

Chapter Nine

Extension Cords: Plugging into the Power of Prayer

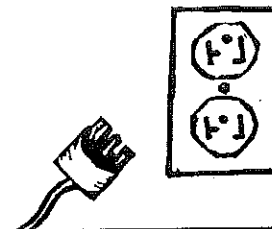
I was all set to begin paneling my basement. I had all the panels and nails ready, as well as my electric drill and all of my drill bits. I put the drill into place to get started, pressed the power button, and—nothing. I wasn't plugged in. I looked around and noticed that the nearest outlet was all the way over on the other side of the room. Did I have an extension cord? Take a guess. It's frustrating when you have all the tools ready to complete a project, but you're missing the one thing that will get you going: the power to make it all happen.

"Because catechesis seeks to lead persons and communities to deeper faith, it is oriented to prayer and worship."

*NATIONAL DIRECTORY
FOR CATECHESIS, 34*

The Power of Prayer

As a catechist, you may have all the tools needed to complete your lessons. Yet without prayer, it's like trying to drill holes without an extension cord: if you're not plugged in, forget it. Personally, you need prayer to sustain yourself and your own level of creativity and commitment. Your participants need prayer because without a personal affective relationship with God in their lives all the doctrine in the world can seem meaningless.



In a good lesson, prayer is not just the frosting on the cake. It is not just a set of bookends to open and close a session. Prayer is the “yeast” that makes the “dough” of our lessons come to life. Prayer is the extension cord we need in order to reach out to and plug into our source of energy: our Creator, God. Prayer is part of the content and doctrine of our lessons. As

we pray, so we believe. As we believe, so we pray. To teach prayer is to teach a way of life.

Because the *General Directory for Catechesis* teaches us that the most effective catechesis takes place within a climate of prayer, we will devote more space to this topic than to most chapters in this book.

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Leading Others in Prayer

Praying with others can be an intimidating experience for some of us. As you mentor your participants to pray, you guide them to know that they can strengthen their personal relationship with God by praying almost anywhere.

Skills, Tips, and Practical Advice for Leading Others in Prayer

1. **Preparing a Prayer Center**—Invite your participants to help you create this sacred space. A prayer center can be a simple table draped with a cloth to show the liturgical season. On the table you can place a Bible, along with a crucifix, a statue, an icon, or another religious object. Creating this space demonstrates the value of prayer and builds an awareness of the sacred. If space permits, use it as a place for all to gather around for prayer.
2. **Enthroning the Bible**—We show reverence for God’s word by “enthroning” the Bible—respectfully placing it in an open position in the prayer center. Invite participants to participate in a procession (especially when working with children) led by a volunteer holding the closed Bible high while the others follow singing a song or an alleluia. Another participant may receive the Bible, open it, and reverently place it in the prayer center for all to see.

3. **Taking Traditional Prayers to Heart: Memorization and Prayer**—One of the ways that we sustain the “memory” of the church is through the memorization, or “taking to heart,” of traditional prayers. Traditional prayers are like family heirlooms—they have been passed on from generation to generation. These prayers link your participants to basic truths of our faith

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by supporting personal prayer and allowing groups of people to unite their minds, hearts, and voices in prayer. Be sure that your participants understand the meaning of the words in the prayers they are taking to heart.

4. **Lectio Divina**—Lectio divina, Latin for “sacred reading,” is a way of spending time with the word of God using a special form of reading and listening so that we can hear God “with the ear of our hearts” (St. Benedict, Prologue to the Rule). In our hectic world, this quiet and contemplative form of prayer is a welcome transformation. This form of prayer follows four steps.

- a. **Lectio** (reading)—Slowly and prayerfully read aloud a brief Scripture passage, repeating the passage up to three times after a silent pause between each reading. Listeners are encouraged to allow a word or phrase to speak to them in a special way. After one of the readings of the passage, participants may be invited to share (without trying to explain) the word or phrase that is speaking to them.
- b. **Meditatio** (meditation)—The listeners silently reflect for a few minutes upon the word or phrase that is speaking to them. In doing so, participants take the word or phrase to heart and allow it to interact with their own thoughts, hopes, desires, and memories.
- c. **Oratio** (prayer)—The participants now enter into a silent dialogue with God for a few minutes, speaking as one friend speaks to another and allowing themselves to be touched and changed by God’s word.



d. **Contemplatio** (contemplation)—The participants simply rest silently and prayerfully in God's embrace for a few minutes. By letting go of their own words, participants allow the word of God to speak to their hearts in silence.

