



THE FIRST SIGN

PRAYER

Chapter Two



ARE YOU SPIRITUALLY HEALTHY?

WHEN I AM SPIRITUALLY HEALTHY, nothing bothers me. This one truth is the fruit of many years of self-observation. When I am spiritually healthy my wife can take forever to get ready, the stock market can drop a thousand points in a day, the flight can be canceled, my favorite team can lose, and my plans can fall apart, but I am able to remain calm and maintain a joyful outlook with a deep inner peace.

I know when I am in a place of spiritual health, and I know when I am not. One of the key indicators of spiritual health seems to be gratitude. When I am spiritually healthy I am grateful. But when I am not, even the smallest things drive me crazy. At those times I tend to be irritable, restless, and discontented. In fact, my attitude toward other drivers on the road between my home and the office is a pretty good barometer of how healthy I am spiritually. If I have a spiritual cold I am just a little bit irritable, a little bit restless, and a little bit discontented. But if I am struggling with a spiritual cancer these indicators go off the charts. Someone around me at work or at home could do the smallest irritating

thing and that will be enough to get me all twisted up inside. I may not lose it on the outside, but on the inside I am seething.

When I am not spiritually healthy the only way for me to be happy is for everything to go my way . . . and never does everything go our way. So it becomes an impossible scenario. I cannot remember the last time everything went the way I wanted. Even on our best days things don't always turn out as we hoped. That's life. Learning to be joyful even when things don't go your way is one of the ongoing invitations of the spiritual life.

If I am spiritually healthy I can be happy even when things don't go the way I want them to. The world says that the key to happiness is getting what you want and having things go your way. As a result we spend so much time and energy trying to control people and situations, and in the process we make ourselves sick and miserable—not to mention the suffering this type of behavior inflicts on everyone who crosses our path. If you can be happy only if you get your way, isn't that a horrible way to live?

Anyone can be happy when things go their way. Anyone can be happy when they get what they want. But part of our inheritance as children of God is a way of life that allows us to be joyful even when things don't go our way.

Wouldn't you like to carry within you a joy that cannot be extinguished by anything that happens? Are you willing to work for it? When we are spiritually healthy we experience that joy, and nothing can rob us of it. More than anything else, wherever you are in your life, I hope this book helps you to grow in spiritual health so that you can experience that kind of joy.

How spiritually healthy are you today?

How Do Your Best Days Begin?

Life is a collection of days, and some days are better than others. This may seem obvious, and so we perhaps don't question it. But why are some days better than others?

If you look back over the past couple of months, a few days were probably great, most days were average, some days were not so good, and perhaps there were even a couple of days that were horrible. But what made the difference? Was it something outside your control or something within your influence?

One thing I have discovered as I become more and more conscious of what is happening within me and around me is that if a day doesn't get off to a good start it very rarely finishes as a good day. Once a day gets away from us we tend to go into survival mode. And a day can get away from us in so many ways. In fact, a day will almost certainly go wrong unless we consciously take the time to focus the day first thing each morning.

How do your best days begin? Most people don't know. They have a hunch, but they have simply never thought enough about it or experimented with it. This is the first thing that sets Dynamic Catholics apart. They know how their best days begin, and they use this knowledge to give real direction to their lives at the beginning of each day.

The first sign of a Dynamic Catholic is prayer. More specifically, it is a daily commitment to prayer. Dynamic Catholics universally begin their day with some type of prayer, a spiritual routine that focuses their day. Some settle down in a comfortable chair with their morning coffee. Others go to Mass. Some focus

their day by praying the morning offering, and have their main time of prayer at some other time in the day. But all of them begin their day with prayer of some kind, however brief, and on a day when they don't follow their routine they can feel the difference. They feel unfocused, stressed, less conscious of what is happening in and around them, less capable of giving those they care about the love and attention they deserve, and disconnected from God. It is as if they feel disconnected from themselves when they don't start their days in the way that they know works best.

Dynamic Catholics know how their best days begin, and the more mature among them (mature in wisdom, not in age) will do almost anything to defend their morning routine. They would rather get up an hour early than forgo that routine. They know that a day that doesn't start well tends not to end well. It is simply too difficult to shift the momentum of a day.

How do your best days begin? Try beginning your day with prayer, however brief, and observe how it impacts the rest of your day.

