

Helping Youth Pray

Understanding Prayer



The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines prayer as God's Gift, as Covenant, and as Communion

- The wonder of prayer is this gift of God, a God who "thirsts that we may thirst for him." # 2560
- It is the human heart that prays. This heart is our "hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully...it is the place of truth...it is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation; it is the place of covenant. # 2563
- "(prayer is) the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him. #2565

"One of the cardinal principles of prayer is that God does speak and always speaks first. Prayer then is what I say, and it is always a response to God.

It is truer to say that the reason I wan to pray at all is that God has spoken to me and I want to speak to God in response."

Thomas Hart - - The Art of Christian Listening

"Prayer is making yourself available to God." - Fr. Matthew Kunkle SJ

"Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God." St. John Damascene (as quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 2590)

- Turn our intellect and our wills to God
- Thoughts of love offered God
- Offer ourselves in prayer
- Less what we do—what God does for us

Michael Pennock

- Prayer is about relationships.
- God has already initiated the relationship.
- Prayer is integrating and holistic.

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Understanding Change

Your brain is like an elephant with a rider perched on top. The rider does the planning and analyzing. The elephant provides the emotional energy. To create change the elephant and rider must cooperate. The *Switch Framework* helps create change by:

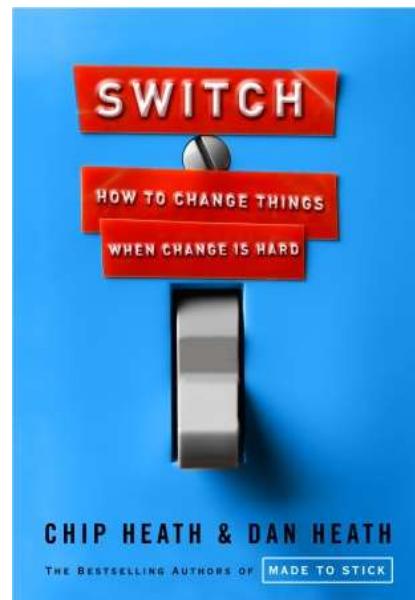
- **Directing the rider.** Make sure the rider knows where to go, how others got there, and how you'll get there.
- **Motivating the elephant.** Knowing isn't enough. Make sure the elephant feels drawn to the change. Make the change small (so it's not intimidating) and encourage a growth mindset ("change is possible").
- **Shaping the path.** Change the environment to change the behavior. Build habits. Behavior is contagious: surround yourself with others exhibiting the behavior you want; help is spread.

That's the gist of it! What are you trying to change? And are you factoring in the influence of the rider, the elephant, and the environment?

Three key surprises about change:

- First, people problems are often situation problems. The environment has a large influence on the behavior of our elephant and rider. Popcorn overeating may have a simple cause: the bags are too big!
- Second, laziness is often rider exhaustion. Our rider can only tug the reigns of our elephants for so long until its arms get tired. **Self-control is an exhaustible resource!** Have you ever been in a one-hour meeting where you wanted to scream the whole time, but kept your cool, and felt *exhausted* afterwards?
- Third, resistance to change is often a lack of clarity. Our rider needs crystal-clear directions so it doesn't spin in circles. Being told to "eat healthier" is vague (and mostly useless), but "Drink low-fat milk!" is simple and actionable.

This knowledge gives us a framework for change, a framework for making a switch in our behavior.



The Switch Framework

The switch framework has three key components:

1. **Direct the Rider** – Provide crystal-clear directions so the rider doesn't spin its wheels.
2. **Motivate the Elephant** – Get the elephant onboard with the rider's plans, so that the rider doesn't have to tug on the reigns all day.
3. **Shape the Path** – Create an environment that puts both the elephant and rider on the right path.

How do we do each of these three things?

Direct the Rider

- *Find the bright spots.* Figure out what's already working and clone it.
- *Script the critical moves.* Don't think too much about glorious big picture changes. Instead, think in terms of *small, specific* behavior changes.
- *Point to the destination.* Change is much easier when you know where you're headed and why it's worth it. Make your destination/goal clear and visible.

