

A twelve day study

Prayer



Heart of Mary
Women's Fellowship

heartofmarywf.com



Prayer Study Introduction

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that prayer and Christian life are inseparable, for they concern the same love and same renunciation, proceeding from love; the same filial and love conformity with the Father's plan of love; the same transforming union in the Holy Spirit who conforms us more and more to Christ Jesus; the same love for all men, the love with which Jesus has loved us. *"Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you. This I command you, to love one another."* (CCC 2745)

Daughters in Christ, Lent is almost upon us and we here at Heart of Mary want to give you all of the tools to have the most loving and transformative Lent ever. In doing so, we have created a two and a half week study on prayer leading up to Lent. We hope that each day you will discover and learn more about each of these forms of prayer and find some that speak to you. My hope for you is that the Lord uses these next few weeks to truly speak to you and prepare your heart for the upcoming Lenten season.

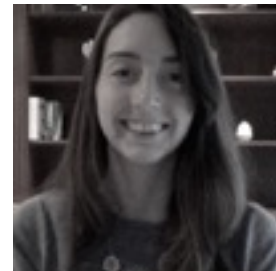
-MaryKatherine



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The Mass is the most perfect form of prayer! Pope Paul VI

The heavens open and multitudes of angels come to assist in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Saint Gregory

Growing up I knew of two kinds of prayer: quietly praying whatever I was thinking in my head, and group prayer where everyone held hands, we closed our eyes, and one person at a time saying a blessing.

When I converted to Catholicism at 18 years old, a whole new world of prayer exploded for me and it was pretty hard to keep up! I had to start from scratch learning the prayers everyone else grew up with. I didn't know the full Our Father or a line of the Hail Mary! Not to mention all the prayers at Mass!

For a while I thought there were only two types of prayer: spontaneous and planned. As I've grown in my Catholic faith I've come to see that prayer is more than just words, and nowhere is that more evident than when we are at Mass. As Catholics, prayer vibrates through every part of our being, especially when we come to pray together in the Mass. If you're like me, though, sometimes praying at Mass is harder than it looks.

Most Sunday's you'll find me in the foyer of the Church chasing my fifteen month old around and trying my hardest to listen, pray, and reflect. Some weeks it's harder than others to pray at Mass (like when my daughter walked head on into the corner of a table and proceeded to smack her head against the brick floor). I remember a time when I dared to think that Mass was "boring", let me tell you friends, that time is long past.

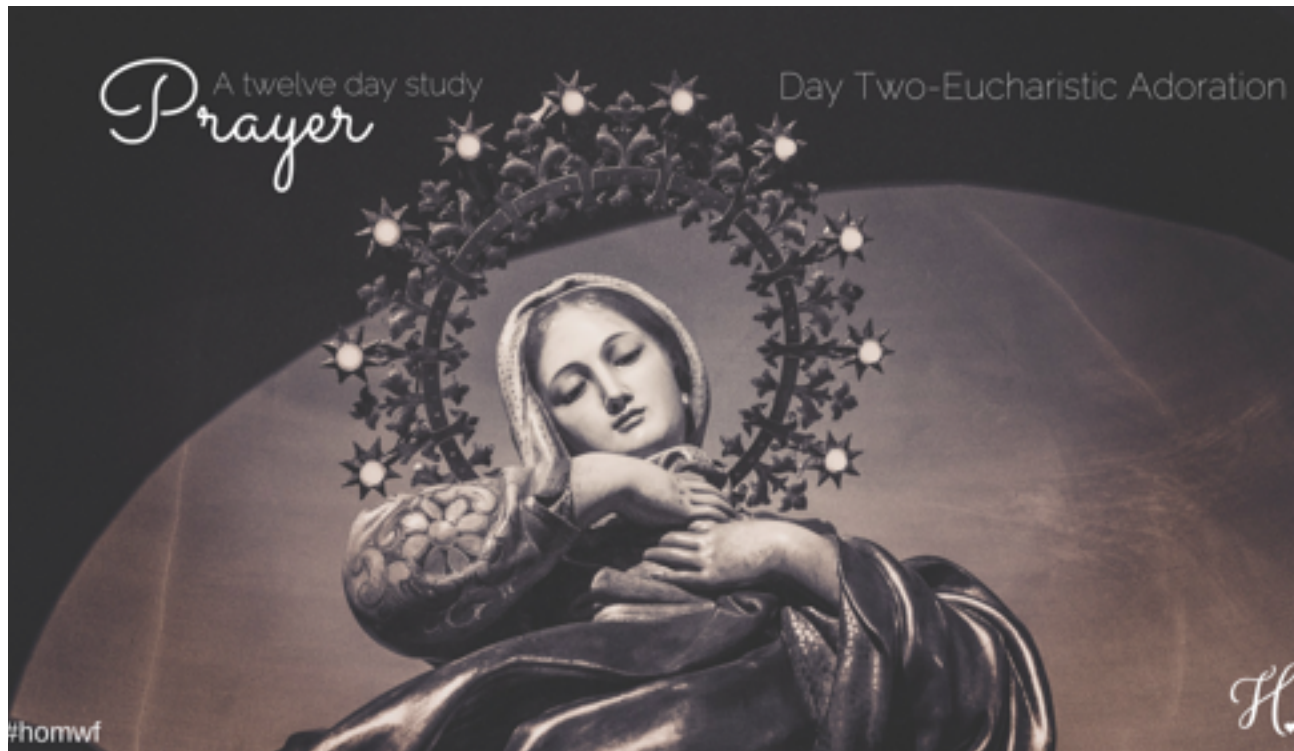
In this season of life I've learned that simply being at Mass is a prayer. We are all united as one, the Saints in heaven and the Church Militant on earth, praying in the presence of our savior through the liturgy of the word and Eucharist. It's not just the words we say and the songs we sing; it's the kneeling, the standing, the sitting, the offering of peace.

Every part of Mass reflects a different aspect of prayer, and all of it is valuable, even when your mind isn't always present. It can be easy to breeze through the motions, without realizing that each physical movement is a prayer, to listen to the homily and forget that listening is as much a prayer as speaking. I challenge you to be more aware of the different forms of prayer the next time you attend Mass.

Throughout this series we're going to be looking at a lot of different ways we as Catholic women pray. Some of them you may have never considered prayer before, like me. Others you know all too well, but may need some time to pause and reflect on them. If you, like me, have difficulty focusing on prayer at Mass, perhaps try keeping a Mass journal. You can see the page for Mass journaling on our homepage to find out more. -Sarah

Reflect: List all the types of prayers at Mass. How can you be more attentive to them? How can you enter a more prayerful mindset at Mass?

Act: Look up some of the prayers used in the Mass. Find one that speaks to you and pray it during the week as well!



Psalm 46:10

I still remember the first time I was in Adoration. I was a college student at the time and the chapel at the University of St. Thomas offered Adoration every Wednesday. There would be a person who would sit with Jesus for an hour. At first, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. The chapel was so quiet and it wasn't something that I was used to. Eventually, Adoration became something that I looked forward to every week.

I always feel at peace whenever I'm in Adoration because it is there that I'm in the presence of God. More often than not, I tend to dump all my thoughts, but eventually, the calmness of the hour I spend in Adoration finally sinks into my heart. There's a great freedom in letting go of your thoughts and focusing more on God's presence.

There were times during retreats that I would be up in the late after-midnight hours, just sitting in Adoration. A friend of mine told me that she often struggles with sleep, but finds that she can sleep easily in front of the Blessed Sacrament. It's not hard to see why. Sometimes, though, His presence can give me a second wind.

I remember one particular evening during a retreat when I went to Adoration feeling exhausted from all the work that I did. I told Jesus "Just catch me when I fall, Lord. Let me rest in You." I sat down in a chair next to a pillar and just rested in the silence for a while. Strangely enough, however, I never fell asleep. Instead, the Holy Spirit renewed my strength and asked me to minister to someone who was crying. That retreat later gave testimony in gratitude at the end of the retreat.

