

Why All Couples Should Pray Alone and also Together.

Like every engaged couple that meets a priest to arrange for a wedding, you have your own expectations. Generally, the man and woman expect a religious ceremony in which they and the priest will each have a part to play, with the desired outcome of receiving God's blessing upon their marriage. What might be God's expectations of the couple and of the priest? What does God expect of us? What kind of blessing do you expect from God on your marriage? There is no escape from human suffering and death, but you might expect God to minimize your pain and delay your death to an advanced age. You may be afraid of marital difficulties and expect God to save you from friction and marriage failure. You may fear giving birth to less than perfect children and expect God to prevent such deformities from happening. The expectations you might have of God could be as extensive as your fears about life. It is quite human to have fears, but a life primarily driven by them would be a wretched existence. Love is a much more reliable engine for your lives, marriage, and family.

We probably all expect that engaged, as well as married, couples have within them deep desires that are true – for all that is true, right, good, loving, and beautiful. Taken together, these desires could be seen as the desire for happiness, and they are another great motor driving our decisions and choices. It is considered wise – the Bible often speaks of this – to seek the counsel and experience of our elders. Yet, we who are alive at this point in time and belong to our 21st century culture do not want to be told how to live our lives. We value our own competence, while being open to receive more information in order to make better decisions, and we want the freedom to make those decisions ourselves.

It is at this level that God has expectations of engaged couples, as of all his children. The first human beings knew what God expected of them, and they were happy to carry it out. Then they gave in to the temptation to doubt the generosity of God's motives in the few restrictions He had put on their choices, they decided to be free from God's expectations, and ventured into behavior they had been warned to avoid. Since they had taken back the trust they had until then put in God, the result was the loss of the harmony and peace they had enjoyed with God, with each other, and with all other creatures. That is our situation to this day. We are not in harmony with God, with each other, and with all other creatures. We rely far too much on our own opinions and preferences, and avoid asking or following advice, even when this results in pain, suffering, and death.

Humanity remained in this state of rebellion and ignorance for countless generations. In time, God chose a people for himself, with a merciful plan to restore them to harmony with Him by giving them in the form of Law what the first human beings had in their natural conscience. Moses brought to the Jewish people these 10 commandments, and passed on the words God gave him to say: "Choose life or death. Keep the Lord's commandments, and you shall live. Break these commandments, and you shall surely die. Consider well, and choose between life and death." It was a struggle for people to observe the law and all that God expected of them. They felt that faith in God was a burden, and they didn't always feel closer to God. Yet, "God so loved the world, that He sent his only Son." Jesus came to restore us to harmony with God his Father, with each other, and with all the other creatures. He did not come only for the people alive on earth when He came as man, but He continues to come to each person in every generation until the end of the world. He uses various means to get our attention and then offers us life; that we might be able to live a life like his own. If we respond to Jesus, He lets us know what God expects of us, and we allow Him to have influence in our lives. As pastor I interpret your request as an expression of your willingness to discover and do God's will for you.

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Jesus said that to have life is to know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent into the world. Jesus lived the most human life ever lived, being in perfect harmony within himself, with other people, and with all creatures. He lived in a way that was also divine, in communion with his heavenly Father. He clearly intends for us and all his disciples to learn from Him. He continues to send his Holy Spirit in us to guide us into living our life as Jesus lived his. Jesus went to Synagogue every Friday and spent every Saturday with his family in rest before God, in study and discussion of the Scriptures. He prayed 7 times a day: on waking, before every meal, at the beginning and end of his work, and before going to bed. He lived in the peace, trust, and joy that come from knowing his Father's love. He worked, made his contribution to society, and earned food for the family. He faced the world with courage, resisting its efforts to pull Him away from doing the Father's will. He lived on good terms with all, was kind to the poor and suffering, forgave all who offended Him, and gave his love and mercy to enemies.