Motivate the Elephant

- *Find the feeling.* Knowing something isn't enough to cause change. Make people *feel* something.
- *Shrink the change.* Break down the change into *small* pieces that don't spook the elephant. Don't plan to clean the entire house, plan to put the dishes away.
- *Grow your people.* Build a sense of identity. Encourage a growth mindset (change is possible, our character and qualities are not carved in stone).

Shape the Path

- *Tweak the Environment.* Situations change behavior, so change the situation.
- *Build habits.* Habits, once formed, are "free" behavior—they are effortless.
- *Rally the herd.* Behavior is contagious. Surround yourself with others exhibiting the behavior you want. Spread your desired behavior to others.



Obstacles for Youth and Prayer

- Understanding Prayer
- Distractions
- Insecurity / Frustration
- Feeling Self-conscious

Starting Points

- Praying with Nature
- Adoration
- Praying with Scripture
- Patterns of Prayer
- Praying with Music
- Praying with Journaling
- Praying with Technology
- Meditation

Helping Youth Pray

- Help youth to identify styles of prayer
- Connect communal prayer to personal prayer
- Provide peer witnesses about prayer
- Pray with and for young people
- Use social media and technology to encourage youth to pray



Helping Youth Pray

Help	Help youth to identify styles of prayer
Connect	Connect communal prayer to personal prayer
Provide	Provide peer witnesses about prayer
Pray	Pray with and for young people
Use	Use social media and technology to encourage youth to pray

Praying 10 Words a Day



I love you Jesus.

