

CHAPTER 1

Praying Spontaneously

Now, therefore, my eyes shall
be open and my ears attentive
to the prayer of this place.

—2 Chronicles 7:15

With all prayer and supplica-
tion, pray at every opportunity
in the Spirit.

—Ephesians 6:18

The Gospel of John shares this beautiful prayer of Jesus: “Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me” (Jn 11:41–42). Raising his eyes to heaven and praying these words, Jesus is not following a formula. He is not referring to a book of prayers. He simply describes what he is doing and how he is feeling. Without prior preparation, he asks from his heart for what he wants. This is spontaneous prayer.

Romano Guardini, an Italian-born priest who was raised and educated in Germany, believes spontaneous prayer is the “prime language of prayer.” He writes, “The most vital prayer is the one which springs unprompted from the heart.”¹

Whenever we share with God what’s on our heart, we are praying spontaneously.

Shaking his head sadly, a close friend once told my children, “Your mother has no filter.” It’s true. I often say just exactly what pops into my head. When I was teaching English at a Catholic university, my students compiled a booklet of all the spontaneous things that gushed out of my mouth during class. It was a long booklet. For some reason, the Quaker Oats man figured prominently in my analogies and examples that semester. Thankfully, I’ve been learning how to filter myself more successfully, but I have also been working on “baptizing” the impulse to share what’s on my heart. Instead of censoring myself entirely (which would probably be impossible anyway), I try to accept my spontaneous thoughts and feelings and offer them to the Lord. When I blurt out something like, “Why is the Internet connection so slow?” I can address that question not to the universe at large but to a person: Jesus Christ. In so doing, I keep a comfortable conversation going between God and myself throughout the day.

We are individuals and adults who care for children. The more comfortable we are with keeping up a conversation with God each day, the more our children will see how God touches every aspect of our lives. Like an enthusiastic best friend, God loves to hear from us about even the most mundane details of our lives. God wants to share

our prayers, thoughts, words, actions, joys, sufferings, and temptations. Jesus affirms this when he picks out the single greatest commandment of the whole law: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt 22:37).

Nothing is omitted. Spontaneous prayer invites God into the fullness of each day. Children enjoy considering how God cares about what books they read, what games they play outside, which jammies they wear to bed, and what they think about others in their heart.

Spontaneous prayer helps us remember to include the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our everyday lives. Sometimes it is helpful to choose certain predictable actions to trigger brief conversations with God: hitting *send* on e-mails, washing dishes, buckling a seat belt, putting on shoes, facing a recurring temptation, looking in the mirror. All of these moments can remind us we are in relationship with God and, therefore, lead to prayer.

Prayer Triggers

One of the most practical ways to help children develop the instinct to pray is simply to pray in their presence, speaking out loud about God and to God at any given moment of the day. Lots of families I know model spontaneous prayer to their children when they hear the siren of an emergency vehicle. No matter what they're doing at the time, they stop and say a quick prayer for the people who

need help and for the personnel responding to the emergency. The siren acts as a prayer trigger. What are some other prayer triggers? Take a minute now and think of one or two prayer triggers for you, things that tend to make you sigh or cry out, whether in joy, grief, boredom, or frustration. How would your day be different if you caught a glimpse of God in those moments?

St. Peter Faber, one of the earliest companions of St. Ignatius in the Society of Jesus, loved to encounter God in spontaneous prayer. For him, almost anything could serve as a prayer trigger. On St. Peter Faber's canonization day, December 17, 2013, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., said this about the new saint: "For Faber, any circumstance, place, or moment was an occasion for an encounter with God."²

No matter what our state in life, our days are comprised of circumstances, places, and moments—all opportunities to encounter God. St. John Chrysostom gave a homily on prayer that compared spontaneous prayer throughout the day to seasoning a dish: "Our soul should be directed in God, not merely when we suddenly think of prayer, but even when we are concerned with something else. If we are looking after the poor, if we are busy in some other way, or if we are doing any type of good work, we should season our actions with the desire and the remembrance of God. Through this salt of the love of God we can all become a sweet dish for the Lord."

Think of how many times a day we are "busy in some other way," as St. John Chrysostom put it. Parents, teachers, and other adults caring for children constantly attending to children's needs. When those immediate needs are met, we continue to interact with our children, talking,

laughing, crying, playing, singing, studying, and learning together. All of these moments are opportunities for prayer. Let's let our children hear us offer heartfelt words to God! We can model spontaneous prayer for children by telling God what we're doing or feeling in our own simple words, encouraging children to do the same.

