular and common litanies are those of the Sacred Heart, the Precious Blood, the Holy Spirit, and the Litany of Loreto, which is prayed at the conclusion of the Rosary, among others. Pride of place probably belongs to the Litany of Saints, which is prayed every year at the Easter Vigil and is also used in priestly ordinations.

- **Consecrations:** The faithful often wish to consecrate themselves to special saints and angels as a deeper expression of their love and devotion. A personal consecration to a saint never stands on its own but rather reflects one's primary consecration to God at Baptism. There are several types of consecrations: St. Louis Marie de Montfort's "Total Consecration" to Jesus and Mary; the Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel; consecrations to St. Michael the Archangel or one's Guardian Angel; and those made to patron saints or saints dedicated to causes such as missions, charitable works, education, etc.
- **Patron Saints and Intercessory Prayers:** The overwhelming abundance of devotional prayers in the Church is due to the saints who became known for certain types of miracles and intercessions. There are patron saints for every conceivable human situation, place, profession, and ailment! One has only to do an internet search with key words to find out who is the patron saint of any need along with the prayers that accompany his or her intercession.
- **Pilgrimages and Stations:** Pilgrimages are journeys to holy sites for the sake of penance or to request divine favors. These derive from the Jewish practice of "going up" to Jerusalem for Temple to worship on certain Jewish holidays each year. Christians adopted this practice in the early centuries to visit the places of Christ's life and death in the Holy Land, as well as the death sites or tombs of martyrs. The holy practice of making pilgrimages has remained constant to this day. From these devotional journeys came the practice of praying the Stations of the Cross. It developed because the vast majority of Christians could not go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, so the devotion of the Stations allowed them to symbolically walk the sorrowful path of Christ as He carried His Cross to Calvary. The fourteen stations (plaques or symbols) hanging on the walls of most Catholic Churches represent this unique devotion. The main places of pilgrimage from ancient times to this day are the Holy Land (Israel); Santiago de Compostela (dedicated to St. James in northern Spain); numerous Marian Shrines throughout the world; Mont Saint Michel (in Normandy, France); as well as any place where an apparition occurred or a saint lived.

Taking our eyes off the saints and holy images for a moment, we turn our gaze to the interior of the cathedral and can't help but notice a significant number of individuals sitting quietly by themselves in different parts of the church. What are they doing?

A few are praying on the beads of their Rosaries, a couple more have books in their hands, a few others have their eyes closed or are placidly looking at something in the distance. Many of them are kneeling, but all of them are quiet, focused, attentive. All are enveloped in devotional prayers: They are *the praying soul of the Church*.

## *Saints*

"After each conversation with the Lord, my soul is extraordinarily strengthened, and a profound tranquility prevails within and it gives me such courage that I do not fear anything in the world ... except making Jesus sad."

**~St. Faustina Kowalska**

"Prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus."

**~St. Thérèse of Lisieux**

## **The Divine Office**

As we continue our tour, we advance toward the center of the Gothic cathedral. There, we look toward the altar and see two sets of elaborately carved wooden pews with high backs on either side of the sanctuary where men in religious habits sit facing one another across the open space.

This unusual seating arrangement is the prayer setting for the monks and priests associated with that church. It is called a *choir*—not a group of singers as we normally understand the word, but *the place* where the singing occurs.

In this case, the music is *chanting*, a type of unison singing commonly used for prayer by those who have dedicated their lives to the service of the Church. When the monks sit in these pews, the function of the seating becomes clear: they chant to each



other, back and forth across the space in alternating verses, using books of Psalms in Latin or in the common language of their community.

This practice of *singing back and forth to one another* comes from Scripture. It is the Church's attempt to imitate the seraphim angels at prayer! These angels are the spirits closest to God in the heavenly hierarchy and the ones who worship Him most directly. In Isaiah's vision of the seraphim, he hears them "*crying out to one another*" across the heavenly sanctuary: "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!*" (Isaiah 6:3)

This type of prayer, which originated in the ancient Benedictine monasteries, is called the Divine Office (also known as the Liturgy of the Hours) and describes the series of prayers that its monks must pray at designated *hours* of the day as an obligation of their religious consecration. ("Office" is the Latin word for "duty".) In other words, it is the duty of all monks and cloistered nuns to pray for the Church and the world, ceaselessly, like the angels.

### **The official prayer of the Church**

The Divine Office is made up of the psalms of the Old Testament divided evenly throughout a four-week cycle to include all 150 psalms. The Office also adds readings from Scripture and excerpts from the writings of the Fathers of the Church or other saints, as well as a few church documents.

Priests, deacons, and religious brothers and sisters also pray with a similar book called the "breviary" (because it is a "brief" version of the monks' book of Psalms), and these usually say their prayers privately unless they live in some form of community where they may pray the breviary in common.