- Setting our hearts on Jesus

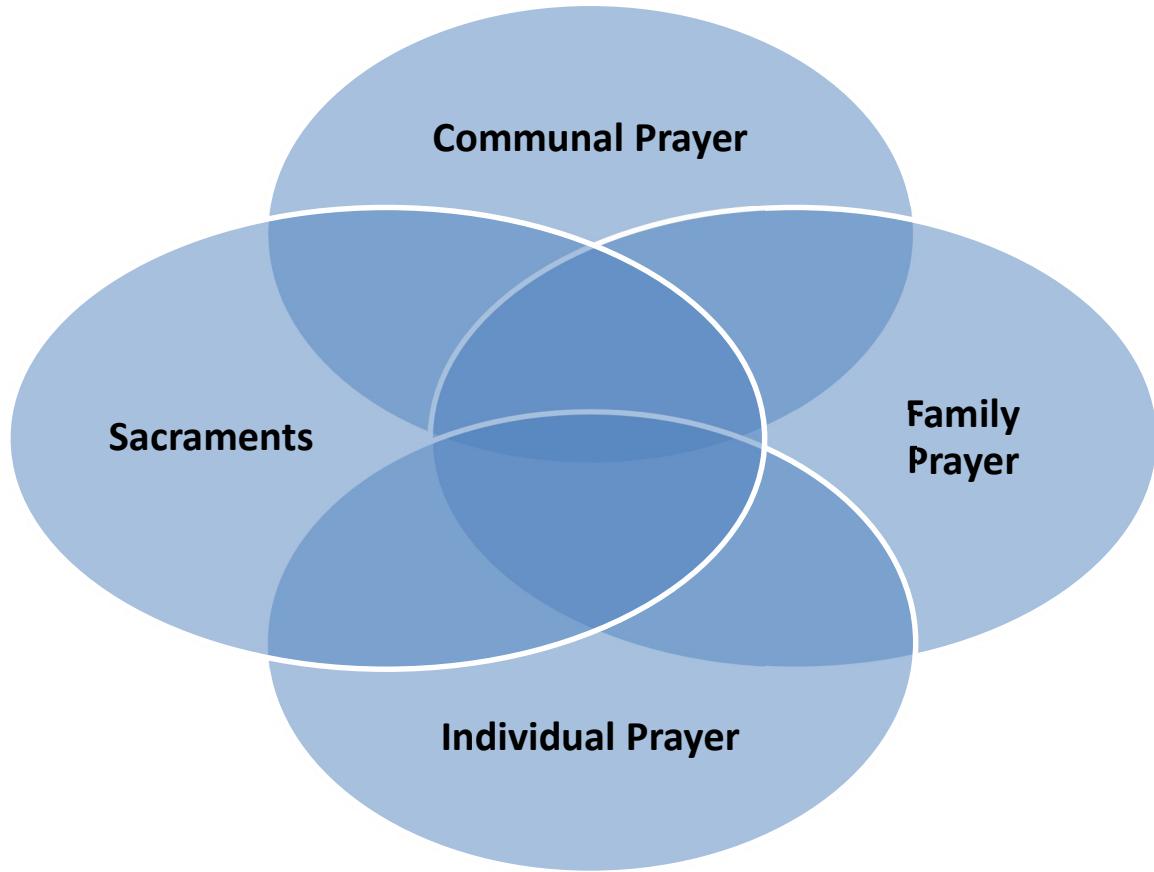
Thankyou God

- Acknowledging our gratitude and dependence on God, our Father

Come Holy Spirit.

- Bringing the Holy Spirit into our greatest challenges

Prayer



- Teach a variety of prayer styles to youth for ongoing prayer
- Types of prayer
- Prayer journal
- Praying with music
- Praying with creation
- Praying with scripture
- Praying as a family – mealtime – weekly – preparing for Sunday readings
- Involve parish community in praying for youth preparing for confirmation

Dimensions of Prayerful Youth Ministry

Promote and provide a variety of communal prayer experiences. Within the variety of ways that we gather youth in our parish we can provide a variety of prayer experiences. These prayers can vary in length and style to help youth experience different ways to pray. Sometimes prayer gathers us, helps us to know each other, and begins the process of becoming community. Sometimes prayer is part of our gathering as an opening or closing prayer or a prayer within a teaching or community building time that integrates with our theme. Sometimes prayer is the gathering; a communal prayer can be the whole time that we gather with a youth community. Within these gatherings, we have an opportunity to include a variety of prayer experiences.

Communal prayer with youth introduces youth to our tradition of prayer and ritual, but it also brings the life experiences and symbols of life for youth into prayer. We can include the music, language, and images from youth's experience of their culture and their tempo of life within prayer. When we provide communal prayer, we also want to consider the ethnic and cultural heritage of the youth who are in the community. We also want to introduce youth to prayer that includes the richness of faith that makes us truly Catholic and universal, by including prayer symbols, rituals, music, environment, styles, and texts from the rich diversity of people of faith throughout the world.

One way to promote a variety of prayer experiences, consider hosting a prayer banquet. This banquet is like a progressive dinner except that the community experiences a variety of prayer styles. Have an appetizer prayer of one style such as praying with creation; have a salad prayer such as a guided meditation; provide a main dish prayer of praying with Scriptures with a side dish of praying with music; provide a dessert prayer that focuses on praying with ritual and symbol.

Promote participation in the sacraments, especially Eucharist. The sacraments are the way we pray as Catholics. Any planning for prayer with youth should focus upon building toward our participation together in the central prayer of our faith, which is the Mass. Part of our prayerful ministry can lead youth to the sacraments of initiation: baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation. Our life of service as a community should prepare youth to discern and be open to the sacraments at the service of communion: marriage and holy orders. We should also help youth to experience the sacraments of healing by providing ways for youth to experience

reconciliation and by providing for those who need the sacrament of anointing of the sick. Many youth do not take advantage of the peace and grace within reconciliation; we can help them to be comfortable with this sacrament by preparing them for participation and by participating in reconciliation as a youth community within a wider parish celebration or in a reconciliation service provided for youth. Youth should be aware of the power of the sacrament of anointing of the sick; youth who are experiencing serious illness or who are undergoing major surgery can contact a priest to experience this sacrament. Youth who are overcoming drug addictions and other dangerous patterns in their life may also be eligible to experience the peace of this sacrament. (See “Chapter 8—Pastoral Care of the Sick” in *Saying Amen: A Mystagogy of Sacrament* by Kathleen Hughes, Liturgy Training Publications, 1999, for a greater explanation and guidance in use of the sacrament of anointing.)

