

Portals of Prayer: Tending to the Spirit

It's so easy to cede our time and attention to everyday pressures, commitments and responsibilities. And while there is a lot of focus on the importance of building resilience and avoiding burnout in Catholic health care settings, *Health Progress* wanted to share some of the ways people attend to and strengthen their spiritual lives. Whether vowed religious or a layperson, Catholic or from another spiritual tradition, we asked several people to share aspects of their prayer and spiritual practice in hope that others may find it illuminating and to serve as a reminder of the importance of tending to our own spirits.

EMILY SOUTHERTON, BCC, MA

Mission Leader, Holy Cross Health, part of Trinity Health, Silver Spring, Maryland

What's one spiritual practice you have integrated and consider core to your prayer and spiritual life?

Regularly, I practice a variety of spiritual practices — to name a few, journaling, a sacred pause, active listening and community service, but recently I have leaned into cultivating and honing a spiritual practice of extending hospitality at every touch point. Whether at work or among friends, often I am told that my “Midwest roots” of hospitality show themselves as I extend hospitality in various contexts. At its core, hospitality involves creating a sacred space where individuals feel valued, heard and cared for as a whole being — physically, emotionally and spiritually. I have found that extending or receiving moments of hospitality is a simple effort with profound impact that builds outstanding relationships.

The practice of welcoming others as they are and helping them feel comfortable is a simple gesture, found in sacred texts and amidst cultural and religious traditions, that leads to genuine connection while fostering personal growth. Extending hospitality has not only deepened my faith but, at times, provided me with a sense of



Handout photo

Emily Southerton, a Holy Cross Health mission leader, engages in hospitality as a spiritual practice.



purpose and meaning. Viewing hospitality as a spiritual practice, like in the sacred text of Luke 10:38-42 with Martha, Mary and Jesus, transforms hospitality from a mere act into a pathway for spiritual enrichment and community building.

I have been surprised how encountering hospitality has helped me move beyond surface-level interactions and encouraged me to genuinely listen to others, embody servant leadership, and inspire hope within my spirit.

During my childhood, I spent a few years living in Galicia, Spain. I lived in a town that was on the Camino de Santiago pathway. I remember regularly seeing pilgrims journeying through Ferrol to Santiago de Compostela. These pilgrims would often ask for directions, lodging locations or grocery stores, and I would take joy in helping them fulfill their needs. Helping patients, strangers, new community members or pilgrims find their way in unfamiliar circumstances is the start to building trusting relationships and serving one another. At times, I have found that offering or seeing hospitality can touch a multitude of people, creating a ripple effect of culture change.

Is it helpful to engage in this prayer or spiritual act in a particular environment?

This practice of hospitality can be offered in a variety of environments. It can be as simple as helping community members find their way within the care setting or post discharge. Hospitality only takes a second or two, and is best engaged in offering or receiving, and by being fully present. I try to find new ways to offer hospitality, and that is what continues to help me feel rooted in this practice.

In addition to this, at least three times a year I try to volunteer with other community partners to strengthen relationships within the community and know deeply the needs of our neighbors. A professor once told me, "Theology without ministry is like work without purpose." This phrase has stuck with me and has informed my understanding of hospitality and ministry.

Who/what do you focus on?

I focus on extending openness, support, creating connections and purpose. In focusing on the present and the person before me, I experience moments of sacredness and deeply rich encounters. For example, when previously work-

ing in downtown Los Angeles — 10 blocks from "Skid Row," known as the most underserved and unhoused population in America — I have come to see hospitality not as a planned "tea or coffee party" with family or friends but more as a radical understanding that our duty to our community is to welcome and offer hospitality to all members of our community, even those who have been estranged or living without basic needs met. My understanding of hospitality means offering comfort to strangers and especially to those who depend on it for their livelihood.

How often do you engage in this spiritual practice?

I try to engage in this practice as a lived charism or as often as possible. It can be as simple as offering a caregiver or community member a glass of water or listening and accompanying a leader in their needs during instances of challenges, joys and transitions. As a department leader and with colleagues, I regularly organize formal and informal hospitality events. This practice derives from my experience working in a rural emergency department as a chaplain, where I often came in touch with members of the community who depended upon the services we offered. I realized that as a collaborative member of the community, we could do more together than individually.

