

Introduction to Prayer

*O Lord, look down from thy holy habitation, and consider us.
Incline thy ear, O Lord, and hear. ~ Baruch 2:16*

OUR PERSONAL relationship with God is more important than anything else. The heart of this relationship is prayer, which is also the primary way that we foster and maintain it. Prayer, as the *Catechism* explains, "is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God"¹ (CCC 2559). Whether spoken or unspoken, prayer is that privileged communication which each person shares with his or her Creator.



Praying Hands, c. 1508, by Albrecht Dürer

Why Pray?

God created us to know, love, and serve him in this life, and to be happy forever with him in the next (see Is 43:7; Mk 8:36; Mk 12:30; Jn 14:2). The deepest desire of the human heart is for God. Having experienced the signs of his presence in the world around us and in our own lives, in faith we seek and desire God above all else. St. Augustine, a bishop of the early Church and himself a convert, put it beautifully when he said, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

We all long to rest in God. The Father sent his Son into the world to draw us back into communion with him and to be that source of his compassion and mercy for all who are troubled and weighed down by the trials of life. Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30). The most important way of knowing this "rest" is through prayer.

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¹ St. John Damascene, *De fide orth.* 3, 24 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 94, 1089C (Paris, 1857-1866)

The Art and Gift of Prayer

Prayer is something that we learn and it is also a gift from God. It is a combination of our own personal effort and the work of God within us. It establishes a real communion with God that forms into the relationship intended by him for each one of us. If we begin by doing what we can and ask him for help, he will help us although sometimes in ways that we may not at first understand. Developing a prayer life can only happen if one makes time for the Lord each day. Also, the Scriptures are useful in teach-

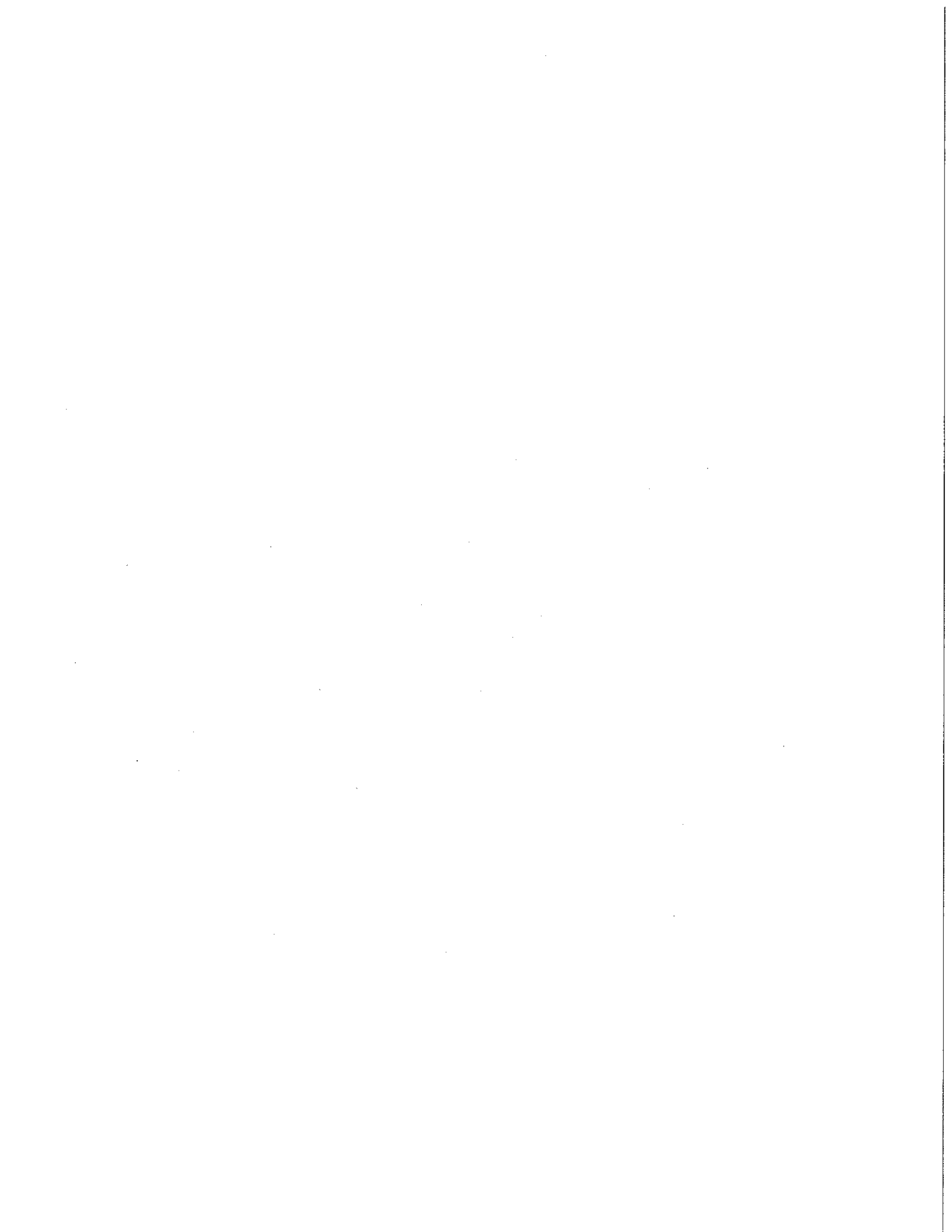
ing us how to pray.