Teach youth to pray. All prayer is personal, and we always pray with the community in mind, but sometimes we pray as part of a community, and sometimes we pray as an individual. Years ago, my nephew broke his arm near the growth plate and my sister called my aunt to ask her to pray. Upon hearing the request, she said simply, “I’m on my knees with the rosary.” My aunt had a prayer in her pocket; she had a way to pray that she could turn to when things were bad and when things were good. What can we give youth to turn to so that they learn to pray? Part of becoming a prayerful youth ministry is teaching youth to pray individually. We teach youth to pray each time we have them participate in communal prayer, but we can be intentional in teaching youth the prayer traditions of our faith and providing youth with a way to pray, a time to pray, and places to pray. As part of our faith formation efforts with youth, we can teach about prayer and introduce them to a variety of prayer practices. By doing this, we help them to remember the holy in their life and to turn their moments and lives toward prayer.

Pray the moments of youth ministry. Moving beyond opening and closing prayer means that we take the time to pray the moments of our ministry. When a youth sprains her ankle playing volleyball, we take the time to pray as a community. When we hear of a disaster in our world or an accident or illness in our community, we stop and pray. When we finish building a home for a family in need, we stop and pray. As the bus is leaving for the retreat center, we stop and pray. Before we eat our meal together, we stop and pray. There are also times that we celebrate with our nation or the world as occasions for prayer, such as World Day of Prayer or Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We pray the occasions in a young person’s life such as their birthdays, the day they receive their driver’s license, graduation, or going back to school. There are also moments that are huge concerns for our youth that become the agenda of our gathering, such as the death of a peer in the parish or wider community. In these moments, we turn to God as a sign of our faith, our gratitude, and our absolute dependency on his love and greater understanding. Praying these moments is being truthful about our relationship with

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God. Youth who experience us praying this way will pick up this pattern in their own lives; when this happens, prayer moves from the “should do” list and becomes as natural as breathing or eating.

Pray with and for youth. A teacher who was teaching a group of youth ministers about pastoral care challenged his students this way: “In youth ministry, we have often been very willing to use the tools of psychology and human development to know how to listen to youth in their struggles and refer them to professional help, which is all good. But sometimes, do we forget the tool that is in our toolbox as people of faith? Do we take the time to pray with youth and let them know we pray for them?” When we meet with youth, we can ask them if we can pray with them. This roots our conversation in our faith and puts the future under God’s continued guidance. Besides praying with youth, as leaders in youth ministry, we can include youth in our daily prayer intentions. Develop a pattern for prayer that includes praying for individual youth and for the youth of your community and of our world. We can also ask youth what intention we could pray for. This may be conversational, or we could have an intentions book or a white board where youth leave intentions that become part of our prayer as leaders and teachers, as well as part of the community’s prayer.

Pray as a team. “Day by day as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people” (Acts 2:46). Faith is caught by young believers; youth catch us in the act of living faithfully—shared prayer is part of that. Take time as a team of people who serve youth to pray about your ministry. Teams that work together, laugh together, and pray together bring steadiness, consistency, and faithfulness to their ministry. If our team is rooted in prayer, we will not rise or fall on whether youth show up to a program or whether we face a struggle in the community.

Support families of youth in prayer. We can encourage families to pray at home with their teens by providing resources and support so that families find ways to pray that work for them. It is harder to start patterns of prayer with families of adolescents if this was not a pattern when children were younger. There are ways we can help. Bring parents of teens together to talk about prayer and ritual at home. Families of adolescents can find times to pray as a family—mealtime, morning time, bed time, and seasons of the year. We can also help families to pray the moments of family life: celebrations, birthdays, overcoming conflict, and experiencing forgiveness. We can help families find a place of prayer in their home such as the family table. We can suggest creating a family prayer space with a Bible, a cross, and a candle. Families can name prayer intentions for each other by having a white board in the home that lists prayer intentions. We can also support families in experiencing a variety of ways to pray by providing times for family prayer in your community.

