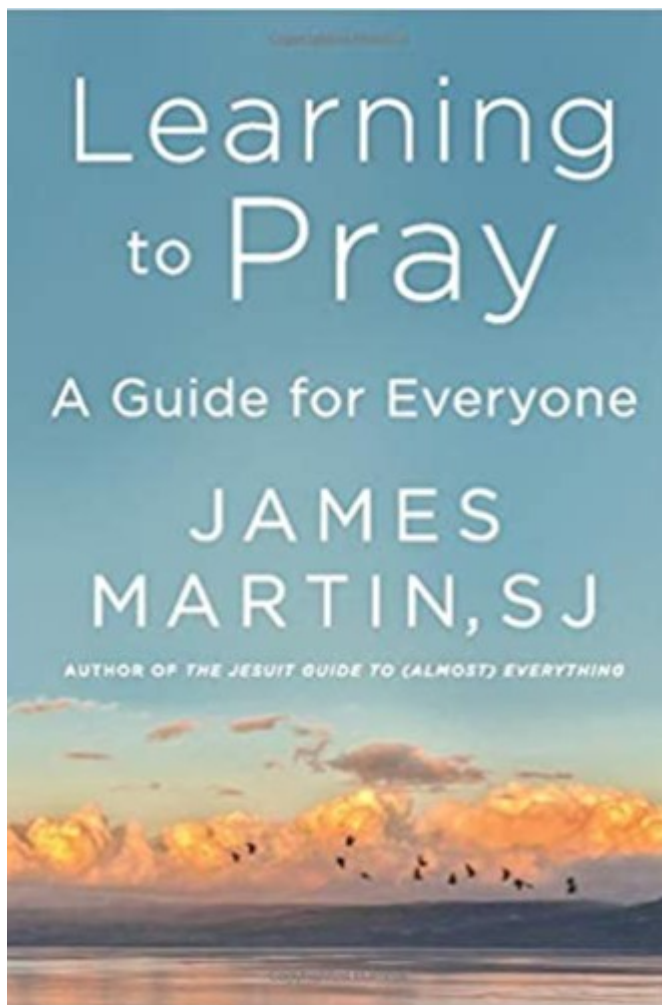


James Martin offers a primer for prayer

His definition of prayer is simple: conscious conversation with God.

by [L. Roger Owens](#) in the [June 16, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Learning to Pray

A Guide for Everyone

by James Martin, SJ

HarperOne

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The tradition of writing prayer guides reaches back to the early centuries of the church, to Origen and Evagrius and to the many treatises on the Lord's Prayer by church fathers. The tradition has continued into recent decades, with popular books like Richard J. Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* and Marjorie J. Thompson's *Soul Feast*. Because each generation needs instruction in prayer that is contemporary and accessible, we are fortunate that James Martin has written *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*.

Martin, a Jesuit priest, is the author of a number of books on the Christian life. In this one, he brings deep learning, his own experience of prayer, and wisdom gleaned from many years as a spiritual director to bear on fundamental questions of prayer: Why pray? What is prayer? The early chapters clear this conceptual ground, but Martin's writing is never heady or esoteric. Throughout the book, he shifts effortlessly from theological explanation to practical advice.

Though the book is subtitled "A Guide for Everyone," Martin writes with beginners in mind. A winsome and gentle guide, he lowers the bar for those who seek a life with God but struggle to begin or persevere. While he discusses the pros and cons of many traditional definitions of prayer, in the end he offers his own simple definition: "Prayer is a conscious conversation with God." He appreciates more expansive accounts of prayer that affirm that all of life can become prayer, but he focuses his attention on those intentional times set aside for communicating with God.

In the middle chapters of the book, Martin's Jesuit formation shines prominently. One chapter considers the examen, introducing readers to a practice that encourages noticing and savoring God's presence in everyday life. Martin displays his gift for memorable one-liners when he addresses the critique that the examen invites solipsistic navel-gazing: "The examen is not so much about you as about God *with* you." He introduces the Ignatian practice of praying with the imagination, and he discusses how to discern God's voice in prayer (discernment being a Jesuit charism).

Reading Martin's chapter on discernment, I thought of a philosophy professor of mine who used to challenge students when they would say that God was telling them to do something (like drop a class or break up with a significant other) by

growling, “Is it *God* or is it *gas*?” Martin, trusting that God speaks to us through the affective dimension of our lives—through our feelings and emotions—might answer, Why do we have to choose? He reminds readers that when the Bible says Jesus had compassion, the Greek literally means he was moved in his bowels. “Jesus feels things in his guts,” Martin writes.

One chapter in particular stands out. “What Happens When You Pray?” looks at emotions, insights, memories, desires, images, words, feelings, and other experiences that arise during prayer. The longest chapter, it will likely be the most helpful for more experienced readers. Pastors, spiritual directors, and those who teach prayer will benefit from its comprehensiveness. For instance, when Martin considers how to tell whether the words one senses interiorly during prayer are from God, he suggests that messages from God will be short, surprising, and to the point; they’ll make sense and leave their mark: “If they are authentic, they strike your soul in such a way as to make an indelible impression.” Though beginners might feel overwhelmed by this chapter (all of those things can go on in prayer!?), others will appreciate the chapter’s thoroughness.

If the book’s strength is that it comes primarily out of a single tradition—Ignatian spirituality—that is also the book’s limitation. Shaped by an Ignatian emphasis on conversation with God and its promotion of more mentally active ways of praying, the book devotes less attention to another important aspect of prayer: communion with God. Martin says that as he grows older he’s more drawn to silent prayer, to simply being with God. And yet the chapter on centering prayer is the shortest one in the book.

Likewise, in the chapter on *lectio divina*, I was surprised that Martin replaces the tradition’s final movement—contemplation—with action. A spiritual practice that for hundreds of years has invited those praying into an experience of resting in God has been amended to fit a Jesuit commitment to contemplation in action.

Which brings me back to where we started: there are many books on prayer, written from different angles and with varying emphases. This is as it should be, because each one has limits. Especially for beginners wondering what it means to communicate with God and how to listen when God communicates with us, *Learning to Pray* proves a useful guide.