

# Praying As We Age

Prayer is essentially about nurturing our relationship with God. We can have a relationship with each of the persons of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can also have a relationship with the saints. As we grow older, all of our relationships in life tend to change. And, experience has shown that our relationship with God goes through some changes as we age. What are those changes and how can we prepare for them and experience them with grace?

## **Change happens the longer a relationship lasts**

We all know that relationships have a flow. There are ups and downs. There are times of greater or less intimacy. We spend lots of time together and then we can get very busy and spend less time. Communication changes as we grow in comfort and grow in the skills necessary to reveal ourselves to another and to express our feelings more deeply. Sometimes, there are great ruptures in a relationship, with perhaps a period of distance, followed by reconciliation and a renewed connection. Good, healthy, loving, self-sacrificing relationships grow in love more deeply as the years go by. Signs of affection can become simpler and more bonding. There has been a strong growth in a sense of “us-together” which is beyond “me and you.” In long-lasting relationships, there can be a growing comfort, just being in each other’s presence.

## **Our relationship with God has these same patterns**

Fundamentally our relationship with God is a gift. We don’t create it, earn it or maintain it on our own. However, our relationship with God has many of these same elements. To the degree that we continue to nurture in that relationship, with personal interaction – moving beyond formal prayers, written by others – we can grow in intimacy with God. Formal prayers, as well as devotions, rituals and liturgy, are key ways to nurture a prayer life, for us as individuals and as a community. However, Pope Francis makes an important distinction between “saying prayers” and praying. He encourages us to develop a relationship which is personal and has elements of affection and genuine interaction. It is this kind of praying intimacy which takes on the elements of relationship, as we know it.

## **Aging can have blessings and challenges for us, as we age**

It has been said that the great advantage of getting older is that we have learned from the mistakes we’ve made before. So often, one of the great blessings of the maturity of years is that we grow in experience and wisdom. Maturity comes with growing freedom, after the journey of youth. We can become more secure and settled. We have often faced some of the biggest hurdles of our life. We’ve likely experienced a number of losses and hurts and found ways to integrate those losses and hurts into our faith life. We’ve probably moved beyond being angry at God for not doing what we’ve wanted God to do and more grateful for God’s faithful presence with us, especially during the most difficult times. Aging can be wonderful when it involves maturing, especially maturing in our ability to relate with others with balance and generosity, and our ability to relate with God with a maturing faith.

Of course, aging can also be very challenging. While aging can bring maturity, wisdom and an inner peace, it can involve diminishment and illness. Though we gain from the experiences of our past, there is a natural wearing down of our bodies, as we age, even when we keep ourselves in good physical shape. We experience that we just don’t have the agility, the energy, the facility

with reacting that we used to have. That experience is often progressive. We feel it more and more in our 50's, our 60's, our 70's, our 80's and our 90's. And, as we age, various health problems can develop – chronic and critical ones. They can further diminish us, as least lessen our experience of resilience.

### **Sometimes the diminishment of aging can affect our spirits**

With the process of losing our abilities, can come a growing impatience. We might have fewer and fewer friends. We might become crabby and judgmental about the changes going on around us. Sometimes we can tend to be more “set” in our ways, even stubborn. Any way we might lose our independence can have a terrible impact on our spirits. We might experience that others are impatient with us. Of course, there are a number of ways to avoid some of these effects on our spirits, but it is undeniable that these struggles are a part of aging.

### **Preparing to age, spiritually**

Just as physical exercise can help us stay fit longer and prepare for the physical effects of aging, so, too, spiritual exercising can help us prepare for the transition in our relationship with God and with others, on a spiritual level. Whether we are 50 or 70, we can prepare for what is to come.

By reflecting upon the blessings and challenges of aging, we can assess at this time what our desires are, as we age.

We can say to ourselves, “I want to grow in my ability to be open to what is to come in the future, by beginning to pray for the grace to surrender to the Lord more and more at this time of my life, so that I’ll be more comfortable with living out those graces in the future.”

We might acknowledge, “I’m recognizing that I can be fairly impatient and inflexible these days. I don’t want to get worse, when I get older. I want to begin asking the Lord for the grace to let go more and to place my life in God’s hands, with each challenging experience of my day, of my life.”