A Routine of Prayer

Once upon a time there were three frogs sitting on a leaf of a lily outside the palace of a great king. Two of the frogs decided to jump into the pond. How many frogs are left on the lily leaf? Three. Deciding to do something is not the same as doing it.

The first sign of a Dynamic Catholic is prayer. More specifically it is a daily commitment to prayer. That means that they don't *hope* they get around to praying each day. It is not merely

a good intention; it is a priority. Daily prayer has become an ingrained habit for them.

You see, if you ask Catholics, "Do you pray?" they all say yes. But the great majority of Catholics don't have a plan when it comes to prayer. We just pray when the mood strikes us. This type of spontaneous prayer is good and should be a part of all our lives. But it is not enough if we really want to grow in virtue, become a-better-version-of-ourselves, have dynamic relationships, and change the world in the ways God intends us to. The Christian life is simply not sustainable without daily prayer. It is just not likely that you will become (or remain) a patient, compassionate, others-centered person who is focused on what matters most without daily prayer. Highly engaged Catholics have figured this out, and that is one of the reasons why they have a daily commitment to prayer.

Even more specific than a commitment, Dynamic Catholics have a routine of prayer. This was one of the inspiring patterns that showed up over and over again in the research. They have a routine of prayer. What does that mean? Well, they tend to pray at the same time every day. They tend to pray in the same place every day. And they tend to pray in the same way every day.

Too many of us tell ourselves that we will pray when we get around to it. This of course means that on many days we don't get around to it. Over time we are more likely to fall into the habit of not praying every day than we are to fall into the habit of praying every day. The reason is because we tend not to just fall into really good life-changing habits. We tend to fall into bad habits. The good ones need to be sought out intentionally. And prayer

is one of them.

What I found even more fascinating is that highly engaged Catholics tend to have what I would call a routine within their routine. While it would be easy to skip over this simple point, that would be a mistake, for this routine within their routine is of crucial importance. It is also probably one of the great accomplishments of their lives, though most of them seem a little oblivious to how much of an achievement it is to establish this routine within the routine.

So, what is the routine within the routine?

One set of questions interviewees were asked surrounded their practice of prayer. They were asked when, where, and how they prayed. The answers to these questions were revealing. But when they were asked to walk us through exactly what they did during their time of prayer we discovered something quite important.

When people would say that they pray in the big leather chair in the corner of their living room each morning at seven o'clock, I would ask them, "What happens when you sit down in that chair?" They would usually respond casually, "I pray," as if that were obvious. But I would then ask them to walk me through exactly what happens and how they pray. This is where they revealed the pattern of a routine within a routine. Here are some of their responses.

"Well, I start with a morning offering and then I talk through my schedule for the day with God."

"I read the Gospel of the day and then I talk to God about how I can live that Gospel more fully."

"I take out my Magnificat and pray the morning prayers."

"I read one chapter of the Bible and then I pick one line that jumps out at me and use that to begin a conversation with God."

"I have this devotional book that I have had for many years and I start by just reading the page for today."

All of this may seem basic, obvious, perhaps even remedial to some, but it isn't. You see, when most people do finally sit down to pray in earnest at some point in their life, it is this routine that they are missing. Most people's first attempt at really praying is a disaster because they don't have this routine. The result is that many people simply stop praying.

Most people when they pray sit down and see what happens, and of course very often nothing happens. So they get frustrated and stop praying. When Dynamic Catholics sit down to pray they don't just see what happens; they have a plan. They have a routine, and a routine within their routine.

Interestingly, the great majority of the 7% were never shown how to develop a routine of prayer and a routine within the routine. They forged their routine by trial and error. They observed themselves and figured out what worked and what didn't work for them through sheer perseverance. Some of them have developed their routine of prayer over decades. Here I think we stumble upon one of the great tragedies of modern Christianity, and perhaps Catholicism in particular. We do an awful lot of talking about prayer, but we spend very little time actually teaching people how to pray. We assume that people know how to pray, but the truth is when most people sit down in the classroom of silence to make an earnest attempt at prayer they haven't got the

foggiest idea how to begin.

The first sign of a dynamic Catholic is about helping people establish a routine of prayer. One of the greatest gifts we can give anybody is to help them develop a sustainable prayer life. What I mean by that is that we give them the tools to cultivate a spiritual life and the tools to adapt that spiritual life according to the changing demands and challenges of different stages of their lives. Helping them develop a routine of prayer that works for them is the very first step.

