

PRAYER

FINDING INTIMACY WITH GOD

LEADER'S RESOURCE GUIDE SESSION 1



LECTIO™

UNVEILING SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

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SESSION 1

PRAYER: AN INTIMATE DIALOGUE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Read this overview in advance to familiarize yourself with the session.

Prayer is fundamental to the Christian life because we are created by God for an intimate and everlasting relationship with him. But a relationship can't be built or maintained without ongoing conversation with the other person. Despite how basic prayer is to a life of faith, it is not always easy. This session will explore the difficulties we experience in prayer and point us in the right direction of approaching prayer as a conversation.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that all prayer is a response to God's desire for us—prayer is an encounter that God initiates. When we experience difficulty and dryness in prayer, it's often a result of approaching prayer as a monologue rather than a dialogue. It's important to open our hearts and express our thoughts and feelings in prayer, but if we're only talking and not listening, then prayer cannot be a conversation. We speak to God in prayer, but we must also learn to engage God in silence, especially through the Scriptures. Listening to God speak through the Scriptures is the secret of the saints who mastered the art of prayer.

This session establishes the importance of approaching prayer as a dialogue and emphasizes that Scripture is the normative way in which God speaks to his people. These principles set the foundation for our study.



CONNECT

*Begin this session by leading the **Opening Prayer** and reading aloud the **Introduction**, both found in the Study Guide. Then discuss the following questions.*

What is your earliest memory of praying?

Memories might be from childhood, such as learning a formal prayer like the Our Father, listening to a parent pray out loud at mealtime or bedtime, or being encouraged to talk to God in their own words. Memories might also be from later in life, such as hearing someone else pray and feeling moved, reaching out to God (maybe even before really believing he exists), learning formal prayers, experiencing the Mass for the first time, etc.

If you had to define prayer for someone who had never heard of it, how would you explain it?

Explanations might include defining prayer as an encounter or a conversation with God, thinking of it as talking to a friend. Some might include explanations of formal prayers as both teaching us about God and as articulating our relationship with God. They also might include the rationale behind why we pray—to deepen our relationship with God and to seek and understand his will for our lives.



Play the video segment, which will last about 29 minutes. The Study Guide provides participants with a brief outline of the topics covered in the video teaching, along with the following discussion questions.



DISCUSS

After the video segment, discuss the following questions. Familiarize yourself with the comments after each question; these are meant to guide you in the conversation.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

1. What was one thing you heard for the first time or that was an “aha” moment for you?

Participants might not have realized that finding prayer to be difficult or even a somewhat unpleasant obligation was a common experience. They might not have realized they were treating prayer as a monologue rather than a dialogue. They might not have realized that when they read Scripture, God is speaking to them directly and personally.

2. What obstacles to prayer do you experience? How have you dealt with these in the past? How might approaching prayer as an encounter and a dialogue affect your experience?

There is no end to the obstacles we encounter in prayer: laziness, feeling like it isn't doing any good, simply being busy, setting unrealistic or unsustainable goals and giving up, feeling like we don't know how to pray and not knowing where to start, getting into a rut and not knowing how to get out, etc. Participants may have dealt with these by establishing a set time for prayer, by starting small in the amount of prayer time and in their expectations and increasing these over time, and by reading books or writings on prayer. Approaching prayer as a dialogue can change our focus from “prayer is my job/work” to “prayer is a relationship.”

3. Do you feel it is easy or difficult to hear God speaking directly to you in Scripture? Why?

Some participants may have grown up with the understanding that Scripture is meant to be personal—God's love letter to each of us—and so the idea of God speaking to them personally isn't new and may be easier. Others may be used to viewing Scripture as an ancient text and not taking it personally. Some may even feel it is presumptive to read Scripture as God's words directed to them. Some may get hung up on passages that don't seem to apply to them (like laws or genealogies in the Old Testament) and that might get in the way of hearing God in other passages.

*Direct participants to this session's **Memory Verse** in their Study Guides, and read it together. Then lead the **Closing Prayer**. Encourage participants to do the **COMMIT** reflections on their own before you meet again as a group.*



COMMIT

The following are suggested answers to the questions participants will be asked to reflect upon in their daily COMMIT reflections.