5. **Leading Reflective Prayer (Meditation)**—As we share reflective prayer or meditation, we lead participants to use reflection and imagination, to engage in prayerful conversation with God, and to recognize his presence in their daily lives. Here are some basic steps for leading reflective prayer.

a. **Getting Ready for Reflective Prayer**—Invite the participants to focus on God's presence. Establish a quiet, prayerful, and comfortable environment and mood to help them overcome distractions. This first step may take anywhere from three to five minutes. Consider the following as you join them in reflective prayer:

(1) **Encourage a Comfortable Posture**—If possible, move your participants to the prayer center and invite them to find a position in which they can be comfortable yet alert. If space is limited, invite them to get comfortable in their seats. Encourage your participants to close their eyes or to focus their attention on a symbol or a picture.

(2) **Invite Deep Breathing**—Take two or three minutes to help the participants to relax and breathe deeply. Ask them to rest their hands and to slowly and silently breathe in deeply and then breathe out gradually. Help them establish a rhythm to their breathing by having them count slowly to three as they breathe in, and asking them to breathe out as you count to three.

(3) **Use Reflective Music**—Reflective (instrumental) music can help by covering distractions and providing a soothing setting.

b. **Leading the Reflective Prayer**—Begin the reflective prayer with an invitation to reflect or meditate on an aspect of the theme that you are teaching—often a Scripture passage or a traditional prayer. Reflection time with your participants can range from just a few minutes to a half hour, depending on the age of your group and the circumstances.

(1) **Step-by-Step Directions**—

Through a series of age-appropriate "directions" that you have prepared or are following from a resource (such as a book of guided meditations for children, teens, or adults), you invite your participants to engage their imagination and enter into a setting where they can encounter Jesus, dwell on his words, and converse with him. (For an example of a guided reflection, see Appendix 1.)

(2) **Speaking Slowly and Pausing**—By speaking slowly and pausing for emphasis after each line of the reflection, you invite the participants to pray more reflectively.

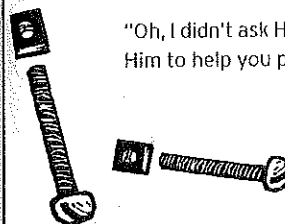
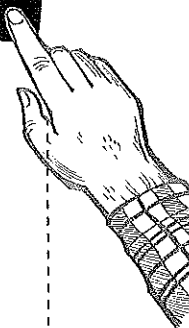
(3) **Engaging Imagination**—Reflective prayer uses an approach inspired by St. Ignatius of Loyola. It invites us to pray by using the senses of imagination—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. We thereby create a setting in our minds: a welcoming place—whether it is a biblical setting or a place of our own choice—to enter into conversation with Jesus. St. Ignatius said that such conversation should resemble the way "one friend speaks to another" (*The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, 54).

Johnny had been misbehaving, and the catechist asked him to put his head down and pray for a few minutes. After a while, he lifted his head and told his catechist that he had thought it over and had then said a prayer.

"Fine," said the pleased catechist. "If you ask God to help you not misbehave, He will help you."

"Oh, I didn't ask Him to help me not misbehave," said Johnny. "I asked Him to help you put up with me."

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c. **Allowing Quiet Time with God**—In closing, invite the participants to spend time in silence with God, while being aware of God's presence. This is called contemplation. This last step may take anywhere from three to five minutes.

(1) **Silent Prayer**—Invite your participants to rest in God's presence. Allow one or two minutes for silent prayer, depending on the responsiveness of the group.

(2) **Transition**—A few gentle words provide a gradual transition, inviting the participants into the next activity.

(3) **Respect**—Your participants' thoughts and reflections in prayer are theirs alone. You show respect for their conversation with God by letting them keep these thoughts to themselves.