For us, doing as Jesus did could look something like this. We go to Sunday Mass and worship the Lord, spend part of the day reading, studying, discussing and learning more about God, and enjoy the Lord's Day rest with our family and friends to honor the Lord and also receive his blessing on our life. We pray alone often during the day – bringing God into all the different experiences and concerns of our day – and also together as a couple and as a family. We live in a peace, trust, and joy that come from experiencing our Father's love. We work all week to make our contribution to society and earn food for the family, and face the world with courage, resisting its efforts to pull us away from doing the Father's will. We live on good terms with everyone, show kindness to the poor and suffering, forgive all who offend us, and give our love and mercy even to those who make themselves our enemies.

Jesus did not take his standards for the conduct of his life from the world around Him, but from his Father's will, which He knew from Scripture, the Synagogue, the teaching of his parents and the rabbis, and from personal prayer and converse with his Father. If we are to be his disciples, as Catholic Christians, then we must in all things do as He did. We cannot take our standards for the conduct of our lives from the world around us, but from Jesus. He sets our standards, and they are the same standards for all of us. Jesus is the Person against whom we must measure ourselves, for one day we will have to account to God for all his gifts we have received and for all his gifts we have refused.

Jesus lived out his life as a vibrant, intimate, and constant relationship with his Father in heaven, and He calls us to do the same. Jesus' faith, hope, and love of his Father were out in the light of day for all to see, though He kept much of it concealed in his heart. Still, his faith in God was not occult but public. Our faith in God must likewise be open and public – not occult or hidden. When someone considers himself Christian, yet does not participate in Sunday worship every week, does not pray alone every day, does not pray openly – at home and in public places like work, church, and society – then their faith is occult or hidden.

This means they push God into the shadows, the corners of their lives. That leaves the wide-open spaces of their home and lives empty, attracting all kinds of other influences to come and set up shop. This in turn can open them up to harassment by dark powers and the influence of demons and people motivated by dark motives – all the manifestations of evil that we associate with the “occult”. God abides by the laws He has put in place to govern our lives, including the law of freedom. This means that the only way that God will actually be God in our lives is for us to take Him seriously, to put our trust in Him, surrender our lives and homes to Him, pray, and openly practice our faith. These are attitudes that bear fruit every day only as we deliberately put them into practice.

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This includes actually praying openly with others. You will find below some simple methods or guides for prayer that you can use in order to get over the initial embarrassment and hesitations that can keep us from even trying to pray together, or even alone for that matter. Keep in mind that God is alive and was the first One ever to love you. The Father loved you even before you were conceived, when you were only one possibility out of hundreds of thousands in your mother's ovaries and your father's testes. He picked you because He wanted you to have life and come into the world; so you might come to know Him and his never-ending love for you. As you begin to pray, and return to prayer each day – alone and with others – remember that you are responding to God's invitation. He is always there first, the One who waits for us, so that He might reveal a little more of Himself and his love for us.

Prayer Exercise #1 – Praying Alone.

God is the Creator of all that exists in the entire Universe. Without faith, all that human beings can perceive is a power, or order, at the heart of the Universe. Faith makes it possible for a person to know God directly – although in a mysterious way, since God is a Spirit – and actually communicate with the three Divine Persons revealed by Jesus Christ. The amazing thing we discover is that God was there long before us and is highly motivated to reveal Himself to us and pour into us the vitality of his own divine life and love. Prayer is entertaining God's presence in order to let Him connect us to his divine vitality. Here is how you can pray.

Step 1. Decide to do it at a specific time and place.

1. Pick a form of prayer activity, such as praying with Scripture, Liturgy of the Hours, adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Rosary, or other forms of prayer that have been proven to be effective and safe and approved by the Lord.
2. Select a passage of Scripture, or one of the 4 sets of Mysteries of the Rosary, or other texts.

Step 2. Start somehow.

1. You can stand up, genuflect, prostrate yourself, bow before an icon, and make the sign of the Cross, kneel, or sit. Various postures suit various occasions of prayer.
2. You can, if you are in Church, make a reverent genuflection before the Blessed Sacrament.
3. Remember to ask for God's guidance, asking the Holy Spirit for inspiration, or with words like these: "Dear Father, here I am in your presence. Please guide and inspire me, in Jesus' Name. Amen."

