



SILENT HOMILIES

The Words We Did Not Invent

*Prayer, and the Catholic habit
of borrowing a mouth*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



The Words We Did Not Invent

Prayer, and the Catholic habit of borrowing a mouth

Before You Begin



Most of us divide prayer into two piles without noticing. In one pile sit the words we invent when we cannot sleep. In the other sit the words somebody else wrote: the Our Father, a psalm, a Hail Mary, a collect the priest reads a little too quickly. Modern feeling prefers the first pile. It suspects the second of being less sincere.

The Church has never agreed to that ranking. She has always been willing to lend words to people who do not yet know what to say. She has always believed that borrowed words can become, by use, as honest as a cry.

The Catechism begins its long section on prayer with a sentence that is easy to rush past. Prayer is the raising of the heart and mind to God. St John Damascene said it in the eighth century. St Teresa of Avila later called it a conversation with a friend. Neither of them thought the conversation had to start from scratch every morning. Israel already had a Psalter. The disciples already had a prayer they were taught, not one they invented on the spot.

This book is not a timetable that will make you holy by Thursday. It walks through the words we did not invent, and asks why Catholics have never been ashamed of them. Spontaneous prayer matters. Received prayer matters too. They are not rivals.

Contents

Before You Begin

1. Not a private hobby
2. Three times a day, almost from the beginning
3. Our Father, not my Father
4. The Psalms already knew
5. Hours that cut the day
6. The Angelus interrupts work
7. The body prays as well
8. The Rosary is a school, not a machine
9. Mass when you do not feel prayerful
10. Dryness is not always a failure
11. When only a few words will come
12. Prayer is not magic

A Last Word

Sources and Further Reading

If these old words have helped you

Chapter 1

Not a private hobby



A person can pray alone. The Gospel assumes it. Christ tells us to go into the inner room and shut the door. What the Gospel does not assume is that prayer is a hobby we invent in that room without reference to anyone else. Even there, we still belong to the Church. The words we use there are often words the Church has already been saying for a very long time.

This is the first surprise for a modern reader. Catholic prayer is personal, and it is not private in the sense of being unshared. Even the silent minutes after Communion belong to a rite that other people are keeping in other places. When a nun in a choir stall says the same psalm a tired parent is reading from a phone on a bus, they are not performing two different religions. They are taking part in one conversation.

That does not make the parent less sincere because the words were printed. It does not make the nun less personal because she is following a book. The Church has never thought that a prayer becomes ours only when we invent it. Sometimes it becomes ours because we have said it long enough for it to fit.

If you have been told that only spontaneous prayer counts, this book is for you. If the written prayers feel like furniture, it is for you as well. The Catholic tradition is not against the cry that has no script. It is against the idea that a script cannot carry a cry.

Reflection

We are used to thinking that the most honest sentence is the one nobody has said before. That may be true of a love letter. It is a poor rule for prayer. A child does not invent “I am sorry” from nothing. The child is given the sentence, and then one day the sentence is true.

Catholic prayer works in the same way. The Church hands on words because she does not want us to be left speechless when life becomes larger than our vocabulary. The inner room still matters. Christ still tells us to shut the door. What He does not tell us is that we have to invent a new language every time the door closes.

There is a humility in this that modern people find hard. To pray with inherited words is to admit that other people knew God before we did, and that we are joining them. That is not a loss of personality. It is how a person becomes part of a Church.

A Short Prayer

Lord, when I shut the door, let me not be too proud to use the words your people have already learned. Amen.

Chapter 2

Three times a day, almost from the beginning



There is a short Christian handbook from the first generations of the Church called the *Didache*, “the Teaching.” Scholars usually date it to the late first or early second century. It is not Scripture, but it is extremely early. It tells Christians how to baptise, how to keep the Eucharist, and how to pray.

On prayer it is blunt. Pray the Our Father three times a day. That is all. No long explanation. The first Christians, or some of them very close to the first, were already repeating a fixed prayer at set times. They were not waiting for the Middle Ages to invent repetition.