How is it helpful for your personal growth or resilience and to others?

This practice has been tremendously helpful to me in my own personal growth because it has strengthened my understanding of community, purpose and identity. I have joined people in their reality and invited others to join me in moments of need — creating fluid relationships that build trust. Practicing hospitality as a spiritual practice is a moral responsibility. It means taking responsibility for more than oneself and seeing our connected nature as one.

What specific learnings do you find helpful that others may learn from?

There are several books that are written on hospitality as a spiritual tradition. I recommend reading Henri Nouwen's *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* and Christine D. Pohl's *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*.



Photo by Jerry Naunheim Jr./CHA

Fr. Joseph J. Driscoll, DMin, celebrates Mass at the 2024 Catholic Health Assembly in San Diego.

FR. JOSEPH J. DRISCOLL, DMin

Director of Ministry Formation and Organizational Spirituality,
Redeemer Health, Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania

What one spiritual practice have you integrated that is core to your regular prayer and spirituality? Do you set aside dedicated time for this?

Journaling is at the heart of my daily prayer practice combined with, and concluded usually by, the Liturgy of the Hours (Morning Prayer). The actual writing in my journal can go anywhere from 20-90 minutes, averaging about 45 minutes. The spiritual rule guiding length of time in any prayer form came from a retreat long ago led by Fr. George Krieger, SJ, who said, "Pray always. Abbreviate it when you must, expand it when you can, but never omit."

Is it helpful to engage in this prayer or spiritual act in a particular environment?

A long-standing and powerful metaphor from my early spiritual journey imagines and brings to life

the environment for my prayer: walking or running through a field. The field is endlessly wide open and free, and so are the pages of the journal. Like my pen, I just start walking across the pages. The journal itself is the environment for walking or writing. It is a specific, substantial hardcover book that I can hold in my hand after the practice, look at, and know that I just met the Divine in this sacred time and space. This imaginative setting allows me to write any time or place: on a plane, a park bench, a beach, beyond my "at home" spaces that are quiet and familiar.

Who do you focus on?

Jesus. One-to-one, second-person singular, addressed as "Lord." I utilize a method akin to Julia Cameron's "morning pages" in *The Artist's Way*. She counsels the novice to fill three pages



I can tell the difference, and I suspect others can, too, when I am praying or not praying. When I begin the day this way, I know where I am in the moment, and I know my Lord knows and loves me right there.

every morning no matter what, sort of like a “free association” methodology. I often start simple, even mundane, and just follow my pen, my heart. I might write, “Lord, I am loving this quiet and the sun on my face,” or, “Lord, this person in the seat beside me wants to talk. I am getting aggravated. Help me to be kind.” And then, often, I go to places way past: to worries real and current, long-ago hurts surfacing, joy emerging seemingly out of nowhere. It is always conversational with the Lord.

How often do you engage in this spiritual practice?

Regularly, almost every day. There are two important specifics about this spiritual practice for me. First, over many years I have overcome the inner editor responding to “What if anybody ever reads these?” No editor. And second, I almost never go back to read the past entries of now dozens of journals.

How is it helpful for your personal growth or resilience? In what ways does it benefit you and others?

“You are what you eat,” as the saying goes. I am more spiritually grounded, reflective, available to myself, others and God. The end results are less important than the process. I can tell the differ-

ence, and I suspect others can, too, when I am praying or not praying. When I begin the day this way, I know where I am in the moment, and I know my Lord knows and loves me right there.

Can you provide some learnings or spiritual prompts that you find helpful that others may learn from?

The practice is rooted in the unknown. I intentionally try to do this first in my prayer, so that my unconscious, particularly, has the freedom to express the deeper conversations of the dreaming night, for example. Rooted in the unknown, the fruit is a surprise, more often than not. It is seldom dramatic but consistently revealing. Lots of emotion can, at times, stop my pen. God’s word, specifically familiar scriptures, will be spoken back to me. I capitalize them when writing, as they just come.

Recently, a six-page, tiny script entry went places I never imagined. Suddenly, the psalmist’s words, “in your light, we see light,” from Psalm 36:10. These words brightened all the darker pages of this atypical, longer time in prayer. The surprise? When I finished, closed the journal and went to Morning Prayer, the very first refrain on the page read, “In your light, we see light.” A very real, down-to-earth, two-way conversation developed. This always occurs.