Step 3. Enter into your time of prayer, conscious that you are entertaining God's presence.

1. Read your Scripture passage, or the Liturgy of the Hours, or Mystery of the Rosary, etc.
2. Include moments of silence, especially as something moves you, or impressions arise, or memories. Allow your mind and heart to be aware of them. Remember you are in God's presence. Notice that God sees all that is happening inside you at this moment, and that He also sees all the connections with your entire life.
3. Dwell there a bit more if you sense God making connections, or bringing light or peace, or even challenging you or inviting you to follow his lead within you.
4. As that comes to an end, allow a moment of silence and peace. Then carry on with your prayer exercise.

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Step 4. Take a step back and – with God’s help – have a look at this prayer time.

1. As you come to the end of the prayer exercise or text you had chosen or else approach the end of the time you have, stop and try to tell God something of what you feel now, or of what has been happening during this prayer time.
2. If you’re not clear about it, then just say that and begin thanking the Lord for his time.
3. Remember that the important thing is simply to have visited with the Lord, and that whether or not you think anything happened is secondary.
4. Leave God room in the silence to express his love for you, by letting yourself enter into an attitude of receptivity, like a child that is content to be on his father’s or her mother’s lap.

Step 5. Now you can enter into a few moments of putting into prayer anything you noticed happening or coming up during your prayer.

1. You may have been touched by the Word of God to remember something that happened.
E.g.: “As I read your Word, I remembered the fight I had with my boss, and I feel bad about it, and worried.”
So, you say, “Father in Heaven, You know what happened. Please give me peace and help me find a way to resolve that problem, in Jesus’ Name. Amen!”
2. If you sense God is drawing you to do or correct something, then ask his help and guidance.
3. The prayers can be as simple as in the example given, or they can be more detailed, as you are comfortable, see more clearly, and have the time to do so. This whole exercise is done in freedom, trust, faith, and generosity.

Step 6. Let your prayer time become more and more human, personal, and fully alive.

1. Remember the old man who told the Curé d’Ars that in his prayer what was happening was just that he looked at God, and God looked at him. Eventually, a soul at prayer does become somehow aware of God’s love shining as it were on them.
2. Because prayer is really entertaining God’s presence, or being ready for God’s visit, you may at some points not need to use any words, but may simply be content to know that God sees the simple, daily, secrets of your heart.
3. We tend to feel tremendously loved when we realize that someone – even God – is interested in the simple thoughts and feelings of our heart, because this is who we really are.
4. Remember that none of this may seem to be happening – that nothing at all may appear to be happening during the prayer time – and that would be perfectly normal too. At such times, your perseverance is an expression of your faith in God and your love for Him.

Step 7. Wrap-up and closing.

1. Wrap up with prayer in your own words, to simply express to God your gratitude for his abiding presence, care, and love.
2. You can then end with an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and a Glory be to the Father, or at times you can skip prayer in your own words and just jump ahead to these three prayers.
3. Feel free to stand up, genuflect, prostrate yourself, bow before an icon, make the Sign of the Cross, and make a reverent genuflection before the Blessed Sacrament. Prayer doesn’t have to be painful or boring. In fact it is as lively and connected as we ourselves are.

Prayer Exercise #2 – Letting God Show You His Presence in Your Whole Life.

A good, holy, elderly priest – Fr. Walter Lallemand, a war veteran – sometime in 1977 introduced a bunch of us young adults to a form of prayer exercise that likened our own personal life to the life of the People of God – making both of them a sacred history of God’s grace. You can follow the steps for prayer alone as in exercise 1, and use for your activity a personal reflection employing your memory, with the help of the table below. The point of this exercise is to ask God to help you remember the many times – whether you realized it at the time or not – that God was there for you and with you. As this relies on our ability to remember, it is an exercise that you can return to and add onto several times over the years. May God bless you and reveal to you his sacred history with you.

