



Hearts *on* Fire

A GUIDE TO
CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY

FOR TEENS

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INTRODUCTION

What is spirituality?

What is spirituality? First, spirituality is personal, so before you read any further, take a few moments to answer this question for yourself. Can you identify elements of spirituality in your life? What values are most important to you? How do you live those out? What items or experiences make you think of God? Do you feel close to God? Do you think of God more as Father, as Son, or as Holy Spirit?

Each of these questions can help you think about your spirituality, although it's not necessarily something we need to think about. It's something we should experience.

While uniquely personal, spirituality is also universal. A document from the Second Vatican Council (a meeting of all the world's

bishops that took place in the 1960s) explains the universality of our spiritual questions and religious commitments: “People look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on people’s hearts are the same today as in past ages” (*Nostra Aetate* 1).

Hopefully, your experience of Catholicism has helped to shape your spirituality. Sacraments help us grow in the understanding that God always wants to come to us. Beliefs and traditions about saints, especially Mary, deepen our conviction that we have people looking out for us and that we are a community that helps one another, even through heavenly prayers. Catholic Social Teaching guides us toward deep love for others and the desire to make justice a priority.

Any definition of spirituality is bound to be incomplete, but my hope is that sharing a summary of my spirituality will help give you an idea of what it means. My spirituality is rooted in the idea that God is love, sent to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, and continuing to inspire us through the Holy Spirit. Other values spring from that. I value integrity because I believe God creates us to be good, whole, and holy people. I value justice because I believe God wants what is best for everyone in the whole world. I value honesty because I believe strong, healthy relationships are part of God’s plan for us. A big component of my prayer life is considering how my actions are aligning with these values.

My spirituality grows when I feed it well: participating in the sacraments, reading Scripture, being attentive to preaching, experiencing beautiful art, reaching out of my comfort zone to meet people different from myself, spending time with good friends, and trying to find God in all things.

Hopefully, some of the ideas in this book will help you to feed

your spirituality. The first section shares practical advice on traditional prayer practices that can become part of your prayer routine. The second gives tips to participate fully and prayerfully in the sacraments, and the third gives suggestions for making everyday experiences part of your spiritual life.

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SECTION 1

Prayer practices

ABOUT A PRAYER ROUTINE

We can experience God any time, day or night. Maybe you've had some powerful moments of spontaneous prayer: being awestruck by the natural world, or overcome with gratitude for your family, or having hardship make you deeply aware of your need for God.

When I was a teen, I was really attuned to these spontaneous moments of prayer, but it took me a while to be disciplined about a prayer routine. Planned times for prayer are just as important as staying open to spontaneous prayer. There are plenty of ways to make use of these planned times for prayer; we'll have a look at some of them in this section.

I often think of Catholic spiritual practices like a toolbox: you won't need all of them at every moment of your life, but exploring different experiences lets you find the ones that help you most. As you get older, your preferences may change, so it's good to be familiar with a wide range of options.

An easy way to start to build a prayer routine is by linking prayer to things you are already doing. Pray the Our Father while you are brushing your teeth. Review the list of people and things you want to pray for when you go running. Keep a Bible or prayer book in the spot where you do your homework, and pull it out for five minutes a day when your work is done.

Be realistic about your plans. Don't expect to say the Rosary on the ride to school if the car is full of noisy siblings. You don't need to plan on praying for hours at a time, either. Start with small goals. Think minutes, not hours.

Whatever you choose for your routine, do your best to limit distractions. Your notifications will still be there when you are done.

This all takes a bit of self-discipline, a virtue that will help in all aspects of your life. And as you grow more attentive in planned moments of prayer, you may find yourself more open to God's surprises all day long.

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

“The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63).

The Bible is big. Don't let that intimidate you. You probably already know that the Bible is an anthology, made up of many pieces of writing referred to as “books.” Some are history, some are poetry, some are story, and some are less familiar genres that take time to get used to.

The Bible is full—full of ideas and guidance, of beauty and insight, of stories and lessons. It has so much to offer, and as we find the parts we need at a given time it can be a great companion.

One place to start is the Book of Psalms. The psalms are short bits of poetry—likely songs, originally—that pray with the strongest emotions of human existence. Sorrow, penance, joy, and more: if you've had an emotion, you can find it in the psalms.

Of course, you can also start exploring the Bible in the gospels. These are essential to a life of Christian prayer, as they are where Jesus speaks to us directly and we learn from his example. This is another place you can find short passages that give you plenty to think about without overwhelming you.

There is an ancient practice of praying with the Bible called *Lectio Divina*. It's not the only way to pray with Scripture, but since people have been doing it for centuries it is worth trying as you look for ways to pray with the Bible. There are four stages to the process, during each of which you read the same selected passage. It's best to pick a short passage, such as Psalm 100 (it's only five verses and gives us a lot to pray with). If you don't know where to start, look up the readings of the day for inspiration.

First, read. Go slowly. It might help to read the passage out loud or follow the text with your finger if that helps you to focus. Pay attention to what jumps out to you. That might be what God is inviting you to pray about.

Second, reflect. As you read the passage again, lean into the bits that jumped out from the first reading. Let your mind expand on its message, always looking for what God is saying rather than trying to analyze the passage.

Third, pray. Read again. Talk to God about what questions you have. Ask what you can do to grow in the message you are find-

ing. If you have a prayer journal, writing these things out might encourage deeper prayer.

Finally, contemplate. This may be the hardest part, when we stop being mentally active and try to simply listen and receive. We know God loves us and wants to be close to us. Contemplation opens us up to deeper experience of that mutual love.

This is a practical addition to a prayer routine, allowing a variety of readings within the consistency of the habit. The message of Scripture is inexhaustible. You could find something new in a passage every time you read it.