6. **Leading Liturgical Prayer**—A more structured or formal prayer experience, often referred to as a prayer service, is a form of *liturgical prayer*. This means that it is a shared communal prayer with assigned roles (such as leader, reader, group 1, group 2, left, right, etc.) and a specific order (song, greeting, opening prayer, Scripture reading, etc.). Here are some things to keep in mind when planning and leading liturgical prayer.

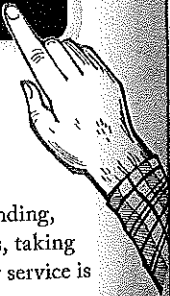
a. **Ask Yourself, "What**

Is the Assembly

Doing?"—When planning liturgical prayer, it can often be tempting to focus on what you, as the prayer leader, are doing

throughout the prayer. Be sure to ask yourself, "What is the assembly doing?" throughout the prayer. This does not mean that every participant must have an individual role, but that the assembly as a whole is participating actively in the prayer through singing, responding, listening, praying in silence, sharing traditional prayers, taking part in ritual action, and so forth. Be sure that a prayer service is

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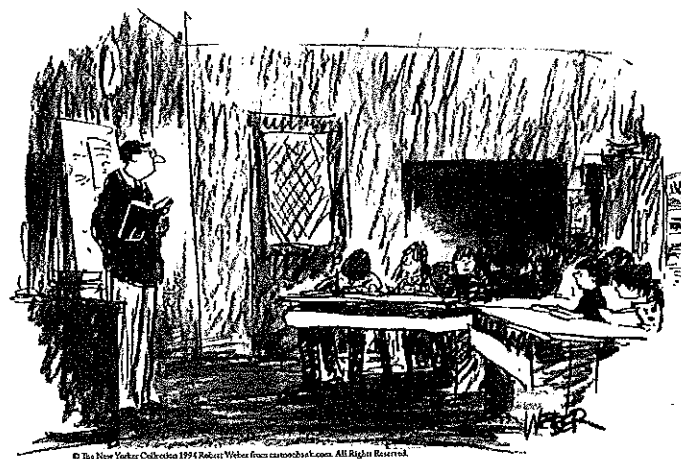


not something that is done by just a few but is truly a liturgical experience: the work of all who are gathered.

b. **Assign Roles ahead of Time**—Before beginning a liturgical prayer, be sure that everyone knows his or her assigned part. Readers should have an opportunity to prepare their parts ahead of time. If there are parts to be prayed aloud that you've assigned to "left" and "right" or group 1 and group 2, be sure to tell your participants ahead of time which side or group they belong to. If there is a ritual gesture that needs explaining (e.g., participants coming forward to bless themselves with holy water), give directions ahead of time so that the prayer can flow smoothly.

c. **Consider the Following "Ingredients"**—Liturgical prayer follows a definite, though not a rigid, order. As you plan a prayer service, consider including the following ingredients or elements:

(1) **Song**—Singing and music are not just the background noise of a prayer service. St. Augustine taught, "To sing once is to pray twice." Singing is a way of raising our minds and hearts to God by raising our voices. It is also a way of gathering our minds and hearts into a community of faith as our voices become one. Finally, liturgical song is also catechetical: the



"I'm sorry, Mr. Landis, would you repeat the question? I was lost in prayer."

lyrics to our hymns teach about our faith. A traditional Latin phrase says *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, which means "the law of prayer is the law of faith." This means that we pray (including singing) according to our beliefs.

- (2) **Silence**—Resist the temptation to fill every space of a prayer service with words and sounds. Silence is a crucial form of prayer. Many contemplatives consider silence to be the primary language of God. Allow for silence at various points throughout a prayer service, especially after Scripture is proclaimed. Brief directions for what to focus on during periods of silence can be helpful.

