



The Longing of Prayer

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Evangelical Lutheran Church
of Finland, Bishops' Letter, 2023

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To the reader

The Longing of Prayer is the second booklet published in a series of bishops' letters. The series publishes the joint statements on current issues by the bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The subject of the first publication in the series was *Raamattu ja kirkko (The Bible and the Church)* (2021). The bishops' letters are appearing in print and online.

The bishops' letters are aimed at both the general public and church workers and parishioners. They are intended for everyone with an interest in exploring the important questions of Christian faith and the world we share.

This bishops' letter sheds light on prayer. It reflects on the essence and significance of prayer in human life. The topic is approached from the perspective of both personal and corporate prayer. The bishops show that prayer can serve as the day's rhythm, leaving everything in God's hands. When you pray, you can rely on familiar common

prayers or look for ways to pray that suit you. In the letter the bishops also talk about how they pray themselves.

The bishops' letter encourages us to pray and to deepen our understanding of prayer. It opens to the reader how prayer directs us away from ourselves towards others, creation and the world. As people who pray, we can be a force together to change the world – this is the message of this bishops' letter.

Kirkkonummi 5 September 2023

Editorial board

Longing

For several years running Finland has been chosen as the happiest country in the world. We are also among the most prosperous countries in the world – but like other places, wellbeing isn't evenly distributed. Coinciding with the growth of material wellbeing, personal alienation and alienation from others have increased. Living in a performance-oriented society amidst the constant flood of communication easily severs our connection with our inner selves. We are tested by various crises, and many are seeking meaning and purpose in life. We long for peace and presence, and fellowship with others and with something greater than ourselves. We are looking for hope in life.

Prayer has helped people at various times. The power of prayer is strong. It doesn't always need words – it is present in breathing, amidst our daily lives, as we move about, in joy and in sorrow. At life's turning points age-old prayers support us. Prayer is an encouragement, and

rituals tie the generations together. We can pray alone or together. Prayer focuses on the current moment and helps us become aware of our own deep yearnings and direct our gaze away from ourselves to others and to the world.

Prayer can initiate fellowship with God. It encompasses the experience of rest and peace, joy and sorrow, anger

and sadness. Prayer unfailingly restores the confidence that we lack to live life on our own. When we sigh to God, God hears and sees our longing. God is close to us when we need help and safety, or when we feel a deep sense of gratitude.

Prayer isn't about escaping reality.

It is to look at the world with honesty.

As prayer deepens, it becomes practical: it is directed beyond ourselves towards other people, creation and the world. Together, as people of prayer, we can be a force of change in the world.

This bishops' letter sheds light on the world of prayer. It encourages us to pray and deepens our understanding of it. The text is interspersed with the bishops' own experiences of prayer.

Prayer can initiate fellowship with God.

The essence of prayer

The Old Testament tells us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. At creation the spirit of life was physically breathed into the human being, and we long for communion with our Creator. Prayer enables this communion. God is unsearchable and yet close to human beings. When we seek God, God is already among us.

Prayer is how we are and live before the face of God. It is as natural and necessary to the spiritual life as breath is to the body. Being is more important than doing when we pray. We don't have to be in control. Prayer can include rest, gratitude and the desire to entrust the whole of our lives to God.

For me prayer is the conscious placing of oneself as the object of God's attention and love. It can happen anywhere. Sometimes prayer simply entails the awareness of this; sometimes it brings forth words from us. In the latter case I resort to familiar prayers, which I may repeat many times. One of the most important is the prayer of Hezekiah: "O Lord, by these things people live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. O restore me to health and make me live!" (Isa. 38:16).

Sometimes prayer is a quest for a new direction. It's asking for what has been lost, where the points of pain in our lives are, where the prayer will lead. When there is an emergency, we are not alone. We can turn to God. Our everyday prayers are often requests and cries for help on behalf of ourselves or others. Prayer doesn't need to be complicated. God hears words of simplicity, wordless sighs, gratitude and cries. In everyday life prayers are shortened and made simpler: "Lord help"; "God protect"; "remember me"; "bless and help my loved ones"; "thank you".