This matters because many people assume that written, repeated prayer is a later Catholic habit that Jesus never intended. The *Didache* makes that story difficult. The prayer they repeated was the one He taught. The rhythm of three times a day already looks like a small office: morning, midday, evening. Later the Church would build a much larger pattern around the hours. The seed is older than most of us think.

We do not have to pretend that every Christian in the year 100 lived this rule perfectly. The point is simpler. From very near the beginning, the Church thought it normal to give people words and a time to say them. Prayer was not left entirely to mood.

Reflection

If the Didache is right, Christians were using Christ's own words as a daily habit before most of the New Testament had even been gathered into one book. That should steady us. We are not being unoriginal when we say the Our Father again. We are doing something the Church has done almost from the start.

Three times a day also says something about time. God is not only for Sunday, or only for the hour when we feel devout. Morning, midday and evening already belong to Him. The first Christians did not wait until they had a monastery. They put prayer into an ordinary day.

We may not manage three formal recitations. Some of us will barely manage one. The old instruction is still worth hearing. Morning, midday and evening already belong to God. Prayer can sit in those ordinary places, even if it is short and the day is crowded.

A Short Prayer

Our Father, teach us again the words you first taught, and let them mark the ordinary hours of this day. Amen.

Chapter 3

Our Father, not my Father



When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He did not give them a method. He gave them words. That fact is easy to miss because we know the words so well. They asked for help, and He answered with a prayer they could repeat.

The first word after the address is not “my.” It is “Our.” Even when a Catholic says the Our Father alone, in a parked car or in a hospital corridor, the prayer remains plural. We do not stop being a people because the room is empty.

The rest of the prayer is equally shared. Give us. Forgive us. Lead us. Deliver us. A person can pour a very private fear into those sentences. Even then, the words will not let the prayer become only about me. They keep bringing the speaker back into the Church.

This is one of the deepest Catholic instincts about prayer. We may go into the inner room. We may not invent a Father who belongs only to us. The God we address is the God of a people, and the people are included in the first word.

Reflection

It is possible to pray the Our Father for years and still treat it as a private conversation that happens to use old language. The first word will not allow that, if we let it work. Our. Not mine only.

That can be a comfort. On a night when you feel abandoned, the prayer refuses to let you be the only child in the house. Other people are saying the same words. Some of them are as tired as you are. Some of them are already dead. You are still included.

It can also be a correction. A prayer that begins with Our will not bless a spirituality that has no room for the awkward neighbour, the difficult parish, or the Church we did not choose. If God is Our Father, then the person next to us at Mass is not an interruption. They belong in the first word as well.

A Short Prayer

Our Father, keep me inside that first word, especially when I would rather pray as if I were the only one. Amen.

Chapter 4

The Psalms already knew



Before the Church had an Our Father, Israel already had a book of prayers. The Psalms are not a theory of prayer. They are prayer that has already happened: praise, fear, anger, grief, bewilderment, hope, repentance, and the occasional wish that God would deal sharply with an enemy.

Catholics inherit this book. Christ prayed it. The Church has never been able to replace it with something nicer. That is one reason the Psalms still unsettle people. They do not only say what a well-behaved religious person is supposed to feel. They say what a human being actually feels when God seems late.

Some of the hardest verses, the ones that ask God to smash enemies, are omitted from the present Liturgy of the Hours. The Church has judged that those lines are easily misunderstood in public recitation. That is a pastoral decision, not a claim that the Bible never contained anger. The Psalter as a whole is still much rawer than a modern hymnbook.

This is a mercy. When your own prayer has shrunk to “please” and “help,” the Psalms already have longer sentences for the same place. You do not have to pretend to be calm. You can use words that other believers have already used in the same kind of trouble.

Reflection

There is a strange comfort in discovering that Scripture already contains words for anger, fear and bewilderment. We are not the first to arrive at those feelings. We are not even the first to say them to God.

That does not make every fierce verse a model for how we should speak about our neighbour. It does mean that holiness is not the same as good manners. The people who prayed the Psalms brought God the truth they had, including the ugly truth.

If you have ever felt that your prayer was too messy to count, the Psalter is not shocked. It has already been there. The Church keeps putting those old poems on our lips because she does not want us to tidy ourselves before we speak.

