4.

How Do I Pray?

Over time, I have learned two things about my religious quest: First of all, that it is God who is seeking me, and who has myriad ways of finding me. Second, that my most substantial changes, in terms of religious conversion, come through other people. Even when I become convinced that God is absent from my life, others have a way of suddenly revealing God’s presence.

—Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*

Prayer is a matter of solidarity.

—Johann Baptist Metz, *Courage to Pray*

How do I pray? This is, of course, a very personal question. Prayer is a matter of intimacy with God, and details of intimacy on any level are not shared lightly, and certainly not without safeguards. How a person prays involves taste and style, as in the manner of when and where one prefers to pray, one’s customary way of addressing God, the particular sights, sounds and circumstances that trigger off an awareness of God’s nearness.

Adult religious sensibility is acquired over a long time. It is stretched and refined by everything from chance encounters and friendships, the countless crises and challenges life sets before us, to the thoughtful words we read or hear preached, the tensions and tragedies of our time and place in history, and those everyday experiences and moments which constantly feed our desire for communion and transcendence. We are, first and last, creatures of the world.

*How* do I pray? I really cannot answer *how* without including something about the *when*, the *where* and the *why*. 
The prayer of no two days is ever alike, perhaps because the I—my praying self—seems constantly to be changing, continually bounced back and forth, shaped and reshaped, by events largely outside of my control.

I think I could manage, if asked, to describe the current state of my religious belief, or my understanding of Christian existence at the twilight of the twentieth century and as I push towards fifty-four. I could give a reasonable account for my hopefulness, as the first letter of Peter directs us, and I could render a satisfactory picture of how I view my relatedness to God, that lifeline to the divine which comes from the core of my being.

I could even venture an account of other people’s prayer, drawing on what people confide to me, and on what I observe every Sunday at Mass. Quiet, profound and unsung moments of being with God: that is what their faces and their lives reveal so surely and vividly as they kneel on the sanctuary step before Mass, or as they finger their rosaries in front of the statue of Mary. The greatest Eucharistic devotion I have ever observed is regularly embodied in the humble posture of several men who do not receive communion out of respect for the sacrament; they are living in irregular marriages. I marvel at their unabashed union of spirit with Christ, as they kneel week after week with eyes closed while others approach the altar.

From what I witness around me each Sunday, I can infer the source of so evident and so reverent a faith within ordinary men and women. I do not hear the silent words they speak to God, and I cannot say for sure that words are even being used. But I have no doubt that these lives would reveal more finding than seeking, more oneness with God than frustrating ambivalence about God’s care for the world. Bread, wine and
the faith of the people: I could remain God-centered in church without the first two, but never without the third.

How do I pray? Speaking as a believer and to other believers, the honest answer is that I never stop praying. For me, praying has no boundaries. There is rarely a time in my waking hours in which I can clearly differentiate when I am praying from when I am not.

Now lest this admission sound more like a boast than the truth, I should add immediately that I honestly believe the same to be the case with most people who take their religion seriously. The problem is that our way of defining prayer frequently tends to be too restrictive. The fact is that we are constantly living out of our fundamental relatedness to God, even when we are not attending to that relatedness directly. There is nothing exceptional about our being prayerful, spiritual people; I presume this to be the rule for countless Christians. We can be God-centered even when we are not expressly directing words to God.

How do I pray? The question had been playing in my head as I was making my way one summer through Kathleen Norris’ book *The Cloister Walk*.¹ I related effortlessly to her description of the spiritual rhythm in a Benedictine monastery, her enthusiasm for the Liturgy of the Hours, her attentiveness to the feast days of particular saints, and her engagement with the daily readings at Mass. Life in the Jesuit novitiate had been fairly monastic; even today, many years later, I occasionally drive outside the city to enjoy the grounds of the nearby Trappist monastery. I closed the book one evening, not without

a touch of envy, and sighed for the predictability of the quiet life.

The following morning I was seated in a packed courtroom, awaiting our case to be called; it was Probate Court. As I listened to the tales of disappointment and frustration people were revealing to the judge about their family situations, I felt my soul stirring from its monastic drowsiness. I had accompanied a young woman to a messy custody proceeding. Since minors were involved, the judge mercifully cleared the courtroom of all those not connected with the case. And with good reason! Tears, shouts, threats, insults and accusations came pouring out in all directions.

The week before our court date, I had requested a police escort for the first time in my life. A six-week-old child was, we knew, hidden in a large housing complex of mainly poor Latino families. The experts at the Department of Social Services had advised that we request the police to be in the parking lot, just in case of violent resistance. The court order for temporary custody turned out to be useless; we left the housing project without the infant.

