

**SCRIPTURAL**

**PRAYER**

**WITH**

**CHILDREN**

BY RITA BURNS SENSEMAN

**A**mong the many ways to pray, scriptural prayer is one of the best for children. The stories, images, characters, and words of the Bible are an excellent starting point for a child's prayer. What better way to begin praying than to start with God's own Word? Using Scripture as a foundation for prayer helps children to engage their imagination and, in turn, express their feelings, thoughts, and concerns.

Before we turn to some of the methods used when praying with Scripture, let's consider a few general recommendations for praying with children.



# TEACH CHILDREN TO PRAY

Although some children are very comfortable with prayer, many need to be taught to pray. Some children do not even know what prayer is. When you first start praying with the children, explain that praying is talking and listening to God.

## TALKING TO GOD

When we “talk” to God in prayer, we may pray out loud or speak silently to God in our hearts. We may use words written on paper, or pray with music, drawing, works of art, or God’s gift of imagination.

## LISTENING TO GOD

When we “listen” to God in prayer, we are aware of the ideas, thoughts, and feelings that come from God. Furthermore, when we use scriptural prayer, we hear God’s own Word.

In scriptural prayer, we listen to God’s voice by doing the following:

- listening to the readings from the Bible (Did something in the reading catch my attention? Did someone seem to be talking to me?)
- being aware of thoughts and ideas that come to mind when we think about the Scripture readings (Did the Scripture story give me an idea or make me think about a particular person or situation in my life?)
- being aware of our feelings and emotions (How did the reading make me feel? What do these feelings tell me?)

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

The best way to teach prayer to children is to model it. Prayer need not be complicated or a production. Let it come from the heart.



# WAYS TO PRAY THE

# SCRIPTURES WITH CHILDREN

## **VOCAL PRAYER**

One of the first, most comfortable ways of praying for children is to pray a familiar prayer aloud. The Lord's Prayer is one of our most beloved scriptural prayers (see Matthew 6:9-13). The Book of Psalms also presents many familiar prayers, such as Psalm 25. The Canticles of Hannah (found in 1 Samuel 2:1-10) and Mary (found in Luke, chapter 1) also offer prayers rooted in Scripture for children to pray, alone or with others.

## **SPONTANEOUS PRAYER**

Vocal prayer may be spontaneous, with the children free to choose their own words to address God. After discussing or reflecting on a particular Scripture story, invite the children to pray freely using the given Scripture story or passage as their inspiration. Often it is helpful to give children a simple prompt or a few words to help them get started.

## **MEDITATION ON SCRIPTURE**

In meditation, children are invited to use their imagination to reflect on God's Word. Meditative prayer is particularly effective with children at the fourth-grade level and older, as it often involves more abstract thinking. For example, many prayer leaders begin meditative prayer by asking participants to relax the body, clear the mind, and breathe deeply. Then, children might be guided into a meditation where they are asked to imagine Moses and the burning bush, Jesus walking on water, or another of many stories that lend themselves to meditative prayer. Through guided meditation, children have the opportunity not only to use their imaginations but also to be more attuned to God's message in stillness and quiet.

## WRITTEN AND DRAWN PRAYER

Writing a response to God's Word can be especially effective for children who are introverted or timid about speaking in front of others. Writing and drawing also give children a vehicle for processing their thoughts about what God is saying to them in Scripture. Children can pray through their writing and drawing in a variety of ways: write a letter to God, write their own prayer, write a poem, or draw a picture.



## **LECTIO DIVINA**

*Lectio divina* is an ancient and special type of scriptural prayer. Translated from Latin, it means “holy reading” or “spiritual reading.” Here is a simplified version of the four steps of *lectio divina* that you can do with children.

**1. Lectio (Reading):** Proclaim the Scripture reading to the children. Read a portion of the Scripture, or a particular phrase, a second or even a third time.

*Example:* Read John 10:11-15. Then, slowly repeat the phrase, “I am the Good Shepherd,” two more times.

**2. Meditatio (Meditation):** Give the children a particular word or phrase to think about. Also, briefly explain why the chosen word or phrase is so important.

*Example:* Explain what a shepherd is and show a picture of a shepherd. Then, ask the children to close their eyes and imagine Jesus as a good shepherd. Ask the children to silently reflect on the following question: How is Jesus like a shepherd in your life?

**3. Oratio (Prayer):** Ask the children to silently talk to God about the Word that they have heard.

*Example:* “In the quiet of your heart, thank Jesus for being your Good Shepherd and talk to him about your family or your friends.”

**4. Contemplatio (Contemplation):** Invite the children to be silent for a minute and rest in God’s love.

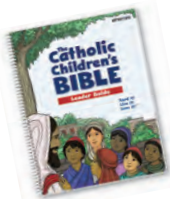
*Example:* “Be still and rest in the love and protection of the Good Shepherd.”



## SILENCE AND SCRIPTURAL PRAYER

Children of any age can greatly benefit from periods of silence. Of course, the amount of silent time must be in proportion to their age (about 1 minute for a second grader). Allowing time for silence, even at a young age, helps children to develop the habit of listening to God. It gives space and time for God's Word to take root and grow. Even if nothing "special" or out of the ordinary happens during a moment of silence, the children learn that silence is part of prayer. Thus, even the proclamation of the Word followed by one minute of silence can be a prayer.

Ultimately, scriptural prayer happens anytime we respond to God's Word. Having these various responses in your repertoire of prayer with Scripture can help you to introduce God's Word into the lives of the children and will no doubt enrich your own experience of Scripture as well! ■



This article is adapted from Chapter 8 of *The Catholic Children's Bible Leader Guide*.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT **THE CATHOLIC CHILDREN'S BIBLE** AND ITS COMPONENTS  
**visit [smp.org/ccb](http://smp.org/ccb)**