Learning to Be:  
Encountering Jesus in  
Prayer and Sacraments  

By Peter Bierer

Purpose
In this session, participants experience a variety of prayer styles and identify personal encounters with Jesus through prayer and sacraments. Candidates learn five basic forms of prayer and understand why prayer is essential to the Christian life.

Session at a Glance
- 7:00 p.m. Welcome and Opening Prayer
- 7:25 p.m. Reflection on the Opening Prayer
- 7:35 p.m. Meeting Jesus in Prayer and Sacraments
- 8:10 p.m. Building a Prayer Wall
- 8:20 p.m. Closing Prayer
- 8:30 p.m. Announcements and Dismissal

Materials Needed
- Prayer table items: Bible, white pillar candle, a cross, a clear bowl filled with water, a white cloth, rosary, and other items that represent prayer and sacraments
- Pens, one for each participant
- Handout 1, My Encounters with Jesus in Prayer and Sacrament, one for each participant
- Handout 2, Prayer Isn’t Always Easy, one for each participant
- Handout 3, Forms of Prayer, one for each participant
- Newsprint and markers
- Half sheets of 8½” x 11” red paper
- Masking tape
- CD or MP3 player and soft music
- “Open My Eyes” by Jesse Manibusan (Power of Peace, spiritandsong.com) or another appropriate song

Prepare in Advance
1. Set up a prayer space near a large empty wall for the closing prayer. Set up a table for prayer and use the items listed above.

2. Set up the meeting space with chairs in a semi-circle around the prayer
3. Set up tables for refreshments and sign-in. Have one or two people at the sign-in table with a check-in sheet and nametags.

4. Prepare refreshments for hospitality.

5. If you are unfamiliar with the Ignatian Examen, visit http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/ in preparation for the opening prayer.

6. Prepare two readers to proclaim the readings for the closing prayer.

Note to Leader: To use this session with middle school youth, omit using Handout 1. Rather, move from the group reflection to Meeting Jesus in Prayer and Sacraments.

**Welcome and Opening Prayer (25 minutes)**

Greet the participants as they arrive and provide hospitality. When you are ready to begin, say the following in your own words:

Welcome! We are glad to see you and cannot wait to get started tonight. Before we do anything, we are going to begin with a unique prayer called the *Ignatian Examen*. It's a prayer that Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, developed. The idea is do this prayer at the end of each day.

I want you to find a place where you can be comfortable being still for about seven minutes. I am going to turn down the lights, and I will light the candle on the prayer table. You may close your eyes, or focus on the flame of the candle during this prayer. I only ask is that you do not talk or distract your neighbors. Now would be a good time to turn off your phones.

Turn down the lights and light the candle on the prayer table. Invite participants to get comfortable, close their eyes, take a few deep breaths, and then begin with the following prayer. Be sure to take your time and read the prayer instructions slowly.

We begin our prayer with the sign of our faith... in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Become aware of God’s presence.**

As we prepare ourselves in prayer and for the learning we will do this evening, we are reminded that we are in the presence of God. Jesus said to the disciples, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). Jesus is here among us, around us, within us, and in all that surrounds us. We are grateful to be in the loving presence of our God.

**Gratitude.**

In your mind, review your day. Remember how you began the day, where you went, what you did and who you met. As you review the day, where can you recognize the presence of God? Was it in the smile of a friend or the kind words of a teacher? Was...
God in the beauty of nature or in the complexity of an equation? What are you most thankful for today?

Take a moment to thank Jesus for these things.

**Call on the Holy Spirit.**
Now we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us as we look deeper into our thoughts, words, and actions from the day. “Holy Spirit come, guide our hearts and minds to be honest and truthful, to see the good and to acknowledge our weaknesses. Give us strength and understanding to learn from our reflection of the day.”

**Review the day.**
Look again at your day. Look at the details. What motivated you – was it God, or were your motives selfish? Why did you act the way you did? Was it out of love, or malice? How do you feel when you review the day? Pay attention to these emotions.

Where did you love? When were you able to show God’s love to others?

Where did you fail today? When did you fail to love? When did you ignore God’s presence or act as a barrier of God’s love to others?

**Respond in prayer.**
In your own words and in your heart, speak to Jesus about your day. Ask for strength in your weaknesses, forgiveness in your failures, and comfort in your sorrow. Ask Jesus for the courage to begin anew tomorrow and to be with you as your journey throughout your day.

After a few minutes close with the Lord’s Prayer.

**Reflection on the Opening Prayer (10 minutes)**
When the prayer is finished, quietly turn up the lights and invite the group to reflect on their experience of the Ignatian Examen. Use the following questions to guide the reflection, invite participants to expand on their answers when appropriate:

- What did you experience in this prayer?
- How did this prayer experience make you feel?
- Was there anything that you liked about this prayer?
- Was there anything that made you uncomfortable or that you just did not like?
- Were you able to encounter God in this prayer?
- What made your encounter with God easy or difficult?

Be sure to acknowledge that not everybody is able to connect with every prayer style. Some people may have had a great experience with this prayer while others may have felt completely disconnected. This is okay.

Distribute **Handout 1**. Invite the participants to complete the handout on their own. When it appears that everyone has finished, direct the participants to share their responses with one other person.
When everyone has finished sharing, refocus the group to the front of the room and say the following in your own words:

**Meeting Jesus in Prayer and Sacraments (35 minutes)**

Why do we pray? It’s easy to think that prayer is something you have to do. Really pray is about a way to be. The Church says that prayer is our relationship with the “living and true God” (CCC, 2558). Sometimes our experience with prayer may seem like a formula of magic words or gestures that will get us what we want. No, prayer is about how we are with God.