So, how is your prayer life?

There is perhaps nothing more telling about the life of a Christian than the answer to this question. It is one thing to judge the past external behaviors of a person, but it is what is taking place inside a person that speaks most about the future.

Catholics approach prayer across a broad spectrum. There are some who identify themselves as Catholics but refuse to pray or involve God in the decisions of their lives. There are others who pray in a mechanical way, but do so inconsistently and are easily distracted by the happenings of life. There are still others who are very passionate about prayer from time to time, but they are erratic in their practice of prayer. There are those who pray every day and try to involve God in the big decisions of their lives, but cut their time of prayer short as soon as it lacks immediate consolation or becomes difficult. There are those who are committed to the practice of daily prayer, but it is a relatively new endeavor. There are those who have firmly established a habitual routine of prayer through years of faithful practice, and involve God intimately in the daily decisions of their lives. And there are

those who yearn for a deeper and deeper relationship with God through prayer and have an almost continuous conversation with him throughout the day.

Where do you fall on the spectrum? I am ashamed to say that I am not as far along as I would like to be. And I am fully aware that I have fewer excuses than most for not being farther along, as I have been given the benefit of knowing much more about the process than most. But the point is, each of us should be working to establish a routine of prayer. Later in the chapter I will give you a simple outline for developing a daily routine of prayer, and a routine within the routine. It is brief and simple, and something that you can begin today.

Nothing will change your life like establishing a solid routine of prayer.

The Classroom of Silence

C. S. Lewis was one of the great Christian voices of the twentieth century. He was best known for his Narnia children's books, but his contribution to Christian thought through his lectures and books on Christian spirituality make him one of the giants of modern Christian times.

During World War II, Lewis wrote a weekly column for *The Guardian*, a London newspaper. The column took the form of a letter each week. The letters were written from the perspective of a senior devil training an apprentice devil. The apprentice devil has been given a task by Lucifer himself, and that task is to win

a particular young man's soul away from God and for the devil.

The senior devil's name is Screwtape, the junior "tempter" is Wormwood, and the young man whose soul is being sought is known as "the patient." Screwtape is also Wormwood's uncle. The letters themselves are a combination of humor, spiritual education, inspiration, and uncanny insight into the nature of the predictable ways in which we behave as human beings. These letters were published later as a book titled *The Screwtape Letters*.

When the apprentice devil is first given the assignment, he goes to work immediately, thinking of all sorts of creative ways to tempt the young man he has been assigned. But his uncle Screwtape writes him a stern letter rebuking these efforts. He counsels young Wormwood not to waste his time trying to dream up new ways of tempting man. He further explains that their plan is very simple, that it consists primarily of creating so much noise in the world that man can no longer hear the voice of God in his life.

I am writing in 2012, and so these words were penned by C. S. Lewis more than seventy years ago. When he wrote these words Lewis was prophesying. Prophets are not confined to the Old Testament. Every age has them, and C. S. Lewis was a prophet in his time.

Think of the evolution of noise since he penned these words. At the time television had just been invented, but would not take on great popularity for many years yet. And as the noise has increased in the world, and as we have invited it into our lives, it has become harder and harder for us to hear the voice of God.

It is in the silence that God speaks to us.

This diabolical plan to fill our lives with noise is pure genius for its simplicity. And countering it requires the same simplicity. The more time you spend in silence, the more clearly you will hear the voice of God in your life.

And beyond the silence, it is interesting how some forms of noise lead us closer to God and others lead us far from him. Next time you are listening to the radio, as each song comes and goes, ask yourself: Did that song lead me closer to God or further from God? In the same way, conversations with some people inspire us to be better, while conversations that focus on negativity and gossip have the opposite effect.

In my car I always keep one CD in the player: *Come to the Quiet*, by John Michael Talbot. I love to listen to it on my way to the office in the morning. It is a beautiful collection of morning prayers set to music. It soothes my soul and focuses my mind for the day. It reminds me that God is constantly inviting us to spend some portion of our lives in the quiet, so we can live the rest of our lives to the fullest. The gift of this particular collection of music is that it makes me yearn for more quiet time with God.

