What is Prayer

Young children often give a very simple definition for prayer, namely that it is “talking to God”. While there is some truth in this definition it does not portray the complete picture. Prayer is a relationship between ourselves and God and, as a result, it is not all our own work.

Christian prayer:

- Encompasses God as the source and inspiration of all prayer
- Requires an openness to a relationship with God
- Involves being aware of the presence of God in everyday life
- Develops through our faith and our experience of God
- Is at the heart of the Christian tradition
- Guides and forms our beliefs about God
- Is centred on the person of Christ
- Is revealed through the Scriptures
- Is an essential component of Christian spirituality

Christian prayer

- Christian prayer is for all people regardless of their age, race, sex, class and social status.
- Prayer takes place in a wide variety of ways — there is no single “right” way to pray.
- People prefer to pray in different ways according to their life experiences and their personality.
- God has called people to prayer throughout history, and will continue to call people to pray as long as humanity exists.
- Prayer needs to be learnt and developed through practice. Certain skills are required.
- Prayer engages the whole person. It is not just a cognitive exercise.
- Prayer requires effort and perseverance. It is not always easy to pray, but the Spirit come to help us (Romans 2:26-27).
- Christian prayer is a response to a loving God and a great act of trust that God is able to hear and respond to our needs.

The role of prayer in the Catholic school

Prayer is a key element in not just the religious education program but the whole life of a Catholic school. Prayer permeates the boundaries of time and structures within the Catholic school. Prayer permeates the boundaries of time and structures within the Catholic school as it is a fundamental element of Christian life. While schools may have set times for students to pray at the beginning of the day or other times, prayer cannot be neatly locked into a timetable. Prayer needs to occur frequently and at appropriate times. The role of a Catholic school includes immersing students in an environment that teaches them to pray not just at the right time according to the clock, but in response to the need for prayer. Such moments could occur during times of sharing, when a student tells the class about a baby sister being born on the weekend, or when the class learns that a member of the school community is faced with a serious illness. The need for prayer can also arise when relationships are filled with tension perhaps when arguments and fights have broken out
during the lunchtime break. This is an appropriate time for prayer, because there is a need for students to stop and become aware of the presence of God within them and who God is calling them to be.

*Teachers need to have the skills to:*
- Identify the opportunities that arise for prayer each day
- Provide students with the opportunity to pray each day

*This will enable students to:*
- Recognise the need for prayer in their own lives
- Understand that prayer is an essential part of daily life and the whole life of the Catholic school.

The Catholic school community extends beyond students and teachers. It also incorporates the families of all students and, if the Catholic school is a parish school, then the school community is a part of the parish community. Therefore, prayer is important not only for the students, but also for the staff and families in the school community. The Catholic school supports parents in their role of educating their children in faith. There is a need for families to promote the values and practices of the Catholic school and for teachers to work together with parents to achieve this goal. Do all students enrolled in a Catholic school leave knowing how to pray so that they can express and develop their relationship with God? Hopefully they do because knowing how to pray is a life skill. When they need to express thanks to God, when they need to ask for the guidance of the Spirit during times of decision-making when they want to become more aware of the presence of God in their own lives, hopefully they know how to pray.

**Evaluating a prayer program for the classroom**

As prayer is central to the life of the Catholic school, it is important that it be evaluated. In any evaluation process it is usually necessary to highlight both the strengths and the areas needing further development.

**Planning a prayer program for the classroom**

There are many factors that need to be considered when planning a prayer program for students. Some of the key factors are discussed below.

**Selecting relevant prayer experiences**

It is important that teachers select prayer experiences that are relevant to the age and stage of faith development of students. For example, young children live in a very self-centered world. Their spontaneous prayers will revolve around their families and the things they treasure most, such as their pets. On the other hand, older students are likely to have developed the ability to think globally and tend to pray for issues such as the environment and world peace.

**Providing a wide variety of prayer experiences**

As students have different personalities and different strengths, they will also develop different preferences for a way to pray. Some students will love praying through writing in their journals, while other students may struggle with this way of praying. Some students will be able to pray very easily through the use of movement; however, other students may not enjoy this form of prayer at
all. Sometimes a traditional prayer will take on special significance for one student, while another will find it hard to understand the words in the prayer. There is no singular right way to pray, so students need to be introduced to as many different ways as possible. Students may think they do not have the ability to pray but they might never have been introduced to a way of praying that matches their personalities and learning preferences.