Very specific desires are very helpful: “I’ve been simply feeling more and more selfish these days. I really don’t have terrible burdens to carry, but I have been feeling a lot of self-pity. I can’t imagine what an older, more struggling version of me will look like in the future. I really need to take a concrete turn here. I need to make a list of what I have to be grateful for and start practicing new behaviors for when I slip into those patterns.”

A growing desire might be expressed in the form of a prayer: “Lord, I have put off growing in simple intimacy with you. I have lots of excuses, most of them legitimate. My life has been busy. I haven’t always stayed close to you or let you be close to me in my daily life. I don’t want to wait until I have a heart attack, or find out I have cancer, dementia or some other illness or disability, before I try growing closer to you. Let me have the graces I need to develop and feel a closeness and growing dependence upon you now, to prepare for the time, later, when my life will really be in your hands.”

### **Developing some new practices which might serve us well in the future**

Some of the new practices we can develop are fitting for maintaining a connected, relational prayer life, as we grow older. We can begin by reflecting on a plan which will serve us, depending upon where our relationship is now and where we would like it to be in the future.

For example, we might want to decide that there are several ways we want to write out very simple prayers of trust and surrender, expressions of serenity and faith, which we can begin to make a part of our ongoing connection with God. As we put together these various, personal ways of saying, “Lord, let my life be in your hands,” we can then begin the practice of saying these prayers at particular times in our day – when we get going in the morning, at meal times, and perhaps when we encounter a challenging moment. Developing these patterns will be a great benefit for us, when it becomes more difficult to develop new patterns later.

Another thing we can do is to begin to get comfortable with gesture. For example, we could speak to our Lord, either at home or while we are sitting quietly in church before Mass or a worship service, with our hands open on our lap. That simple sign of an open heart, a relationship of trust, can “carry” the time of communion with our Lord, when words might later fail us. And, at some time in the future, when we are facing great struggle or severe pain, we will be so blessed to have developed a habit of opening our hands when we are in communion with our Lord. At those very difficult times, that simple gesture can seal the communion we need at that time, when we might not have any energy or strength and might be without words, even without thinking.

St. Paul encourages us to think about the things of heaven, rather than the things of earth. (Colossians 3:2) As we get older, this advice becomes more important. Though there can be troubles and sometimes many very worldly circumstances which take over our thoughts and feelings, the time when we will be end this life and be receiving the rewards of eternal life is drawing near. We can develop the practice of thinking about our redemption and salvation and eternal communion with our Lord and all our sisters and brothers. We can ask for the grace to anticipate the desire for that fulfillment of our Lord’s promises. We can ask for the grace to look forward to the joy we will experience. This kind of preparation can be of tremendous help for when we are approaching our final journey. We can stay in this world, and deal with what we have to deal with, and still pray, from time to time, “Dear Jesus, I long to see your face.” Then, when we are facing the concrete reality of letting go of our life, our hearts will be ready to surrender our anxiety and fear and to genuinely long for eternal joy.

### **Taking advantage of the support of others**

It is sad to encounter a family who has developed a practice of never talking about aging or dying. It seems that they have decided that if they don’t talk about it, it won’t become a reality.

It is wonderful to witness people who grow old being very comfortable talking with family and friends about their experiences, and at times, to ask for help and support, or just a compassion ear. Aging is a process nearly all of us will experience. As we begin this process, we can look for the support of others, as companions on the journey. We can be good for each other. And, whenever two or three of us are together, in faith, in his name, he is there with us. To be candid about the humble experience of diminishment and the desire to let grace into our lives as we grow older, is a whole lot more fulfilling and mutually supportive than a gripe session.

## Turning to Mary

As we age, we can turn to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the mother of the Church, to grow in affection for her and to learn from her, as rely upon her for help. Her *Magnificat* is a marvelous prayer for our journey. She can teach us to say, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord,” in whatever way in our lives those words will be full of grace. And, as St. Ignatius prayed to her, we can ask her, “Mary, place me with your Son.” So much anxiety and fear, so much doubt and anger can be softened and healed with Mary’s help.

With Mary’s assistance, let us pray for the graces we need in the journey ahead of us, and let us pray for each other, especially for those who are struggling the most through the last years of their lives.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior  
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed:  
the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his Name.  
He has mercy on those who fear him  
in every generation.  
He has shown the strength of his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has come to the help of his servant Israel  
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
the promise he made to our fathers,  
to Abraham and his children for ever.

-The *Magnificat* – the ICEL translation

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