I cannot imagine God saying, "Come to the noise," or "Fill your life with noise." It seems God is constantly calling out to us, "Come to the quiet."

Of course, the silence can be excruciating at first. This is why so few people slow down for a dedicated time of prayer each day. Most have tried at some point in their lives, but because they don't know what to do, the quiet becomes too much to handle.

The first attempts at most things are excruciating. A child first trying to walk is a perfect example. Progress is slow, excruciating.

atingly slow at times. They stand and fall, and fall over and over again. Only after weeks and weeks of effort do they take those first steps.

When two people are first dating, silence can be excruciating. Silence on a first date can be the kiss of death for a relationship. But over time as a relationship develops into a great love, two people often learn to enjoy just being with each other in silence. Once their relationship reaches this stage, far from being awkward, the silence can be comforting and powerful. Now they can sit on the couch together and neither has to say anything. They have learned just to be with each other.

A great life of prayer develops in the same way. At first the silence can be excruciating, almost torturous. But over time we learn to tolerate it, and then enjoy it, and before long we find ourselves yearning for more and more of it.

The great mystics such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, and so many others who fill our rich Catholic history came to this place where they could just be with God. Learning just to be with God is truly a thing of beauty.

One of the first requirements of the Christian life is to learn to be comfortable in our own company. If we are not, we will avoid silence and solitude, two of the key ingredients for spiritual growth. But perhaps more important, we will constantly seek the approval of others, because we are afraid to be alone.

I have often noticed in my work with teenagers that the ones who get the faith at that age have stepped away from needing the constant approval of their peer group. They have learned to be

comfortable in their own company, and so have been able to resist the push and pull of the pressures placed on them by their peers and the culture.

In some ways, I suppose we are not really ready for life until we have learned to be comfortable alone in the great classroom of silence. For it is out of the silence that clarity emerges. Over the past couple of years I have been presenting a one-day retreat called “Living Every Day with Passion & Purpose.” One of the first things I explain to those who attend is that we tend to look at people who live with great passion and purpose and think to ourselves that we would like that for ourselves. What most people fail to realize is that passion and purpose are the by-products of something else: personal clarity. Those who live with passion and purpose have more personal clarity than most people. They have a greater sense of who they are and what they are here for. They know what matters most, and this empowers them to focus and prioritize their days. Where do they get this personal clarity? In the classroom of silence.

Clarity emerges from silence. You know this instinctively. If you are taking a road trip with a car full of people and you get lost, what does the driver ask everyone to do? Turn off the radio and be quiet. Why? When you need laser clarity you want silence. Lots of people who work listening to music turn the music off when they really need to concentrate on something. Why? Clarity emerges from silence. And people who live with high levels of passion and purpose are not afraid of spending some time alone in silence to work out who they are, what they are here for, and what matters most.

In this way it seems that God is always saying to me, “Come to the quiet.” The world is noisy and distracting. It is in the silence that we find God and our true self.

In the Scriptures we read again and again about Jesus going away to a quiet place. When I am sitting in Mass on Sunday and I hear one of the readings that talk about Jesus going away to a quiet place, I yearn for that myself. I am reminded of how much I need to step back from the hustle and bustle of life for a few minutes each day into a quiet place. At the same time, I know how difficult it is to actually do it. For twenty years I have been encouraging people to carve out ten minutes a day to spend in silent prayer and reflection. And yet, still, on most days I have to force myself to do it. Sure, there are some days when I would rather spend those few minutes in prayer than do anything else in the world. But I must be honest with you, those days are few. Even though I know all the benefits and privileges that come from prayer, even though I know prayer puts me at my best, even though I know these few minutes maintain my spiritual health, I still have to drag myself to prayer on many days.

If it is important to spend time in the quiet, it is also important to have quiet places to go to. In the Scriptures, when we read about Jesus going off to a quiet place, it does not say he went off *looking for* a quiet place. It says he went off to a quiet place. This presupposes that he knew where he was going. Perhaps while he was walking into the village earlier that day he noticed a place and thought to himself that it would be a perfect spot for some quiet time.

In the same way, we all need our quiet places, places we can go to when we need to step back from the world. We need quiet places set apart from the hustle and bustle of our very noisy and busy modern lives. Again, this requires some intentionality. The world draws us toward noisy places, so quiet places can be harder and harder to find. They are not going to just mystically appear at that moment in the day when we need them most. We need to plan.