Eight long hours passed in the courtroom the following Thursday with a stubborn teenager who refused to disclose the whereabouts of her little girl, and by the end of the afternoon everything seemed less sure than when we began. Although I had known the family for almost eight years, the public defender asked the judge that I not be listened to as an expert witness, since I was neither a child psychologist nor a licensed social worker.

In the end, it was not the sense of time wasted which annoyed me, but the sheer craziness of spent lives and the awful, chilling madness of sin. I knew, too, that I was as much a
part of the human scene as everybody else; I felt unclean as I left the courthouse, and disgusted. It was as if humanity itself had let me down. Then out of the blue the totally unrelated thought crossed my mind that no matter how much I had cleaned up and simplified my own life, I had already consumed as much of the earth’s resources as most people on the planet would consume in five lifetimes. There was no escaping entanglement in the human condition, not even in the painful events of that courtroom.

Yet what happened that day was, to my reckoning, all part of the same fabric as everything else in my life and in my soul. Each moment of that day, each feeling, each thought and reaction, each desire, each sorry detail in the faces and stories of the people in that court room, moved in and out of my abiding sense that God is present within everything that takes place in our lives. I was simultaneously attending to the moment and attending to God.

Two different worlds, the cloister and the court. I would never claim that God was present to one of those worlds but not to the other. I do confess, however, that I have never been able to pray, really pray, in cloistered settings. Outdoors, yes; in churches, on occasion, although even less so as I get older; but in holy places like shrines and pilgrimage sites, great cathedrals or monastery chapels, no. About this I am neither defensive nor apologetic. My sense of God’s presence is inseparably connected to the people and events that make up my life. Some of those events, and some of those people, are immediate or close by. Many of them fall into my world from newspapers and television, or from the opportunities I have had to study and travel in the Far East and in South America.
When I am with other people, especially with people who are poor and struggling for a more secure place in society, I feel God’s presence and something from deep inside keeps whispering, “Lord, it is good for me to be here.” Occasionally it breaks into a cry, “Lord, it really is you!” The moment is not euphoric; it is not ecstatic; it does not come close by a million miles to classical accounts of mystical states. Yet the moment is nearly always immeasurably rich. It is characterized by a sureness and a confidence that I have come to associate with the Easter scenes in the gospels. In those moments, the haunting question, “Lord, when did we see you . . .” from Matthew 25, gets turned around: “Lord, I did see you, I am seeing you . . .”

Many of us are understandably accustomed to look for God in the quiet places of great natural beauty. The mysterious silence of a clear night sky, the powerful majesty of crashing surf, mountains and valleys, rivers and forests, lush hillsides and even barren deserts: how frequently these have provided the setting for wonderful experiences of God. After enjoying such experiences of divine transcendence it is never hard to join one’s voice to the words of Psalm 8. And for a long time, this is the direction in which I naturally looked to refresh my spiritual bearings.

The cross, however, is another place to look for God, for the cross is also a place of transcendence. The cross reminds us not only that there is a harsh side to creation; it reveals to us just how intimately God has bound himself to the misery, the poverty and the brutality that have marked countless human lives. I have ever so gradually learned to sense God in the history of oppression. Poor people have become for me a marker of transcendence every bit as evocative as breathtaking natural beauty. I am drawn to collections of photographs that
record their lives, to the personal memoirs and recollections that chronicle their histories, and even to the buildings and neighborhoods where they are forced to live. These, too, are markers of transcendence. They elevate the mind and heart towards God.

How do I pray? I pray with my imagination and my fantasies, especially when I begin fantasizing the good things that I would love to see happen in the lives of people that matter to me, or whom I read about in the newspapers, or whom I hear about from friends. Many others pray this way, too. I pray with my memory when, before going to sleep, the people whom I love and those who have shared their concerns with me, pass through my mind’s eye. Again, so do many others.

I pray with my hands when I cook and clean, or lift a child, or gesture during a lecture, or write, or bless and absolve, or hold a sick person’s hand, or rake leaves. So do many others. I pray with my mind when I help a youngster with homework, or prepare my classes, or do research, or figure out what concretely can be done in situations of great human need. So do many others.

I pray with my heart and soul when I refuse to speak ill of someone who has judged me wrongly, or when I try to be fully truthful with others, or with myself in terms of my own deeper motivations and inclinations. Once more, so do many others. I pray when I pause in the thick of a hectic day to listen to myself breathe, to re-center my energies, to recall what I am and what I am not, to feel that holy specialness that surrounds each of us, individually and together. I live and breathe and walk on holy ground; we all do.