Silence is a crucial form of prayer

- (3) **The Sign of the Cross**—As mentioned earlier, Catholics pray sacramentally. Beginning our prayers with the sign of the cross is a profound gesture that expresses who we are, whose we are, and what we believe. To begin our prayer with the sign of the cross is not a prelude to prayer but is a prayer in and of itself.
- (4) **A Greeting and Invitation to Prayer**—In order for the assembly to pray well together, it helps if they feel at home with one another and with the prayer they are about to enter into. As the prayer begins, it is more than a nicety to greet and welcome into the prayer those who are praying. The greeting is a reminder that God is extending the invitation, and, through our prayer, we are about to respond.
- (5) **Scripture**—In liturgical prayer, the word of God is non-negotiable. If we want to hear God's voice, we must listen to the word of God proclaimed in our midst. It is acceptable to include readings from inspirational literature or from the writings and speeches of great figures, but these should never overshadow the living word of God that comes to us in Scripture.

- (6) **Ritual Gesture**—Liturgical prayer is sacramental, which means that it involves ritual movement and gesture. Processing around the room (children especially love "parades!") with the Bible, coming forward to bless ourselves with holy water, sharing a sign of Christ's peace, blessing one another on the forehead, and so on are all opportunities to pray with our entire bodies.

“ Liturgical prayer
is sacramental . . . ”

- (7) **Responses and Shared Prayer**—As mentioned earlier, be sure to pay attention to the role of the assembly. Provide opportunities for your participants to respond to the Scripture readings with a responsorial psalm or other form of prayer. Include traditional prayers that the assembly can pray together in unison, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Memorare, the Confiteor, and other prayers that are appropriate for the occasion. It is also important to include spontaneous prayer, such as the sharing of petitions, so that your participants know that—even in formal prayer—speaking with God can be informal.



(8) The Liturgical Calendar—Be sure to look to the church's liturgical calendar for guidance. The season or feast that the church is celebrating will provide clues as to how to prepare the environment, which readings to choose, and what prayers to include. Using prayers from the Sacramentary (such as, the opening prayer of that day's liturgy) or from the Liturgy of the Hours serves to bind your group's liturgical prayer more closely to the liturgical prayer of the universal church.

(9) Length and Pace of the Prayer—A prayer service that is either rushed or dragging along can affect how “at home” participants feel about the prayer experience. Consider your age group as well. Small children have very short attention spans and cannot sit still for very long. Older children may have longer attention spans but still need variety.

By leading others in liturgical prayer, we help to prepare them for the celebration of the Eucharist—the source and summit of the Christian life. For more information about the Mass, see my book *Living the Mass: How One Hour a Week Can Change Your Life* (Loyola Press, 2005). We cannot love God with our head alone. Through prayer, we learn to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

7. Teaching Spontaneous Prayer—With our rich treasury of traditional prayers, Catholics are sometimes unfamiliar with spontaneous prayer. You can help your participants become more comfortable with spontaneous prayer by encouraging them to follow these steps.

- a. **Address God**—God answers to many names, so any title of honor will do. (For example: Dear God, Heavenly Father, Almighty God, Dear Jesus, Creator of All Things, or Loving God.)
- b. **Offer Thanks**—It's always good to begin prayer by being thankful. It reminds us that God provides for us. Help your participants to offer thanks for simple things. (For example: Thank you for bringing us together today. Thank you for the summer vacation

“It's always good to begin prayer by being thankful.”

Offering a spontaneous prayer can be simple. Follow these steps.

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|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. Address God | 4. Pray for the needs of the group |
| 2. Give thanks | 5. Pray for the needs of others |
| 3. Ask for forgiveness | 6. Conclude: Amen |

that we just enjoyed. Thank you for helping us to learn about our confirmation.)

- c. **Ask for Forgiveness**—In private, you might ask for forgiveness for a wrong you have committed. When praying for a group, a leader can ask forgiveness for our general sinfulness. (For example: We're sorry for the times that we don't follow your word. Please forgive us for the times that we think only of ourselves.)
- d. **Pray for the Needs of the Group**—Typically, a group is gathered for a purpose. The simplest thing to pray for is success for the purpose of that gathering. (For example: Open our minds and hearts so that we will learn about you today. Inspire us so that we make wise choices about our service projects.)
- e. **Pray for the Needs of Others**—We never simply pray for ourselves, but we think of the needs of others. (For example: We pray for all those who are sick and unable to be with us today. We pray for the homeless on this very cold day. We pray for an end to the violence in our world.)
- f. **Conclude**—A simple phrase indicates that the prayer is ending. (For example: We ask this through Christ our Lord. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.)