Prayer from the Heart

Whether we recite formal written prayers or pray spontaneously, prayer should come from the heart. Love is the source of prayer, our response in love to the God who created us out of love. Praying from the heart also means that we are honest with ourselves and with God. Scripture says, "before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare" (Heb 4:13), so there is no way to hide even our deepest wounds and sins from him. However, he promises that, to those who come to him in prayer with a contrite heart, he will listen and offer forgiveness. Letting God into our hearts will deepen our ability to pray and make us ever mindful of his mercy and love.

Helpful Scriptures for Prayer

Ps 27:8-9 Mt 6:6 Jn 16:23-24 1 Jn 1:9
Ps 46:10 Mt 26:40-41 Phil 4:6-71 Jn 5:14
Ps 62:1 Jn 15:7 1 Thes 5:16-18
(CCC 2558-2619, 2598-2619, 2656, 2658)



Jesus: Our Exemplar in Prayer

*In these days he went out to the mountain to pray;
and all night he continued in prayer to God. ~ Luke 6:12*

THE APOSTLES SPENT a great amount of time in the presence of Jesus. They observed what he did, heard what he said, and ever so slowly became aware of what he valued, and why and how he thought and did things. Jesus was their leader; the apostles looked to him in all things. He was their Lord; he was their model. In time, they tried to imitate him. On many occasions, they witnessed Jesus praying (see Lk 3:21; Lk 4:1; Lk 9:28; Lk 10:21; Lk 11:1; Lk 22:32; Jn 17:1-26; Heb 5:7) and, wanting to be like him, they finally asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). He gave us the essential prayer, the "Our Father" (see Mt 6:9-13; see also Lk 11:2-4). Their request of him clearly indicates that they accepted him as their exemplar in everything, prayer included.

The apostles had ample opportunities to observe the prayer life of their Master. They noted that he often withdrew from the crowds, oftentimes even from them, in order to pray (see Mt 14:23; Lk 5:16). They must have seen that Jesus was refreshed and ready for another teaching mission after having spent time in prayer. They also knew that Jesus prayed before important acts and decisions (see Mk 1:35-38; Mk 14:35; Lk 6:12) and before he worked miracles (see Jn 11:41-42). They saw that prayer was a constant background in Jesus' life.

