

Fr James Martin SJ - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about Faith and Religion

The last of five excerpts from a talk given by him at the recent World Youth Day in Lisbon

7. How do I pray?

Many of us are familiar with the Jesuit ideal of “finding God in all things.” And I think most of us are pretty comfortable with the idea of encountering God in the Eucharist and through the sacraments of course, but also relationships, family, school, work, nature, music, art and so on. But here I’m talking about quiet one-on-one time with God. For some people encountering God, or letting God encounter them in prayer, is much harder.

The first thing to know is that everyone can pray. How can I know that? Because we all have within us the desire for prayer, placed in us, once again, by God. You have a desire for union with God. How do I know that? Well, unless you’re doing this for extra credit for some theology class, you all wanted to be at World Youth Day, and you probably want to be here out of a desire for some sort of union, or relationship with God, or Jesus, which is also the goal of prayer. So the main reason for prayer is that God is calling you to it.

One of the key insights about prayer is that there is no one right way to do it. Whatever gets you closer to God is the “right” prayer for you. Some people like Ignatian contemplation, where you imagine yourself in a Gospel scene or speaking with God or with Jesus. Some like *lectio divina*, where you ask certain questions of a Bible text and meditate on it. Some like the examination of conscience, where you review the day to see where God is. But those are sometimes too “content heavy” for some people. So some people like more abstract prayer, like centering prayer. Some like eucharistic adoration. Some like rote prayers like the Rosary. The best way to pray is whatever brings you closer to God. And that varies from person to person.

But let’s get to a FAQ within this FAQ. One of the hardest things for people to understand about prayer is: “What is supposed to happen?”

The most effective invitation to belief, to faith, to religion, to Christianity, to the Catholic Church is not an answer to a question, but a person: Jesus Christ. When I was a Jesuit novice, other Jesuits would say things like, “Oh, God felt so close in prayer.” Or “I felt God inviting me to look at this.” Or, “God said this to me in prayer.” And I said: “What are you talking about? Am I supposed to hear

voices? See visions?” When people talk about having a relationship with God, what are they talking about? Briefly let me go over a few things that can happen when you pray.

First, nothing. A lot of times it feels like nothing is happening in prayer. You’re distracted or you fall asleep or your mind wanders or there’s just...nothing. At least on the surface. Now, any time spent in the presence of the divine is transformative. But sometimes things seem dry. And that’s natural. But other times something does happen. Let’s say you’re anxious about something in your life and the Gospel passage for that day is Jesus stilling the storm at sea. What can happen when you close your eyes? Well, first you can get an insight. You realize, say, that even though the disciples were worried, Jesus was in the boat with them. And you start to think about how God is with you now, in ways you’ve overlooked. It’s an insight. Now, pay attention: this is one way that God has of communicating with you. When people talk about “hearing God” in prayer, this is one way they experience that.

Or you might experience an emotion: You’re sad, because you feel God isn’t in your boat with you. This may be an invitation from God to be honest with God about those feelings. Maybe you have a desire: to lead a more trusting life or to follow Jesus even in the storms. Or you might have a memory of a time when you were afraid and God was with you. Or you might have a feeling, of calm. Or you might even have a few words or phrases that come to mind—not hearing them audibly but like you were remembering the lyrics to a song. All these things—insights, emotions, desires, memories, feelings, words and phrase—are ways that any spiritual director might tell you about, ways that God communicates with us in our prayer. It can happen during adoration, or saying the Rosary, or while doing Ignatian contemplation, or when being quiet after Mass, or doing centering prayer or just walking in nature. All these ways are how God “speaks” in prayer.

These are the FAQs I’ve heard most frequently. I hope they help you and maybe help as you speak with your friends. But remember the most effective invitation to belief, to faith, to religion, to Christianity, to the Catholic Church and even to prayer is not an answer to a question, but a person: Jesus Christ. And one way that works today is by people seeing Jesus Christ in you! Your very life is a tool for evangelization. “Preach the Gospel always,” as St. Francis of Assisi said, “Use words when necessary.” Be Christ for your friends, your family and for the world.