Whenever we are in adoration, we are asked:

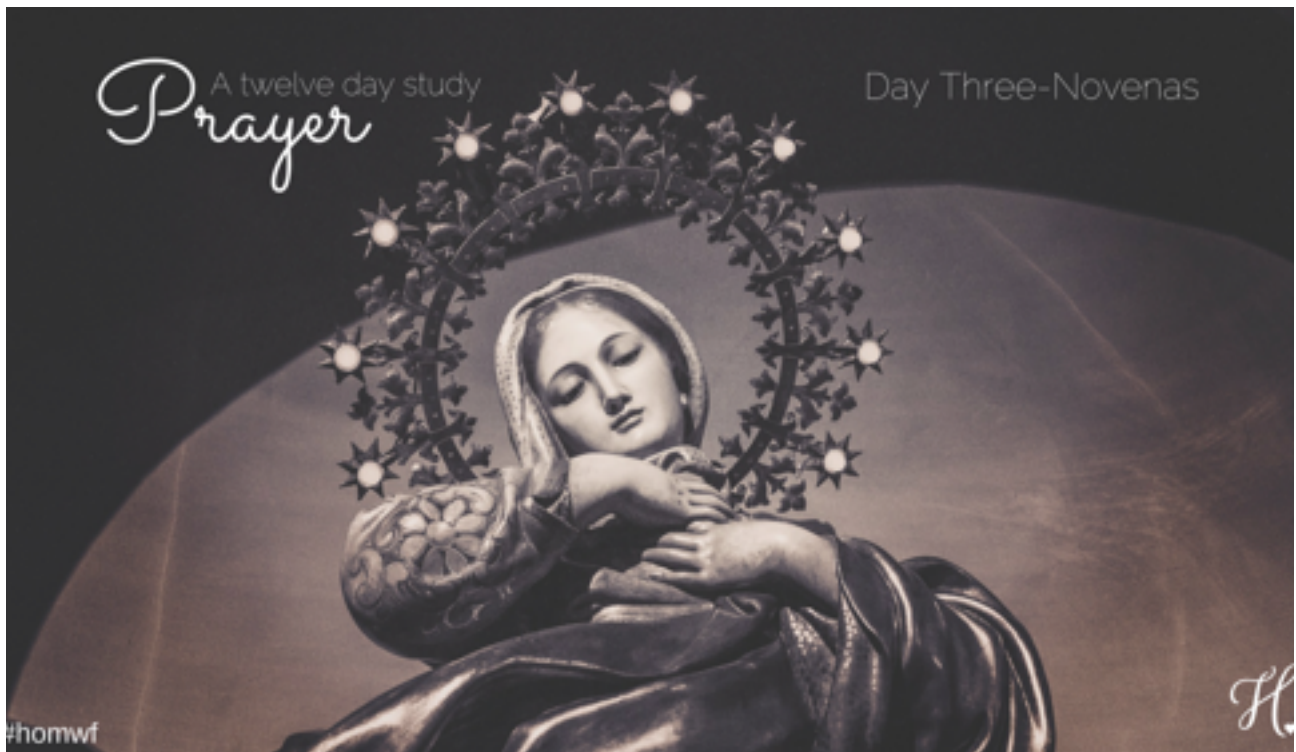
"Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10)

It takes a while to get used to the silence, but remember that God is with you.

You just need to listen and be still.-Monique

Reflect: How often do you go to Adoration? If you haven't done so yet, why? Why do you think it's so hard to be still and silent, even in prayer?

Act: Set aside 1 hour in your week for Adoration. See if you can make it a weekly habit.



Novenas are something that I have recently come to discover as a form of prayer and have really started to love. A novena can be defined as nine days of private or public devotion in the Catholic Church to obtain special graces, to implore favors, or to make special petitions. After a little research I found out that the scriptural origins of novenas come from the nine days of prayer before Pentecost, but can also represent the nine months that Jesus was in the womb of Mary. The novena can be actually considered to be the “gestation period” of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

There are two extremes to beliefs on novenas that people have seemed to accept. Some people think they are almost like a legal contract that the Lord will follow through with if the person praying is persistent and consistent in their prayer. Another belief is that it is an outdated form of prayer for people who are “too pious” or superstitious. Both beliefs are false and novenas are a very powerful way to pray as long as they are used and understood in the correct manner. As with any form of prayer, we as prayers have to understand that our will needs to align with the will of God. We are more than welcome, even encouraged, to pray, but with our prayer we have to understand and acknowledge that the Lord knows what is best for us.

What I especially love about novenas is that they are a persistent form of prayer. Novenas allow us to completely dive into prayer and specific intentions for nine days. Jesus encourages us to be persistent in prayer when He asks us to knock on the door and through novenas we can be persistent while knocking on His door for nine days straight. Through my time spent praying novenas I do have one suggestion; start each morning with your prayers in the novena, especially if you want to be consistent in all nine days. By starting each morning with the prayers you are guaranteeing yourself not to forget or become too busy during the day and accidentally miss a day.

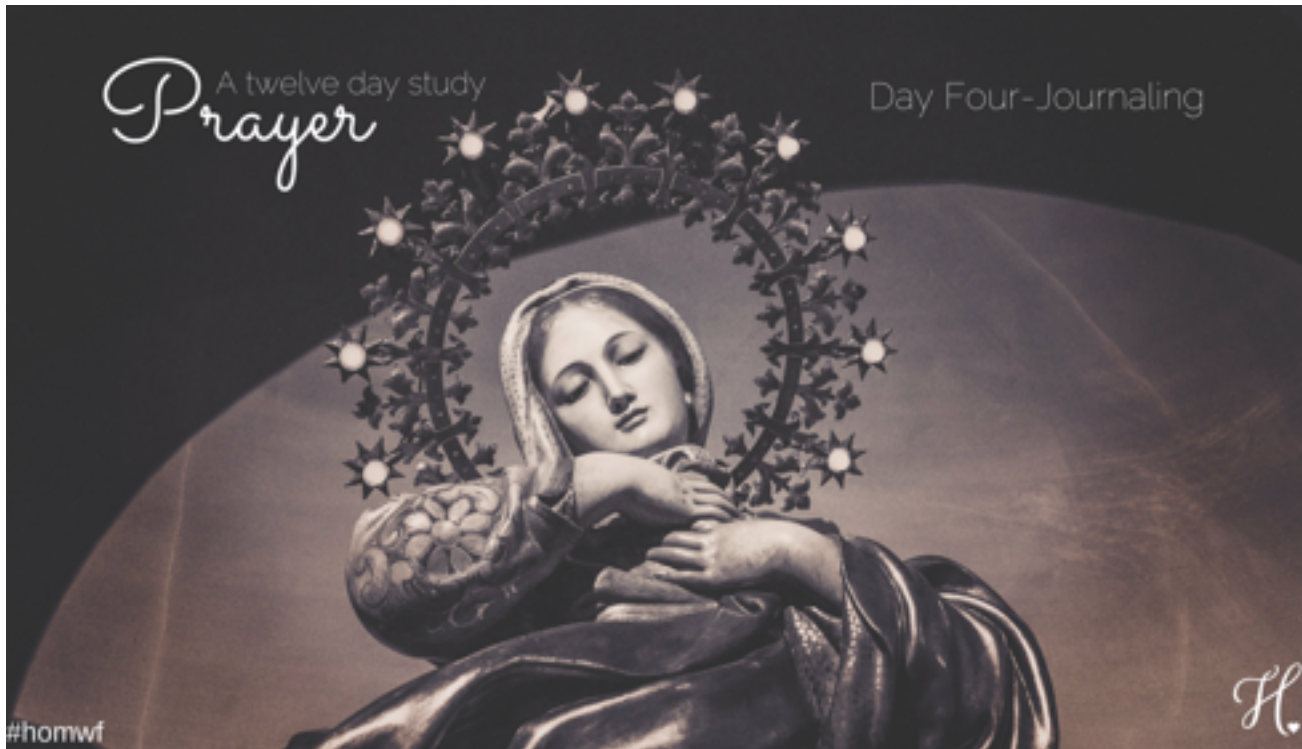
I will finish by saying that novenas have been such a consolation and help in my life, but only after I understood that above all else, the Lord's will is the most important detail and path in my life. Sisters, I encourage you to spend some time gathering your petitions and desires. Who should you be praying for and how can you unite your prayer with the Lord for the betterment of the Kingdom of God? My hope is that we become a community united in prayer through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Do not be discouraged in prayer, either. The Lord will always reward those who love Him and let me tell you, He loves each and every one of you.