Include youth in planning and leading prayer. The last dimension of prayerful youth ministry demonstrates our need for youth and our belief in youth’s gifts—we provide ways for youth to

share in leadership and planning for our shared prayer. How will we bring the world of youth into conversation with God in our shared prayer? One way is to invite youth to help us bring the symbols, music, issues, and tempo of their life to our shared prayer. Youth can help lead prayer: there are many youth who are gifted and sincere presiders for communal prayer. Youth can help lead prayer in the wider parish community. Youth grow in their experience and readiness as we teach them to pray, as we take the time to plan prayer together, and as we provide formation for them as prayer leaders.

Conclusion

Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, we journey with youth as they question, struggle, and celebrate. This becomes a prayer journey when we bring our laughter, our tears, and our questions to God and wait for the strength and peace that we find in the heart of prayer. May your adventure with youth be a journey blessed with creativity, innovation, faithfulness, and renewal.

Resources

Prayer and Young People

By R. Thomas Richard PhD

<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-catechesis-of-teens-they-need-to-learn-to-pray.html>

The Spiritual Life of American Teenagers

By Jessica Mesman Griffith

<http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201607/spiritual-life-american-teenagers-30714>

Stop Breathe Grow: Spiritual Disciplines for Your Soul

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/stop-breathe-grow-spiritual_b_13022104.html

(Good insight for everyone but especially for young people: Stop, Breathe, Grow is a good model)

The God of My Heartbreak: Teaching Teens to Pray

<https://everthinehome.com/god-heartbreak-teaching-teens-pray/>

5 Prayers for Your Teens

<http://youthspecialties.com/blog/5-prayers-for-your-teens/>

Barna Research about Americans and Praying

<https://www.barna.com/research/silent-solo-americans-pray/>

Worksheet: Helping Youth Pray

The Current Reality

The Desired Reality

What are some ways we can crystal clear direction to **Direct the Rider**?

What are some ways we can inspire, tap into emotions, and break a big task into small pieces to **Motivate the Elephant**?

What are some ways we can make change more likely to **Shape the Path**?

You, Who, Do Through prayer pattern

- You
- Who
- Do
- Through

A simple structure for composing prayers

An easy way to compose a prayer for use as an opening or concluding prayer, or 'collect', is to follow the **YOU-WHO-DO-THROUGH** pattern.

YOU- begin by addressing God or naming God. "Loving God", "God of Mercy", "God who heals", "Father in Heaven".

WHO- name 'WHO' God is for us, for example: "Giver of all good gifts", "You are always ready to forgive", "Our strength and hope".

DO- we ask God to act, to 'DO' something: "Be with us as we gather in your name", "Grant peace to our world".

THROUGH- We pray to God in and **THROUGH** Christ, so our prayer concludes with a simple "Through Christ our Lord Amen", or "In the name of Jesus your Son, Amen.

This pattern or structure can be used to compose a prayer for any occasion;

- grace
- opening prayer
- closing prayer
- blessing
- prayers of forgiveness

You

- God of new beginnings
- God, ever patient and loving
- God our creator
- Faithful God
- Ever generous God
- God, source of strength
- Loving God
- God of abundance
- Merciful God
- Loving God

Who

- You fill us with love and kindness
- You fill our hearts with faith
- You lead us in your ways
- You help us to love others
- You give us your word
- You guide us in this time of _____
- You give us your Spirit
- You bless us with gifts of creation
- You created us to live and love
- You know us and love us

Do

- Send us your Spirit to make us strong in faith and active in good works
- Inspire us to care for all creation as you do
- Teach us courage to believe in you
- Give your Church the gifts of unity and diversity in every land and culture
- Lead all people to a future of dignity and peace
- Bless our country and open our eyes to those who need our care
- Help us to bring peace and joy to others
- May we follow the courage of Mary and say “yes” to your will
- May we act fairly to all people and treat them with respect

Through

- We make this prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen
- We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen
- We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen
- Through Christ our Lord. Amen