Although a number of Church documents encourage the laity to pray the Divine Office on their own, that rarely happens due to the time commitment required. Many lay people, however, often find that praying a limited form of the Office—Morning and Evening Prayer only, for example—is an excellent way to sanctify the day in union with the rest of the praying Church. It is never obligatory for the laity, however, unless the person has made a private vow or is a member of a lay association that is attached to a religious order (often called a Third Order or Confraternity).

As a communion of souls that encompasses all nations, cultures, and languages, Catholics offer prayer to God from monasteries, religious houses, and consecrated communities every hour of every day in every corner of the world. The goal is literally to

fill the earth with prayer as the psalmist says happens when religious souls raise their hearts and minds to God: “*From the rising of the sun to its setting / let the name of the LORD be praised*” (Psalm 113:3).

And even when this prayer is prayed by individuals, it is not a personal prayer, per se. It is their participation in the *common prayer* of the Church, which rises like incense to heaven from the earthly Bride of Christ.

### **Featured Prayer: The Morning Offering**

It has been a pious tradition throughout the history of the Church for the faithful to make an offering of themselves and their activities to the Lord at the beginning of each new day. Our daily, morning offering reminds us that Baptism confers on us a membership in God’s family and a consecration of ourselves to His service.

Christians have always interpreted this as a call to consecrate every aspect of our lives (works, prayers, joys, and sufferings) to Him, especially at the first waking moments of the day, with the intention of living our entire day in His Presence.

## *Scripture*

It’s amazing how many references there are in the Bible to Morning Prayer. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, (Genesis 19:27, 28:16, 34:4, respectively), Joshua (Joshua 6:15), the Prophet Samuel’s parents (1 Samuel 1:19), and so on, indicate that prayer and worship in the morning was a regular habit of God’s people. The psalms are also full of references to prayer in the early hours (Psalms 5, 57, 90, 119, 143). Above all, Jesus Himself “*rose early in the morning*” to pray to His heavenly Father (Matthew 28:1; Mark 51:35). He gives us our best example of the Morning Offering.

In 1844, a French Jesuit, Fr. Francois Xavier Gautrelet, composed a Morning Offering (also called the Daily Offering), which has become well-known for its simplicity and beauty. He also established a ministry called the Apostleship of Prayer, which even today propagates the Morning Offering and all the prayer intentions of the Holy Father.

As you pray this Morning Offering, keep in mind that you are united with the entire Church at prayer, from the most pious nuns and monks in their monasteries to the simplest believers on all six continents:

### THE MORNING OFFERING

*O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you my works, prayers, joys and sufferings of this day for all the intentions of your Sacred Heart. I offer them in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, in reparation for my sins, for the intentions of all my relatives and friends, and in particular for the intentions of the Holy Father.*

*Amen.*

## Devotional Spark

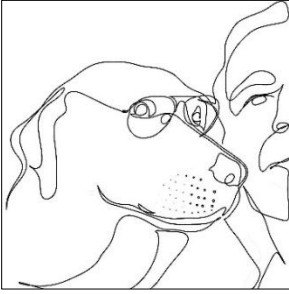
Those who offer themselves and their day to God through the Morning Offering develop the habit of uniting themselves to the mystery of Christ's Cross, the source of all grace and mercy. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that this practice of "offering up" the sacrifices of the day is a way of participating in Christ's ongoing redemption of the world:

What does it mean to offer something up? Those who did so were convinced that they could insert these little annoyances into Christ's great "com-passion" so that they somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race. In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love. (*Spe Salvi*, 40)

Do yourself a spiritual favor and take the time to learn this beautiful prayer by heart. Allow it, through daily recitation, to transform your faith practice from a simple Sunday obligation into a continual burning sacrifice of praise, offering yourself and all your actions to God from the first moment of every day.

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# About the Author



Peter Darcy is a writer, editor, and web designer who spent thirty years in the non-profit sector and Catholic missionary work. His great passion is educating others about the power of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. In 2020 he launched the Sacred Windows initiative for this purpose. He is a columnist at Catholic365.com.

Darcy has authored or ghostwritten fifteen books dedicated to spiritual and leadership themes, including:

- \* Praying with Fire: Learning to Pray the Catholic Way (2025)
- \* No Knot Too Tight: Short Reflections on Mary, Undoer of Knots (2024)
- \* Natures of Fire: God's Magnificent Angels (2021)
- \* No Nonsense Non-Profit: Leadership Principles for Church and Charity (2020), and
- \* The Seven Leadership Virtues of Joan of Arc (2020).

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<https://www.amazon.com/~e/B089WKPMW7>.

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