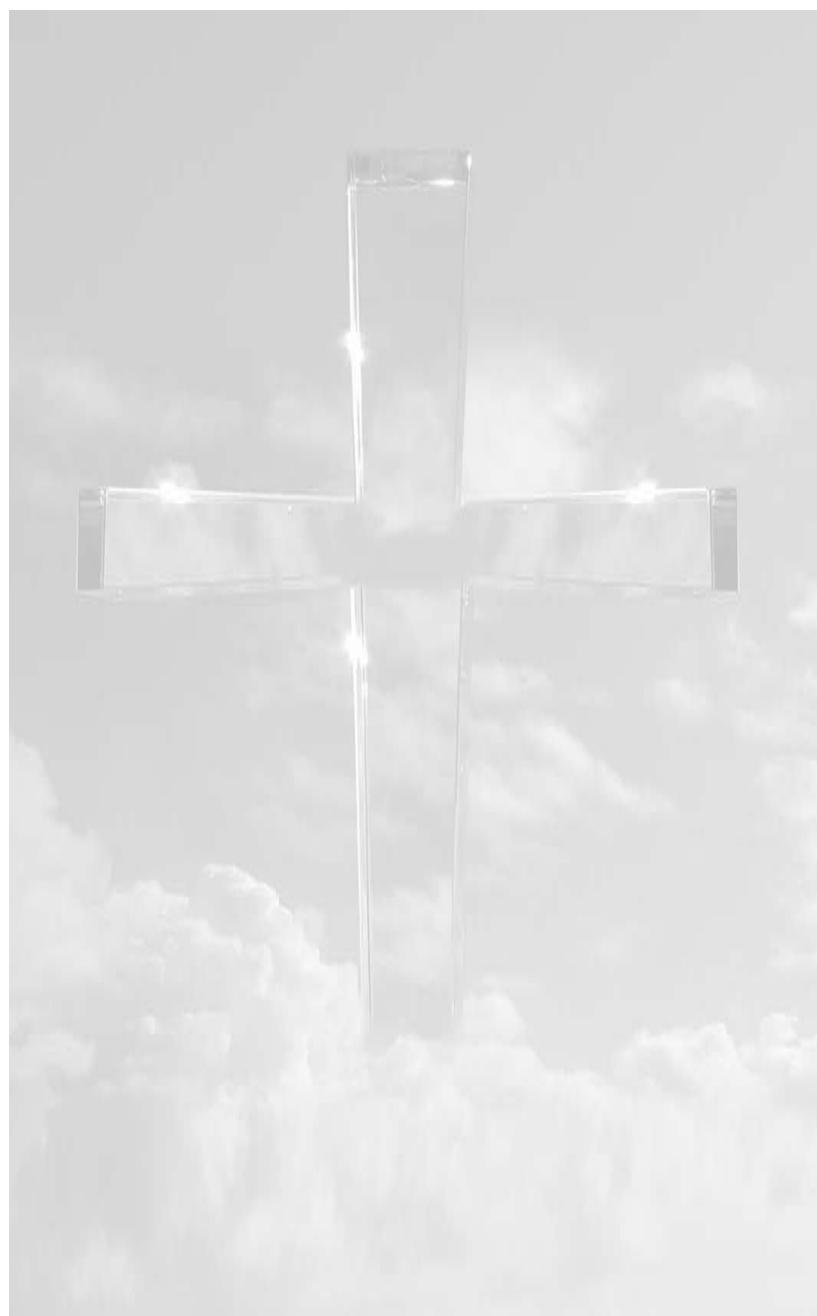




PRAYER IN THE BUSYNESS OF LIFE

New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference



The Church had hardly begun when the Apostles realized that the demands of administration were distracting them from their duty to the word of God. They had to arrange things differently so that *prayer and the service of the word* were not neglected [see Acts, 6:1-4 NRSV].