The Old Testament tells us that the prophet Elijah, hopeless and exhausted by his mission, flees from the ancient pilgrimage route to Mount Horeb. Around Elijah on the mountain natural upheavals are raging – metaphors for everything in life that can tear a person apart. Finally, the turmoil is stilled, and there is “a sound of sheer silence”. Elijah hears God speaking to him in the silence (1 Kings 19:3–13). God shows his trust in a human being despite his depression and exhaustion.

Sometimes we cannot find it in ourselves to pray. The Bible tells us God’s Spirit constantly prays for us and within us when we ourselves cannot. Prayer is not ultimately a person’s responsibility. The Bible’s promise is that Jesus Christ lives and prays constantly within us and for us.

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Personal prayer

Prayer is both a gift that is received and a conscious decision to interact with God. Praying may seem difficult or frightening, but it is enough to seek God.

A person can turn to God in many ways. Sometimes prayer is breathing. It can also be whispering or shouting. Sometimes the one who is praying is seeking a miracle. They confess they cannot decide what to do, are sinful and completely dependent on God. God hears both silent prayer offered alone and prayer that is offered corporately.

Christianity's inherent creative tension is also related to prayer. Prayer is simultaneously both work and complete rest. As we knock on the door, the one who opens it is already on their way. When we pray and leave our lives in God's hands, we begin to be emptied of our own imaginations and to be filled with God's love.



Prayer gives rhythm to the day

The day is transformed when you start the morning and end the evening with prayer. Our perspective on the world changes when we remember to give thanks to God for life and its gifts and leave our burdens in God's hands. Providing rhythm to the day with prayer is the gift of ancient Christian wisdom.

The early Christians wished to devote special moments of the day to prayer. The Old Testament mentions seven daily prayer times (Ps. 119:164), and the New Testament divides the day into different "hours" of prayer (Acts 3:1; 10:9). This accords well with the exhortations of Jesus and the apostles to pray without ceasing and always (e.g. Luke 18:1, Rom. 12:12, 1 Thes. 5:17, Eph. 6:8).

When we pray, we can rely on familiar common prayers or look for ways to pray that suit us in various prayer books. Today's worshipper has access to social media and various online platforms. The prayer material they offer helps us stop and breathe in the rhythm of prayer throughout the day. It also enables us to join in common prayer.

The Bible is clothed in the form of prayer in daily devotions. In our moments of prayer the Bible's prayers and teachings are combined in small acts of worship amidst daily life. Patterns for moments of prayer can be found in hymnals and online, for example. We can find both on our phones. They encourage a life of daily prayer. Moments of prayer can be undertaken freely and as is natural for you.

Christians all over the world are familiar with dividing the day into mornings, meals and evenings. It's not only a simple prayer practice – it's also ecumenical, and it can be seen in Martin Luther's division of the day into a rhythm of three prayers in the *Small Catechism*.

We give thanks in the morning for the night's rest and ask for blessing for the day's activities: "In the morning, when you rise, you shall bless yourself with the holy cross and say, in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen."

My wife and I have a custom of starting each day by reading one verse of the Bible before breakfast and praying the Lord's Prayer aloud together. Some years ago we decided to raise our hands during prayer. There

was a biblical example, but the custom became like a morning spiritual exercise for us. Your head rises, and you gaze turns to the ceiling – but the whole of your being strives upwards. The back is stretched in supplication for God's kingdom and in praise of God's power and glory. I feel that word and prayer converge in the soul and body in this simple gesture.

The Jesus Prayer – the prayer of the heart – is a short sigh of prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”. You can rely on it throughout the day. At its best it is not only the mind and reason that pray, but the longing for God arising from our whole being.

Saying grace before meals is a valuable practice. We say it in gratitude because we are aware of life's necessities. When we say grace, we give thanks for all life's gifts, including the food that our prayer blesses. We can do this with the words of a familiar grace at meals: “Jesus bless our food; be with us always”. An ancient Celtic grace says: “Bless the sky above us, the earth below us, the friends around us, and God's gifts in our hands.”