-Marykatherine

Here is a link to various novenas: <http://www.praymorenovenas.com/novenas>

Reflect: Who can you pray for today? What special intentions has the Lord put on your heart?

Act: Find a novena that speaks to you. Make a resolution today to be consistent and persistent in your prayer, understanding that the Lord's will takes precedence over our desires and intentions.



Ask any of my family members and they will tell you that I've always been what you call a talker. I made good grades in school, but all of my teachers, probably even my college professors, always had one complaint- she talks too much. I knew that my parents would come home from parent-teacher conferences with a report card full of A's, but I would still have to sit and listen to the "you are a good student Dana, you just need to learn when to keep your mouth shut" talk. Never failed.

When I was younger, I used to get upset about being teased for talking too much, vowing to go days without talking and being as quiet as I could. Since I'm an adult now, I see my ability to talk as a blessing. I can still remember my grandpa telling me, "It's okay to talk as long as you have something to say." And usually, my friends, I do have something to say.

Weirdly enough, at times it's hard for me to talk to God. I know, I know, I talk all day, why not just throw a few words up to God? I don't know what it is, maybe it's the pressure of sounding formal enough, or not too formal, that trips me up, but at times I find myself shying away from an actual conversation with Christ. I tell myself

"I need to have a good talk with God" and then days will go by without me actually having much more than a "please and thank you" conversation with Him. You know those "please help me with my patience" or "I offer this up to you Lord" type conversations that often come with being a mom of young kiddos. It's talking, but, in my opinion, not truly conversing.

Prayer is something that's different for everyone. That's what I absolutely love about it. There's no right or wrong way to pray. Your relationship with Christ is what's important, not the means in which you talk to Him. I'm a talker, but when it comes to prayer, I'm a writer.

I love to write, I always have, and I think it goes hand-in-hand with my love of talking. I think I always have something to say, therefore I usually have something to write. Sometimes expressing my prayers through spoken word is hard, but when I journal, when I write to God, my thoughts pour out more easily.

Now there are a few ways to prayer journal- I chose the easiest. I got a notebook, one with a pretty cover or something that would instantly put me in a good mood, and I wrote. Sometimes it was a letter, sometimes it was random thoughts, sometimes it was Bible verses, but whatever came to my head I wrote.

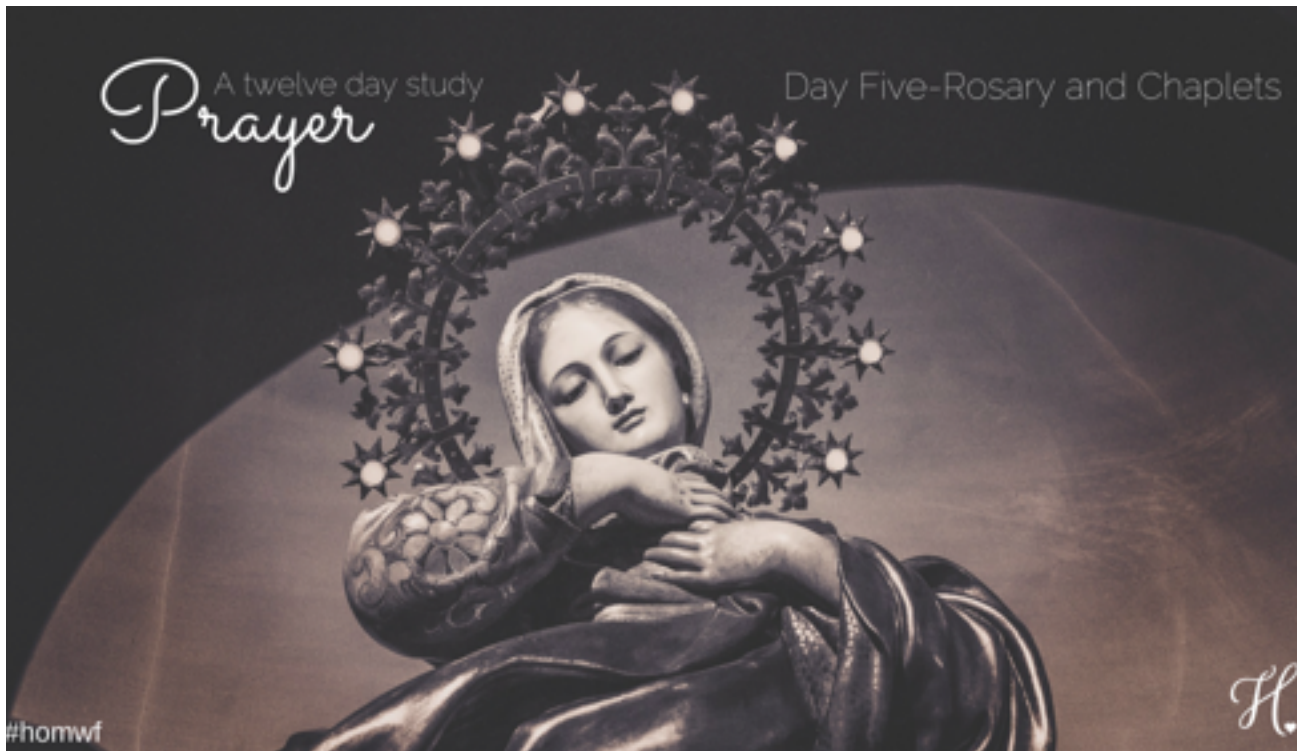
When we were trying to conceive our first child, I wrote to God a lot. I was nervous, anxious, upset and didn't know how to convey that all to God without feeling like I sounded ungrateful for the many blessing He had already bestowed on us. I would sit with my notebook and let the pen do the talking. I would cover page after page with my emotions and feelings, and tried to just remain very true to how I felt in that moment. Now that my daughter is almost four, that journal provides such an intimate look into my heart that I love looking back on it.

Another way to prayer journal is much more creative- through art. Just type *"prayer journal"* into Amazon and you will find numerous Bibles, journals and books that allow you the opportunity to focus on a scripture, and color a beautiful picture at the same time. It's therapeutic for many and I personally love this. I even received a prayer coloring book for Christmas that has a scripture, along with an intricate coloring page beside it.

Sometimes it's easiest to talk to God, when you don't talk. When you focus your attention on His word instead of your own. When you allow scripture and His teachings into your heart. -Dana

Reflect: If you were to pull out a notebook right now- what would you write to God? What feelings have you been holding on to that may need to be released?

Act: Take at least 30 minutes this week to prayer journal. Whether it be as simple as writing down a scripture on a notebook and talking to God about how it makes you feel, or coloring a page in a journaling Bible, spend time in reflection with His word.



Luke 1:28

"Give me an army saying the Rosary and I will conquer the world." Pope Pius IX

I would love to be able to say that I have always been close to Mary and have always found comfort in the arms of our Mother, but that has not always been the case. Up until a few years ago, Mary was somewhat of a mystery to me. Sure, I loved her and acknowledged the awesomeness of her motherhood to Jesus, but that was the extent of it. I did not have a personal relationship with our Mother, and now that I do, I do not know what was holding me back for so long. Our Mother is so wonderful and comforting. She is always waiting for us with open arms and a heart full of love. She knows our sorrows and our joys. We will never be disappointed or left alone when we flee to the arms of Mary, and in return she will bring us closer to her son, Jesus.

I feel like my relationship with Mary did not develop until I started to pray the Rosary on a regular basis. Each morning I take time to pray the Rosary because I am convinced that it is this time spent in the loving arms of Mary that will get me through each day. In fact, through the Rosary I am not simply *"getting through"*

each day, but thriving with each new moment with love and trust in our Lord. Through the Rosary we meditate on the joys, sorrows, light, and glory of Jesus and His mother. The Rosary gives us the opportunity and power to walk along with Jesus and Mary during their lives here on earth.