Above all, I am praying when mindfulness of God becomes mindfulness of God’s people, and when mindfulness of God’s
people becomes mindfulness of God. That is the yardstick by which I measure the meaningfulness of every Eucharistic celebration, the fruitfulness of my reading scripture, and the integrity of my recollection. That is how I discriminate, in all the things that I either do or endure, between what is genuine and what is worthless. The business of the interior life is to achieve union with God by way of communion with God’s people. If what I am engaged in does not further that end, then I do not want to continue doing it. As I said, the how has to take into account the why, the when and the where of prayer.

I am not very helpful when it comes to recommending methods of prayer. Besides, we are hardly wanting for books and articles on the subject! Once, when I was a novice, the master of novices gave us an illustration of simple, meditative praying. He selected a gospel text, knelt down in front of a confessional screen, and began addressing Jesus, telling us to imagine that Jesus was on the other side of the screen: really there, in front of us, but not visible. The effort was valiant, and I attempted the exercise numerous times. In the end, however, I abandoned the technique because it struck me as contrived. My imagination still needed to learn how to pray, but the master’s method was not the way for me. I was unable to pretend that the Jesus of the gospel scenes had stepped into my time and place in history. I had yet to discover how I might step into his.

Nevertheless, the novice master’s faith impressed me for life. The simple, sincere, direct manner in which he addressed the Jesus of the gospel story has stayed with me over thirty years. He was not at all embarrassed to vocalize for us his way of relating to the risen Christ. And that is all I am doing here, vocalizing my way of relating to God in Christ. To be sure, my way is not going to be everybody’s. But whenever any of us
speaks from our hearts and shares honestly how we relate to God, we give each another great encouragement. For while we are all striving to lead God-centered lives, none of us can go it alone. As a community of disciples, we are also continually learning from one another’s oversights when in all candor we recount to one another the missteps we may have taken along the way. The perfect disciple, after all, is not one who never stumbles; the perfect disciple is the one who after making a mistake learns more about the gospel.

Some writers have attached great importance to the fact that Jesus addressed God as *Abba*. They hear in this familiar form of address a confirmation of that intimacy with God that makes Jesus special. There is no doubt that the early Christians picked up on that usage. Paul tells us that precisely because we have the Spirit of Jesus we can know God as Jesus did, calling God “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6). The place in the gospel story where we hear this mode of address on Jesus’ lips is the garden of Gethsemane in Mark’s passion narrative (Mark 14:36), a scene which must have very early etched itself on the imagination of the Church. The Letter to the Hebrews seems to be alluding to that moment when it speaks of Jesus crying out with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death (Heb 5:7).

It is quite probable, of course, that Jesus addressed God as Abba on many occasions, and that the term was his typical or preferred way of addressing God. Yet it is not at all impossible that this form of speaking to God emerged as Jesus became more conscious of the hostile forces arrayed against him. *Abba* might therefore reflect a prayer of growing desperation, an experience of God arising from the midst of rejection, disappointment, betrayal and suffering. In other words, it is
possible that Jesus’ way of relating to God grew more intimate, the more the cross loomed on the horizon.

In either case, I do not believe that it would have been possible for Jesus to experience God as Abba without at the same time experiencing God’s love for his people. How could we untangle Jesus’ personal experience of the painfulness of the world’s sin from what so many others in Israel were also forced to endure? To know God must have certainly meant knowing and feeling God’s great love for the human race, or at least God’s affection for the people of Israel and his passionate desire for their liberation and lasting redemption. It makes little sense to say that love is the very nature of God, if that love has no object apart from God’s own self. For a people steeped in scripture it is clear that God is revealed through saving actions in history. And the central action of the biblical God is the ongoing creation and salvation, the healing and making holy of the human race.

Jesus was not a monk who had discovered God in prayerful isolation from the rest of the human family. He was not a person who had received an intimate revelation of the divine mystery that he then felt compelled to share with the rest of us. Jesus had inherited the faith of his ancestors; he was a product of Israel’s long engagement with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. From a scriptural point of view, there was little particularly novel in his moral teaching, and there does not appear to be anything in his understanding of God that we could not locate, for instance, in the prophets and psalms. Jesus would not have been the first child of Israel to think of God as his father and to relate to God accordingly.

My concern here, however, is not to examine what makes Jesus unique. I am simply suggesting that his calling God
“Abba, Father” points not only to God but to the people whom God loves. Anyone who would contemplate the holy mystery of God will inevitably have to look at what God is looking at. To anyone who believes strongly that the Abba-experience was central to Jesus’ awareness of who and what he was, I would add that oneness with God which was not simultaneously oneness with God’s people would be unthinkable.

[1997]