A Short Prayer

Lord, when my own words fail, let me not be afraid to use the ones your people have already cried. Amen.

Chapter 5

Hours that cut the day



Monks did not invent the idea of praying at set times. They organised it. St Benedict, in the sixth century, arranged the 150 Psalms so that a community would work through them each week. The day was cut into hours with names most Catholics now hear only as labels: the Office of Readings, Lauds in the morning, Terce, Sext and None through the day, Vespers in the evening, Compline before sleep.

The point was not to collect holy minutes. The point was that the whole day should have places where God is deliberately remembered. A community that prays in the morning will be shaped by that morning prayer. Work is not the only thing that is allowed to organise the day.

The present Liturgy of the Hours is the Church's public prayer of praise. Priests and religious are bound to it. Lay people are invited into it. Nobody has to pretend they can live like a sixth-century monk. A nurse on nights, a parent with small children, a student with a deadline, a retired person with a quiet house: each of them can take a psalm, or Morning Prayer, or Night Prayer, and let that be enough.

The interesting Catholic idea is not that everyone should chant seven offices. It is that Tuesday afternoon belongs to God as well as Sunday morning. The hours are a way of saying so with words we did not have to invent before breakfast.

Reflection

We are tempted to give God only the impressive moments: the wedding, the funeral, the conversion, the crisis. The Hours suggest something plainer and better. An ordinary Tuesday can be marked. A tired evening can be handed over. Night Prayer can be said by a person who is not feeling anything in particular.

That is not romantic. It is almost the opposite of romance. It says that God receives the middle of the week, not only the days we would put in a photograph.

If you cannot keep a full office, keep one regular time in the day. Morning, or night, or a psalm at lunch. The Church has already written the words. Your part is to stop long enough to say them.

A Short Prayer

Lord of every hour, receive the middle of this day as well as its edges.

Amen.

Chapter 6

The Angelus interrupts work



The Angelus is a short prayer in honour of the Incarnation. It is traditionally said in the morning, at noon and in the evening. Church bells used to ring it so that people in fields and workshops could stop. The words are simple. The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary. And she conceived of the Holy Spirit. Hail Mary. Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word. And the Word was made flesh. And dwelt among us.

Jean-François Millet painted peasants in a field stopping for that prayer. The painting became famous because it showed something Catholics once took for granted. Work was real. Prayer was allowed to interrupt it. The Incarnation was not saved for Sunday.

The interesting idea is not nostalgia for bells. It is interruption. What happens when the most important Christian claim — that the Word became flesh — is allowed to break an ordinary working day? The Angelus answers: we stop. We remember Mary's yes. We remember that God came into a human life. Then we go back to the field, or the sink, or the email.

You can still say it without a bell. Noon is often the hardest, because noon is busy. That may be why noon needs it.

Reflection

The Incarnation is not only a doctrine for Christmas. It is the claim that God entered the kind of life that includes work, hunger, interruption and tiredness. The Angelus treats that claim as something that may break into a Tuesday.

We are not very good at interruption. We treat work as sacred and prayer as optional. The old custom reversed that for three short moments. It did not make people idle. It reminded them that the work was not the whole of reality.

If you cannot keep three Angelus times, keep one. Let the Incarnation be remembered on an ordinary weekday, not only on Sunday. That is already a Catholic act.

A Short Prayer

Mary, who stopped for the angel, teach us to stop long enough to remember that the Word was made flesh. Amen.

Chapter 7

The body prays as well



Catholics kneel, stand, bow, sit, make the Sign of the Cross, strike the breast, use beads, and sometimes light a candle. None of this is a substitute for the heart. It is a refusal to pretend that the heart lives nowhere.

Christianity believes in the Incarnation. God took a body. It would be odd if prayer then became a purely mental exercise. The body is not an embarrassment that has to wait outside the church. It comes in. It kneels because the person is small. It stands because the person is risen with Christ. It crosses itself because the Cross is the shape of the faith.

St Teresa of Avila, who knew a great deal about interior prayer, still used a book and still knew the difference between a kneeling body and a slouching one. The Church has never taught that the posture does the praying for you. She has taught that we are not brains on sticks.