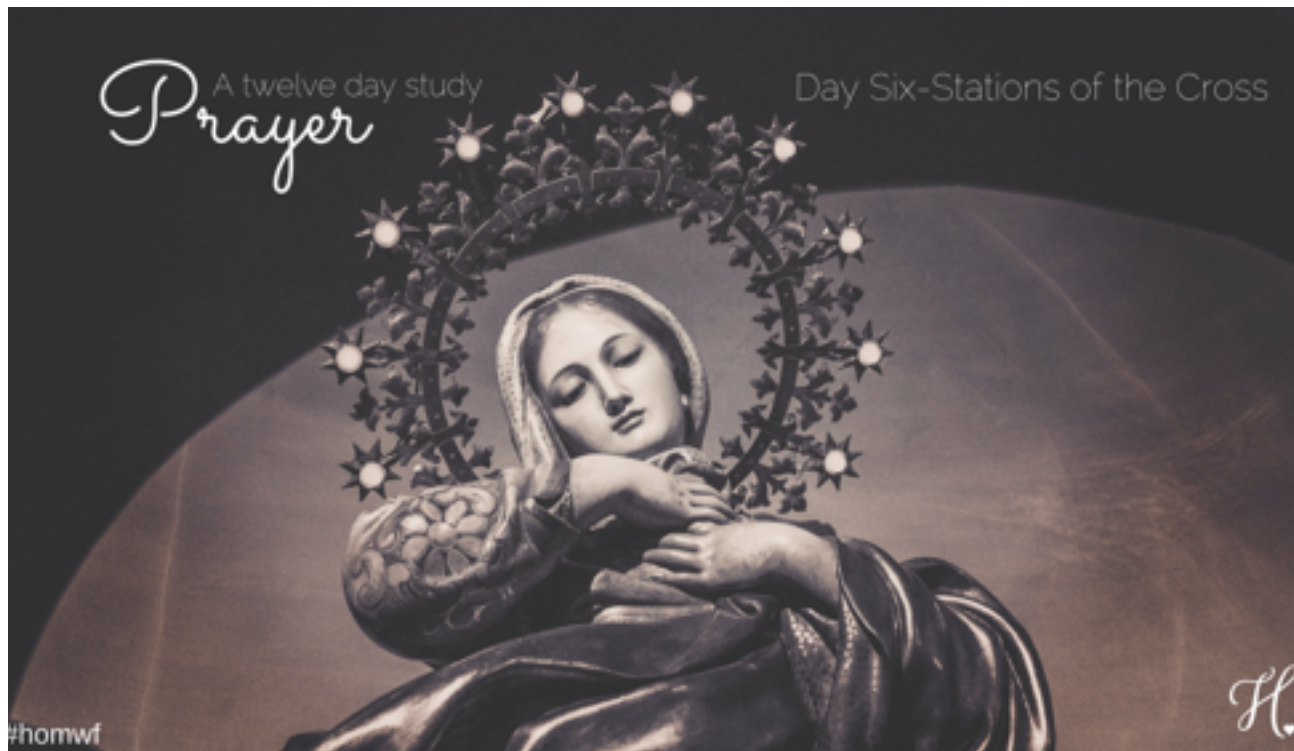
I encourage you to start to pray the Rosary if you haven't already, or have been putting it off. My struggle with praying the Rosary in the past was that I always put it off for a later time in the day, until finally I found myself praying it right before bed and falling asleep while praying it. I now try to pray the Rosary at the start of each day, to prevent myself from putting it off until later. By doing so, I start my morning off on the right foot and do not have to stress about fitting it in later after a busy day at work or out with my family. I cannot stress enough the importance of the Rosary, and I pray that each and every one of you will make an effort to pray the Rosary.

If you don't have the time to sit and complete the Rosary, then break it up throughout the day. Pray a decade here and there and before you know it, you will have finished your Rosary! -

I will finish with these words from Archbishop Fulton Sheen. He said,

"The Rosary is the book of the blind, where souls see and there enact the greatest drama of love the world has ever known; it is the book of the simple, which initiates them into mysteries and knowledge more satisfying than the education of other men; it is the book of the aged, whose eyes close upon the shadow of this world, and open on the substance of the next. The power of the Rosary is beyond description."-Marykatherine

Reflect and Discuss: How has Mary been present in your life? Have you been praying the Rosary and if so, how has it helped you grow in relationship with Mary and her Son?



Matthew 26:41

"Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

What can be said about Jesus' Passion that hasn't be said, analyzed, studied and thought? I can think of at least a half dozen churches I have watched perform the Stations since childhood, as each year we are asked to pray the Stations during the season of Lent to prepare ourselves for the fall and rise of our Savior. Last year I had the pleasure of watching my little brother's 4th grade class act and read the passages of the Bible, as it is a Friday Lenten tradition for most of us, particularly viewing the Passion on Good Friday.

Our faith relies on the death of Jesus Christ to bring about His resurrection and our salvation. I have heard the argument that Catholics spend too much energy on the cross and death of Jesus Christ, however without the sacrifice of the lamb of God, His only son and flesh and blood like us, there can be no completion of the prophecy. I believe we recognize and celebrate both as the truth. Let us pray.

"We adore you, O Christ and we bless you, because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world."

The Stations are as followed:

1. Jesus is condemned to death.
2. Jesus accepts his cross.
3. Jesus falls the first time.
4. Jesus meets his mother.
5. Simon helps Jesus carry the cross.
6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.
7. Jesus falls the second time.
8. Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem.
9. Jesus falls the third time
10. Jesus is stripped of his garments.
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross.
12. Jesus dies on the cross.
13. Jesus is taken down from the cross.
14. Jesus is laid in the tomb.

(source-Praying Our Lives-E. Bernstein)

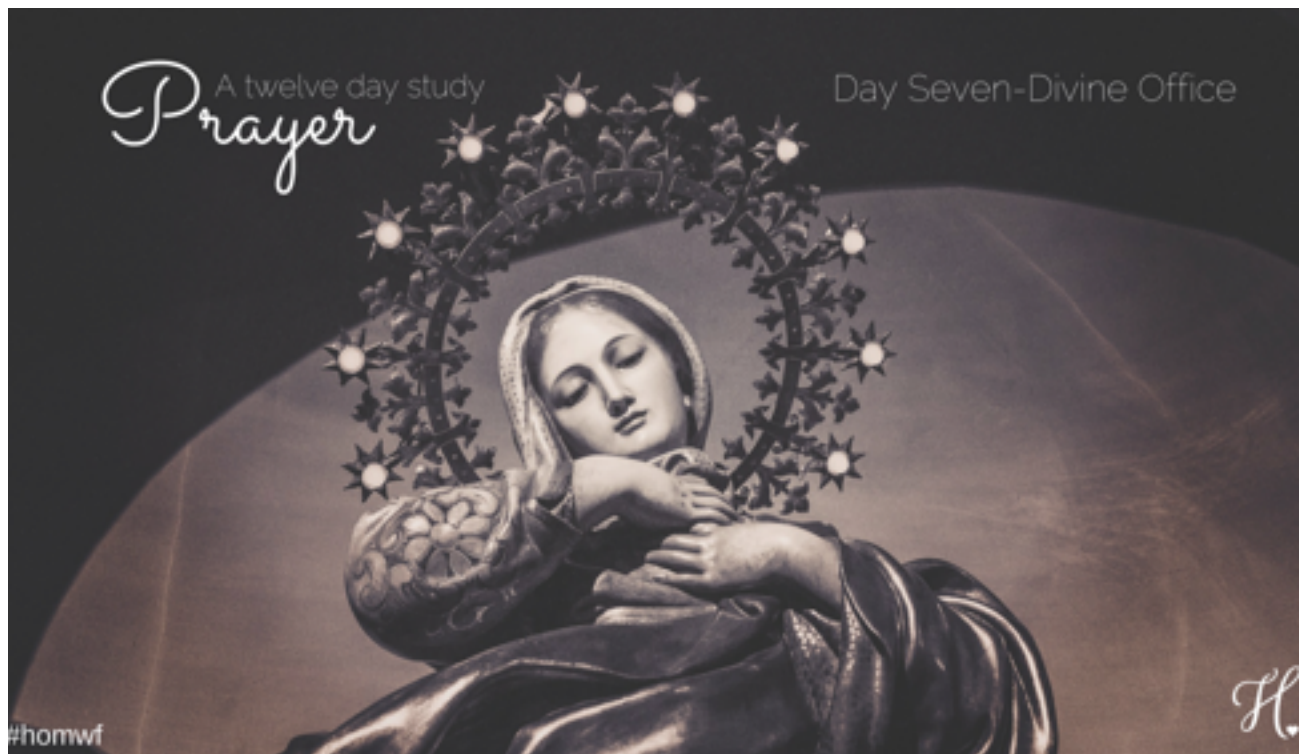
The Stations are the most solemn of prayers, and when praying them I feel most close to Jesus and Mary. How is it that Jesus would sacrifice so much...for

me...especially after I was the one who sentenced Him? I have a lot of work to do to be worthy of such.

