

# Getting in touch with God



## Gary's story

When I first met Gary he was 16. A wild sort of guy, he drank too much, smoked the wrong kind of cigarettes and was always the centre of class restlessness. Not the sort of bloke you would expect to find in a church praying. And yet, as we became friends, I was struck by a definite spiritual dimension to his life that he clearly held to be important. 'You know,' he said one day after an early morning surf, 'Sometimes I love to just sit out there on my board, watching the sun come up and feeling the power of the ocean beneath me. Mate, it's so beautiful! It makes me think about God and how glad I am that he created this world.'

It's a funny thing about prayer. A lot of people associate prayer with something you do with your head bowed, your eyes shut and chanting old fashioned words. Yet prayer is a far more natural thing than that. We Catholics see God as a mystery enveloping our whole lives, whether or not we are aware of this. We believe that whenever people (of whatever creed) turn their thoughts towards the 'more' in life, whenever we open our hearts to love, or find ourselves yearning for the fullness of life, we are – in a sense – praying.

Many people think that **they** are the initiators when they consciously turn to God in prayer. In fact, they are simply responding to the loving presence of God which is always there. When we pray we are 'tuning in' to a line that is always open. Prayer is not so much an activity we 'do' as a lifestyle of openness to God. In this sense, Catholics have a lot in common with many other people.

## What is unique about Catholic prayer?

If many people – Christians and non-Christians – find some way of communing (praying) with the mystery

For any relationship to grow, communication is critical. Married couples especially will attest to this. The enduring strength of their bond is related to many small day-to-day expressions – words, actions, gestures of affection – that feed and nourish their love.

Communication is also critical to a relationship with God. That's why people pray. Prayer is fundamentally our human way of communicating with the mystery that gives meaning to our lives, the 'more' that draws us beyond the confines of our human limitations. Throughout human history, people have named this mystery in different ways, but all these efforts of communication are a kind of prayer. For Catholics, this mystery is God, revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. In this leaflet we will explore the Catholic approach to prayer and worship of God.

## Approaching the Topic

we call God, what then is unique about Catholic prayer? If we have so much in common with other people, what makes us different?

The unfolding of the story of Christianity has led Catholic prayer to take on some very specific characteristics. Firstly, our prayer is **Christ-centred**. We name our God in a very personal way. At the heart of our prayer is our belief that God

has been revealed through Jesus Christ, that Christ has shown us a way to God that is of an unsurpassable quality. As Catholics, like all Christians, we come to God, through Jesus, in the Holy Spirit. Our prayer takes on a highly personal quality. We relate not just to a force or a mystery in a vague, impersonal sense, but to a person.

Secondly, our prayer is **ecclesial**, or

communal. As Catholics, we believe we cannot come to God on our own. We always come as a community of people. Like a marriage union, our prayer is always coloured by an awareness of our relationship with each other. This attitude may explain why Catholics place so much importance on their gathering for worship (eg. the Sunday Mass). However, it also holds true even when we are praying by ourselves. To pray

## The ways we pray

### Personal prayer

Whatever activities we undertake in the course of a day, a Catholic is encouraged to approach these with a 'Gospel' sense. Regular personal prayer helps us do this, that is, setting aside some time each day to focus on God's presence.

By way of analogy, consider a husband and wife who lead busy lives. The many activities competing for attention can threaten to pull them apart or suffocate the essence of their relationship. By setting aside some regular time to be alone together – just the two of them – they bring their love into focus. Their lives take on a consciousness of the other.

Similarly, with our relationship with God, Catholics are encouraged to 'spend time' with God.

### Community prayer

'Whenever two or more are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst', says Jesus. Because of the union of love which is at the heart of the Church's nature, Catholics regard communal prayer as essential. This can happen in many ways: in families and households; in small prayer groups and school classrooms, in parishes and dioceses, in churches and in outdoor settings. When Catholics gather together they do so with an awareness of the universal church and the communion of saints. We see



ourselves as part of a body of believers that extends beyond those physically gathered in one place.

### Prayer of the Church

When a community of people treasure a value or a relationship in common, they feel moved to give expression to it in concrete ways. A 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebration is a simple example. To celebrate this landmark in the life of a family member, there is likely to be a gathering of friends, speeches, music, the cutting of the cake, presentation of gifts and so on.

For Catholics, the 'liturgy' is central to the way we worship God as a community. In the liturgy we gather together – usually in a church – and express ourselves through traditional prayers, symbols and rituals. 'Liturgy' comes from two Greek words which mean 'the work of the people'. When we gather to wor-

ship, it is the whole community that participates. It is not simply the work of the priest and altar servers while the rest of the congregation looks on.

We regard the Mass, the breaking of the Eucharistic bread and the sharing of the one cup, as the greatest liturgy of all because it expresses the central mysteries of our faith. We celebrate the Mass each Sunday and on special occasions. Over the course of a year, the Church focuses on particular aspects of the Christian story (eg at Christmas we celebrate the birth of Christ). We call this the Liturgical Year because it is divided into various feast days and seasons that highlight the overall story of Christianity, from the birth of Christ to his death and resurrection to his ascension into heaven and the birth of the Church at Pentecost.

### Signs and sacraments

We communicate in many ways beyond words: smiles, handshakes, gestures of affection, gifts, cards, flowers. In our relationship with God, too, we use signs to express the mystery of God's loving presence. There are many ways we do this, but some rituals have developed in our Church community which we hold to be particularly sacred. We call these 'sacraments'. A sacrament is a sign or symbol that 'makes present' within us the reality of God's love that is signified.

as a Catholic is to prayer with a consciousness that we are part of a community, a body of people who profess their faith in the risen Christ.