I have everyday quiet places and once-a-year quiet places, and I think we need both. My everyday quiet places include a number of churches and chapels close to my home, the rocking chair out on the back porch, the leather chair in my study, and the beach. Where is your favorite quiet place? When were you last there? Should you be thinking about going there more often? How would your life be different if you did?

The quiet is critical to our spiritual development because it is in the silence that God speaks to us. We pray for many reasons, and one of those reasons is to seek the will of God for our lives. Without the silence it becomes almost impossible to discern God’s will.

One of the great struggles of the Christian life is surrendering our will so that we can embrace the will of God. In my conversations with Dynamic Catholics it became very clear, very quickly, that they believe the only way to secure any lasting happiness in this life (and the next) is by seeking the will of God and trying to fulfill it to the best of their ability. Part of their decision-making process, whether the decision is large or small, is to consider what God’s desire is in any given situation. When was the last time you set aside what you wanted and surrendered to what you felt God

wanted instead?

God desires nothing but good things for us. So when we speak of following the will of God, we are entering into a process of discernment to discover the good that God desires for us. Too often we resist God's will. We can spend all of our energy fighting him for things we don't really need, instead of surrendering to his perfect plan for our lives.

God, what do you think I should do? I call this the big question. It has been my experience that it is the only question that leads to peace and fulfillment.

When was the last time you consciously sat down and explored God's will for a particular situation? In this way, highly engaged Catholics are committed to listening to the voice of God in their lives. At the same time, they will be the first to admit that they don't always get it right, that it is almost never totally clear, and that at times they know exactly what God is calling them to do but ignore his will. And yet, over and over they learn that it is openness to God's voice and God's will that most brings them peace in the decisions they make.

Develop the habit of spending a few minutes each day in silence and you will have more clarity about every aspect of your life and peace deep in your soul. Clarity emerges from silence, and passion and purpose are the fruits of clarity. If we can raise up a new generation of Catholics who live with passion and purpose, we will once again capture the attention of our age for Christ and the genius of Catholicism.

The Routine within the Routine

When I first set about planning this chapter I noticed myself falling into the obvious trap. It is a trap we fall into all the time at work, at home, and at church. I was tempted to speak to you about many, many different forms of prayer: ancient and modern, personal and communal, etc. There are thousands of different methods and forms of prayer. But one of the important lessons the four signs have taught me is the absolute need for focus and simplicity. If we are to succeed at implementing anything with ourselves (or with large groups of people), simplicity and focus are essential. Every additional option creates a layer of complexity, and every layer of complexity reduces effective implementation.

So I turned my mind toward this question: If you could get every Catholic to pray in the same way for ten minutes each day, how would you encourage them to spend that ten minutes?

The Prayer Process is that one way.

If you really want to markedly improve your life and are serious about growing spiritually, this is the one prayer that I recommend to you. Commit yourself to this practice for ten minutes daily and you will advance spiritually like never before.

The prayer I am referring to is an adaptation of the daily examination of conscience. The idea of examining our conscience before going to Confession is a long-standing part of our Catholic tradition. But too often the concept carries with it a negative connotation. But in reality, examining ourselves can and should be an incredibly positive experience. Far from being about self-

deprecation and self-loathing, it is about peace and liberty, awareness and spiritual growth.

Paul advised the early Christians, “Let a man examine himself.” (1 Corinthians 11:28) This was particularly in reference to some type of examination before receiving the Eucharist. The hermit Saint Anthony examined his conscience every night before retiring. Over time this became a daily practice in many monasteries, and most founders of religious orders include a daily examination of conscience as a requirement for all members.

Interestingly, I read recently that in the prayer life of priests and religious the deterioration of one’s spiritual life begins with skipping the daily examination of conscience. They may still attend Mass and pray the Divine Office, go to holy hour and pray the rosary, but once the daily examination is set aside real spiritual growth ceases, and in time spiritual decay begins.

Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, “As a searching investigator of the integrity of your own conduct, submit your life to a daily examination. Consider carefully what progress you have made or what ground you have lost. Strive to know yourself. Place all your faults before your eyes. Come face to face with yourself, as though you were another person.”

But most known for furthering the use and popularity of the daily examination is Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius began the first week of his famous *Spiritual Exercises* encouraging participants to engage in the daily practice of examining one’s soul and life. He believed that the daily examination, which is often referred to as the *Examen*, was the most important of the spiritual exercises.