In every age there is similar concern over time for prayer. Our fast-paced 21st century is no exception. Pastoral affairs and the demands of family and commercial life, can make it difficult for prayer to have any place at all.

Yet prayer remains at the heart of the Church. It is our life-blood. In its various forms, prayer is at once praise and thanksgiving, an appeal for mercy and our hope in time of need. Prayer is a doorway to personal and community renewal and also to the tranquility challenged by the world.

This letter encourages you to seek the form of prayer best suited to your situation. But in writing this, we, your Bishops, want to assure you that, like you, we know from personal experience it is not always easy to find the time and the energy to nurture a habit of prayer.

Pope John Paul II saw this difficulty very clearly, referring to the **art** of prayer, thereby aligning prayer with a practiced skill. In his letter to the Church at the close of the Jubilee Year 2000 [*Novo Millenio Ineunte*], he reminded us that we have to learn to pray.

The first disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke, 11:1) and he led them to understand prayer as a conversation where there is both a listening and a speaking.

The Pope reminded us that prayer, whether personal or communal, draws us into the life of God and continually revitalizes our own life. Prayer "is the secret of a truly vital Christianity, which has no reason to fear the future, because it returns continually to the sources and finds in them new life."

(NMI 32)

At the baptism of their child, parents are blessed as the child's "first teachers in the ways of faith". This places a privileged responsibility on parents to make prayer the centre of family life and to introduce prayer at the beginning of a child's journey into life.

Pope John Paul calls for Christian communities to become "genuine schools of prayer" [para. 33] and our first "school" is our family home. To whisper a simple prayer in baby's ear while settling for sleep, to trace the cross on the forehead, to speak gently of God's love, are early lessons that will create memories of intimacy with God later making for easy spiritual conversation.

Prayer comes from God's initiative in loving us and being there for us. Prayer begins as we respond to God's invitation to offer something of ourselves. As this dialogue opens, life is nourished and friendship is born. Family bonds are developed in the same way, through open, honest communication. This makes the family the ideal nursery for the growth of holiness.

The great contemplative, St Therese of Lisieux, tells us that prayer *is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned towards heaven, it is a cry of recognition and love, embracing both trial and joy.* [quoted in Catechism of the Catholic Church, English Edition, 1994, n.2558]

Such an approach enables prayer to easily complement our daily routine, and to accompany the routine of work and other responsibilities. With this in mind, we have based our own "Pastoral Priorities" for 2008-2013 on the Eucharist - that most wondrous of prayers - with initiatives to help all Catholics towards a new appreciation of the relevance and accessibility of holiness.

By entering the Eucharist - the source and summit of the Church's life - with a sense of wonder and awe, our worship can be transformed from a duty to a joyful encounter. This is St Therese's *surge of the heart*.

The already initiated programme of re-discovering the beauty of the Mass [Worshipping Under Southern Skies], is but one of the ways we want to strengthen a sense of holiness and mission in each of you and throughout every parish.

We commend those parishes and individuals who already participate in the Morning and Evening Prayer of the Church, we also warmly endorse traditional devotions such as the Rosary and Novenas. They bring spiritual sustenance, nourishment and comfort to Catholics as they have done for many centuries. The "Angelus" at midday and/or in the evening, a "Grace" prayer at mealtimes, can help focus our attention on the gifts in our lives and can bring a sense of holiness to all our human activity.

More recently, the Charismatic and Taize prayer forms have touched the lives of many. The Church has always given special honour to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and we strongly encourage our Catholic people to give time to this devotion. It is a powerful witness to our belief in the abiding presence of Jesus and is a distinctive characteristic of Catholic faith.

Although many advances in technology pander to our physical comfort and provide almost limitless entertainment choices, there is still an unease within people, a deep yearning for a quieter, less rapid movement through life. [see NMI No.33]

Fortunately we do not have to invent new ways to achieve this. The devotions mentioned above can be easily adapted. Christian bookshops offer a wide selection of easy-to-read prayer and meditation material. Biblical scholarship offers some wonderful ways of integrating the scriptures, and particularly Gospel passages, into daily meditations.

