

There are as many reasons to pray as there are people. But as one of the world's best-loved Christian writers explains, all are different ways of responding to an invitation from God / By JAMES MARTIN

Nine reasons to pray

WHY PRAY? Let me suggest the first reason: *God wants to be in a relationship with you.* How can you know this?

Because you want to pray. And how do I know that? Because you're reading this.

That may sound sarcastic, but it's not. There's a serious point here: your desire for prayer reveals something about how God created you. Deep within you is a natural desire to communicate with God, to share yourself with God, to have God hear your voice, or, more basically, to encounter God. Deep within you is a longing to be in a relationship with God. So you long to pray.

You may doubt many things when it comes to prayer. You may doubt that you'll be able to pray. You may doubt that God wants to communicate with you. You may even doubt God's existence. But you cannot doubt that you feel a desire for prayer. After all, you're reading this. So clearly something within you desires prayer.

Where does the desire for prayer come from? *From God.* The most common way God draws you closer is by placing within you the desire to be closer, the desire that drove you to think about prayer and to read this article. Strange as it sounds, your reading of these lines at this moment is a sign of God's call.

How else would God draw us closer, other than by planting a longing inside us? Once I saw a ceramic plaque in a retreat house that summed this up: "That which you seek is causing you to seek."

This insight is helpful to those beginning their journey of prayer because it helps them feel, even before they've started to pray, connected to God. It helps them to know that God has taken the initiative, that God is calling to them, that God *desires* them. It helps people take the first tentative steps toward God.

Many of us have felt that there is more to life than what we know. We feel a sense of incompleteness. We long to feel complete, to be connected, to be satisfied, to *know*. Inside us are nagging feelings of longing, restlessness, and incompleteness that can be fulfilled only in a relationship with God. There is a hole in our hearts that only God can fill. Augustine put it best when he wrote: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord. And our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Your desire to pray is a sign that God desires

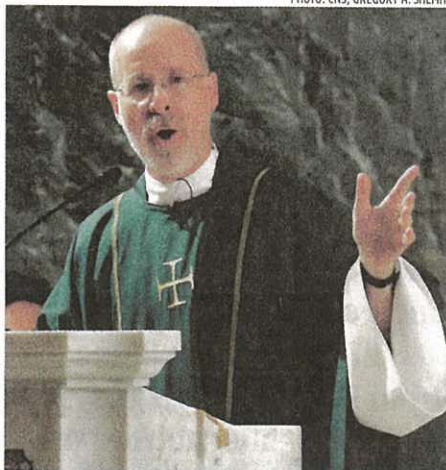
you. It's an indication God is calling you. And that is perhaps the most important reason to pray. Not simply because you desire it, but because the desire is a sign of something else. You desire to pray because *God* desires it.

A **second reason** for prayer is a slight reframing of this. We pray *because we want to be in relationship to God*. That may sound obvious – of course we pray to be closer to God. But it's important to state that the aim of prayer is not simply physical relaxation, mindfulness, knowledge, or a connection to creation, as important as those things are. These are goals that many people mention when speaking about meditation. But the goal of *prayer* is closer union with God.

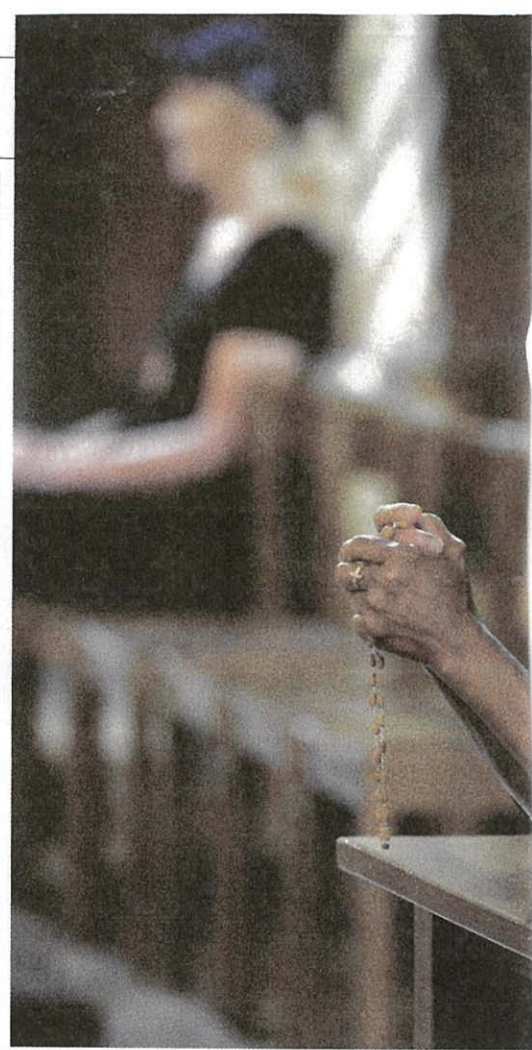
More basically, we pray because we love God. William Barry SJ writes: "The primary motive for prayer is love, first the love of God for us and then the arousal of our love for God." We pray to come to know God as well. "Who is God?" is an important question in the spiritual life. So are "Who is God for me?" and "Who am I before God?"