We also use Psalm 145 as a grace: “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.” The Catechism adds a prayer from the fifth century to this psalm: “Lord God, our heavenly Father, bless us and this your bounty which of your great goodness you have bestowed upon us to enjoy.”

In the evening, before going to bed, we give thanks for the day and pray for a peaceful night’s rest. At the same time we can bless ourselves by making the sign of the cross. A beautiful thing to do in the evening is to remember your loved ones and those you’ve met during the day by name.

Prayer in the evening gives us a sense of security, and it still comes naturally to many of us. One in three Finns say they had a religious upbringing, but many more than that

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say they pray in the evening. Many consider it important to pass on the custom of prayer in the evening to the next generations. We know that more people teach or intend to teach their children to pray in the evening than who pray themselves. It is often grandparents, especially grandmothers, who teach their children to pray in the evening.

When my children were little, I used to stroke their backs in the evening. As I traced the day's events, joys and sorrows with my finger, I quietly sang the evening prayers my parents and siblings had sung for me. As I traced and sang, my child's body relaxed, and I drew all my fears and requests, joys and hopes on their skin. I knew I couldn't protect them from everything, but I turned to the prophet Isaiah, who describes us as being drawn on the palms of God's hands. As the children were growing up, they might not have known how to ask for prayer in the evening, but over the years they asked me: "Draw on my back". When I've visited the elderly in hospitals, and I've felt there's no longer a connection, I've drawn my prayers on their arms in the same way and sung familiar songs.



A place for prayer

We can pray as we breathe and walk and during the rest of daily life. Nevertheless, many people also need a physical space for prayer. You can build your own altar and silent space at home, where you can place an icon or a cross, and when you pray, you can light a candle and say:

I light this candle before you and I pray, enlighten me O Christ. Enlighten me in the early dawn of morning. Enlighten me as day draws into night. Enlighten me when night's darkness oppresses me. Enlighten me O Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

(Mika K. T. Pajunen)

You can place a Bible, hymn book, and a favourite prayer book or book of devotions in your quiet place. The place you reserve for prayer can also have other Christian symbols, photos and flowers that are important to you.

Many Finns seek peace in nature. So you can also put a meaningful picture of nature on your home altar, or your place for experiencing the sacred can be by a window, outside in the garden, at the foot of a tree or on a rock. We may find ourselves praying in the midst of beauty.

In addition to nature, an important place for many Finns to calm themselves is the sauna. In the sauna we fall silent in our nakedness with the questions of our own life, or we share our lives. We emerge cleansed. A sauna affords us the opportunity to be free of gadgets for a while.

The area covered by the northern bishop is large – almost half of Finland. This means I’m on the road a lot in my work around the vast diocese. I often find myself praying in my head when I’m driving. I may not even “decide” to do so. The prayer simply arises from within me. In practice it’s about sharing my thoughts with God. I often pray about the tasks that await me or for the people that come to my mind. It’s a modest kind of prayer, but it’s still important for me. Prayer doesn’t always have to have specific forms. God hears my sigh of prayer even from the steering wheel of my car.

Prayer is felt and gets us moving

Physicality is part of prayer. Making the sign of the cross is a prayer. The fingers touch the forehead, then the chest, then the left and right shoulders. In this way we ask for our thoughts, feelings and the work of our hands to be blessed. You can make the sign of the cross whenever you want. There are no precise rules. You can do it in the morning, at meals, in the evening, on entering a church and at the altar rail. According to ancient custom we make the sign of the cross during worship whenever we say, "In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit". In making the sign of the cross, we ask God to bless our lives.

Other familiar prayers include clasping one's hands and bowing one's head before the sacred. We stand or kneel as a sign of prayer. A prayer gesture already found in the Bible is the opening of the hands in prayer. It indicates openness, sincerity and honesty before God.

Many long today for a holistic spirituality. A spirituality felt by the whole body is needed alongside the intellectual practice of religion. There is an expectation that the church will offer different avenues for this. For example, retreats,



spiritual direction, meditation and pilgrimages in nature provide a natural environment for this.

