

# Prayer Problems: Are Catholics Bad at Praying?

A few months ago driving to work, I listened intently to NPR's special report entitled, Losing Our Religion. The particular story that caught my attention was a group interview of young "nones," people who do not identify with any religion. Having written my dissertation on the process of secularization and studied the phenomenon of "nones" extensively, the majority of responses were predictable. Until, they were questioned: do you pray?

To my surprise, every interviewee acknowledged that they pray. With great candor, one admitted hypocritically to praying when hitting rock bottom, yet not believing in God. Others revealed that they often expressed a spirit of gratitude or did a daily examination. While not directed to a personal God, these actions contain many characteristics of prayer.

Reflecting on these responses, I concluded that prayer is a very natural response to certain circumstances. We often pray to God when faced with a great difficulty - a death, illness, or loss of job, or we offer a prayer of thanks when something good happens. It's intuitive. We don't even have to think about doing it.

Now, it's time for my confession. Even though praying is a natural action, I am very bad at it. I went to Catholic schools, attended religious education classes, and heard thousands of homilies, and yet, I struggle communicating with God in a personal and meaningful way.

What did you think of the responsorial psalm from last Sunday? Were you blown away by its profound meaning? If you are like me, then you probably don't remember it. I am not an expert in body language, but are most people at Mass present only physically? Too often, when I am praying the rosary or night prayers, I am planning the next day or daydreaming about something else. I am merely saying words with no movement of my heart.



*(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)*

I feel like I am not alone, and I would argue that it is more a problem with Catholics than members of other denominations and faiths. In today's Catholicism, there is a strong emphasis on verbal prayers. We teach children to memorize certain prayers, but neglect to instruct them what to do mentally while praying the words.

Communicating with God through prayer has many similarities with interacting with

a spouse. It is natural and easy to communicate with your spouse at first, but over time, it takes work to develop and deepen your relationship. You cannot say the same thing over and over again, and not expect the relationship to become stale. You have to create new ways to express your love in order for your marriage to be fresh and vibrant. The same is true with our relationship with God. If we repeat the same prayers while we are zoning out, we will not grow in our love for God.

Most Catholics assume other faiths are more attentive toward mental prayer. Eastern religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, are focused on meditation, and Protestantism has a rich history of spontaneous prayer. Catholics have even sought to integrate eastern mysticism and revivalism into Catholicism in order to enhance their prayers.

Borrowing or inventing new methods, however, is not necessary as Catholicism has a profound tradition of mental prayer. The church has always encouraged mental prayer, and countless mystics have written on the subject, climaxing in the writings of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. The current problem is not that Catholicism is opposed to this type of prayer, but that it has been forgotten and neglected.

We need to be part of a movement that restores mental prayer to the forefront by reading and learning from the classical texts. Yet even before exploring the writings of the mystics, we can begin with simple practices like taking a few minutes every day to meditate on the passion and death of Jesus while contemplating a crucifix or reading a passage from the Bible and then silently reflecting on it.

Some of the “nones” in the NPR report were former Catholics. Why did they leave? Perhaps, they were not taught how to properly pray, and therefore, they felt that their prayers were fake and empty, prompting them to leave the faith. It is our responsibility to ensure that does not continue to happen.

Catholic instruction should move beyond memorizing prayers. It should help people develop a deep and living prayer life by building on people’s natural desire to pray and develop and deepen it with proper guidance. Only with this renewed focus on mental prayer will young Catholics see their relationship with God as meaningful and thus remain devoted to the faith.