Reflect and Act: This prayer comes via the 4th grade DMCC's Stations performance. Pray and reflect on those moments and people that you are most grateful for. Without Jesus' sacrifice we wouldn't have that. Let us be grateful for our blessings and act to pass them on to others. Make sure to also find out your Church's upcoming Stations schedule for Lent and add it to your calendar. -Michelle

Lord Jesus, You love us so much that You gave Your life for us. Even though You never committed a sin, You chose to walk the path of Calvary, this path to suffer for us, for our sins, so that someday we could be with You forever. As we pray today, draw us closer to You. Set our hearts on fire with love for You. Thank You, dear Jesus.

Thank You for loving us.



1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

I remember the first time I prayed the Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours. I was a college freshman, on a mission trip in the Bronx, praying with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal and laughing with homeless men. The book of prayers, with its five ribbons and its changing nature (having to use the ribbons to navigate the different prayers) intrigued me. One of the friars with a kind smile and a small chuckle had to help me every morning as I struggled to keep up. Sitting there, in the darkened chapel, lit only by the early morning light and a few candles, wearing my grimy hoodie and beaten Converse, preparing to catch the subway to the people we would be serving, I felt a deep connection to the very heart of the Church.

The Liturgy of the Hours, as the name suggests, is liturgical, in the sense that it is an action of the Body of Christ. While it is said primarily by priests and religious, the 1983 Code of Canon Law made it clear that laypeople can pray the Divine Office liturgically, even when praying alone. It is a prayer made through and with Christ our high priest and it unites us with the Church Triumphant as they worship God in heaven. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1174): "The mystery of Christ, his Incarnation and Passover, which we celebrate in the Eucharist especially at

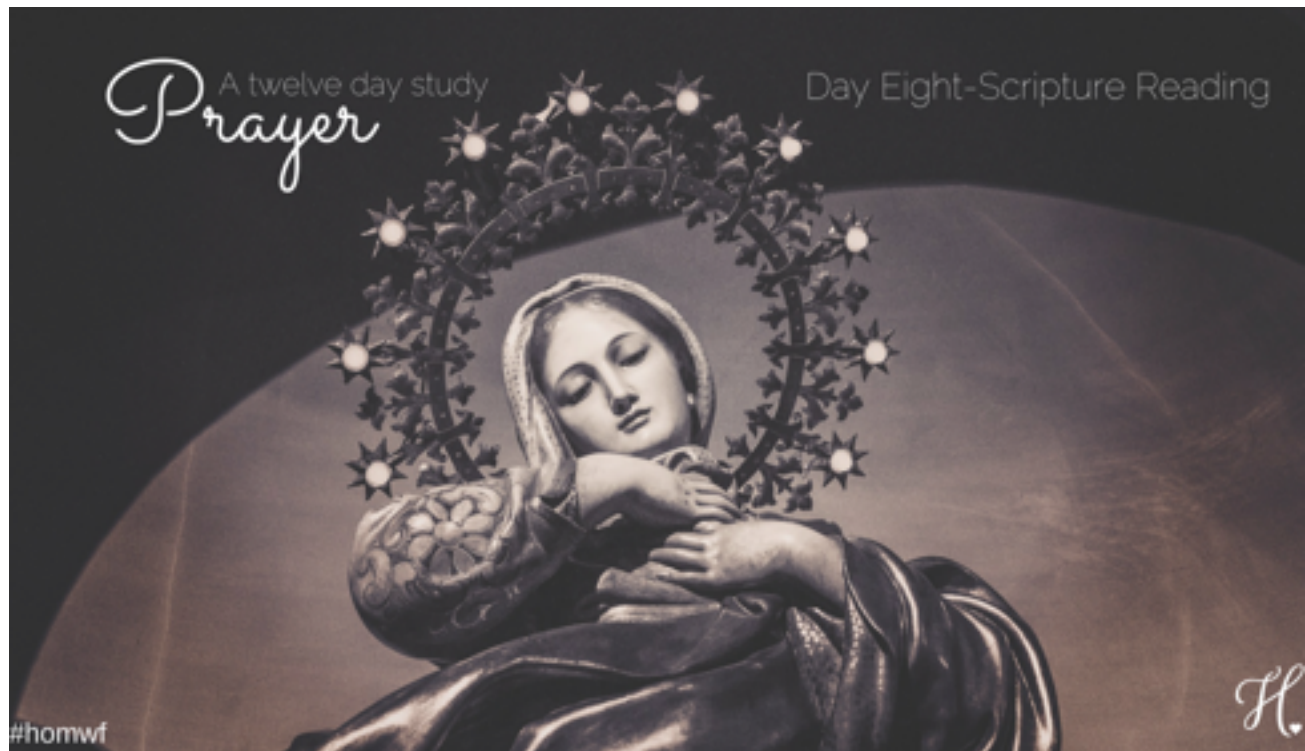
the Sunday assembly, permeates and transfigures the time of each day, through the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours." The Divine Office extends the Liturgy found in the Mass into one's daily life and activities.

The Divine Office fulfills the Lord's order to, as it is written in St Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: "*Pray without ceasing.*" Many saints have spoken on the importance of making your entire life a prayer, whatever your vocation or state in life might be. If you are a college student, a business woman, a wife, or a mother, you do not have time to sit in Adoration for hours on end. Nor does God want you to. While structured prayer is important and does have a place in the Christian life, the Lord wants more than that. He wants you to make your life and all of the school work, emails, dirty dishes, and smelly diapers that go along with it an offering to Him.

The Divine Office sanctifies your daily activities. It transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. It raises your everyday life to an experience of God Himself and makes everything you do an act of worship. It further reveals your place, your role in Salvation History by weaving together your life and the Paschal Mystery, or Christ's passion, death, and resurrection; it calls you to be a witness to the Good News with your very life. It orients us toward heaven, where we will pray without ceasing in the unending liturgy. -Carissa

Reflect: What is God asking you to offer to Him? How can you make your daily life and activities a prayer no matter what your state in life?

Act: Pray either morning, evening, or night prayer of the Divine Office today. If you don't have a breviary, don't worry! You can find the Divine Office of several free apps, such as iBreviary and Laudate.



Hebrews 4:12 John 8:31-32 Matthew 7:24-27

Growing up Catholic, I never read the Bible except at Mass. It wasn't until I started studying theology in college that I began to dive into the Word. But Scripture still didn't come alive for me until my semester abroad, when I received the Holy Spirit in a new and profound way. Once I deepened this tuning in to the Spirit, Scripture was no longer a book of past events, but a "living and active" Word of God that has relevance to my own life as well. I will never forget that semester, sitting in the little Adoration chapel opening my Bible and discovering new Scripture verses that spoke so directly to my heart. I drank it in like life-giving water to my soul.

There are many ways to pray with Scripture. It can be in a more formal sense, such as reading the Mass readings each day or reading through a certain book of Scripture. You could possibly even read it cover to cover, like we would any other book. But Scripture isn't a normal book. My favorite way to pray with Scripture is what some call with affection (and others disdain) bible roulette. It's saying a prayer to the Holy Spirit and opening to a random page of Scripture, and reading whatever your eyes fall upon. While God has spoken to me this way many, many times, there is definitely a way to abuse it which is why some are so leery of it. To be clear, you

shouldn't base any huge life decisions on a single bible roulette experience. Common sense always has to be taken into account, as well as proper discernment. Plus, you may get one of those graphic battle passages in the Old Testament, and then what? If anything though, it's a fun way to get to discover different parts of Scripture.

Scripture has something for everyone, going through any stage in life. There are passages of triumph, grace, sadness, despair, pain, suffering, resurrection, and conversion. The Psalms specifically have about every emotion known to man in them. So don't think you only read the Bible to strengthen virtue. You can also use it to pray with your pain and your frustration with either God or others. You'll be amazed at the comfort it brings.