DEMETRE SKLIRIS, MD, MS, MNS

Family Medicine physician at Avera W. Benson Road clinic, Sioux Falls, South Dakota;
Avera McGreevy Executive Committee; Regional Medical Director of Clinic Quality

What one spiritual practice have you integrated that is core to your regular prayer and spirituality?

As an Orthodox Christian, a core spiritual practice for me is preparing for and participating in the Divine Liturgy. Prior to receiving the Divine Mystery (the Holy Eucharist), I prepare through

prayer, fasting, confession, repentance and daily Christian living. This involves striving to remain in a state of repentance by asking for forgiveness, forgiving others, and showing love and compassion. Especially during the Lenten season, I make an effort to read more spiritual books by the Church Fathers and the saints, focusing on



Photo courtesy of Avera Health

Demetre Skliris, MD, left, a family medicine physician, visits with Abby Schulte, RN, at Avera W. Benson Road clinic in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Religious icons in the office serve as reminders of Avera's mission, while he says acts of compassion and service affirm his purpose as he treats patients.

practicing humility while continually examining my life. The goal is to be spiritually ready to partake of the Divine Mystery, the Holy Eucharist.

Do you set aside dedicated time for this?

As a family, we pray our morning and evening prayers together whenever possible. We also pray before meals and before engaging in various tasks or activities, even if we are alone, and especially in starting our workday and before driving.

In the Bible, 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18 (ESV) states: "Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." In the morning, after praying and upon arriving at work, I make the sign of the Cross, asking for Christ's blessing to enlighten my mind and heart so that I may serve Him and treat my patients appropriately. Throughout the day, I often use my prayer rope — a black wool bracelet made of 33 knots and a cross, used by Orthodox Christians and Eastern Catholics — to recite the Jesus Prayer, which is a brief prayer core to Orthodox Christianity, or to ask the Holy Virgin to intercede on our behalf, much like Catholics use a rosary.

Is it helpful to engage in this prayer or spiritual act in a particular environment?

Any place is a good place to pray. We often become busy and distracted in the world, so I make it a priority to redirect my focus through constant prayer. There are times when patients share difficult experiences, and while I'm actively listening, I may also be praying for them internally, or sometimes even praying with them. It is a wonderful opportunity to practice my faith at work.

What about the environment is beneficial to you?

There are times when it's easier to pray in a quiet environment, whether I'm with family or alone, without distractions. I prefer being alone when reading books by the Church Fathers or the saints, as I like to underline, highlight and take notes, which is challenging to do amidst external distractions. However, I very much appreciate how I am able to live my faith at work and pray at work.

Who/what do you focus on?

I focus on reciting the Jesus Prayer, which serves as a reminder to seek God's presence in my every-



day life while reflecting on repentance or praying for a patient and their family. Reciting the Jesus Prayer helps the words enter my heart and reinforces a spiritual habit that cultivates a more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

How often do you engage in this spiritual practice?

I engage in the Jesus Prayer or ask the Holy Virgin to intercede on our behalf frequently throughout the day. Regarding my passion for learning about Church history, I read books by the Fathers of the Church and the saints and visit monasteries to venerate the saints. I do this as often as I am able, particularly during Great Lent.

How is it helpful for your personal growth or resilience?

Prayer is a humble form of communication with God. Prayer leads to humility, which opens the door to many other blessings. I often ask myself, “Who am I without Christ?” If I am not growing spiritually, I feel spiritually thirsty, sensing that something is lacking in my life. By attending the Divine Liturgy and adequately preparing to receive the Holy Mysteries while striving to live a life in Christ, I can continue to grow in my faith and work toward communion with Him.

In what ways does it benefit you and others?

My spiritual obligation and passion are to grow in

Christ — for my own salvation, for my family and for my patients. I believe I can grow in my faith at work by serving Christ through my service to my patients, treating them while Jesus, the great physician, heals them.

Can you provide some specific learnings or spiritual prompts that you find helpful that others may learn from?

