

In All Seasons
For All Reasons



In All Seasons, For All Reasons

Praying Throughout the Year

James Martin, SJ

A Give Us This Day Book



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

A Give Us This Day Book
published by Liturgical Press

Cover design by Ann Blattner

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Martin, James, 1960– author.

Title: In all seasons, for all reasons : praying throughout the year /
James Martin, SJ.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2017. | “A
Give Us This Day book.”

Identifiers: LCCN 2017020634 (print) | LCCN 2017008795
(ebook) | ISBN 9780814645314 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814645079

Subjects: LCSH: Prayer—Christianity. | Catholic Church—
Doctrines.

Classification: LCC BV210.3 (print) | LCC BV210.3 .M365 2017
(ebook) | DDC 248.3/2—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017020634>



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Teach Us to Pray: An Introduction

One day, according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' disciples caught sight of their teacher praying. "Lord, teach us to pray," they said (Lk 11:1).

This vignette shows us not only Jesus' prayerful life, but what must have been the powerful appeal of what he was doing. It's something like a child seeing a friend engaged in something enjoyable, like skipping rope, and saying, "Show me how to do that!"

Jesus responded by teaching his friends the Our Father, often called the "perfect prayer." But even afterward, his followers probably continued to wonder about what it meant to pray.

Even for those who know the Our Father, the disciples' request remains a timeless one. Many Catholics, indeed many believers, doubt that they pray the "right" way. In this collection of brief essays drawn from my monthly column in *Give Us This Day*, together we will explore many ways to pray—in all seasons and for all reasons.

What is the "right" way to pray? The Rosary? Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament? Reading Scripture? Imaginative prayer? Well, as far as I'm concerned, the right way is whatever works best for you in your particular time and place. For God meets you where you are. And the fact that you are holding this book in your hand means you are already open to that encounter.

Like the disciples, we continue to ask God to teach us to pray, trusting that we will be answered in ways that will help us, move us—and even surprise us.

James Martin, SJ
New York City



**A Rich
Tradition**

Praying the Our Father

Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). It is the simple request of a disciple who wants to learn from his Master. John the Baptist, it seems, had taught his disciples to pray. And Jesus’ followers had seen him “withdraw” to pray, many times. Indeed, Jesus prays so frequently in Luke’s Gospel it is sometimes called the “Gospel of Prayer.” And Jesus is happy to teach his disciples: “When you pray, say ‘Father, hallowed be your name.’”

One of the most surprising aspects of the Our Father is that much of it is petitionary. I mention this because petitionary prayer sometimes gets a bad rap in spiritual circles. Many people have told me that they feel they shouldn’t ask for things in prayer: it’s too selfish, they say.

Yet Jesus asks us to ask. He is confident before the Father in prayer, and he encourages us to ask for what we need: our daily bread, of course, but also deliverance from evil and temptation.

And whom are we asking? Not some far-off, impersonal God, but our Father. Now, the very word “Father” can be difficult for some people. Some have, or had, fathers who were cruel, judgmental, or even abusive. Also, the language can seem sexist—after all, God has no gender. But Jesus’ father is the tenderhearted *Abba*, an Aramaic word roughly translated as “Dad.” A few years ago in Jerusalem, I saw a young girl running to catch up with her father, shouting, “Abba! Abba!” It is to this loving parent that we turn when we pray the Our Father.

So ask away, and remember that you’re asking your *Abba*.

Praying the Hail Mary

The first prayer I learned as a boy was the Hail Mary. (Don't ask me why it wasn't the Our Father: maybe it had something to do with not attending a Catholic school!) Sometimes when I wanted help from God, I would pray the Hail Mary on the way to school, my feet hitting the sidewalk in sync with the prayer's cadence: "*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . .*"

Mainly I used the prayer as a kind of "payment" for what I wanted from God. The bigger the favor from God, the more Hail Marys I would say.

Not until I was a Jesuit novice was I able to appreciate the underlying beauty of the prayer, and was able to see it as a twofold prayer, of Scripture and tradition. The first part of the prayer is taken almost directly from the greeting of the angel Gabriel to Mary in the Gospel of Luke. The second part of the prayer is a brief compendium of Marian tradition, which invokes one of her traditional titles, "Mother of God," and asks for her prayers.

Some of us (myself included) recite the Hail Mary almost as if in a trance—for example, when we say the Rosary—perhaps without pausing to reflect on the beauty of the individual words. But that's okay, as long as this ancient prayer reminds us that we are asking for the aid of someone who has long been listening to human hopes and desires.

Whether we are a child asking for help at school or a sick or elderly person "at the hour of our death," Mary hears our prayer. And prays for us.

Praying the Rosary

The Rosary, one of the oldest forms of Catholic prayer, has been a popular devotion in the Catholic Church since roughly the fifteenth century. Originally this circlet of beads enabled laypeople to pray along with monastic communities. (The 150 individual prayers mirror the 150 psalms. There are 10 Hail Marys in each “decade” of the Rosary, and there are five decades each for the sorrowful, joyful, and glorious “mysteries.” That is: $10 \times 5 \times 3 = 150$.)

Briefly put, one begins the Rosary with the Apostles’ Creed, and then prays a Hail Mary for each of the small beads and an Our Father for each of the larger ones. Along the way, one meditates on various events (mysteries) in the lives of Mary and Jesus.

Such rote or repetitive prayers are sometimes dismissed by “sophisticated” Catholics. Yet believers can use the Rosary in many ways: slowly meditating on the words of the beautiful prayers, pondering the lives of Mary and Jesus (one person described the Rosary as “Mary’s photo album”), or using the rote prayers as a mantra to quiet oneself in order to enter more deeply into God’s presence. For me, the Rosary helps when it’s hard to concentrate, and the familiar prayers I’ve known since childhood are an unailing comfort.

As an elderly woman once told her Jesuit son, “When I pray the Rosary, I look at God, and God looks at me.”

Mary as Patron and Companion

Most Catholics are familiar with Marian devotions, especially the Rosary—even if some may misunderstand these practices.

Though Mary without question holds a most special place in the roster of saints, it is important to remember that we don't worship Mary, and we don't see her as equal to God. We venerate her under many titles: *Mother of God*, *Our Lady*, *The Blessed Mother*, among others. But worship is reserved for God. When we ask for Mary's help as a patron (someone who prays for us) we believe that she is praying *to God*.

Mary's entire life was in service to God. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord," she says to the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:38). And her last words in Scripture point to Jesus when at the Wedding at Cana she says, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). In all this she is a model of fidelity and prayer.

But the saints are not just our patrons; they are our companions. Seeing Mary as our companion means remembering that the Blessed Mother was once Miriam of Nazareth, a poor woman in an insignificant village. God chose one of the most marginal of people—indigent, young, unmarried, living in an occupied region under Roman rule—to be the mother of Jesus. She knows what it means to live on the edge. Mary dealt with surprises in life, knew suffering, and rejoiced over God's activity.

In a word, Mary was human.

So the next time you take out a rosary or say a Marian prayer like the *Memorare*, remember that it unites us not only with Our Lady enthroned in heaven but also with Miriam of Nazareth.