The popularity of pilgrimages has grown strongly during the twenty-first century. Almost half of Finns feel that moving and being in nature bring them closer to God or to a higher power. Pilgrimages also entail the quest for a sustainable way of life in the face of the environmental crisis.

The human being is part of creation, and our wellbeing and that of nature are tied together. The whole creation groans to God and awaits its salvation (Rom. 8:19–23). When we're on pilgrimage, we pray as we walk and journey towards the holy. At the same time the journey is itself holy. Alongside the external journey we also make a journey into the depths of ourselves.

Prayer is often accompanied by the lighting of a candle. The flame is a metaphor for prayer and the Holy Spirit. Prayer can also be accompanied by smoke, fragrance and other aesthetic elements. Incense, which is important for the Orthodox, and which has its roots in the Old Testament, has also become familiar again in the Lutheran Church. Incense is a reference to smoke, which the psalms consider

a visible sign of the prayer of the heart: Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice (Ps. 141:2).

Prayers are written in journals, on social media sites, in updates and in journals. The most familiar form of prayer for many is writing. Painting an icon or looking at it is prayer.

Smilies on social media have brought prayer to the heart of conversation in a new way. When



you're wishing someone well, it's natural to attach praying hands to the comment or update.

Of course, praying hands express more than prayer alone: many meanings and feelings are associated with them.

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Ask and give thanks

Not many of us are good at asking for things from others. “You don’t have to – not for me,” we often say, whatever’s going on. If it’s difficult enough to ask other people for things, how can you even begin to ask God – to be needy before God?

I’m a secret prayer-maker. When I’m on a plane taking off, I make a small sign of the cross under my jacket. As I’m approaching a difficult situation, I say silently to myself: “How will I get through this? Help me.” Sometimes I’ve felt a strong response to a prayer I’ve just said silently. When I was young, I once crossed my arms when I was in trouble, and I couldn’t untangle them – they wouldn’t unfold themselves for several minutes. I think God powerfully wanted to hear my silent prayer. God grasped me so that I could calm down as I needed to and have enough trust to feel encouraged to continue the day. I find that experience wonderful and comforting, even decades later.

We're told in the Bible to love God, our neighbour and ourselves. Lutheranism emphasises that God's love is manifested in faith. Meanwhile, faith is trust in and reliance on God. You can show love to your neighbour and yourself through words and actions. And you can rely on God in prayer.

The practice of the art of gratitude unites many outlooks on life and religions. The fact that gratitude is good for us seems to be a universal truth that happiness researchers have also observed. Studies have shown that gratitude relieves stress, increases self-esteem, strengthens positivity and promotes physical health – among other things. It's unsurprising that thanking God is spoken of almost three hundred times in the Bible. A prayer of thanksgiving is healthy for the individual. It strengthens the culture of gratitude and creates wellbeing for the entire community.

In one book a psychologist introduces a new form of therapy in which the therapist helps someone suffering from depression to keep a diary of the things for which they are grateful – even amidst adversity. The results are exceptionally encouraging, the psychiatrist says.

"I was startled. I saw an astounding convergence with the Christian life of prayer here. Like all human beings, I tend to cling to the things I lack. Christian prayers and hymns remind us of the good things God gives to us freely every day. A regular life of prayer feeds gratitude – and gratitude reinforces the experience of joy and happiness, which in turn strengthens our compassion for others and our faith in the future. That's how prayer strengthens the cycle of goodness in life. When I find myself grumbling about trivialities, a prayer of thanks reminds me of the ultimate goodness of life. When I can't pray regularly, I need the assistance of the Christian community – a parish. I'm thankful for that too."

In silence

The essence of prayer also includes the cultivation of silence. Jesus himself also gave an example of this when he said to the disciples: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). A listening prayer

begins with stillness. This helps us hear the voice of God within us. Teachers of prayer speak of holy carelessness.

In the teaching of the early church prayer has three levels. Oration, or prayers that are recited aloud, is an inextricable element of the Christian life. In addition to words, we need internalised, wordless prayer. This is what we mean by meditation, or contemplative prayer. Christian meditation isn't a monologue. It's a dialogue: a conversation between the human heart and the word of God. Contemplation is prayer of acceptance and watchfulness, in which silence takes us more deeply into a space within, where one wonders and looks at God.