My Sacred History With God

AGE	WHAT HAPPENED	WHAT IT FELT LIKE	HOW I PRAYED	HOW I CHANGED

Prayer Exercise #3 – Praying As a Couple.

God is the source of vitality and love for Marriage. Prayer is entertaining God’s presence in order to let Him connect us to his divine vitality. Here is how you can pray together as a couple.

Step 1. Pick a form of prayer activity, such as praying with Scripture, and select a passage.

Step 2. Someone pray out loud, in a way something like this, in order to ask God’s guidance:
“Dear God, here we are in your presence. Please guide and inspire us, in Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

Step 3. Follow this simple process, which will give each person the opportunity to hear the other person sharing their thoughts and in this way reveal how they need to be prayed for.

1. One person read the Scripture passage out loud, slowly, and clearly.
2. Both remain quiet for a good 2 to 3 minutes, to allow the Word of God time to bounce around inside you and stir up impressions that come from your daily life, thoughts, feelings.
3. The other person reads the same passage over again out loud, slowly, and clearly.
4. Both listen again to what’s bouncing around inside as the Word of God continues to connect with thoughts, impressions, and feelings that come from your daily life and deep within you.

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Step 4. Now each of you can put into words, for the sake of the other, what effect the Word of God had on you, and give each other a glimpse of your thoughts, impressions, feelings.

1. One person simply puts into a few words what the reading from Scripture stirred up inside; meanwhile, the other person listens attentively.
2. Once this first person is finished giving a glimpse of their impressions, then the other does the same thing, and the first person now listens attentively.

Step 5. Now that each of you has heard the other's impressions, you have some idea what they need and what it would be good to ask God for them. So just go for it: put into simple words of prayer, offering them to God, what you heard the other say and reveal as a need.

1. One person volunteers to say a simple prayer out loud based on what the other has previously disclosed about what is inside them that has been touched by the Word of God.
E.g.: She said, "As I listened, I remembered the fight I had with my boss, and I feel bad about it, and worried."
So, he says, "Father in Heaven, You heard her say what happened. Please give her peace and help her find a way to resolve that problem, in Jesus' Name. Amen!"
2. Then, the second person prays for the first, in a similar way.
3. The prayers can be as simple as in the example given, or they can be more detailed, as you are comfortable and have the time to do so. This whole exercise is done in freedom, trust, faith, and generosity.

Step 6. You look at each other and notice how you now feel, having prayed for one another.

1. You may not need to exchange any words, but may see in each other's eyes, that this has been a significant time of prayer – a time of intimacy with God, but also a time of intimacy with each other – because you have trusted each other with simple, daily, secrets of the heart.
2. We tend to feel tremendously loved when someone takes the time to really be interested in hearing the simple thoughts and feelings of our heart, because this is who we really are.
3. (Kleenex may at times be useful at this point, and that would be perfectly normal.)

Step 7. Wrap-up and closing.

1. Now, hold hands, sitting as you are, or standing up.
2. Wrap up with prayer out loud in your own words, to simply express to God your gratitude for his abiding presence, care, and love.
3. You can then end with an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and a Glory be to the Father, or at times you can skip prayer in your own words and just jump ahead to these three prayers.
4. Feel free to stand up, hug, and kiss. Prayer doesn't have to be painful or boring. In fact it is as lively and connected as we ourselves are.

Remember that prayer is simply one more human activity. You will become more at ease with it the more you do it. On the other hand, because you are not alone in it, but God is there with you, prayer is not only a human activity, but it is also a divine activity. That means that it doesn't make any sense to evaluate our prayer experiences using only human parameters or measuring sticks. In fact, it is better not to evaluate our prayer at all, but rather to pay attention to the fidelity and generosity with which we spend or "waste" time with God every day. The ultimate rule of thumb here is the rule of love. Still, in order to grow, you can ask your spiritual director or father confessor for guidance to progress in prayer.