

CHRISTIAN PRAYER AND LITURGY

Prayer is experienced within many religious traditions. Catholics believe prayer is a conversation, or an expression of a relationship with God who is present in the world, and who resides deep within the human person. People can pray alone or with others, at any time, anywhere and in many different ways. Prayers, both personal and communal, formal and informal, help connect life and faith. Prayer is an important part of the rich heritage of the Catholic Church. It draws people into the mystery of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Scriptures are a rich source of inspiration and example for personal and communal prayer. The beautiful Psalms, or wise words and inspirational stories of the Old Testament, as well as the life and works of Jesus, help Christians reflect on life. We read in Scripture that Jesus often took time to pray, emphasising the importance of prayer. Jesus also modelled how to pray to God, particularly in the Lord's Prayer.

There are various types of prayer; thanksgiving, petition, praise and sorrow, which can be expressed in different ways to nourish and enrich individuals and communities. Prayer may take different forms, often arising out of cultural traditions and expressed in rituals through meaningful symbols, silence, music, movement and meditation. In Australia, the spirituality of Indigenous Australians is a rich source of prayer and reflection.

The senses can be involved in prayer and Liturgy through, for example words, movement, gestures, actions, music, pictures, and incense. Prayer is not a magic formula, a hotline to God, always answered in the way we may like. God's ways are not always our ways. However, prayer and reflection can be transformational experiences that nourish spirituality and provide an opportunity to listen and respond to God's Spirit, which is important for wise decision-making. Prayer and reflection allow God to work in and through people.

The public prayer of the Catholic Church is Liturgy. Originally, the term 'liturgy' meant a public work or a service in the name of, or on behalf of, the people. In the Christian tradition, it means the participation of the people of God in 'the work of God'. Liturgies in the Catholic tradition are the established rites (how ceremonies are conducted) found in the Church's official books of liturgy. Celebrations of the Word, though containing elements of liturgy, are not considered liturgy in the strictest sense. Liturgies in the Catholic tradition are all seven sacramental celebrations, celebration of Eucharist outside Mass, Liturgy of the Hours, celebration of Christian death and burial, Blessings e.g., of Oils (Chrism) and any other liturgical act authorised by Rome for all Catholics.

For Catholics, the celebration of the Mass (Eucharist) is the heart of community prayer; central to Christian life. It is the most important celebration, a time when the community gathers to worship and remember, to give thanks and praise God for the gifts of Jesus and creation. The word Eucharist, which means thanksgiving, is used in reference to the whole Mass and also to the sacred meal itself. The Mass is a sacred meal, a sacrifice, a thanksgiving, a covenant, a gift, a presence and a memorial. Catholics believe that Jesus is truly present in the priest, the people, the Scriptures and the bread and wine.

The Catholic Church follows a liturgical calendar that remembers and celebrates the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Just as we mark special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries every year, the Church calendar, based on a three-year cycle for Sundays and a two-year cycle for weekdays, marks special seasons and days. Mary is especially honoured and celebrated through feast days and, as a woman of faith, she is an inspiration for many formal and informal prayers. The purpose of a liturgical cycle is to remember past events and people, thus keeping the mystery of faith alive today and making every day holy. The seasons of the liturgical year are Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter which ends at Pentecost. There are also thirty three or thirty four weeks of Ordinary Time throughout the year, so called because the weeks are numbered in order. Seasons and special days are marked by the use of particular colours such as white at Christmas and Easter, purple for Advent and Lent, and red for Pentecost and days that celebrate martyred saints.

Prayer and liturgy are crucial for the life and mission of the Catholic Church, as a support and nourishment for individual relationships with God, and for the life of the community as it carries on the mission of Christ.