DAY 1 – THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

Participants will explore the importance of prayer as seen in its repeated appearance throughout the Bible.

How do you keep Sunday, the Lord's Day, as a day of prayer? How does this influence the rest of your week?

The first way we keep Sunday as a day of prayer is by participating at Mass—we pray together with the rest of the Church to mark the day as holy and a day of prayer. Other ways may include special family prayer (perhaps a Rosary) or Scripture reading times on Sunday to foster the habit of prayer together. Keeping Sunday a restful day free from unnecessary work or busyness also makes space for prayer and for a spirit of restfulness and quiet that is more conducive to hearing God speak. Hopefully the prayers and readings of the Mass stick with us throughout the week, continuing to bear fruit—and perhaps prompting us to attend daily Mass if possible. Being especially aware of God and the importance of prayer on Sunday can help us improve our habit of prayer throughout the week.

Look up the following psalms: Psalm 73:28 and 105:1–4. Take a moment to recall and praise God for his many works in your own life.

In both these psalms, and many others, the psalmist exhorts us to “tell of all [God’s] wonderful works” and to give God thanks. In the monotony of daily life, we can forget the many blessings of God. Remembering these things, small and great, renews in us a spirit of joy and thanksgiving and draws us nearer to God.

What does your life of prayer have in common with prayer as lived throughout Salvation History?

Mass on Sundays and other Holy Days of Obligation corresponds with Israel’s liturgical feasts: worshipping God in community and responding together to his invitation to encounter him in prayer. As Catholics we pray the psalms in the Mass and in the Liturgy of the Hours and in many hymns and songs; this unites us with a tradition of prayer that is 3,000 years old. We also face many of the same challenges and difficulties that the Israelites faced in being faithful to God in prayer—and when we fail, as they did, God also calls us back to faithfulness.



DAY 2 – THE PROBLEM OF PRAYER

Participants will look at some of the things that make prayer difficult—especially too much talking on our part and not knowing how to listen.

What are some activities you know to be good and important, but that you simply don't like to do—the ones that always seem to get moved to the bottom of your "to do" list?

Some examples might include: flossing my teeth, going to the dentist, exercising, chores around the house such as vacuuming, folding laundry, or cleaning out the gutters, etc.

What is your greatest struggle with prayer right now?

Struggles might include being so busy that it's difficult to find time for prayer, not knowing how to pray, not feeling like it does any good, or even doubting the efficacy of prayer. When we encounter struggles in prayer, it's important to remember that a difficulty or struggle is not a defeat or failing—in fact, persevering through doubt, difficulty, etc. is virtuous, proving our love and faithfulness.

What are some things you can do to cultivate a habit of exterior and interior silence, and practice the art of patient listening?

Some ideas include setting limits on background noise—both audio and visual. Consider committing to a "media fast"—don't listen to the radio on your drive to work for a few days, or limit the time spent watching movies and videos, etc. Practice giving your full attention to whatever you are doing (no multitasking or daydreaming), and practice active listening in your conversations with friends and family (if you aren't really listening to God, maybe you're not listening 100% to others either). When thoughts or "to do's" interrupt your interior silence, practice setting those aside, maybe by writing them down so that you aren't anxious about forgetting them after your prayer time. Begin by setting small goals for silence and listening in prayer to start and increase slowly over time.



DAY 3 – LECTIO: "I THIRST"

Participants will reflect on Jesus' words from the cross, "I thirst," and how they relate to prayer.

LECTIO

What need or desire does Jesus express in this passage? What does he receive?

Jesus expresses his thirst—both a need for something to satisfy his physical thirst and a passionate desire for each and every one of us. He receives vinegar or sour wine to drink.

What does Jesus give in this passage?

Jesus gives his life, and he gives up his Spirit. He also gives forth water and blood from his side (symbolizing the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, which are received in Christ's Church; the water and blood are also proof that he really died, etc.).

What reason does St. John offer for presenting his testimony in this passage?

St. John says that his reason is "that you also may believe." His whole account of the crucifixion is directed toward inspiring faith—inspiring us to respond to Christ's thirst for us.