Jesus showed his followers that prayer can be drawn from the great treasury of Scriptural prayer, or can be simple prayers in our own words. He prayed the "Hallel" Psalms (songs of praise; the

word "Alleluia" derives from "Hallelu-ya" or "praise to God") at the Last Supper (see Mt 26:30). Hanging on the cross, he used the Psalms to express his anguish of spirit — "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:45, citing Ps 22:1) — and his trust in his Father — "into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46, citing Ps 31:5). He offered prayer in

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Jesus going up onto a mountain to pray, by James Tissot, 1836-1902

simple language, using "Abba" (an affectionate term similar to "Daddy") to address his Father (Mk 14:36) and to conform his human will to his Father's will: "remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk 22:42). He commended the humble man who prayed simply, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (Lk 18:13).

Jesus' closest followers could not have failed to realize that his prayer and his whole life were centered on his Father. His communion with his Father at one point prompted them to ask him to "show us the Father" (Jn 14:8). So many times, in the hearing of his apostles, Jesus prayed to and in praise of his Father (see Lk 10:21; Jn 11:41-42; Jn 12:27-28; Jn 17:4). Jesus' love for his Father, his glory, his will, his every desire was the core of his life. Before he left his apostles for his final hours on Calvary, Jesus spoke emphatically of his Father: "I shall... tell you plainly of the Father... for the Father himself loves you.... Father,... glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee.... And this is eternal life, that they know thee as the only true God.... I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do.... I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me.... Holy Father, keep them in thy name.... keep them from the evil one.... Sanctify them

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in the truth ... that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee.... Father, I desire that they also ... may be with me where I am, to behold my glory.... O righteous Father, ... these know that thou has sent me ... that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 16:25, 27 and 17:1, 3-4, 6, 11, 15, 17, 21, 24-26).

This priestly prayer of Jesus could hardly have failed to make a tremendous impact upon the apostles and, no doubt, this was his intent, for he was about to leave them behind in a world in which they would be hated (see Jn 15:19). His prayer to the Father, in their presence, was intended also to instruct them: to emphasize for them that what was paramount in his life on earth should be the most important aspect of their own lives as his disciples. The lesson he wanted them, and us, to grasp was the central importance of his Father: that the Father was the Alpha and Omega (see Rv 21:6), the end-all and be-all of his life and, as our exemplar, of our lives as well. This Father-centeredness is unmistakably evident when Jesus’ followers asked him to teach them

to pray. It is Jesus’ Father, now our Father too, who is the heart of the matter of life as well as our heart’s desire at the moment of death.

During his life on earth, Jesus also emphasized the importance of faith in prayer. Again and again, the apostles heard that faith is the condition for answers to our prayers. Faith can move mountains, Jesus tells us, if that faith is even as small as a mustard seed (see Mt 17:20). But it must be actively present if we expect prayer to have results. *“All things are possible,”* says Jesus on one occasion, *“to him who believes”* (Mk 9:23). *“And whatever you ask in prayer; you will receive, if you have faith”* (Mt 21:22), he says on another.

In reading the Gospels, we become aware of Jesus’ requirement of faith in those who requested favors of him, even miracles. He was pleased with those who had faith, and rewarded it: the Roman centurion (see Mt 8:8-10), the woman with the hemorrhage (see Mt 9:21-22), the pagan Canaanite woman who drew from Jesus the joyful exclamation, *“O woman, great is your faith!”* (Mt 15:28), the blind Bartimaeus (see Mk 10:51-52). He was dismayed by evidence of lack of faith. The Evangelist Mark tells us that *“he could do no mighty work there”* and *“he marveled because of their unbelief”* (Mk 6:5-6). And he rebuked the apostles when, fearing they would die, they awakened him while he slept in their boat through a storm on the Sea of Galilee: *“Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?”* (Mt 8:26).

In showing us the importance of prayer and its necessity in daily life, Jesus taught and practiced two essential things. First, prayer and our whole life are centered on God the Father and the accomplishment of his will. Second, the essential means of attaining an answer to our prayers is faith.