I have a beautiful icon carved in the shape of a cross in every exam room. Each cross features a colorful depiction of a Bible scene created by the nuns from a monastery we visit. Patients often comment on these vibrant icons, which I believe serve as beautiful reminders of our purpose here at Avera. Additionally, I have a large photo of my three children standing in the Church of St. Timothy in my mom’s home town in Greece, which is so beautifully decorated with iconography depicting scenes from the Bible.

I would guess that at least once a week, a patient will ask me about the icons or the photo of the church. I believe these icons and photos act as symbols of our Christian faith and serve as reminders of the Avera mission, while our acts of compassion and service will affirm in one’s mind the reason and purpose in why we are seeing them today. I appreciate being able to live and grow in my faith within the ethos that is Avera as I continue to serve Christ by serving my patients.

SR. CATHERINE O’CONNOR, CSB, PhD

Congregational Leadership Team, Brigidine Sisters; Board of Directors,
Covenant Health, Tewksbury, Massachusetts

What one spiritual practice have you integrated that is core to your regular prayer and spirituality?

On my journey thus far, there have been many influences which have shaped and changed my spiritual practice and have been a great source of hope. In a post-Vatican II environment and the deepening awareness of the call of the laity, a broader sense of spirituality has developed. I was very influenced by the Better World Movement, which invited us to a practical hope-filled living of the Vatican II call to be “The People of God.”

In recent years, a spiritual practice which I find

sustaining and hope-filled is Centering Prayer. I made a silent retreat some years ago where the retreatants were introduced to Centering Prayer. I was grateful to later attend a workshop given by Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault at Boston College, and one at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, given by Thomas Keating, OCSO, the founder of the Centering Prayer method. The phrase “Silence is God’s first language. Everything else is a poor translation” is attributed to him.

The core understanding of Centering Prayer is freeing and hope-filled in itself: that with Baptism, we participate in the life of the Trinity through



Once Films

Part of the spiritual practice of Sr. Catherine O'Connor, CSB, PhD, draws inspiration from the founder of Centering Prayer, Thomas Keating, OCSO, who taught: "Silence is God's first language. Everything else is a poor translation."

grace. In spending time in Centering Prayer, we are connecting with the Divine life within us. We choose a word which represents our desire to surrender to God's presence and action in our lives. We recall our sacred word as we gently breathe in and exhale.

Do you set aside dedicated times for this?

I generally spend 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening in Centering Prayer. I have a favorite place where I sit and have the Bible and a lighted candle on a coffee table. Distractions come, and as I become aware of them, I come back to my sacred word, which I recall slowly. I find that Centering Prayer keeps me grounded and growing in faith and self-knowledge. I am also more keenly aware of relationships, of people who are ill or perhaps experiencing challenging events

in their lives, and very conscious of the need for hope in our world. Centering Prayer invites me to continue on a hope-filled journey in life.

Are there particular spiritual prompts or experiences that you find helpful that others may learn from?

Pope Francis proclaimed the theme of the Jubilee Year 2025 as Pilgrims of Hope. The theme is an invitation to embark on a hopeful journey of faith and transformation. The theme is also an invitation to reconnect with our journey of faith and sources of hope thus far. I find myself recalling my family, where my journey of faith began, my religious community, and the many people whom I have met on life's journey who have witnessed hope in their lives. The theme also invites me to reflect over a lifetime of vary-

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ing spiritual practices and how I developed a sense of the sacred.

I remember a clear October evening when I was about 7 years of age. I was walking home from the evening devotions in Church, and I gazed up at the sky. I found the star-filled night sky utterly amazing and was filled with a profound sense of awe and awareness of the God of Creation. Nature has continued to be a source of spirituality and hopefulness for me.

As in every person's life, life has had its challenges. However, I have found life overall to be

hope-filled. I have been privileged to meet so many hope-filled people on the way as I served in education, parish ministry, seminary education and hospital ministry. In each of these ministries, I have encountered many people who have been models of hope for me, sometimes in the midst of major challenges. I recall a young man who was paralyzed from the waist down, due to spina bifida. I said to him one day, "D., you never complain." He responded: "And what do I have to complain about?" He surely modeled being "a pilgrim of hope" on life's journey.



Photo by Mike Kane

Justin Hurtubise, chief mission officer with Providence, center, shares a moment of prayer with colleagues Jai Kahl, executive director patient experience, left, and Cara Santucci, chief of staff to the CEO.