But we are not just meant to be hearers of the Word, we are also meant to be doers of the Word (Matthew 7:24-27). It means the difference between building our foundation on sand or rock. The Word of God is *"sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* (Hebrews 4:12) *Jesus himself tells us that we are only truly His disciples when we live in His Word, which will allow us to know the truth, and the truth will make you free."* (John 8:31-32)

This obviously means that we should live out what is in Scripture, and not just listen to it. But what if it goes deeper? What if we also used Scripture to root out the lies in our own lives? What if we could use Scripture as a weapon of sorts, to shield and strengthen us? This is the sharp two-edged sword that St. Paul writes about. The words of God, the words of truth, have the ability to cut right to our hearts and chop away any of the cobwebs or strings of lies that may be growing there. This truth sets us free.

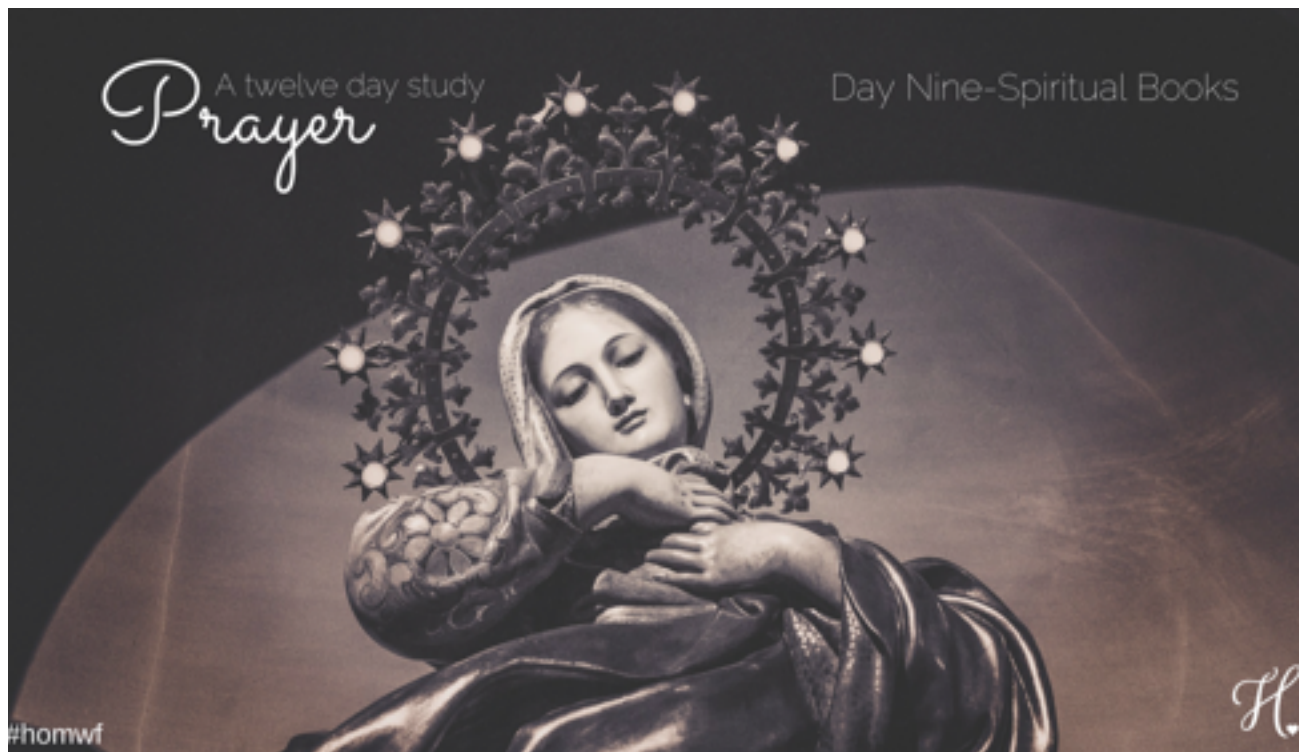
You can use Scripture in this way by practicing something called rhema. Rhema is the Greek word for the spoken word. It is the word used in the Bible to describe the breath of God or the word of God. This divine outbreath is what spoke creation into being and filled Adam's lungs and soul with life. The practice of rhema means speaking Scripture out loud. It holds an extra power when we do this, cuts to our hearts in a deeper way. You can choose one specific verse to focus on for a day

or for a week, like a mantra. A priest taught this to me at college, and I've seen lives changed through it. It helped a friend of mine to beat an eating disorder, and has broken many others free from the harmful lies they believed about themselves in their heart. For instance, do you believe you're not worth anything? Repeat to yourself under your breath, *"I am fearfully and wonderfully made."* (Psalm 139:14)

-Emily

Reflect: What is your relationship with the Word of God? Are you just a Hearer of the Word, or are you also a Doer? Have you always wanted to be a lover of Scripture, but just couldn't seem to get there? Take a moment to ponder how all of Scripture is one big love story of God chasing humanity and bringing us into covenant with Him. If you want to learn how, consider buying the book *Walking with God* by Tim Gray and Jeff Cavins.

Act: Ask for the Holy Spirit to fill you with a love for Scripture. Try praying at least once a week with Scripture, either the bible roulette version or a more formal, organized version. (Note: praying with Scripture is different than studying Scripture). You may also choose a Scripture verse once a week to practice rhema with. Write it on a sticky and tape it to your bathroom mirror, desk at work, etc! Need help finding the right verse? Check this out or Google "Bible verses for ____" depending on what emotion, lie, or suffering you might need help with. Then let the Truth set you free.



CCC 2559 Philippians 4:8

"You will not see anyone who is really striving after his advancement who is not given to spiritual reading. And as to him who neglects it, the fact will soon be observed by his progress."

(St. Athanasius, Bishop, Confessor and Doctor of the Church)

When thinking about prayer, spiritual reading isn't the first thing that normally comes to mind. The Our Father comes to mind. The Rosary comes to mind. And, depending on the time of day, the Prayer Before Meals comes to mind. But reading books?

Yes! In fact, prayer and spiritual reading have gone hand in hand for a long time. Consider St. Augustine who said, *"he who wishes often to be with God ought to pray frequently and read pious books."*

The Catechism teaches us *"Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God."* But how do we raise it? If you are anything like me, there are times when I try to do the raising myself. I think hard. I meditate harder. But ultimately, these methods are fruitless. We can't force ourselves to God.

But, there are elevators to heaven, in a manner of speaking.

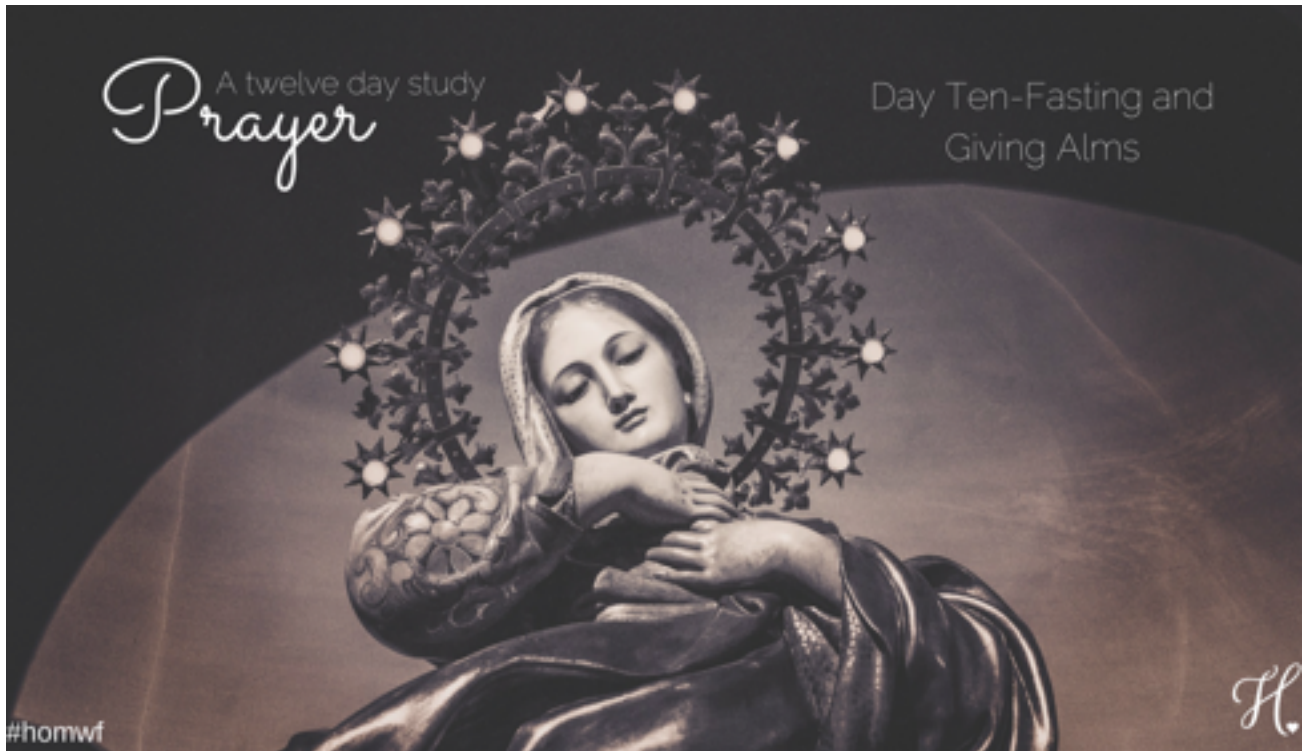
By reading spiritual books, our mind is instructed on the finer things of the faith. We have ideas, teachings, and examples of the saints that we can watch, imitate, and meditate upon. In turn, by meditating on these things, they become such a part of us that we begin to contemplate them, in essence, raising ourselves to heaven.