Choosing the time for prayer

To demonstrate to students that prayer is an important part of life and is valued in a Catholic school, the time of day when students will be given the opportunity for prayer is vital. There needs to enough time for the prayer activity to take place, and prayer times should be as free from interruptions as possible. While this can be very difficult to achieve, there are strategies that can be put into place, such as making a sign for the door: "We are having time for prayer now. Please come back later”.

Choosing the place for prayer

Students need to know it is possible to pray anywhere, not just in the classroom. Therefore, it is good to use different environments for prayer, such as outside under a tree, in a quiet place in the school ground, in the classroom, in the church or in any other place that is appropriate for a group of students.

Using scripture as a basis for prayer

Because the Scriptures play a key role in the Catholic tradition, students need to know their significance and how they can assist prayer. There are different ways of using the Scriptures for meditation, contemplation and other forms of prayer, and students need to develop skills to use scripture for a variety of ways of praying.

Developing the concept that prayer is part of life

Prayer will only be meaningful and relevant to children if the prayer experiences provided are relevant to their own experiences, so they can integrate life and prayer as one, not as separate realities. It is important to pray with students to demonstrate that prayer is for adults as well as children and adolescents.

Providing an appropriate environment and atmosphere for prayer

In order for students to appreciate prayer as being an essential and special part of our lives, a special place and space is required. This space may be created outside or in the classroom, or a prayer-room may be set up but wherever it is, it should be the obvious prayer space.

Using creativity

In order to develop ways of engaging all students in a variety of prayer experiences — for example, through music, dance, drama, art, story, and movement — teachers need to call on all their creative skills. While there are many resources available to assist teachers in this task, they will still need to draw on their creative skills to build on and adapt suggested prayer formats so they are relevant and meaningful for the students in their own class.
Teaching students about prayer and skills for prayer

Teaching the students about prayer and teaching them the skills for prayer are two very different elements, requiring good planning. There are many things students need to know about prayer, and there are many skills to be learnt in order for them to pray.

What do we know about children and prayer?

Research in the field of children and prayer has revealed the following:

- All children have the capacity and potential to pray.
- Children’s faith develops in different stages and is usually age-related.
- Children develop their images of God as they grow older.
- Children need mature adults who have a good understanding of their own faith development and of theology for them to model different ways of praying and to help them develop their understanding of God.
- Prayer experiences for children need to take into account the whole child — the physical, emotional and spiritual levels of each child.
- Prayer experiences for children need to engage all five senses and include both verbal and non-verbal elements.
- Prayer is relevant and meaningful for children of different faith traditions and for children who do not have any regular or formal association with the Catholic Church.
- Adults can learn about prayer and theology from children.
- An awareness of the presence of God is fundamental in the development of a life of prayer.
- Children need to be taught that prayer is a relationship with God which permeates one’s whole life; it is not just “talking to God”.
- Adolescents need to be given opportunities to develop their own spirituality rather than being forced into a traditional formal prayer style.
- Gender makes a difference to the way prayer is experienced and perceived.

Praying in different ways

According to the Catechism of the Catholic church, vocal prayer, meditation and contemplative prayer are the three main expressions of prayer in the Christian tradition. For the purpose of naming and evaluating different forms of prayer that can be used with children and adults, the prayer experiences can be placed into the following categories:

- Traditional prayers (such as the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Nicene Creed)
- Formal and informal prayers (prayers of praise, thanksgiving, petition and sorrow)
- Meditation (using guided imagery, story scripture, nature and art)
- Contemplative prayer (through silence, mantras and breath prayer)
- Other methods of prayer (through movement, journal writing and music)

There are many different experiences of prayer that can be provided for students, staff and families for each of the forms of prayer listed above.

A balanced prayer program

For balance, it is important to include traditional prayers, formal and informal prayers, meditation, contemplation and other methods of prayer. Often teachers will find they provide prayer
experiences for students that reflect the way they like to pray in their own lives or the forms of prayer they are most familiar with. The challenge is to provide students with prayer experiences covering all of the above forms of prayer.

A balanced prayer program will cater for the needs of all students. There may be a student who can get in touch with the presence of God most fully by praying through movement. If this student is not provided with opportunities to pray this way, they are not being catered for and, obviously, this could have major repercussions for their relationship with God. The more teachers develop the prayer experiences they provide, the more they will be able to assist all students to grow in their relationship with God.

Evaluating different types of prayer experiences in the classroom

Because it is difficult for teachers to provide prayer experiences with which they are unfamiliar, many teachers resort to teaching the types of prayer that they learnt in their own childhood. Consequently, there is a need to evaluate the types of prayer experiences that teachers are providing for students.