## Bells and smells

Symbols play a big part in Catholic prayer. That's why to outsiders it can sometimes seem that the Catholic Church is full of 'things': bells and incense, statues and medals, ashes and palms. Catholicism is a very 'earthy' religion. While we know that no image or 'thing' can capture the

presence of God which is a mystery beyond our comprehension, we also recognise that as human beings we need to express our faith in a human way. In becoming human in the person of Jesus, God has shown us that created realities are not to be scorned but embraced as part of our loving response to God. When we portray mysteries of our faith through human realities we are not 'confining' God but making a statement about what we hold so dear.



## Stories

### Sundays are special

'Growing up, family prayer was an important feature of our household. On Sundays all six of us would go to church and spend the day together. It was special. I felt a closeness to my family because of it. Greg and I have just had our first child and I want to pass on that experience to him too.'

### Beyond words

'For me, music and movement unleashes a spirit of prayer in a way that words cannot. When I pray, I often find myself reaching for my guitar or making some simple gestures with my hands and body which expresses my response to God.'

### In the silence

'At times in prayer I feel a beautiful peace and confidence. At other times, I feel nothing. It seems as if God is silent, absent. I've learned that God's silence can be a way of drawing me closer rather than ignoring me. I ask: what is God trying to teach me through this silence or this loneliness? Prayer is often about faith in unseen realities, not nice feelings.'

### Sitting with God

'I'm a very contemplative person. I love just to "sit" with God, sometimes at the Eucharist or just holding God's word in the scriptures. Or an icon or statue that helps me focus on some aspect of God's presence.'

### Beyond Santa Claus

'When I was younger, I treated God a bit like Santa Claus. My prayer was very much "give me, give me". Now I tend to approach prayer with a greater openness to whatever is the greater good in God's plan. I listen more. And I am more trusting.'

### Couple Prayer

'My marriage plays a much bigger part now. I used to see my prayer life as something completely private from my husband, Rob. Now I understand that, as a Catholic, our sacrament of marriage is central to my prayer life. It's no longer just "my" prayer life. It's "our" prayer life. Praying with your spouse can be quite difficult. It's funny how you can feel embarrassed praying with the person you love most. Perhaps because it is such an intimate thing.'

### 100% authentic

'I once had this idea that to pray I had to be in the "right" frame of mind. I couldn't be angry or bored or speechless. Now I turn to God in whatever mood I might be in. If I'm angry, I say so! If I'm happy, I might let out a mighty whoop! If I'm bored, I tell God "I don't feel like talking to you right now" and things seem to go from there.'

### Not just for monks!

'I used to object that I didn't have time for prayer. Not with five young kids and all the unpredictability of a busy family household! Daily prayer is fine if you're a contemplative monk, I thought. Gradually I have learned that my life offers many precious moments for prayer – I just have to be ready to respond to them: like contemplating God's gift of life while rocking the baby to sleep at 3am. Like praying for my children while waiting to pick them up after school (much better than cursing them for being late). Like holding my husband after making love and basking in God's tangible love. Prayer is for family people as much as it is for contemplative monks. The opportunities are there, they're just different.'





## Four important characteristics of a Catholic's prayer:

### Prayer of praise

'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks to God at every moment' (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18) says St Paul. At the heart of our prayer is a sense of gratitude and joy for what God has done for us in Jesus. Remember: Gospel means 'good news'! A disposition of praise and thanksgiving to God is a hallmark of our prayer.

### Prayer for unity

John's Gospel tells us that, as the hour of his death approached, Jesus' prayer for his followers, those who were to become his Church, was a prayer for their unity. 'May they all be one as you Father and in me and I am in you. May they be one in us; so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' (John 17.21) Unity is essential to our mission as a Church. Factions and divisions undermine our credibility as a sign of God's love. Our prayer as Catholics persistently reflects our calling to be united in mind and heart.

### Prayer for a forgiving heart

One of the greatest blocks to unity is a hardened heart. As every family knows, our differences are not reconciled by focusing solely on principles and issues and insisting that we are 'right'. Only when we reach out and listen to the heart of the other, in a spirit of repentance and forgiveness, can communication breakthroughs occur and resolutions be reached. For Catholics, reconciliation – with God and with one another – is a constant theme running through our prayer lives.

### Prayer for a missionary spirit

A Catholic can never be satisfied with a nice, cosy relationship with God. Our faith impels us to invite others into that relationship; to share our gift of faith with the world. So our prayer takes on a sense of mission. Although we pray for specific individuals, needs and local situations, we do so within a wider perspective: God's plan of liberation for the whole world. Conscious of the pain and suffering that afflicts so many nations, our prayers take on a sense of urgency, a yearning for all people to know Christ and the gifts of salvation.

## Your Story

### Think About It

- How do you pray?
- Why do you pray?
- What new attitudes or approaches to prayer has this leaflet raised for you?

### Talk About It

- Describe some of the experiences of prayer you have had:
  - alone
  - with someone else
  - as part of a big gathering of people

### Try It

Try praying with each of the four emphases mentioned at the left: praise, unity, forgiveness, mission.

If possible, this week participate in a specifically Catholic form of prayer. Eg. join in a Catholic liturgy.

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