Silence isn't a passive activity. It is active, a source of strength for the Christian life. Prayer is to be still and to move at the same time. In prayer the visible, the weak and perishable unite with that which is imperishable and powerful. At various times we will always find new ways to be still and to pray. Prayer seeks better understanding and deliberation. "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow" (Phil. 1:9).

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The Bible and prayer

We don't know when human beings began to pray, or what the practice of prayer was like before the Bible's texts came into being. In the early accounts of the Old Testament prayer is a corporate activity and a cry for help: "At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26).

The New Testament continues the theme of crying out for help. It even becomes a term that is used to refer to Christians. Christians are those who "in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 9:14, 21; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rom. 10:12).

In the world of the Old Testament corporate and individual prayer focused on the annual cycle, harvest, individual and community crises, and life's turning points. In the midst of our trials the prayer of one person was and often still is a short sigh or a cry: "Help me"; "Listen to me"; "Look upon me".

Prayer is strengthened by interaction. Common prayer encourages the prayer of individuals and vice versa. As they pray, the members of the congregation join in a stream of common prayer.

At the edge of the secret

Old Testament Hebrew refers to God with a word of only four letters: YHWH. When sacred texts were read, the letters YHWH had to be circumscribed because the four consonants referred to the secret, to the One beyond words.

People in western countries seek answers to their spiritual longing in mindfulness and eastern meditation. Is it possible that one of the reasons for this lies in how we talk about God? The church's common prayer has begun to be heard in a modern world from which the secret has vanished, and everything is revealed and explained. We are weary, and we have no words.

Yet the limitation of language and the impossibility of tying God down with it were already recognised in the Judaean-Christian tradition thousands of years ago. Meditation

is also an important part of the Christian tradition. In the Old Testament God's name could not be spoken. When Moses asked for God's name, he received only these words: "I am who I am." In the New Testament God is spoken of in parables, and God's mystery is approached through the liturgy of worship. God is a secret, yet God is also close to us and seeks us.

Martin Luther's Small Catechism is a short summary of Christian faith and doctrine. It isn't only a book of the head, however – it's also a book of the heart. As a prayer book, it can also be used for daily meditation, a few lines at a time. Luther taught that we should imprint a short passage on our minds and meditate upon it all day.

As travellers on the road

Prayer starts with God's initiative. In the beginning, God already asks: "Where are you?" and a second time: "Where is your brother?" (Gen. 3:9, 4:9). Both questions are addressed to someone who is missing. The two dimensions of the Christian life are rooted in two questions that must



be answered throughout life. They have Latin names: the *via mystica*; and the *via activa*.

“Via” means a path. On the path of mysticism we constantly place ourselves and our lives in God’s presence in wordless or verbal prayer, examine ourselves and, stripped of our imagination, abandon ourselves to God’s compassion and love. On the active path we direct ourselves towards the other, our neighbour, and this life’s tasks and responsibilities. We serve our own community. The two paths are not mutually exclusive. They both spring from a life of fellowship with God.

We are God’s pilgrim people.

The parable of journeying along the road is a recurring motif in the Bible. In the early accounts of the Old Testament it is said of Noah’s great-grandfather that he walked in obedience to God, literally, “He walked with the Lord” (Gen. 5:24). Journeying or walking here can be understood figuratively as a reference to a life in fellowship with God. Images of journeying and the road can also be found in the New Testament. Jesus speaks of himself as the way (John 14:16). The first Christians were called to assist not only

those who cried out to them but, as travellers themselves along the way, those who lived according to that way (Acts 24:14). We are God's pilgrim people.

As a bishop, I pray in many situations, but an important time of personal prayer has developed when I'm jogging alone. In the silence of nature it's easy to fall silent and sigh to God; and it's easy to pray for the homes and people along the route. Often my prayer is the Lord's Prayer or a spontaneous prayer. Prayer easily takes on the rhythm of breathing.

