

# Do You Struggle with Prayer? Take Advice from the Saints

Sr. Kathryn J. Hermes

There are many definitions of prayer, but they all point to one thing: love. Prayer is a relationship that tends toward ever closer union with the loved one. In his Catechism on Prayer, Saint John Vianney used a striking image to describe the union that prayer brings about: “Prayer is nothing else but union with God... In this intimate union, God and the soul are fused together like two bits of wax that no one can ever pull apart.”

While there isn't a secret technique for praying better, there is a wisdom that the saints knew well: pray as you are able, trust in the unconditional love of God, and take the next best step to deepen your relationship with God. If you're struggling with prayer right now, be gentle with yourself. Turn to the counsel of these five saints to get your prayer back on track.

## When You Fall Asleep While Praying

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897), the Carmelite nun known as The Little Flower and who is also a Doctor of the Church, struggled with staying awake while she prayed. For seven years she said she slept during her hours of prayer and her thanksgivings after Communion. The key to unlocking her spirituality, and the wisdom we can learn from her about praying, is this: We are little children before God who loves us immensely. Therefore, we can trust him to keep on loving us even when we struggle and fall. Thérèse wrote in her autobiography *The Story of a Soul*, “I remember that little children are as pleasing to their parents when they are asleep as well as when they are wide awake; I remember, too, that when they perform operations, doctors put their patients to sleep. Finally, I remember that: ‘The Lord knows our weakness, that he is mindful that we are but dust and ashes.’”

## When You Feel Bored or Distracted While Praying

Saint Alphonsus de Liguori (1696–1787), founder of the Redemptorists, was given the title “Doctor of Prayer.” Saint Alphonsus was a brilliant preacher and writer, yet he was masterful at presenting holiness as something within everyone's reach. He understood the particular struggles lay people have in praying and devoted much of his preaching and writing to helping them grow in the spiritual life. In his *Spiritual Treatises* (no. 385), he offers this simple encouragement: “This, then, is your answer whenever you feel tempted to stop praying because it seems to be a waste of time: ‘I am here to please God.’”

## When You Are Overwhelmed with Doubt, Sadness, and the Struggles of Life

Saint Louise de Marillac (1591–1660) cared for her husband through a prolonged illness until his death. Afterward, she suffered doubts of faith, she questioned the existence of God, she struggled with concerns about her son and the rejection of her family, and she was drowning in a sea of hopelessness and confusion. Louise was in need of support, guidance, spiritual direction, and consolation to get her prayer and her life back on track. She found Vincent de Paul who, as her spiritual director, provided Louise with the direction, understanding, and spiritual guidance she needed. Difficulties in life can lead us also to periods of doubt and desolation. Reaching out to a spiritual friend or director and reading good books on the spiritual life can help us find peace. When she was 42, she cofounded with Saint Vincent de Paul the Daughters of Charity. With her sisters she shared the wisdom she gained through her own struggles in the spiritual life: “Our good God has his time and moments for everything.” We can trust that even if things are not going well now, there surely will one day be a time for joy and peace.

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## **When You Have No Time for Prayer**

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1614–1691), a disenchanted young soldier who entered the monastic life and was assigned for the remainder of his life to work in the kitchen and repair his brothers' sandals, is our guide here. In the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, he explains his secret for practicing the presence of God no matter where he was or what he was doing: he held a conversation with God all the time. He talked to God about everything he was doing. When prayer needs to happen “on the go,” so to speak, we can fold this conversation with God into our daily commute, the stirring of oatmeal, the searching for information online, and even checking our email or social media. Brother Lawrence's wisdom is this: “My only prayer practice is attention. I carry on a habitual, silent, and secret conversation with God that fills me with overwhelming joy.”

## **When You Are Frustrated with Yourself**

Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622), bishop of Geneva and founder of the Sisters of the Visitation, wrote *Introduction to the Devout Life* as a guide for spiritual formation. One of the great secrets of Saint Francis is gentleness. He himself struggled with the tempests in his own heart for many years, gradually becoming someone who was known for his patience and his peace. This gentleness became the strongest characteristic of the wisdom he shared in his spiritual guidance and writing. We have to be gentle first with ourselves. It sometimes happens that when we find ourselves falling into a weakness or sin we get angry with ourselves, even berating ourselves. Instead, Francis de Sales urges us to deal quietly and patiently with ourselves, not being surprised at our weakness, for it is no surprise that the weak fall. He encourages us, “When you have fallen, lift up your heart in quietness, humbling yourself deeply before God by reason of your frailty. Heartily lament that you should have offended God, and begin anew to cultivate the lacking grace with a very deep trust in his mercy, and with a bold, brave heart.”