Prayer reminds us of our need for God. It reminds us that we are not the centre of the universe and that we are not God. Sometimes when things are going well, we can grow arrogant and complacent in our self-sufficiency. Prayer, which places us in the presence of God in an intentional way, reminds us of who is in charge, or rather who is nurturing us. Gerard W. Hughes writes in *God of Surprises*: "To begin prayer it is sufficient to acknowledge that I am not self-sufficient, that I am not the

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James Martin SJ pictured in 2019



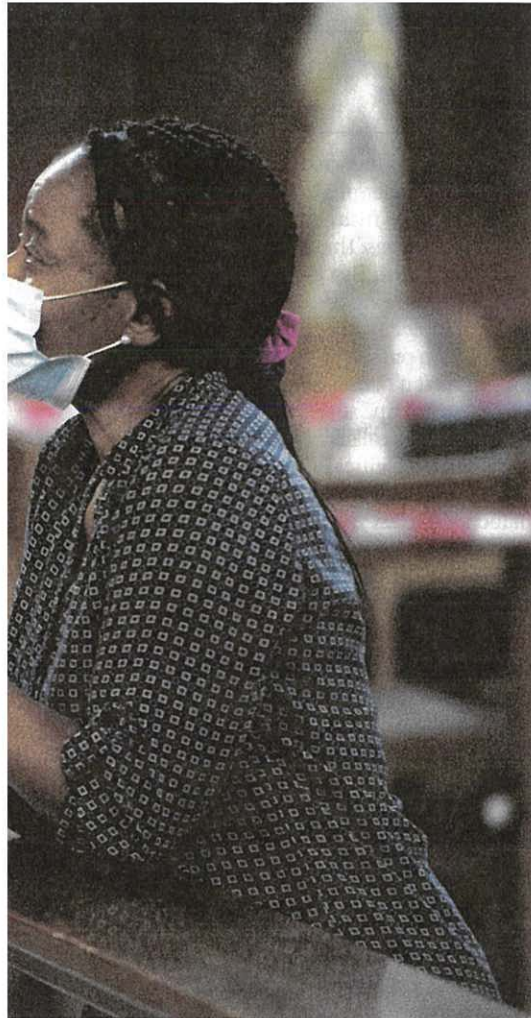
creator of myself and creation. If I can do this, then I acknowledge that there is some power – I may not know whether it is personal or not and may be in complete ignorance of its nature – greater than I."

This inevitably moves us to humility, as we realise more and more our need for God. Thomas Merton went further, saying that prayer is inseparable from humility. Humility, he said, "makes us realise that the very depths of our being and life are meaningful and real only in so far as they are oriented toward God as their source and their end."

A **third reason** is that *we have to*. If you're not used to praying, that may sound ridiculous, but once you start, you'll see that it can feel as natural as breathing. Our innate desire for God means we naturally crave a relationship with God. Prayer is an outgrowth of the human longing for the divine. In a sense, we can't *not* pray, because prayer is part of being human.

There are other reasons that prayer feels necessary. In the face of your problems, how can you not ask for help from your Creator? I've never met anyone who felt that his or her life was free of problems. So we pray for a **fourth reason**: *we are in need*.