Longing for a look of blessing

Alongside cries for help and journeying, a third feature characteristic of the prayers of the Bible is the longing for the compassionate gaze of God. In their longing for the blessing of God's gaze ancient worshippers instinctively recognised what developmental psychology has described millennia later in its own language. At the heart of human longing is a loving gaze.

In a child's early interaction the caregiver's gaze is like a light that begins to draw the outlines of the nascent experience of the self. The face, the gaze and the eyes become an important sustainer of existence: "I can be seen; I exist."

A recurring theme in the Book of Psalms, however, is the anxiety that God will metaphorically hide or cover God's face (e.g. Ps. 10:1 and 13:2) or turn God's face away (Ps. 30:7). Joy is to be found when God's face shines (Ps. 119:35). The Aaronic, or priestly, blessing includes a very special wish that God's loving gaze will reach into the core of the human being.

I was visiting Turku one fine spring day. I lingered in the cathedral, which greeted me with its calm and peace. In the medieval cathedral there are many side chapels. I was amazed when I stepped into one of them. Jesus Christ was hanging on the cross on a redbrick wall. It was a familiar sight. But something wasn't quite right. To my astonishment, Jesus had no hands. They weren't there.

I don't know why they were missing. I stood before the crucified Jesus. He was indeed without hands. I fell silent and prayed. I felt that he knew me, knew my shortcomings, my pain, my anxieties and my longing. I was loved no matter what. Then I looked at my hands and wondered: are these not hands? Does Jesus Christ need these hands?

At that moment it was if he was saying to me: "I need your hands. Go out into the world and show mercy and love to those who need it." The sun was shining when I was coming out of the church. It was spring, and I could hear birdsong amidst the sounds of traffic.

Jesus taught us how to pray

Jesus's teaching about prayer grows out of the Jewish tradition. It is also notable in Jesus's teaching that true prayer should avoid long explanations and posturing in front of others. Prayer is preferably made in silence, in one's own room, or by retreating to a deserted place. "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matt. 6:6).

The Lord's Prayer is a timeless guide about what to pray for in the community's common prayer:

*Our Father, who art in heaven.
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,*

*But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the
power and the glory,
for ever and ever.*

The Lord's Prayer is unceasing. The Lord's Prayer that Jesus teaches is prayed at every moment in some part of the world. This is the best of what it is when Christendom prays together.

All the requests in the Lord's Prayer are in the plural and are therefore prayers of intercession. They embody the all-encompassing reality of the life we share in the world that God has created. Prayer changes the one who prays. God's will is done without our prayer, but we ask for it to be done in our lives. A person who feels their inadequacy in prayer can depend on the fact that the whole church of Christ prays with them.

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Common prayer

Christians have also always gathered to pray together. Common prayer grows out of Jewish worship. Jesus showed the importance of common prayer by his own example. He used to visit places of worship in his own community. This is what we and Christians all over the world do when we gather together in churches and homes.

The Christian church's prayer traditions and forms of prayer differ. Diversity is enriching. It brings beauty and variety to the life of prayer. Prayers are read or sung in different ways and styles. The position of the hands and body may differ – but the object and purpose of the prayer are common.

The gathered people express their belonging together and turn to God together. They speak of the common experience of being human in this world and express the importance of God in their lives. That's why we tell God about our shared failures, ask for help together, and thank God for God's love with one voice.

Worship follows the example of the road to Emmaus

The worship of various churches follows a somewhat similar order. The pattern of the eucharist, or mass, can already be recognised in the account of the road to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel (24:13–34). The account describes how the risen Christ meets two travellers and joins them (the Gathering). Then Jesus discusses and explains some biblical texts (the Liturgy of the Word). The travellers find themselves at a supper where Christ breaks the bread (the Liturgy of the Sacrament). The result is an understanding of what has happened and a powerful experience. This gives rise to the desire to bring the good news to others as well (the Dismissal).

The travellers journeyed along the road to Emmaus as they listened to Jesus and shared their lives with him. Our worship's real language is also one of prayerful listening.