Beads are part of the same mercy. They give the hands something to do while the mind tries to stay with the mystery. A candle does a similar small job. It is not magic. It is a body agreeing that this time is different from the time before it.

Reflection

People sometimes apologise for needing beads, or a kneeler, or a written card. They think a more spiritual person would pray without props. Catholicism is less embarrassed. It assumes we are flesh and blood.

That is good news for anyone whose mind will not stay still. The hands can keep a Rosary moving while the thoughts wander and come back. Kneeling can express something even when the feelings will not. The Sign of the Cross can begin a prayer before the sentence has arrived.

God is not waiting for us to become disembodied. He came the other way. If the body is good enough for the Incarnation, it is good enough for an Our Father said with tired hands.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who took a body, receive the prayer of this body as well as the prayer of this mind. Amen.

Chapter 8

The Rosary is a school, not a machine



The Rosary is one of the most recognisable Catholic prayers, and one of the most misunderstood. People who do not pray it often think it is a machine for producing repetitions. People who do pray it sometimes treat it that way as well.

The older fifteen-decade Rosary had 150 Hail Marys. That number is not an accident. It echoes the 150 Psalms. For Christians who could not read a Psalter, a string of beads became a way of staying inside the mysteries of Christ's life: joyful, sorrowful and glorious. St Pius V gave the devotion a public shape in the sixteenth century. In 2002 St John Paul II added the Luminous Mysteries, the public life of Christ, so that the school would include the Baptism, Cana, the Kingdom, the Transfiguration and the Eucharist.

Historians argue about exactly how the Rosary grew. Popular legends about its origin should be treated carefully. What is not in dispute is the use. The beads keep the spoken prayer moving. The mysteries give the mind something from the Gospel to stay with. One hand keeps count. The other work is to return, again and again, to Christ.

Repetition here is not the same as emptiness. A mother repeating a sick child's name is not empty. The Rosary is closer to that than to a slot machine. It gives the wandering mind something to return to, and it gives love something to do while it waits.

Reflection

The Rosary remains Christ-centred or it is not doing its job. The Hail Marys are a way of walking around His life with His Mother. If we forget that, the beads become only a count.

There is no need to defend every minute of every Rosary as high contemplation. Most people drift. St Teresa would not have been shocked. The school still works if we keep coming back to the mystery in front of us: a birth, a cross, an empty tomb, a wedding feast.

If you have been told that the Rosary is childish, notice how much of the Gospel it quietly contains. If you have been told that it is the only real prayer, notice that the Church has never said that. It is a school. Schools are for learning, returning, and starting again tomorrow.

A Short Prayer

*Holy Mary, walk us through the life of your Son, and when our minds
wander, bring us back. Amen.*

Chapter 9

Mass when you do not feel prayerful



A person can come to Mass tired, distracted, grieving, worried, irritable, or emotionally empty. Children may be wriggling. Work may still be running in the back of the mind. None of that makes the Mass unreal. Catholic worship is larger than our mood.

That sentence needs care. Attention, disposition and participation still matter. We are not meant to treat the Eucharist as a performance that works whether or not we are there as persons. The Church asks us to listen, to answer, to offer, to receive. What she does not ask is that we manufacture a religious feeling before the entrance hymn.

One small treasure most Catholics hear every Sunday without knowing its name is the Collect. After the Gloria, or after the Penitential Act on quieter days, the priest says, “Let us pray.” There is a silence. Then he gathers the prayer of the people into one sentence, which changes with the day. That is why it is called a collect. It collects. Your tiredness, the person’s grief two benches along, the child’s restlessness, and the Church’s memory of this feast are gathered into words none of you had to invent on the spot.

You can be present at that gathering even when you feel nothing. The prayer is still being said. You can add your amen. Sometimes that is the most honest thing you can say.

Reflection

Feelings are not nothing. They are also not the measure of whether God has been worshipped. A wedding can be real when the couple are nervous. A funeral can be real when the family can barely speak. Mass can be real when you are only just there.