A **fifth reason** is that *prayer helps* us. This may sound selfish, but it's another common motivation, similar to reasons for doing physical exercise. If you never get off the couch, you'll end up out of shape, and that will influence your overall physical condition; less exercise means more pulled muscles, perilous cardiovascular health, and greater stress. Not praying – not spending intentional time with God – means your spiritual life will be out of shape, even flabby, and that will influence the



less alone. God is always with you, but praying in this way is a great aid nonetheless. Sometimes I've stood up from prayer and said: "At least I know that God knows how I feel."

A **seventh reason** for prayer is that it helps us *praise God*. If you're a believer, you may wonder about the best way to express your gratitude. You can do good works, live a moral life, and help your fellow human beings. Those are fine ways to show your love in gratitude. As Ignatius Loyola says: "Love ought to show itself in deeds more than words." But it's just as important to say "thank you" to God. Prayer is one way of doing this. Simply resting in things you're grateful for is a way of giving thanks.

Prayer, however, is not a solitary act. This leads us to an **eighth reason**: *solidarity*. When we pray we are, consciously or unconsciously, expressing a connection to our brothers and sisters who also pray – even if they're not physically with us. Prayer in common is an essential aspect of the spiritual life. As social animals, we naturally find comfort and support in groups. Praising God in a group makes double sense: we naturally want to do it, and we naturally want to do it with others. Both are part of being human.

Whenever we pray, we are united with believers across the world who are lifting their hearts and minds to God. We are also united with those who have gone before us, who continue their prayers before God. This is one part of what Catholics mean by the "communion of saints".

A **ninth reason**: we pray *to be transformed*. This is somewhat different from praying to God for help – but it's related. Knowing that we are flawed and imperfect, many of us look to God to help us grow into better people. This is not to say that we are all terrible sinners or irredeemable reprobates. Rather, we are all human beings in need of God's grace.

In my own life, that desire manifests itself especially during prayer. If I do something sinful, I am filled with a remorse that becomes more obvious when I spend time with God. A few years ago, I did something selfish that affected a friend. In my prayer the next day I saw how uncharitable it was and was moved to seek out my friend and apologise. I was

also reminded of my need for God's grace and my desire for more charity. We might also become aware not of one particular sin, but of a general pattern in our lives, a place where we are unfree. We may ask for freedom from this in prayer.

There is a kind of petitionary prayer here too, but of a different nature. "Help me to be a better person, God" might be called a prayer of transformation.

Not long ago, I had been praying that God would change me in a particular way, and not much seemed to be happening. Then, suddenly, it was discovered that I would need some minor surgery. Lying in the hospital bed a few weeks later, tethered by tubes to various machines, I started to think about all the things I was hoping to change in my life: my flaws and failings, all the things I hoped God would change or eradicate. As I enumerated the things that were distracting me from being the person I wanted to become, they began to seem in a word, ridiculous. In other words, I saw the emptiness of whatever was moving me away from God.

During those days I felt God saying to me in prayer: "What kind of life do you want to lead?" It was not so much a matter of waiting for God to change me or remove my flaws; God was telling me that the change was largely up to me. It was a transformational moment, as it seemed to offer me freedom and reminded me of my own agency in life. Transformation is another reason for prayer.

That short list of reasons why people pray is by no means complete. There are as many reasons to pray as there are people. For now, let's say that there are many reasons to pray, chief among them that God is calling to you. It's as if God is saying: "Would you like to spend some time with me?"

Why not say yes?

Adapted from Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone, published next week by William Collins (£16.99; Tablet price £15.29).

James Martin SJ is editor at large of America magazine, consultant to the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication, and author of numerous books, including The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything.

rest of your life. You'll probably be less grateful and thus more irritable, less connected to the deepest part of yourself and thus more scattered, less aware of your reliance on God and thus more frightened. Prayer helps you.

On the rare days that I don't pray I feel off balance. And I always know why. Certainly I feel guilty that I've not spent time with God in an intentional way, but I also feel, to put it bluntly, worse. I'm more irritable, more distracted, less patient, and less able to maintain perspective on life. Even when prayer feels "dry" it helps me feel more connected to the centre of my being, which is God. Being centered in that way always means more perspective, because you know where you stand.

Prayer is also a way to *unburden* ourselves when we're feeling sad, angry, stressed or frustrated. That's a **sixth reason**. Often, after you have told God your problems, you feel

'I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'
Matthew 25:36

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