Praying with and through the Sacred Scriptures should not be underestimated as a means of developing personal faith and growing in holiness. Every family should have a Bible. Listening to the Word of God brings that Word into the situations and circumstances that affect our lives, its life-giving power able to affirm or renew the way we are going. (NMI 39)

The "Retreat in Daily Life" movement is likewise scripturally based and is drawing people. This adaptation of the traditional "Retreat" enables parishioners to experience personal spiritual direction in their local environment at a time suitable to their schedule.

Others are finding strength and renewal through the practice of meditation. The Benedictine, John Main (1926-1982), adapted the prayer of the desert monks to provide a means of building prayer into daily life, recommending two 20-30 minute periods of meditation each day. A similar practice derived from the same tradition is that of the "centering prayer" promoted by Fr Thomas Keating (USA).

These other forms require discipline. Support groups are almost essential here and this is something that parishes might consider setting up. Contemplative communities, formerly associated with convents and monasteries can now be part of parish life. A Christian meditation group meeting weekly encourages individual prayer and may act as a contemplative leaven within the parish.

It is this contemplative prayer form that we would especially like to see developed. While its simplicity masks the effort required, it is one of the best responses to the spiritual vacuum in our modern society. It is already active in some of our schools where children are enabled to quietly ponder the presence of God for a few moments as part of their daily prayer. Knowing how to go into your "inner room" and meet Jesus, is thus the first stage in a personal relationship with God through Jesus and the doorway, we mentioned, to ongoing renewal.

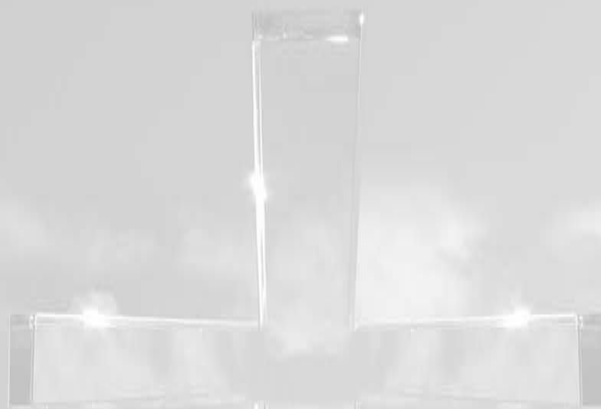
In response to the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray!" Jesus spoke the "Lord's Prayer" which we now consider the family prayer of the Christian people. In this sense, we see prayer as a light on the path to ecumenism, an indispensable means of bringing the followers of Jesus together. As Jesus prayed "may they all be one" (John, 17:21), we should be keen to join in prayer with other Christian groups and with members of other Faiths. Much of what we have written here concerning prayer can be fully shared with all people seeking a fuller appreciation of life.

Ten years ago, Pope John Paul II addressed us, the New Zealand Bishops, during our *Ad Limina* visit to Rome: "In the end, all our reflections on holiness, on the need for separation for the sake of service, on distinctiveness for the sake of dialogue, lead us to be ever more aware of the need for a renewed sense of prayer and contemplation." [21 November, 1998] These words, powerfully developed in his already quoted Millennium Jubilee Year letter are honoured in our own..

Prayer can be either private or with others. But whether you pray alone or as part of a community, you should always expect your prayer to take you out of yourself and lead you to where the love of Jesus is most experienced. Prayer opens your heart to the Holy Spirit who will surprise you not only with the direction suggested for your traveling, but – and especially – with the gifts you need to make the journey.

Our lives are bounded by our horizons, yet God's initiative in loving and accepting us stretches those horizons far beyond our ability to imagine or dream. It is within those bounds that our prayer takes flight, in wonder, in praise and thanksgiving, and in the sure hope that the God who first loved us will not let us lose our way.





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