The Collect is a quiet proof of that. Somebody else speaks a prayer that includes you. You may not have followed every clause. You are still included. That is how a Church prays: not only as a row of private souls, but as a people whose words can be gathered.

If you have stayed away because you did not feel holy enough to go, the Church has never required that feeling as a ticket. Come tired. Come distracted. Try to be present. Let the words you did not invent do some of the work.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, gather what I can bring today, even when it is only tiredness and an
amen. Amen.*

Chapter 10

Dryness is not always a failure



St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross both knew that prayer is not always consoling. Teresa wrote about the difficulty of keeping the mind on God. John wrote about a deeper purification that later writers called the dark night. Those two things are not the same, and it does harm to mix them up.

Most of what ordinary people call dryness is more ordinary still. We are tired. We are distracted. We are bored. We have had a row. We slept badly. The Catechism is calm about this. Distraction is a normal struggle in prayer. The answer is not panic. It is to come back, gently, to the words or the presence we intended.

A deeper dryness, in which God seems absent for a long time and the soul cannot find its usual sweetness, may need a wise guide. It is not a badge. It is not proof that you have become a mystic. It is also not proof that you have failed. The saints did not treat every blank hour as a verdict on their character.

The useful Catholic habit, in almost all of these states, is to keep using words we did not invent. A psalm. An Our Father. A decade. Night Prayer. Those prayers keep us in front of God when our own sentences will not come. Faithfulness can look less impressive than enthusiasm. It may be more honest.

Reflection

We live in a culture that treats strong feeling as the proof that something is real. Prayer does not always cooperate. A person can love God and still find the morning office flat. A person can be faithful and still spend a Rosary thinking about the boiler.

That is not ideal. It is also not a disgrace. The Church has always known that the mind changes from one day to the next. The question is not whether you felt holy. The question is whether you stayed.

If the dryness lasts and becomes a heavy absence, tell someone who knows the difference between tiredness and a deeper night. Until then, keep the small practices. Inherited prayers are very useful when we feel empty. They do not depend on us having a strong feeling that day.

A Short Prayer

Lord, when prayer feels empty, keep me from leaving. Receive even the dry words I borrowed because I had none of my own. Amen.

Chapter 11

When only a few words will come



Christians have always known short prayers. Lord, have mercy. Come, Holy Spirit. Jesus, I trust in you. A person in pain, or in a queue, or on a night shift, may have no strength for a psalm. A few words can still be prayer.

The East has treasured the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It is repeated, often with the breath, until it becomes a way of staying with Christ through the day. The West is not identical. It has its own short cries. Both traditions know the same human limit. Sometimes there is only enough strength for a name.

These are sometimes called arrow prayers, because they are brief and aimed. They are not a replacement for the Mass or the Hours. They are what you can do when the larger forms will not fit the next ten minutes.

They also protect us from the idea that prayer must be a speech. A cry can be a sentence of two words. The Church has never despised that. She has only asked that the cry be real, and that it be aimed at the living God rather than at a mood.

Reflection

There is a kindness in the Church's store of short sentences. Somebody who loved God before we did left a line that can be said in a corridor. We do not have to wait until we have composed something adequate.

This is not an excuse for never learning the larger prayers. It is a mercy for the days when the larger prayers are more than we can carry. The same Church that gives you Vespers also gives you "Lord, have mercy."

If all you can manage tonight is the name of Jesus, that is not nothing. The name was given to be used. Use it. Then, when you can, return to the longer words as well. They will still be there. They were never only for the strong.

A Short Prayer

Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me. Hold me in the few words I can manage. Amen.

Chapter 12

Prayer is not magic



Because Catholics use set words, candles, beads and hours, people sometimes treat prayer as a technique for making God do something. That is not the faith. Prayer is not a vending machine. It does not hire God. A devotion is not a contract. Asking does not guarantee the outcome we request.

The Gospel still tells us to ask. Christ is not embarrassed by petition. Give us this day our daily bread is a request. So are most of the Psalms. The Church has never taught that we should stop asking because the answer may be no, or not yet, or different. She has taught that we should not confuse asking with control.