When we gather for worship, we express our need of God and each other. Running through our worship, common prayer expresses thanksgiving, repentance and intercession, as well as awe. The congregation hears the

reading of the good deeds of God and of past events that are also a point of fellowship for people living in the twenty-first century.

Worship's liturgy, music and symbolism create a shared experience and are an apprehension of the world to come and are transparent, while striving simultaneously for a connection with the here and now.

The most tangible example of the translucent reflection of the life to come is the Sanctus at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer. It is the faith of the church that it is sung "with the angels and all the saints". The prayers and thanksgiving of those gathered in one church building are joined by those of Christians in other churches and by those who praise God in heaven.

One of the most important prayers during worship is "Lord, have mercy upon us!" For thousands of years the

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fears and anxieties caused by wars, diseases and other worries, as well as the experience of human sinfulness and worthlessness, have been taken up in this exclamation.

The cry of “Lord, have mercy” is repeated just before the sharing of communion in the Agnus Dei (“O Lamb of God”). The cry for help is accompanied by a tone of thanksgiving, for the eucharist is a meal of thanksgiving. The prayers of our worship are condensed as all the senses receive Christ’s body and blood. Past, present and future are as one as the heavens drop down to earth. This was also the culmination of the experience of those who journeyed on the road to Emmaus.

Prayer’s common thread

A pervasive theme of the mass is prayer for others and for the whole world. Prayers of intercession still have their place in worship. In them you can tell God things that are both tangible and current. Nowadays it is customary for the congregation to gather the themes of prayers of intercession and bring them into the intercessions at mass.

Prayer supports both the one who prays and the one prayed for. We pray together during worship, but common prayer is also suitable for other occasions. Jesus says: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20).

Prayer brings the other person and their situation into the presence of God. It is neither a power trip nor gossip disguised as prayer, and it makes no assumptions about another person’s spiritual state.

When I was a student, I did a summer internship in the parish. I got sick at the end of the summer during the confirmation camp. I felt awful the whole time. I was constantly throwing up. I was sick for several weeks, but the examinations couldn't explain what the problem was. I began to be in really bad shape, and I even had to have an IV a few times. I'd promised to stay for a few weeks at the end of the summer to serve as the secretary's assistant at the vicar's office of my own parish. I had to call them to tell them I couldn't do the job. I told our chaplain on the phone that I didn't know what was wrong with me, and that my family was really worried

as well. I fell into a deep sleep after the call. When I woke up, the nausea had completely vanished. I'd been wary of and even amused by intercession before this. Now I felt strongly that I'd been prayed for, and that those prayers had been heard. Since that experience, I've thought of intercession as a gift. It's a gift I want to continue to share.

Music and song

Music is one of God's great gifts and is an integral part of prayer. Many people pray as they listen to music. God's people have always sung, played instruments and danced. The Bible tells us to do this. "Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times" (Eph. 5:19-20). The experience of the early Christians was already that the one who sings prays twice.

Luther wrote that he loved music, God's creation and gift. Singing hymns together has sustained us for centuries

in our Lutheran tradition. The familiar songs of the revival movements and the evocative songs of confirmation camp rise from the heart. New songs with a spiritual message are always being created. Through various kinds of music we experience the sacred and sense God's presence.

The message of the Gospel touches human beings, the soul, the spirit and the body. Prayer touches the whole person in the same way. A central element of the spiritual life is our deep longing for love. The Bible tells us of the longing of the heart, and how the human soul and body raise a shout of joy before God (Ps. 84). This experience is strengthened when we sing together.

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music.

I don't recall when the song started playing in my head, but it always played when I was facing an exciting or difficult task. However, that was decades ago. The song has become a prayer that still encourages me in various situations and tasks: "Come Lord Jesus and bless your child on the stormy path of the world. Bear me

up in your arms' safe hold when I am weary. Bring me at last to eternal peace." If I'm alone, I sometimes sing all four verses of this song, which was written by Vilho Rantanen and composed by Yrjö Karanko.