"For prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God."

—ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA

Glossary

Ritual—A ritual is a habitual way of doing something. In prayer, rituals include symbolic ways of acknowledging God's power. Blessing ourselves with holy water is a habitual way (ritual) of acknowledging God's saving grace in baptism. A ritual is effective because it goes beyond words and relies on symbols and metaphors. The more we use them, the more familiar and meaningful they become.

Meditation—Meditation, or reflective prayer, is thinking about God, often with the aid of a Scripture passage, an inspirational reading, or sacred images. When we meditate, we attempt to become aware of—and "plug into"—God's power and presence in our lives.

Contemplation—Contemplation is simply resting quietly in God's presence. In contemplation, one does not attempt to speak to God but simply marvels at his glorious presence. It can be compared to enjoying a beautiful piece of art or a nature scene. No words are needed.

Prayer—Prayer is time spent in awareness of God's presence. Prayer is *always* a response to God. God has already acted in our lives. Through prayer, we are acknowledging and responding to God's saving presence. Even when we offer petitions, we are doing so in response to the fact that God has previously touched our lives. We are acknowledging this fact and asking God to do so once again. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that "prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God" (2559).

Troubleshooting

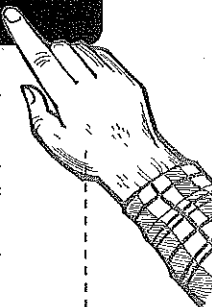
- ⊕ **Like electricity, the power of prayer is nothing to take lightly.** Prayer is powerful. Be prepared for the fact that the power of God may touch one of your participants in an unexpected way (e.g., a participant begins crying during a prayer experience). Recognize it as part of the prayer experience.

- ⊕ **Leading others, especially children, in prayer is not easy.** By the same token, it is not rocket science. In many cases, you may very well be introducing your participants to the concept of prayer. Start small. Start simple. Prayers of thanksgiving are often a good place to start because everyone can think of at least *one* thing that they are thankful for.
- ⊕ **Be patient.** Some people can be uncomfortable with prayer. Children can also be immature about it. Don't give up. Employ simple rituals (such as an enthronement of the Bible in silence before each session) that do not require a great deal of time and concentration. Use them regularly so that your participants develop a sense of prayerfulness.
- ⊕ **Avoid the temptation of saying that you have no time to pray because you have so much content to teach.** Prayer is a part of the content of our faith as well. Remember, it is one of the four "pillars" of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, along with the creed, the sacraments, and the commandments. We are never too busy to grab a bite to eat, even if it's fast food. To skip prayer is to skip the all-important reminder that all that we do is in acknowledgment of God.

High Praise from a Fifth-Grade Boy—A True Story

A substitute catechist walked into a fifth-grade class. A boy confronted her and asked, "Who are you?" She introduced herself and explained that she was the substitute. The boy said, "That's fine, but you should know that I don't believe in God." The catechist smiled and asked him to take a seat with the group, which he did. In the course of the class, she introduced the concept of reflective prayer and led the fifth graders in a meditation. When the class was over, the boy came up to her and asked, "Are you going to be here next week?" When she responded yes, he said, "Good." Then he asked, "Are we going to do more of this prayer stuff?" Again, when she responded yes, he said, "Good." Then he left. From a fifth-grade boy, that was a major display of emotion and a high form of praise! The catechist realized that the way into this young man's faith life was through his heart and that prayer was the vehicle to reach that destination.

The power of prayer is nothing to take lightly.



Scripture

"Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed."

(MARK 1:35)

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you made prayer a regular part of your life and ministry. Time and again, the Scriptures tell us that you went off alone to pray. You knew that the Creator was your source of power. You knew that prayer was your link to the power of the Creator. Help me to realize the power of prayer in my life and in the life of my participants. Teach us all to pray so that we may acknowledge your power and glory and be energized by your grace.

For an opportunity to companion with other catechists and to nourish our vocation, visit www.catechistsjourney.com.