Prayer also cannot replace justice. Religious practice does not excuse cruelty or dishonesty. A person who says the Hours and cheats a neighbour has not found a loophole. The words we borrow include “forgive us, as we forgive.” They have a habit of turning round and looking at the speaker.

Popular piety can be deep and good. Superstition begins when we treat a prayer as a spell, or a saint as a tool, or a number of repetitions as a payment. The Church honours popular devotion and still has to keep saying the same sentence. We are speaking to a Father. We are not operating a machine.

Reflection

The temptation is always to want prayer to work like a skill. If I say the right words, the right number of times, the right thing will happen. Catholicism will not give us that bargain. It gives us a relationship, which is slower and less tidy.

That can sound like a disappointment until you notice what it protects. If prayer were magic, God would be smaller than the formula. Because it is not magic, the old words remain what they always were: a way of standing in front of Someone who is free, and good, and not at our disposal.

Ask anyway. Ask for the job, the healing, the child, the peace. Use the words you were taught. Then leave the result where it belongs. The prayer was still true. It did not become untrue because God answered in a different way.

A Short Prayer

Father, teach us to ask without trying to manage you, and to keep the words honest when the answer is not the one we wanted. Amen.

A Last Word



Sometimes we think a prayer becomes ours only when we invent it. Catholic Christianity has never believed that.

Christ taught His friends words. Israel had already given them a Psalter. The first Christians repeated the Our Father. Monks cut the day with psalms. Ordinary people stopped in fields when the Angelus rang. Children learned sentences they did not yet understand.

Then one day there is a hospital, or a funeral, or a diagnosis, or a night when no original sentence will come. And the old words are there. They fit.

That is not sentiment. It is how a Church keeps people from being left speechless. We use words we were given. After enough years, those old prayers can speak for us more truly than the sentences we make up under pressure.

Spontaneous prayer still matters. Tell God what is happening in your own words when you can. Just do not despise the words you were given. They may be the ones that last.

Sources and Further Reading

Sacred Scripture: Matthew 6:5–13 and Luke 11:1–4; the Book of Psalms; 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), chapter 8, on praying the Our Father three times a day. A first- or early second-century Christian handbook; not Scripture, but very early.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2558–2865, especially 2559–2565 on the nature of prayer, 2697–2699 on times of prayer, 2700–2724 on vocal, meditative and contemplative prayer, 2729–2733 on distraction and dryness, and 2759–2865 on the Our Father.

General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours; the present four-week Psalter, including the pastoral omission of certain imprecatory verses from public recitation.

The Rule of St Benedict, chapters 8–20, on the arrangement of the psalms and the hours of the monastic day.

St John Damascene, on prayer as the raising of the mind to God; St Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*; St John of the Cross, on purification in prayer. These last should not be used to label every ordinary dryness a “dark night.”

St Pius V and the public form of the Rosary in the sixteenth century; St John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), on the Luminous Mysteries.

On the Angelus: the traditional thrice-daily recitation and the ringing of bells; Jean-François Millet’s painting *The Angelus* as a later image of that custom, not as its origin.

The Order of Mass, on the Collect as the prayer that gathers the petitions of the people after the invitation “Let us pray.”

If these old words have helped you



Catholic prayer survives because words are handed on. A child learns an Our Father. Years later those same words may be there when that same person is frightened, grieving, or standing in a hospital corridor. This booklet is about that handing on.

You received this Little Treasure freely. Silent Homilies is trying, in a very small way, to pass on what the Church already knows, in language an ordinary person can hear, and to keep the booklets available so that the next reader can find them too.

Making them takes real time. There is research. There are sources to find and historical claims to check. Some attractive stories have to be left out because they cannot be verified. Then there is writing, rewriting, editing, preparing the finished booklet, keeping the website going, and beginning the next title.

If you are able to support Silent Homilies, I would be truly grateful. Your help gives me more time and resources to research, write and prepare future Little Treasures, while continuing to make them freely available. In that modest way, one reader can help the next booklet reach another.



Silent Homilies

www.silenthomilies.com

© 2026 Silent Homilies. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the copyright holder, except as permitted by applicable law.