So when we pray, we must imitate Jesus. Like him, we must lift up our hearts and minds to God (see CCC 2559), hallow his name, submit ourselves and our requests to his will, and ask that his Kingdom may come on earth as it is in Heaven. Having touched first the heart of our Father, we can then ask, seek, and knock on that heart for our own needs and, with faith — as firm a faith as possible — await his response. To each of us, our Exemplar says: *“And I tell you, ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you”* (Lk 11:9).

(CCC 520, 612, 2559, 2598-2607, 2609-2611, 2746-2751, 2759-2761)



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Aspects of Prayer

And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith. ~ Matthew 21:22

THE LORD'S PRAYER, more commonly referred to as "The Our Father," is a masterpiece of the Gospel and is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. In it the Lord brings together the essential aspects of prayer that are found throughout the Scriptures. It is the most revered prayer among Catholics and is recited every time the Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharist.

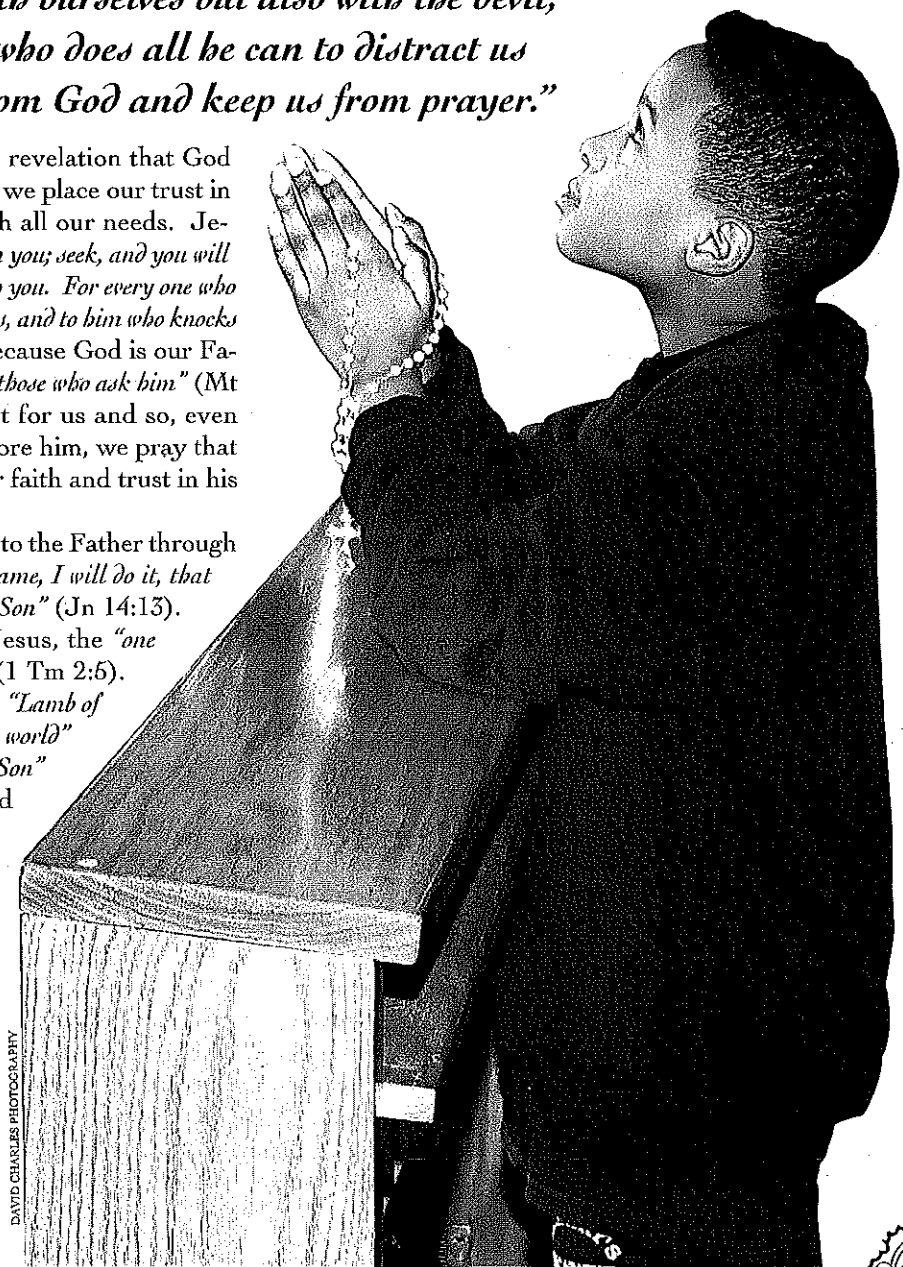
The prayer begins with the revelation that God is our Father. As his children, we place our trust in him and come before him with all our needs. Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Mt 7:7-8). Because God is our Father he will give "good things to those who ask him" (Mt 7:11). He knows what is best for us and so, even before we place our needs before him, we pray that his will be done to express our faith and trust in his Providence.

