

What is Prayer?

When I started planning this series, I figured I would start with why to pray, then move on to how. Simple enough. But before I got very far, it dawned on me that I was skipping something more basic: what actually is prayer? I thought I could answer that in a five-minute article. Turns out, I was way too optimistic.

The more I sat with the question, the more I realized it doesn't have one answer. It has as many answers as there are people asking it. A six-year-old might tell you prayer is talking to God like He's right there with you. A twenty-something might call it a real relationship with God, not just saying words, a way of opening up their actual life to Someone who already knows and loves them. And for someone who has kept at it for fifty years, they might tell you it isn't any single conversation at all. It's every year they kept showing up, the years that felt close to God and the years that felt a bit distant, all of it, decade after decade, turning into simple faithfulness. Not a feeling. A commitment kept. All of those are true. None of them are the whole answer, and I don't think that's a failure. I think it's the point.

Here's what I keep coming back to: prayer is not something we do or that we invent and then offer to God hoping He notices. It's the other way around. God moves first; we respond to Him. The Church's Catechism describes it as the encounter of God's thirst with ours, like Christ meeting the woman at the well, a stranger he approached first. He's already there, already reaching. Prayer is just us noticing and answering.

Peter Kreeft, a Catholic apologetics writer, puts it plainly in *Prayer for Beginners*: prayer is food for the soul. Not a self-improvement project. Not a technique to master. Just the practice of God's presence, however that shows up for you, in words, in silence, on your knees, in the quiet of an empty church. It can even be a shift at work, a hard workout, a test at school, a chore we didn't want to do. None of that is prayer when we're chasing it for ourselves, for our own glory. However, offered to and for Him instead, that same effort becomes prayer too.

I've come to learn that prayer doesn't always have to feel like anything or even something to be real. Some of the deepest prayer happens in dryness, when we sense nothing at all and show up anyway. If you've tried praying, felt nothing, and thought, "I must be doing this wrong," or worse, "I'm not sure this does anything," I'd gently push back. That feeling, that place, that might be exactly where God is leading you to go.

I don't have this fully figured out. I'm not sure anyone does on this side of heaven. But I'm learning that's allowed. We get to say "I don't fully know yet" without treating it as failure.

So, to the question of *What is Prayer?*, my honest answer, for right now, prayer is where I meet God. Yours might sound different, and it should. What prayer is to you is shaped by where you are in life, and that's not a limitation; it's part of the design.

Take some time this month. Think about it. Dare I say, pray about it. What is prayer to you? We'd love to hear your answer. Email us at spiritualcommittee@divinemercysf.org and tell us how you'd answer that question.

"When you look for me, you will find me" (Jeremiah 29:13). He's already reaching. He was reaching before you ever thought to look. All that's left is for you to notice, to look back and pray.

Divine Mercy Pastorate Spiritual Committee