Today the practice has fallen into disuse, like so many of the best practices of our faith. Marred by a negative overtone and caught in an age when people want to think only about their strengths, the practice of taking an honest look at ourselves in order to improve has fallen by the wayside.

One of the real treasures that this practice delivers is an increased awareness of who we are and what is happening in us and around us. This awareness heightens our ability to experience life. That’s right, it actually increases our capacity for life. And in this way, what we are talking about is an examination of consciousness as much as an examination of conscience. This ancient spiritual practice constantly poses the question: How conscious are you? It challenges us to become aware of everything that is happening within us and around us, so that we can live at the height of consciousness.

Very often we wander through a day, a week, a month, or even a year with very little consciousness, almost oblivious to what is really happening inside us and around us. The daily examination of conscience challenges that by liberating us from living unconsciously.

It would seem to me that people are becoming less and less aware of themselves. Many of the things we do and say scream: I am completely unaware of how the way I speak and act affects the people around me!

I promise if you apply yourself to this practice of prayer it will change your life, and it will not take one hundred years for you to realize it. Commit yourself to practicing the Prayer Process for

ten minutes each day for thirty days, and by the end of the thirty days I am confident you will be convinced.

The Prayer Process, an adaptation of the examination, provides a consistent format to guide you in your daily prayer. The first barrier to entry for most people who feel drawn to prayer is that they simply don't know how to pray. They have never been taught to pray. It is amazing how little time we as a Church spend teaching people to pray. The Prayer Process overcomes the first barrier to entry by providing people with a format and a method. It provides the routine within the routine that Dynamic Catholics have spent decades developing through the painstaking process of trial and error.

In developing the Prayer Process I have used it with several focus groups, all of whom reported significant spiritual growth when they faithfully practiced the method daily.

This prayer is a game changer for you spiritually, and a game changer for every aspect of your life. If every Catholic in America prayed in this way for a few minutes each day the Church would be on the fast track to renewal. If everyone in your parish began to pray using this process your parish would explode with enthusiasm and engagement.

But don't take my word for it. Whether you start with one minute a day or go straight to the full ten minutes, use the Prayer Process every day for thirty days. If you do, I think you will very quickly be convinced of its power.

Here is the process in its simplest form.

The Prayer Process

1. Gratitude: Begin by thanking God in a personal dialogue for whatever you are most grateful for today.
2. Awareness: Revisit the times in the past twenty-four hours when you were and were not the-best-version-of-yourself. Talk to God about these situations and what you learned from them.
3. Significant Moments: Identify something you experienced today and explore what God might be trying to say to you through that event (or person).
4. Peace: Ask God to forgive you for any wrong you have committed (against yourself, another person, or him) and to fill you with a deep and abiding peace.
5. Freedom: Speak with God about how he is inviting you to change your life, so that you can experience the freedom to be the-best-version-of-yourself.
6. Others: Lift up to God anyone you feel called to pray for today, asking God to bless and guide them.
7. Finish by praying the Our Father.

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Each of the first six steps in the process should stimulate a conversation with God. It is easy to fall into the trap of merely thinking about these things. When you find yourself doing that, return to

actually speaking with God about whatever it is you are thinking. The goal is to develop the ability to have intimate conversations with God during this time set aside for prayer. The more deeply rooted we become in this daily habit of prayer, the more those conversations with God will spill over into the moments of our daily lives.

If you are just beginning, you may want to start with just one minute of conversation with God each day, adding a minute each week until you reach ten. If that is the case, don't try to race through all seven aspects of the prayer process. Just use the first step, Gratitude. Spend your minute speaking to God about everyone and everything you are grateful for, and then close with an Our Father. As you expand your time of prayer over the coming weeks, adding minutes, I suggest you add one step at a time of the process to your daily prayer. The key is to get the conversation started.

But whether you start with one minute a day or ten minutes a day, I hope this chapter has left you thinking, "I can do that!" Nothing will change your life more meaningfully than developing a vibrant and sustainable prayer life.

