

Christian Prayer 3

Structuring Prayer

Why does structure matter?

Prayer is a subtle thing. It flourishes when we are able to relax into it.

Using a common structure for times of prayer is very helpful in preparing prayer times, and helping participants make the most of the opportunity provided. Once this pattern has been learnt, using it restores agency to all participants: they know where they are, they know what to do in the different parts and how to make best use of them.

A familiar structure

All Catholic liturgical prayer (i.e. the public, official prayer of the Church) uses the same 4-fold structure.

- **GATHER**
- **WORD**
- **SYMBOLIC ACTION**
- **SENDING FORTH**

This pattern is most obvious in the celebration of the Mass (Introductory Rites; Liturgy of the Word; Liturgy of the Eucharist; Concluding Rites). It is there also in the Funeral Rites and the Liturgy of the Hours (the Church's times of prayer during the day such as Morning and Evening Prayer), and the Sacraments (for example, Baptism and Confirmation).

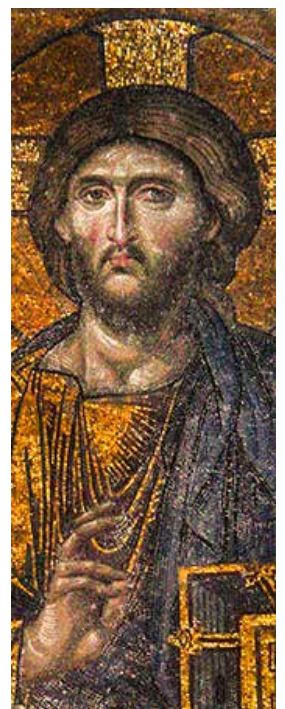
Using this same structure for classroom prayer builds on the structure that pupils may already be familiar with, and helps to reinforce the pattern and help them develop skills in making use of it.

Structure establishes a sort of 'rhythm' in prayer - a basic rhythm over which the 'melody' of any particular prayer time plays according to circumstance. As in music so in times of prayer, rhythm and melody can be varied, but mostly within certain limits, unless one wishes to lose the benefits both rhythm and melody bring to those taking part.

Exploring the Structure.

- **GATHER.** This stage is about beginning the prayer, and uniting the participants in a common enterprise. It can contain a number of elements (on Sundays, the Introductory Rites at Mass include the Opening Song, Sign of the Cross; Greeting; Penitential Act; Gloria and Collect), or just one (for example, making the Sign of the Cross). In every circumstance it is about helping every one present to be present to the prayer. It gives a moment - sometimes quite a long one - when we move from what we were doing to what we are to be about in this time of prayer.
- **WORD.** In the Church's tradition Scripture is our constant food informing and nourishing our lives in Christ. All prayer times should include Scripture (one reading or more, short or long - according to circumstances).
- **SYMBOLIC ACTION.** These actions are evident in the celebration of the Sacraments - for example, the washing and anointings of Baptism; the participation in the sacrificial meal of the Eucharist. In the case of classroom prayer symbolic actions include observing silence together, lectio divina, imaginative prayer, praying a mantra, or doing a stillness exercise, or singing a song of praise, or praying a litany. The list of options is long!

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Prayer can sometimes seem a static thing - yet prayer is much more of a verb than it is a noun. Full, conscious, active participation in prayer is always something to promote and work towards.

- **SENDING FORTH.** Catholic Christians are called to be missionary disciples. Our identity is expressed in the way in which we live - and so bear witness to - our faith in daily life. The Sending Forth is often brief and simple - in itself a reminder that the prayer has ended, and now the time has come for us to bring the fruits of prayer to life. Mass concludes with a Blessing and words of Dismissal. Classroom prayer might similarly end with the Sign of the Cross and a dismissal such as: 'Let us continue our day in the peace of Christ.'

The challenges of such a structure

- It rather pushes us to take seriously the whole business of inviting people to a time of prayer. It encourages us to recognise that there is much more to prayer than 'just saying a prayer'. We need to know why it is worth responding positively to this challenge.
- Sometimes we will be provided with material 'for prayer' that does not observe this structure. Hopefully those higher up the 'food-chain' in school will have spotted this in good time and adapted the materials accordingly. If they have not, and when you appreciate the value of the structure for students, this is something you will want to do - for their benefit.