Even when you are not doing one of these deliberate prayer practices, be attentive to Scripture wherever you hear it. It is easy to take for granted the passages we hear over and over. “Oh, of course the word became flesh, no big deal...” God’s choice to speak to us through the Scripture and through the life of Jesus is a very big deal, and a very great gift.

THE ROSARY

If you’re anything like me, there are probably times when you don’t want to ask for help. We want to show that we can do things on our own. But even if you’re like this, I recommend adding three words to your phrasebook: pray for me.

That’s the powerful message of the Hail Mary. After we acknowledge Mary’s closeness to the Lord we ask: pray for us.

According to tradition, Mary appeared to St. Dominic in 1208 and directed him to encourage the praying of 150 Hail Marys (150 because that was the number of psalms) as part of his struggle against a popular set of incorrect religious beliefs. The practice of using beads to keep track of prayer dates back more than

a thousand years, with our modern rosary an example of these prayer beads.

Over the centuries, the practice developed of meditating on some of the events in the lives of Jesus and Mary for ten Hail Marys at a time (ten Hail Marys is also called a “decade”). These meditations are called “mysteries,” and they give direction to our thoughts if we don’t have a particular intention on our mind as we pray. The Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious mysteries have been part of the Rosary for nearly 500 years; Pope St. John Paul II added the Luminous mysteries in 2002.

The mysteries help us think about the humanity of both Jesus and Mary. They struggled, they celebrated, they made decisions, and they loved each other. All those years ago they had very human experiences that reach across time to be with us in our own. They also had experiences of great glory, helping us understand God’s promises for us.

Praying the Rosary with a group is a great way to start, with a prayer leader guiding you through the prayer. If you can’t find a group like this try it on your own. Before each decade, give yourself a moment to envision the mystery you are about to pray with. Then give yourself over to the rhythm of the prayers, knowing each time you say “pray for us” there is someone who knows that being human comes with both beauty and pain, and who is ready to carry your prayer to her Son.

MEDITATION

When was the last time you sat quietly for more than a few minutes, without technology or entertainment to stimulate you? Did restlessness set in quickly? Was the temptation of your gadgets

hard to resist? Meditation asks us to clear our minds for a period of time, to acknowledge whatever thoughts creep in without letting them linger, and to resist distractions.

This style of prayer has been practiced for many centuries in many religious traditions and is also popular among the non-religious today. For a Catholic Christian, meditation, like all prayer, is a path to greater closeness with God. In our over-stimulated time, it can take some getting used to, but I bet you are up to the challenge.

Simon Stylites was an early monk who lived in the Syrian desert in the 400s. He is well-known because he sat up on a pillar for thirty-seven years so that he could live a life of prayer and self-sacrifice with less distraction. That's probably too extreme for most of us, but it shows the value of withdrawing to pray!

Even if you can't be isolated to try out meditation, do what you can to find a comfortable place away from noise and people. Sit quietly with your eyes closed for a few minutes and focus on your breath. You can find prerecorded guided meditations online and in apps (Hallow is one app for Catholic meditations). If you are going to use technology, though, make sure that you are not becoming preoccupied with it.

One goal of meditation is to clear your mind. You might be prompted to slow your breathing or to focus on an image to help quiet your thoughts. This is valuable, especially if you struggle with anxiety or worries. But if we make clearing our mind our only goal, we miss out on the chance to use that clearheadedness to listen for God's voice.

When you're in a peaceful state, pay attention to your emotions. Do some thoughts keep creeping in? Maybe there's something in your life you need to deal with. Do certain images make

you feel more peaceful, like flowers or books or family members? That might be a sign that you should focus on those more in your prayer.

If a new thought or insight comes to you as a phrase or feeling, don't examine it too much; try to stay in the moment. Later, when you are reflecting on your prayer, give some thought to whatever messages popped into your head. Are they consistent with your values and your faith? Are they ideas that will make you healthy? If they are, that might be God teaching you through this quiet, clearheaded prayer.

In time, you might become so practiced in meditation that you find yourself being meditative even when you are around others. You might enjoy the quiet prayer so much that you, like Simon, regularly seek out a bit of solitude so that your meditation can lead you even closer to God. Breathe deep, relax, and listen.

RETREATS

Whether a few hours close to home or a series of days far away, any retreat can help us grow spiritually. The very act of setting aside time for your spirit is a sign of growth. We want to make this time special; this starts with being present and open to different feelings and experiences. If you're always rushing, let yourself slow down. If you get anxious about new things, be willing to try. If you are a skeptic, try to turn off the critical voice in your head. Let God transform you.

Though God may be calling you to be open to change, that doesn't mean that you need to ignore the interests that you already have. When finding retreat experiences, seek out those focused on what you enjoy: art, reading, physical activity,

Scripture, friendship, solitude, or any number of other ways to find God on retreat.

You're probably in a position right now, though, where your retreats are chosen for you, by parish or school or parents. How can you approach these?

Keep an open mind. Even if you are around people you see all the time, don't expect everything to be familiar. Let them surprise you. Be patient if they are pushing the bounds of their own comfort zones. Listen carefully even if you think you know what you are going to hear.

Don't be a follower. If friends are involved, you might slip into your social routines of chatting, joking around, and laughing. If that's not the vibe of your retreat, be a leader in balancing the attention you want to give to your friends with the attention you give to the retreat experience.

Pray. This seems obvious, but it's essential. Entering the retreat with a desire to pray is the first step toward prayerfulness. God wants to reach out to you through this experience. Stay open to that, and take advantage of the change of pace to offer your own prayers in return.

Even if your only retreat options right now are quick ones with your confirmation class at your parish, there will be a time in your life when you have more available to you. Working on the habits of being attentive and open during these special times of prayer and reflection will help you make the most of whatever experiences you have both now and in the future.