MEDITATIO

From the cross Jesus said, “I thirst,” and in response he was given vinegar or sour wine—a common drink of the lower classes that, although cheap, was considered refreshing. What does Christ thirst for from you? What can you offer him on a daily basis? Weekly? Over the course of your whole life?

What Christ desires from each of us is our total gift of self to him. We may need to be offering Christ things such as our pride or will so as to conform these more to God’s will. Daily we can offer Jesus time in prayer, our love for him lived out in service to others, etc. Weekly offering should include Mass. Long term we can offer Christ ourselves without holding anything back.

The *Catechism* states: “Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him. . . . Prayer is . . . a response of love to the thirst of the only Son of God” (CCC 2560–61). Why is it important to understand prayer as a response to God rather than something we initiate? What effect might this view have on your prayer life?

If God initiates prayer, then we need to be listening and responding, not setting our own terms for the encounter. It also takes away some of the burden of prayer being difficult (for example, “It’s okay if I’m ‘bad’ at prayer right now because it doesn’t totally depend on me.”) But it also lays on us the responsibility to be available to God, to respond to his call to conversation. We might think of prayer as less of something that we have to decide/choose to do, and more of an appointment that has already been set up by God and we just have to show up.

In John 19:28–35, God thirsts for us, but we cannot even respond to him in prayer without his help. From the cross Jesus gives up his Spirit (verse 30), and blood and water flow from his pierced side (verse 34). How do the Holy Spirit and the life of the Church (symbolized by the blood and the water) enable us to respond to God in prayer?

The Holy Spirit teaches us to pray, and the Holy Spirit prays through us (see Romans 8:26). The Church also teaches us to pray by giving us formal prayers to learn and formats for prayer to follow (liturgies).

The Church leads us in prayer by drawing us into her liturgies and her communal life of prayer, as well as providing us a community to encourage and help us along in our journey of prayer.



DAY 4 – GOD SPEAKS

Participants will explore the importance of listening to God speak to them personally in Scripture.

Is there a Scripture verse that is particularly meaningful or applicable to your life right now? (It might be something you have memorized, something you heard or read recently, or even something that made an impression but you can’t remember the exact verse.)

If participants do not have a passage in mind for this question, here are some passages that may resonate with them:

Psalm 118:24 – “This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Proverbs 3:5–6 – “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”

Jeremiah 29:11 – “For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Matthew 6:34 – “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.”

1 Corinthians 13:7 – “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

1 Timothy 4:12 – “Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.”

Consider your current habits for reading Scripture. Do you read from the Bible on a regular basis? Is it for prayer or for study? What are some steps you can take this week to begin praying with Scripture or to increase the time you spend praying with Scripture?

Some participants may already pray with Scripture on a regular basis; others may not have considered the distinction between praying with Scripture and studying Scripture (although both are important and one enhances the other). Concrete steps to take include setting a specific time aside for prayer with Scripture, increasing the existing time, choosing a set place and making it conducive to prayer, possibly getting a Bible without commentaries so as not be distracted when trying to simply pray with the text, picking a specific book of the Bible and reading through it completely rather than skipping around each day, starting the habit of underlining parts of verses in your Bible that touch your heart as you read, etc.



DAY 5 – TRUTH AND BEAUTY

Participants will reflect on Fra Angelico's Annunciation, c. 1450 in the Convent of San Marco, Florence.

Look up Luke 1:26–38. In this conversation between God (through his messenger Gabriel) and Mary, who initiates? Is this a monologue, or a dialogue? How does Mary's interaction with Gabriel change over the course of the conversation?

God initiates the conversation by sending Gabriel to Mary and with Gabriel's words, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28). The conversation is a dialogue as both Gabriel and Mary speak to one another. At first, Mary is perplexed by Gabriel's greeting and considers it in her mind. As Gabriel continues, she dialogues with him, asking him questions about just how God's plan is to come to fruition. As Gabriel continues and she gains understanding, she is able to respond to God's invitation and will for her life.

This response comes both in words, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38a), and also in deeds, as she departs to help her elderly kinswoman, Elizabeth (Luke 1:39–40).

NOTES