- Praise: "God is great!" "What a beautiful snowfall! Praise God!"
- Petition: "Please help my ear infection." "I'm sorry for yelling at my brother—forgive me." "I feel upset, Jesus; help me."
- Intercession: "Please help Grandma in the hospital." "Be with the children who go to bed hungry, Lord."
- Thanksgiving: "Thank you for my family!" "Thank you, God, for letting my friend come over."

Prayer is not complicated. It doesn't require a lot of time or energy. It is just talking and listening to someone we know, "a close sharing between friends," as St. Teresa of Avila liked to say. Prayer is completely natural, in the sense that God plants within us and our children a desire for God. We cultivate our relationship with God just as we do our other relationships, except for this: the Other in this Creator-creature relationship is perfect and eternally generous. What a relief! God will never make a mistake in his relationship with us. We can trust him completely. There is no need to feel bashful; we can simply start talking to God.

St. Thérèse wrote in her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned towards heaven; it is a cry of recognition and love; embracing both trial and joy." To me, this quotation

shows the power of developing the habit of spontaneous prayer. Cultivating an instinct to turn to God any old time—but especially at peak moments—confirms that we are truly children of God. Out of love God brought us into existence, and out of love God provides for us at all times. Children who learn this will approach both joy and suffering with confidence.

"One Cannot Give What One Does Not Have" (Maybe)

Popular wisdom tells us we can't give to others what we don't have ourselves. This implies that adults must have robust prayer lives of their own if they wish to help children learn how to pray. I disagree. I have passed on to my children a variety of things I myself don't have. Throughout their grade school years, for instance, my children thought I was simply crazy about math. We tackled all sorts of math and counting games; we gushed about how fun mental math is; we raced to see who could solve the most multiplication and division facts. It was an absurd charade. I do love analytical puzzles and patterns and several other mathematical concepts, but for the most part numbers bore me. I had wanted each child to embrace math, to thrill to the challenges math hurls in their paths, and never to destroy their growing mathematical abilities by muttering the uncreative phrase, "I hate math."

I threw myself into an aggressive family effort to embrace math. And it worked. Math isn't necessarily the favorite subject of each of my children, but our pro-math attitude prevents the children from giving up and encourages them to consider the beauty of God's logic in the universe.

In a similar way, adults who care for children don't necessarily have to have a remarkable commitment to personal prayer to help children discover the practice—*but it certainly helps*. My relationship with math facts is totally unlike my relationship with the living God who created me out of nothing and lovingly keeps me alive. If I were numerically illiterate, life would be difficult and bewildering; but life without God is simply impossible. As St. Paul quoted to the Athenian pagans the words of their own poet, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Even if we adults don't have the world's most active prayer life, we somehow know St. Paul is right. Deep in our hearts, we know God is the reason "we live and move and have our being." That's why we have an instinct to lead our children to prayer.

Leading little ones to Jesus will not leave us unaffected. When we encourage children to pray, we might very well see for ourselves the natural attractiveness of prayer. How do we feel, after all, when we are in the presence of someone who loves our children? Don't we instinctively draw nearer to that person?

When one of my daughters was experiencing anxiety issues in grade school, I worried that her teacher and classmates would begrudge the effort required to accommodate her extra needs. I sat at home during the school day and

fretted about whether the teacher would lose patience if my daughter burst into tears because, for example, the daily schedule had been changed without warning.

I approached our first parent-teacher conference with some trepidation. When the evening arrived for us to sit down with the teacher, she began the meeting by looking us in the eye, smiling, and saying in all sincerity, “I love your daughter.” I felt a heavy burden lift from me as I recognized in this teacher a fellow caregiver, a partner willing to love my child in any circumstance. It is no surprise that, a decade later, my heart melts every time I see this teacher.

Jesus loves our children this way, and perfectly, too. Adults who care for children will feel drawn to love the One who loves the children, who draws them close to his heart—the gentle shepherd who calls, “Let the little children come to me” (Mk 10:14). While we need not have disciplined prayer lives of our own to start leading children to prayer, we may soon find ourselves falling in love with the God of love as we accompany our children. Prayer is our living relationship with that love.

Children Deserve Our Best in Good Times and in Bad

When I speak to groups of parents, I often ask them what they want for their children. Phrased in various ways, the answer is basically the same: happiness. That means we want our children to get a good education, have lasting