The Prayer Process is infinitely expandable and contractible. If you went away on retreat you could spend hours praying your way through the process, looking not just at the past twenty-four hours, but at the past year—or even your whole lifetime. For example, the first step in the process surrounds gratitude. Imagine how long you could speak to God about everything that has ever happened in your life that you are grateful for. On the other hand, perhaps on a particular day you don't get to pray at your regular time and then the day gets away from you. Rather than going to

bed without doing the Prayer Process because you don't have the will or the energy to pray for ten minutes, shorten the experience. Take just a minute, still go through each of the seven steps, but just speak to God briefly about one thing in each step.

The goal of the Prayer Process is to trigger a regular and meaningful conversation with God.

Prayerlessness: The Curse of Our Age

Prayerlessness is one of the great torments of modern times. For decades the time we spend in focused prayer has been diminishing as our lives have become busier and busier. We have fallen into the tyranny of the urgent, which demands that we rush from one urgent thing to the next. The problem with this is that the most important things are hardly ever urgent. This can leave us always doing urgent things but never doing important things. It is these most important things that we are never getting around to in this cycle. Prayer is one of those important things, and among the highest priority. Prayer helps us to identify what matters most and strengthens our hearts and minds to give priority to those things in our daily lives. What could be more important than prayer?

Prayerlessness also distorts the human person. Without prayer, over time we forget the attitudes and qualities that make us uniquely human (compassion, generosity, humility, fortitude) and we become more and more like mere animals.

Prayer leads us to catch a glimpse of the-best-version-of-ourselves,

and helps us to develop the virtue necessary to celebrate our best selves. If you watch your evening news tonight you will discover that the world desperately needs men and women of prayer and virtue. People in your neighborhood need your prayers, your parish needs your prayers, and your colleagues at work need your prayers. And it is painfully obvious at times that the Catholic Church is in desperate need of prayer.

Over the years I have encountered many great families in my travels. A number of years ago I started trying to work out what made these families so steadfast and full of life. Tolstoy begins the epic novel *Anna Karenina* with these lines: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” What I have discovered is that all the great families I have encountered have a giant of prayer. These prayerful giants pray constantly for their families, surrounding them with God’s protection. Somewhere in their not-too-distant past is a person who was a prayerful giant. A prayerful giant is a person who covers their family with prayer, anchoring the family in God’s grace. Sometimes it is the grandmother or grandfather, the mother or father, an uncle or aunt, and from time to time you have to go back two or three generations, sometimes more. But you always find a prayerful giant in their family tree. Every family needs a cornerstone of prayer to pray for the family, now and in the future.

I suppose if a family gets far enough down the road from that prayerful giant without raising up another, its members begin to lose their way. Does it take a generation or two, or three or four? I don’t know. I suppose it depends on many variables. But in each generation, each family needs at least one of these men

and women of faithful prayer to guide and protect it.

It has always amazed me that when I am writing a book, a number of people and experiences cross my path to fill in the gaps. It is almost as if God were whispering in my ear. As I was working on a draft of this chapter I had one of those moments. I was at dinner in Los Angeles and I asked my hosts some questions about themselves and their lives. What I heard was the story of a prayerful giant.

My curiosity was piqued when I discovered that my hosts have six children and twenty-two grandchildren and they are all practicing Catholics. Wherever I go, I encounter parents and grandparents who are heartbroken because their children or grandchildren have left the Church. So I wondered who were the prayerful giants in the past and the present of this family. My hosts were Kathleen and Allen Lund. This is Kathleen’s father’s story.

On the afternoon of January 24, 1945, American soldier Eddy Baranski was executed at the Nazi concentration camp in Mauthausen after being brutally tortured for days. He was a son, a husband, and a father. His father never spoke his son’s name again for the rest of his life. His mother prayed for her boy every day for as long as she lived. His young wife, Madeline, had a vision of him smiling at her, at what she would later learn was the very moment of his death. And his daughter, Kathleen, who was just two years old when her daddy went off to fight Hitler, spent the next fifty years fatherless, unable to remember his voice, his touch, or his smell.

Fifty years later Kathleen’s daughter participated in a study abroad program in Austria, and while visiting her Kathleen

decided to go to Mauthausen. There she stood in the basement where her father had been tortured and shot in the head. She stood there as if waiting for something—some feeling, some message—but there was nothing.

Returning home, Kathleen began inquiring more about her father. She spoke with relatives, wrote to the National Archives, to museums in Europe, and to the United States Army, and slowly, the story of a father she had never known began to emerge.