Of course, there are instances where God speaks directly to his people. He spoke directly to Moses. He spoke to St. Faustina. He used Mary to speak directly to the three children at Fatima. But speaking directly to us isn't his usual method of instructing us.

Usually, God works in the ordinary scheme of things. He isn't prone to sending in plagues, talking to us in the garden, or setting the sun spinning. He operates in the usual ways. Instructs in the usual ways. And the usual ways that we learn anything, is through teaching and books.

So God teaches us through books and we meditate on these teachings. Eventually - or in my case, hopefully - these meditations become a part of us, and the truth and beauty bring us to contemplative prayer.

Paul said as much in his letter to the Philippians. *"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."* -Christine



Matthew 6:1-4 Matthew 6:16-18 Tobit 12:8

Fasting and almsgiving are two pillars of Christian prayer. We normally only hear about them during Lent, when we are called to fast and give alms as part of our Lenten journey. Fasting means to willingly abstain from food and drink, and almsgiving is the practice of giving food or money to the poor. Jesus himself fasted in the desert, and gave bread to the hungry. In Matthew 6, He links fasting and almsgiving with prayer, like a one-two punch of walking the Christian life.

But can I be honest? I hate fasting. I could give alms all day, but I'm one of those people who gets really grouchy and feels sick when I don't eat. Hangry, you might call it. So you can imagine my reaction when I found out in college that the Catholic sorority I wanted to join (called a household) fasted on bread and water every week, once a week. Wednesdays automatically became my least favorite day.

However, about a semester into it, I realized I was doing it all wrong. It wasn't about eating nothing but Wonder Bread and being miserable all day (which is what I had been doing up until that point). I learned quickly that fasting is an incredibly

powerful type of prayer. You don't just fast to fast, to somehow prove your endurance to both God and yourself. Fasting is meant to aid prayer, to unite the suffering that you willingly experience to Christ's suffering and offer it up for a certain intention. Big things happen when we fast for each other and for our loved ones. Conversions happen, bodies and hearts are healed, and evil flies to the foot of the Cross. I've seen it with my own eyes.

Another thing I learned was that there isn't only one way to fast, and it's not a competition. Bread and water fasts are considered the more extreme type of fasting, while most of us are more used to the "*2 small meals and one large meal with no snacks*" type of fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, as well as those Fish Stick Fridays during Lent. As a perfectionist, if I was going to do a bread and water fast I wanted to at least do it right. But even though I was following all of the "rules" of fasting, my heart wasn't in it because I was so weak and irritable. I realized that if I relaxed my approach a bit, like eating bread with more sustenance and putting some juice in my water, I was better able to keep the spirit of the law and my heart was in a better place.

And while fasting is typically associated with food, it doesn't always have to be. One semester we had a few women in my household who struggled with eating disorders, and fasting from food was hard for them. We decided to fast from something non-food related every Wednesday, like music, Facebook, sleeping with a pillow, makeup, or even looking in mirrors! This also completely changed my opinion of fasting, making it much more accessible and practical. There's just some days where a bread and water fast is impossible. Instead of thinking it's either go big or go home, try to find a smaller abstinence that you can still offer up to God. It was also somewhat fun (as fun as fasting could be) to come up with a new fast every week as a group and walk around campus knowing what we were all sacrificing that day.

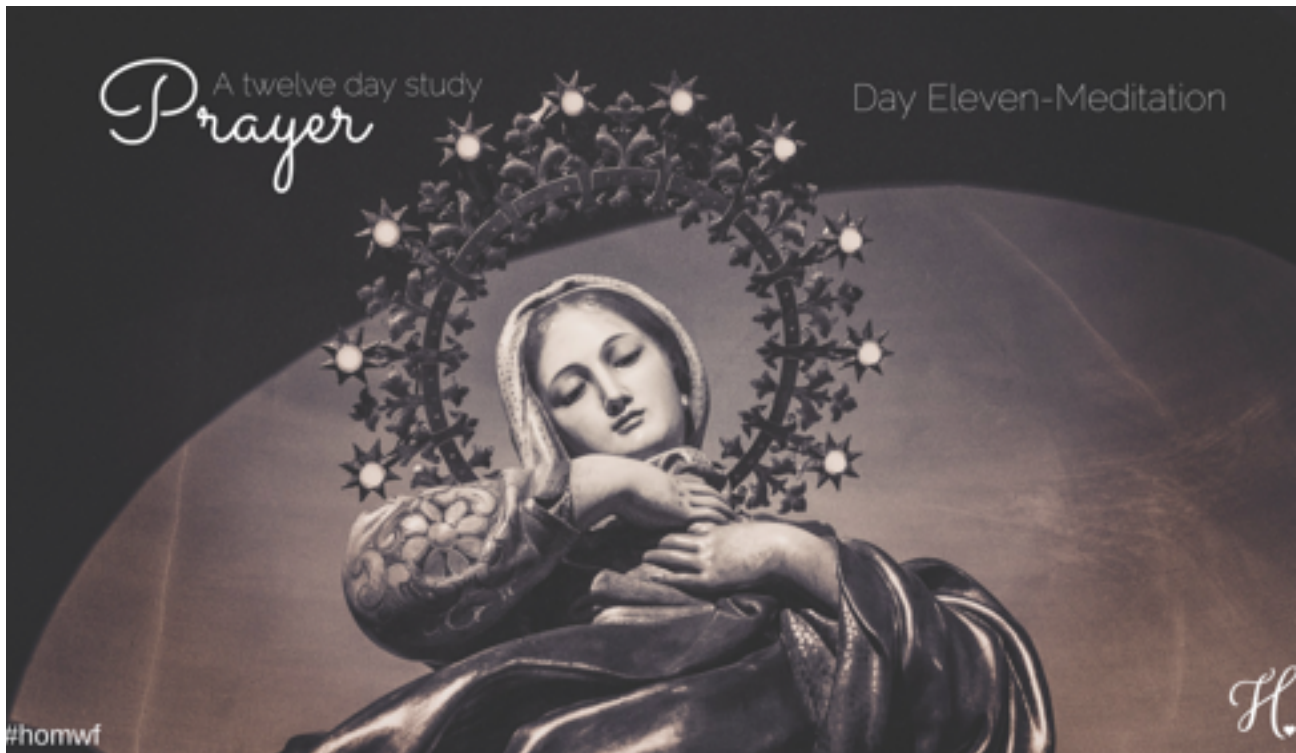
Almsgiving, on the other hand, is traditionally the practice of donating money or food. But while these acts of charity are good and necessary, we can also "*give alms*" in other ways as well. Is there someone struggling who needs your time, or simply your presence? Are there small acts of kindness that you can perform throughout your day? These are all types of almsgiving, for they are all works of charity.