Evaluating the types of prayer experiences being taught is a way of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the prayer program. The process of evaluation needs to address two key questions:

- What prayer experiences are being provided in the school?
- Is the prayer program balanced?

The process of evaluation could be facilitated by the religious education coordinator.

Praying with adolescents

It is important to remember that prayer is an activity of faith, and many adolescents will freely admit that they do not see themselves as a person of faith. Therefore, it is impossible (and highly undesirable to even try) to force students to pray.

However, Catholic schools are faith communities, and therefore prayer needs to be an essential part of school life. So, how does one deal with a student who says they do not believe in God and therefore they will not participate in prayer? Some of the following strategies may be helpful in dealing with students who normally show no interest in prayer or who steadfastly refuse to participate in any prayer activities:

- Talk with students about why prayer is an important part of any Catholic community (or Christian community). Explain that no one can be forced to pray, but being part of a community means that there are some rules or beliefs that need to be upheld by everyone, even if they are not personal beliefs. Therefore, anyone attending a Catholic school must agree to participate in religious education classes, and prayer will be a topic in those classes at various stages. There will also be times when the whole school community prays, and while some students may personally elect not to pray, it is important that they respect and support the rituals and beliefs of others in the school community and allow others to pray.

- Seize the moments when something significant is happening on a local, national or international level. Use these times as a way into prayer, when students are more likely to want to talk about what is happening and how we can make sense of our lives. Terrorism,
death and other significant events such as World Youth Day are opportunities to help students think, talk and discuss issues of spirituality and what gives meaning to our lives. Why are so many people attracted to World Youth Day? Why do so many people turn to prayer to remember those who lost their lives through terrorism? When we lose someone we love, how can prayer help?

- Use retreat days to help provide students with a positive experience of prayer. Going away from the school environment to a different place can help bring awareness that students are entering into an experience that is going to be different. This allows students to be more open to experiences such as different forms of prayer (that may not have worked back at school), and when students reflect back on their best times at school retreat days are usually at the top of the list.

- Work with students who do believe in prayer to develop their skills to be able to plan and lead prayer with younger classes or the whole school community.

- Talk about stories of people for whom prayer has either changed their lives or become the fabric of their lives. Encourage students to do an Internet search about how meditation can bring about physiological changes of the mind and the body. Why do some doctors recommend meditation as a helpful tool for the health of their patients?

- Unless it is a religious education class and the topic is prayer, respect where students are at in the individual faith journeys and ask that if they do not believe in God or prayer that they allow others the space and time to pray. Set up opportunities for prayer that are optional so that those students who are interested can attend (prior to school once a week or once a month; lunch time on a specific day...).

- As part of religious education classes, when exploring the topic of prayer encourage students to create their own prayer journals and keep a record of the type of prayer and what they liked or disliked about it. Adolescents need to be able to talk about, critique and experience many different ways of praying, and develop and explore their own personal preferences so that they have a broad understanding of prayer and can develop prayer skills for life through their Catholic school experiences.

- Ensure that prayer is modelled by teachers to give the message that prayer is important. A teacher who does not believe in prayer and who reads the newspaper during prayer in homeroom time actively conveys the message that prayer is a waste of time. All teachers in Catholic schools need to be supportive of times for prayer, because that is part of the fabric of Catholic (and Christian) life.
What type of prayer experiences do you provide for students?

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Traditional prayers such as:
- Our Father
- Hail Mary
- Glory Be
- Nicene Creed
- Apostles’ Creed
- The Rosary
- Memorare
- Magnificat
- Act of Contrition
- The Angelus
- Morning prayer
- End of the day prayer
- Prayer before meals
- Prayer after meals

Formal and informal prayers such as:
- Prayers of thanksgiving
- Prayers of praise
- Prayers of petition
- Prayers of sorrow
- Spontaneous prayer
- Blessing prayers
- Other

Meditation using:
- Guided Imagery
- Scripture
- Story
- Poetry
- Nature
- Other

Contemplative prayer such as:
- Mantras
- Breath prayer
- Other

Other methods of prayer through:
- Movement
- Journal writing
- Music/song
- Other
What do you know about prayer?

Name ................................................................. Date .................................

For me, prayer is ...........................................................................................................
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In my life God is ............................................................................................................... 
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I am aware of God’s presence in my life when ..................................................................
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I enjoy praying when ...........................................................................................................
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I find it difficult to pray when ............................................................................................
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I would like to learn more about ......................................................................................
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One of my best memories or experiences of prayer is ......................................................
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