JUSTIN HURTUBISE

Chief Mission Officer, Providence, Spokane, Washington

What one spiritual practice have you integrated that is core to your regular prayer and spirituality?

Described in a single word, it would be "silence." Both physically and spiritually, quieting mind, body and soul to make myself available. Silence can be perceived as doing nothing, but it can be quite active. It involves practicing the hard work of listening well.

Do you set aside dedicated time for this?

The goal is to always have dedicated time in silence. I used to be very rigid about this as a spiritual practice, scheduling a specific time each day to pray in silence. But then life got busier. I would find myself feeling guilty if I missed my scheduled time due to a personal or work commitment. Learning to integrate my spirituality into my day has been more helpful than trying to

compartmentalize my prayer life as something separate. I still seek time in silence but am more flexible as to when this happens.

Is it helpful to engage in this prayer or spiritual act in a particular environment?

The Gospel accounts of Jesus tell us that he frequently prayed outdoors in the mountains, wilderness and the garden. This resonates with me. Spending time in nature seems to clear away all distractions, and true spiritual rest can be achieved. At the Providence hospitals where I work, we have established healing gardens specifically for this purpose. We also have chapels in our ministries. When Jesus was missing as a child, he was found “in my Father’s house.” Chapels and churches also facilitate silent prayer; I particularly like Eucharistic adoration.

Who/what do you focus on?

In the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, the advice is provided that before prayer or meditation to pause and “consider how the Lord my God looks upon me.” St. Thérèse of Lisieux describes prayer as “a glance toward heaven.” I find this helpful.

How long/often do you engage in this spiritual practice?

Earlier in my life, the goal was to commit myself to a Holy Hour, but I started to beat myself up if I couldn’t make an entire hour. What used to be a Holy Hour has become more of Holy Moments. Whether I have one minute or 30, it is always worth it to pray. The Sisters of Providence are known as living by the saying, “The streets are our chapel,” and 1 Thessalonians 5:17 encourages “pray without ceasing”; this contemplative in-action mindset has been beneficial. That being said, I find I am my best self with dedicated time in prayer. It is like any relationship; it is hard to have a healthy relationship if you never spend time with that person. Prayer is no different, it is a relationship with the Divine. There is no substitute for time. However, I have become more open on how this time is spent, believing the Divine is found everywhere and in all things.

How is it helpful for your personal growth or resilience?

I really like [Abraham] Maslow’s Hierarchy of

Needs. For those not familiar, it is a pyramid of personal needs in order of priority with physiology (food and water) as the foundation, working up through safety, belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization (morality and creativity) as the top. However, if I were to revise the hierarchy of needs pyramid, I would put a larger base/foundation under physiological needs, called “spiritual needs.” Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew articulates that we “do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.” When I get this order right in my life, resilience becomes easier.

In what ways does it benefit you and others?

I wish I could easily point to how it benefits me and others, but this can be hard at times. I think we live in a very instant gratification-based culture, and only on rare and special occasions is prayer instantly gratifying. I think of it more like exercise and proper nutrition; it can be difficult in the moment. But if I take the long perspective, I notice changes in myself and in my interactions. It can be tempting to think prayer doesn’t work. There have been many times I have been hesitant or slow to pray, but I have never once regretted praying, even if the outcomes are different than I expected.

Can you provide some specific learnings that you find helpful that others may learn from?

When I was newer to my spiritual journey, I remember going to confession and the priest asking me if I was more of a “rosary or divine mercy chaplet kind of person.” I panicked; I didn’t know there was such a thing as a “rosary person” or “divine mercy chaplet person.” In fact, I had never even heard of the divine mercy chaplet. (It’s a Catholic prayer devotion based on Jesus’ revelations to St. Maria Faustina Kowalska.) This question haunted me: “Was I a rosary or divine mercy chaplet kind of person?” I thought I had to be one or the other and that I wouldn’t find peace until I discovered my unique charism.

Ironically, I found peace when I gave up trying to answer that question. Maybe I am both a rosary and divine mercy chaplet kind of person, maybe I am rosary one day and divine mercy the other, or maybe I am neither. I have found the best spiritual practice is the one I actually practice. It is called “practice,” not “competition,” for a reason. We need to be kind to ourselves.

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