Fasting and almsgiving are meant to go together and always be connected to prayer. They are the best tools to help us grow in love of God and love of neighbor, for they kill what is selfish in us. Jesus teaches that if we are still prideful while doing them, we are not doing it right. They aid prayer because they use our bodies and not just our souls, using our whole selves in prayer. As St. Augustine put it so beautifully, *“Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving.”* -Emily

Reflect: How have you always looked upon fasting and almsgiving? Have you seen them as powerful prayers or unnecessary suffering? Has reading this changed your mind at all?

Act: Is there someone or something you could fast for this week? It doesn't have to be a bread and water fast (although here is the fasting bread recipe I use on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday). Consider asking someone to join you in your fast. And instead of doing one calendar day, try doing sundown to sundown (this means you get to have a big dinner at the end!).

Act: Also consider choosing one charity to donate to this week - either with a one-time donation or setting up an automatic withdrawal on a recurring basis. It's best to pick a charity close to your heart! Pray for those whom your donation will be helping.



Matthew 6:5-8

I have to admit that when I first started to think about writing about meditation as a form of prayer I was definitely skeptical. Meditation had always seemed like something that other faiths had practiced and not something we as Catholics should do, but goodness I was wrong! My perception of meditation was very far off from how the Catholic Church views it and it is a really great tool that can help us come closer to God. Meditation is really about quieting yourself enough that you can simply *be* in the presence of God.

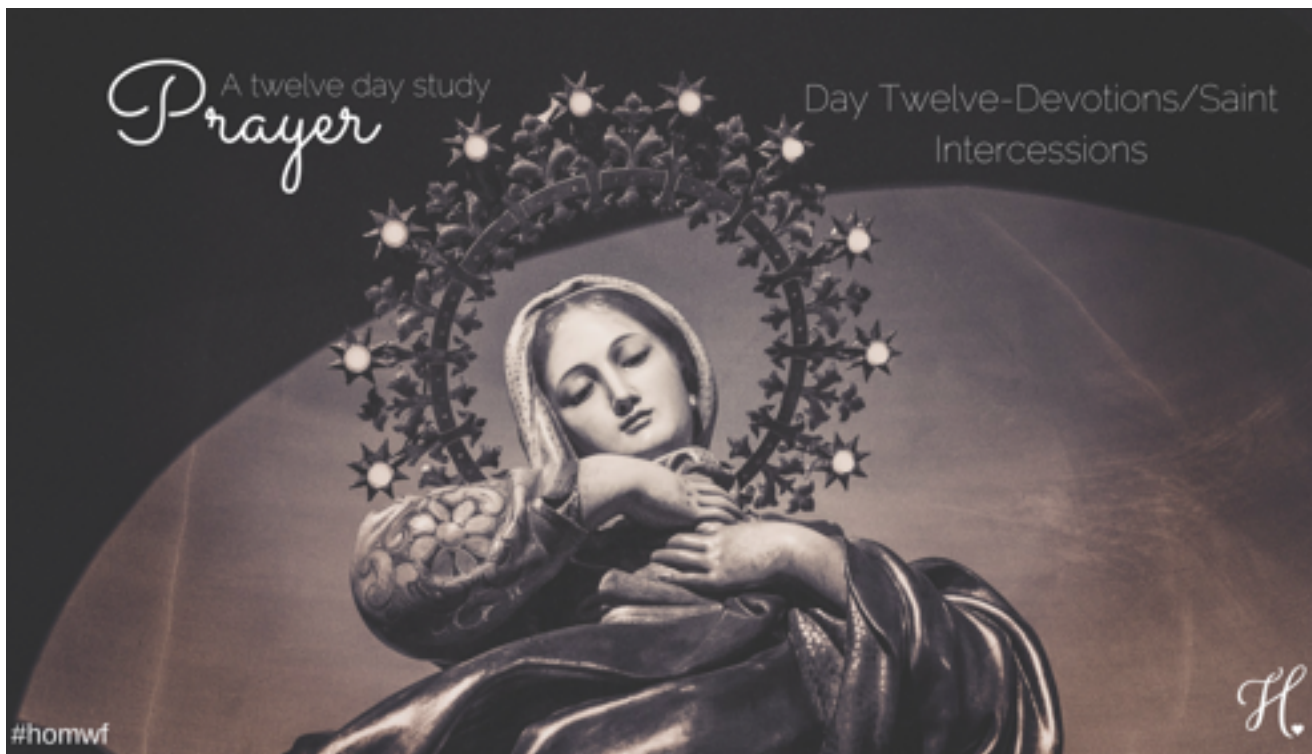
The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes meditation in this way: *“The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking”* (CCC 2705). When we take time to quiet our hearts and minds in the busyness of everyday life we have the opportunity to dive deeper into the mysteries of our Lord and His will for our lives.

If you are still skeptical of this whole idea of meditation there is actually a great saint who wrote a multitude of writings and specifically talked about mental prayer (meditation) in them. In *An Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis De Sales

writes, *"I specially recommend mental prayer, and the prayer of the heart, in particular meditation on the life and passion of our Lord."* He says that it is important to start this meditation in the presence of our Lord. This can be in your local church, adoration chapel, or even in your own home if you have created a prayer corner that you can quiet yourself in. I have found that when I am in front of our Lord in Eucharistic Adoration I have an easier time to quiet myself and truly meditate on the glory of our Lord. There is something beautiful and glorious about looking the Lord in the face while sitting in His presence. During these moments of meditation in front of the Lord in the Eucharist I have truly been able to experience the love and joys of the Lord. He has been my consolation through the hard times and the One I share my joys with. I encourage all of you to spend time quieting yourself each day with the Lord. Time spent with Him is never wasted and will always benefit us more than we could even imagine. *-Marykatherine*

Reflect and Discuss: Do you have a place where you can quiet yourself and simply be with the Lord each day? What things are on your heart today that you can bring to the Lord and discuss with Him in prayer and meditation?

Act: Spend at least ten minutes today quieting yourself and reflect on all of the blessings the Lord has bestowed on you. Thank Him for both the joys and the sorrows of this day.



Hebrews 12:1-4

I am what you call a “*saint-aholic*.” I love meeting new saints, reading saint biographies, and asking saints for help. There is literally a saint for almost everything. Grumbling over household chores? St. Martha and St. Zita were housekeepers. Looking for a relationship? St. Raphael the Archangel is known for being a great matchmaker. Taking a test? St. Joseph of Cupertino’s got you covered. Can’t find your car keys? Ask St. Anthony of Padua for help.

Catholics are often mistaken for worshipping saints, but in reality, the saints are essentially the best friends you can ask for. When you look beyond the stained glass and really look into the lives of the saints, there are aspects in their lives that you can relate to. St. Thomas the Apostle is well-known for being the “*doubter*,” which means that we aren’t alone when we doubt our faith. Feeling ugly or unpretty? St. Germaine Cousin was born with a withered right arm and disfigured skin. Asthmatic? So was St. Bernadette. Struggle with anxiety or overwhelming emotions? St. Therese of Lisieux knew those problems all too well.

There are many saints who can act as role models and show that women don’t have to join a convent or be a martyr in order to be holy. St. Gianna is a great

example of a modern day saint because she was a wife, a mother, and established a career as a pediatrician at a time when most women just stayed in the kitchen. St. Monica struggled with trying to keep her son Augustine in line and wouldn't give up until his heart belonged to the Catholic church. St. Margaret of Cortona was a single mother who worked and lived in a Franciscan monastery because her family wouldn't support her. These women led very different lives, centuries apart from each other, and yet we can learn something from each of them.

Every saint I met throughout the years has taught me something or helped me to improve on something. St. Monica taught me prudence. St. Joan of Arc taught me courage. St. Faustina taught me what it meant to trust in God. St. Therese showed me how to be grateful for the little things. St. Maria Goretti showed me what it meant to forgive and what forgiveness feels like. St. Gemma Galgani was an example of great perseverance in spiritual life.

Learn about the lives of the saints. There's a lot of great books out there that go beyond just an encyclopedic-type biography. Don't be afraid to ask a saint for their intercession. They are always praying for us in Heaven. Who knows? You might just make a new best friend today. -Monique

Reflect: Who are some saints that you know? What was their presence in your life? What do you think you can learn from them? Reflect on a time when you asked a saint for their intercession and you received an answer from them. What happened?

Act: Want to get to know a new saint? Check out the Saint Name Generator. See what you can learn from a saint you may have never heard of before or look deeper into a saint that you've heard of, but never really got to know.