In 1945 Werner Muller, a German citizen, dictated an extraordinary document to an Austrian lieutenant. The multilingual Werner had worked as an interpreter under Heinrich Himmler. In October 1944 Muller was ordered to Mauthausen, where his job was to translate the interrogations of Allied prisoners. He described the next three months as a living hell. Muller remembered one prisoner above all: Eddy Baranski.

He described Baranski praying as a group of Nazi officers tortured him. The commandant asked the interpreter what he was saying, and when Muller revealed that he was praying the officers all burst into laughter. They then offered him a drink by placing water on a table, but the torture had left him incapable of raising his arms or hands, and they would not raise the water to his mouth. Muller described this as the most miserable afternoon of his life.

Little by little, the story of the father she had lost so early in life was coming together for Kathleen. A couple of years later she visited Piest, Slovakia, where her father had been captured, and the house where he was living at the time of his arrest. There she met Maria Lakotova, who wept when she remembered Eddy Baranski, who used to sing lullabies to her at night when she was

a young child in that house.

“Your father would hold me. I would sit on his knees and he would sing to me.” Maria told Kathleen. “But I know he was not singing to me; he was singing to you, his little girl so far away.”

Kathleen never knew it, but her father was singing to her—and praying for her. Eddy Baranski was a giant of prayer. Every family needs at least one. Today Allen and Kathleen are continuing the legacy by praying for their children and grandchildren each day.

Parishes are like large families in many ways. Every parish needs some prayerful giants to surround the parish with prayer. Our world is racing more and more toward an individualistic world, and the parish is one of the casualties of this rampant focus on self. Many people come to Mass on Sunday but never participate beyond that. They don’t engage the community and the community doesn’t engage them. Furthermore, they can often come and go on a Sunday without speaking to anybody else except during the sign of peace. It is, for these people, a wholly personal experience devoid of communal meaning. To explore how far-reaching this attitude might be, ask yourself: What percentage of your parishioners have prayed for the parish outside of the Mass in the past thirty days? This is one of the highest indicators of engagement. We have not conducted research on this question yet, but you can be sure it is a very, very small percentage. Like families, parishes need giants of prayer to guide and protect them.

Have you ever known a really prayerful person? What did you notice about that person? Your family, your parish, the Church,

and the world need you to become a giant of prayer.

Personal prayer is essential to the Christian life, but so is communal prayer. I would be remiss if I did not mention the enormous importance the 7% place on the role of grace in their lives, and the Eucharist is their primary source of that grace. They have tried to do life on their own, and have come to the conclusion that they would rather try to do life with God. Dynamic Catholics recognize that they are imperfect and struggling in various areas of their lives. They recognize that they cannot get to the next level in their spiritual life or in their relationships on their own. They know they need God and his grace, and they need community. They come to Mass seeking this grace and community. For this reason and others, the Mass is central to their lives. Many of them identify it as the crown jewel of the spiritual life.

Personal prayer is a deepening of your relationship with God, discovering who God is calling you to be for him and for others. The liturgical prayer of Sunday Mass is the prayer of the whole Church gathered as a public proclamation of who we are as Catholics. What you bring to Mass on Sunday is your prayer life, and the deeper it is, the more deeply you can enter into the public expression of the faith of the Church. The Mass is not simply about you; it is the whole Church gathered as a sign of hope to the world. A community at prayer is a beautiful thing.

The first sign of a Dynamic Catholic is prayer. Dynamic Catholics are first and foremost men and women of prayer, just as the saints were. Is it enough for us just to pray? No. We have been given the mission to transform the world. But the best action springs forth from a vibrant prayer life. Our efforts to trans-

form society into a more loving and just experience for all must be deeply rooted in our Christianity, and thus deeply rooted in prayer. Otherwise our Christian social efforts can become disconnected from our Christianity, and this quickly diminishes into just another form of social work. Don't get me wrong—social work is good, but we are called to more than that.

I encourage you to begin (or renew) your commitment to a life of prayer today. Use the Prayer Process to guide you. If you do, I am confident that you will find it is a faithful guide that will lead you deep into a lifelong friendship with God. What are you going to do in this life that is more fulfilling than developing a friendship with God?

One of the great moments in the life of a Christian comes when we realize, once and for all, that a life with prayer is better than a life without prayer.