

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

When I was a child, I was good enough at school — but I didn’t love homework. It was hard enough having to sit through lessons the first time!

I remember in year 5 we were asked to chart the phases of the moon for a month. Thirty boxes to draw! The teacher said that on days when it was cloudy, or if we simply forgot, we could just write that down instead. Well, twenty-five of my boxes ended up saying either “cloudy,” or “forgot” or “too dark.” Coincidentally it was only ever too cloudy from my house, not from my friends.

Now, though, I appreciate my teachers a lot more. I understand the importance of learning — not just in school, but in life and in faith.

Over the past few weeks, we’ve been reflecting on prayer — beginning with prayer as relationship, then as routine. Today, I want to bring this little series to a close by looking at formation:

the importance of continuing to learn and grow, and to let the Lord teach us.

Because the only reason we even have the Our Father is that the disciples once saw Jesus praying and said, “Lord, teach us to pray.” They were already people of faith, steeped in Scripture, who said the mandatory Jewish prayers — yet even they realised that prayer must always be learned. None of us is born knowing how to pray.

The word *disciple* literally means student. Disciples are people who learn. And while our Lord was known as a miracle worker and healer, he was known above all as a teacher — Rabbi. And this teacher expected His followers to keep learning and growing. Since a priest carries on Jesus’ work is no surprise then that the Church says the priest’s primary job is to teach, just as it was the main thing our Lord spent his life doing. That only works, of course, if people want to be taught and are open to learning.

My teaching reaches its widest audience at Mass on the weekend through the homily — but it was never meant to be

our only source of formation. The homily is deliberately short — ten minutes is short! Because historically, people would return later in the day to hear a much longer sermon or to take part in study and catechesis. When you read lives of great missionaries like Francis Xavier you read of how in the afternoon, they would go round the streets ringing a bell, so people knew the sermon was about to start. St Francis writes in a letter that as the bell sounded, children would come running, then their parents would gather, and soon a small crowd would form — ready to hear the Gospel. People would be given the chance to learn and to mature in their faith.

We often speak about prayer as relationship — a conversation with God. Think of how children learn to speak: a few words grow into real conversation. The same is true in prayer. Our first simple prayers can deepen into a genuine dialogue with God. And different kinds of prayer suit different people: some find life in the Scriptures, others in the Rosary, others in silent adoration. But we need to learn what works for each of us. I don't pray now like I did even 2 years ago.

So learning and formation is important, but many Catholics don't receive much formation after Confirmation — apart from perhaps marriage preparation. But, if our faith is as important as we say it is, we should nurture it the way we do other things. We all have had ongoing formation in work, certainly in school, and even in things we do for fun. Whether music, sport, or a hobby — we're always learning, improving, keeping up to date. Our faith deserves the same attention.

Think of a meal: you can't cook without a main ingredient, but that alone doesn't make it a full dish. If you try to eat it alone with no seasoning or sides, it'll taste bland. We can think of Sunday Mass as the main ingredient of our faith. It's necessary. But like the main ingredient of a meal, it's not enough. It's not meant to be enough. It's meant to be accompanied by other things. Maybe there are some young people and older people who stop going to Mass because they've never really experienced more than that, they think it's boring or bland, and they don't know that there are other things they're meant to add to their religious

experience. The Acts of the Apostles tells us the early Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.” That’s the pattern we want to recover.

This is also where the parish comes in. Parents often say, “We brought up our children the same way we were brought up,” and yet they notice their children don’t practise the faith as much. It’s not that they did something wrong — it’s that many of the structures that once supported faith have weakened or disappeared: Catholic secondary schools and the necessary transport, large extended families, various church groups, and trips to religious events.

With many of these structures not there as much, the parish has to step up. And that’s what we’re trying to do here — to create more opportunities for people to grow. I won’t repeat everything we’ve been offering recently, but I do want to mention one practical thing: our parish meeting on Thursday, October 23rd.

It’ll be a chance not only for me to share what’s happening, but also to hear what you think of the changes, your suggestions, and ideas. We’ll be sat at tables, not in rows, and there’ll be opportunities for discussion. Even if you don’t say a thing, there’ll hopefully be people on your table who’ve been involved in volunteering, on the parish council or background planning, who have come to Alpha, or the youth groups who can share their experiences of those events.

This homily series on prayer and having a relationship with God as his adopted children — a series we’ve been on for 6 weeks ends today. But because God has a sense of humour, the readings at Mass next week are all about prayer, so I get to talk about it again. I hope this series has helped people to make some practical changes to their prayer life. You’ll probably never hear a priest spend so long talking about prayer again. Soon I’ll also prepare a handout with practical suggestions drawn from the series — simple ways to grow in prayer, to build a routine, and to find your next step. Because each of us has a next step. The important thing is that we don’t stand still.

The apostles asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” We should have that same desire to want to learn — and the confidence that Jesus continues to teach us through His Church, through the parish.