Silence is shared on retreat

In an age of busyness that craves efficiency the longing for silence grows. Being silent is important for the calmness and balance of our mind. Research has shown that quieting down even for a couple of minutes every day clarifies your thinking and improves your mood. It helps us see what is essential and act accordingly.

Silence can sometimes be confusing because it invites us to encounter both ourselves and God. So it can be good to learn silence with others. A silent retreat affords this opportunity. A retreat, on which you withdraw from everyday life for a few days, is one way to cultivate silence. Its roots are deep in Christian tradition, going back to the first centuries of the Christian era. Retreat activities began to take shape and to grow gradually in our own church in

the 1970s. Today, in addition to silent retreats, there are various themed retreats.

In a silent retreat the prayer of listening is learned, both alone and with others. The daily programme consists of moments of quiet prayer, the celebration of the eucharist and meals shared in silence.

When we are present in peacefulness, the senses become alert and sensitised to seeing and hearing. We begin to hear our innermost voices and sense our innermost pains and dreams. We also open ourselves to hearing God's voice. In the silence of a retreat the word of the Bible can be opened and can speak to us differently from amidst everyday life. We notice that God is present and experienced through external signs, in nature, at meals, in common singing, prayers and at the eucharist.

The direction at the end of a retreat is always out into the world, and its goal is to strengthen the link between prayer and action, service, and a sustainable lifestyle. As the Christian community we can thus be a force that changes the world, not just a church that renews itself because of the pressure of change.

Encouragement in prayer

It helps a lot to talk, even if it's difficult sometimes. Talking helps when something is troubling you. It's important in human relationships to discuss things openly, whether they're good or difficult. Problems grow in families and workplaces when people don't talk about things. At its best talking strengthens human connection. It can solve problems, offer relief and save situations.

Talking to God is just as important. Prayer helps us and makes things easier. It strengthens our fellowship with God and with each other. It helps us recognise God's presence in our lives. When we pray, God gives us God's self, and we can give ourselves to God. Prayer is also good for a person who cannot find any words because it is also simply being in God's presence.

In the Bible there are almost a hundred encouragements and exhortations to pray, give thanks or to ask



God for something. Yet there is no compunction to pray. Human beings are not for prayer; prayer is for human beings. We need prayer, and it is good for us. God doesn't require our prayers but yearns for fellowship with God's creatures. Prayer is about being awoken to the goodness of God. God is an active agent in prayer, and we make ourselves the object of God's action.

Prayer helps us direct our hearts, thoughts and actions towards the things for which we pray. Prayer can push us to a change of heart or to let go. When the concern besetting our minds becomes a prayer, space can be opened to what it was that was causing our concern. Perhaps this is precisely what Paul means in his epistle to the Philippians when he says: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).

The one who prays may also feel that God doesn't hear them. Since ancient times Christians have thought that God works in the dark night of the soul. Even though we feel that nothing feels the same, that nothing is happening, we

are being prepared for new light. All that is dead in us can have new life. It is good to join the company of the mystics in quiet times. They can help us find paths that take us forward and learn to see God's presence everywhere.

When we can't pray, or when we don't want to, Jesus prays on our behalf. The whole of Christendom's prayer bears us up even when our own prayer falls silent. All creation and every creature give thanks and pray around us and with us: "For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isa. 55:12).

Prayer brings the blessing of God to the whole of life. This is the blessing that we, the authors of this text, wish to convey to you:

The Lord bless you and keep you.

*The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you.*

*The Lord lift up his countenance upon you
and give you peace.*

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son and
of the Holy Spirit.*

Kirkkonummi 5 September 2023

Tapio Luoma, Archbishop of Turku and Finland

Matti Repo, Bishop of Tampere

Jari Jolkkonen, Bishop of Kuopio

Teemu Laajasalo, Bishop of Helsinki

Jukka Keskitalo, Bishop of Oulu

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The Longing of Prayer is the second booklet published in the Bishops' letters series. This bishops' letter sheds light on prayer. The bishops show how prayer can serve as the day's rhythm and leave everything in the hand of God.

When praying, you can rely on familiar common prayers or look for ways to pray that suit you. In the letter the bishops also talk about how they pray themselves.

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