Jesus also taught us to pray to the Father through him: "whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (Jn 14:13). For this reason, we pray to Jesus, the "one mediator between God and men" (1 Tm 2:5). He is our Lord and Savior, the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29), the Father's "beloved Son" (Mk 9:7; Lk 3:22), and our Good Shepherd (see Jn 10:11). We invoke the name of Jesus — which means "God saves" — and, by keeping his name on our lips, make our lives a constant prayer. We beg his mercy in the traditional sinner's prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (see Mk 10:47; Lk 18:13).

Another aspect of prayer is the power of the Holy Spir-

it. It is the Spirit that has been sent into our hearts who teaches us to recognize God as Father (see Gal 4:6). Scripture says, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).

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DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

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COURTESY OF THE ARCHDIOCESE FOR THE MILITARY SERVICES, USA

A military priest prays over a wounded soldier during World War II

In his encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus describes the water that only he can give as the water of the Spirit which will become in each of us *“a spring of water welling up to eternal life”* (Jn 4:14). Authentic prayer arises out of this spring and is sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture reminds us that in this life we are involved in a spiritual battle not only with ourselves but also with the devil, who does all he can to distract us from God and keep us from prayer. Jesus said to his disciples, *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”* (Mt 26:41). Many of us have complained that, with our jobs and families, we “don’t have time” for prayer. Solving this problem is more about making time than finding it. Prayer has to become a priority in our life because too much is at stake in prayer. *“Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him,*

firm in your faith” (1 Pt 5:8-9).

St. Paul exclaims, *“Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”* (1 Thes 5:17). The command to pray without ceasing may seem impossible, but keep in mind that it is the Holy Spirit in each of us that prays on our behalf. A “morning offering” dedicates the day. Saying the name of Jesus throughout the day is one form of constant prayer. Through this prayer, we call upon the Holy Spir-

it for help and sanctify all the activities of daily life. In this way, our whole life becomes an offering in prayer to God.

Prayer at all times also means that we set aside specific times for prayer. Prayer upon awakening and just before sleep, and prayer before meals, should be part of the daily rhythm of prayer. Many people go to Mass daily. The Liturgy of the Hours (see handout of this title) is an extended form of daily prayer. Prayer at Sunday Mass helps keep the entire day and week holy, and the cycles of the liturgical year (see handout on The Liturgical Year), with its great feasts celebrating the story of our salvation and its celebration of the lives of the saints, create a seasonal rhythm that, over time, becomes embedded in the Christian’s life of prayer.

(CCC 451, 2650, 2652, 2664-2668, 2697-2698, 2725-2745, 2761-2762, 2770, 2780)