So if prayer is about being with God, then prayer is an essential part of being a Christian disciple. Those who pray know God.

Different prayer styles are meant to help us be with God in different ways. Some people are able to connect with God through repetition and mantras; others connect through movement and body language. There are as many ways to pray as there are people who pray. What are some prayer forms that you are familiar with?

Invite the group to share their knowledge of various kinds of prayer. Record their answers on a sheet of newsprint.

These are all excellent examples of ways to pray, and if we had time it would be fun to try all of these! Again, it does not matter so much which of these prayer forms you prefer. What matters is how you direct your life toward God. Focusing our minds, our words, and our actions on God is ultimately what prayer is. Prayer puts us in a place of being with God. Remember, prayer is essential to the Christian life.

Distribute Handout 2, and go over its contents briefly. Ask the group to contribute answers to the following questions:

- What are some things that make prayer difficult? Why?
- What if you change the way you look at pray from something you need to do into something you need to be? How does this change your perception of how and when to pray?

The sacraments are another way that we are able to be with Jesus – to encounter him. In this way, they are prayer. We know that sacraments are signs given to us by Christ that not only show us God’s love and grace, but are true encounters with God’s love and grace. Sacraments not only symbolize something God is doing in us, but God is truly doing something real within us through the sacrament.

Take baptism for example. The waters of baptism have many symbolic meanings, one of which is the washing away of sin. At home when we take a bath, we use water to remove dirt and filth from our bodies. The waters of baptism not only wash our bodies, but bring a forgiveness of sins, and orient us to the wider mission of the church. In reconciliation, the priest is not just a symbol of God’s love and forgiveness; we are actually forgiven by God in the sacrament!
God wants to connect with us through prayer and sacrament. God desires for us to be close to him. All we have to do is choose to be with God in these moments. Prayer and sacraments are essential to the Catholic life. This is also the challenge of discipleship!

Distribute Handout 3, Forms of Prayer. And say the following in your own words:

Making the sacraments and prayer a regular part of our life takes practice and discipline. But the more we do it, the easier it becomes!

Remember prayer can take many forms – communal or private, contemplative or active. Within these styles, we can find five different forms of prayer. Understanding these will help us learn to pray. Let’s look at the handout on prayer forms.

Go over the material on Handout 2, Forms of Prayer, clarify any necessary points and instruct the group to provide their own examples of the prayer forms in the space provided. Give some examples as needed. After about five minutes, invite the group to take the handout home and finish it in their own time.

**Building a Wall of Prayer (10 minutes)**

Now that we’ve learned about different forms of prayer, we are going to put some of these into practice. You may know that in Jerusalem there is an ancient limestone wall that is all that is left of the last Temple. Jews and others of different faiths come to this wall to pray. Often people will write their prayers on a piece of paper and leave it in a crack in the wall. Tonight we are going to build a prayer wall of our own.

Each of you will receive three pieces of paper that will represent the blocks that will make up our prayer wall. One block will be a personal petition – something you want to ask God for yourself. Your second block will be an intercession – a prayer on behalf of someone else. The third block will be a prayer form of your choice. During our closing prayer, we will use these to create our prayer wall.

Give each participant three half-sheets of paper and colored markers to share. Allow enough time for the participants to complete their prayers. When everyone has finished, invite the group to sit around the prayer table.

**Closing Prayer (10 minutes)**

1. **Gather**
   Sing “Open my Eyes” or another song with a similar theme.

2. **Prayer Leader: (begin with the Sign of the Cross)**

   Loving God,
   You created us to be in communion with you.
   So we have the courage to pray –
   to speak and to listen –
   to direct the whole of our being to you.
May we recognize your presence with us here and in all our prayers. 
We ask this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit 
forever and ever.
Amen.

**Listen**
Invite the first reader to proclaim Matthew 6:5-15. Allow a few moments of silence after 
the reading.

Invite the second reader to proclaim Philippians 4:4-7. Allow a few moments of silence 
after the reading.

**Respond**
Prayer Leader:

Confident in the promise that God listens to the prayer of our hearts, let us bring our 
prayers before God and one another. You are invited to come to the wall and tape up 
your prayers to build our own prayer wall.

Play some soft music in the background. Assist the participants as they tape their 
prayer blocks to the wall. Do your best to make the prayer wall look like a real wall, 
such as staggering the blocks every other row. After everyone has finished, take a 
moment to allow the group to view the prayers in silence.

Prayer Leader:

Let us pray the prayer that Jesus gave us. Our Father...

Jesus, may we encounter you and your love in sacrament and prayer. Reveal 
yourself to us so that we may know you and become more like you. We ask this in 
your name. Amen.

**Announcements and Dismissal**
Make any necessary announcements before dismissing the participants.
My Encounters with Jesus in Prayer and Sacraments

1) Describe a time when you felt connected to God through a particular prayer.

2) How did you pray? Were you alone or in a group? Was a memorized prayer, or did you use your own words?

3) Why do you think this was a significant experience of prayer for you?

4) Describe a time when you felt especially connected with a sacrament (baptism, communion, reconciliation, etc.)

5) What made that experience special to you?

6) What did your experiences with prayer and sacraments tell you about Jesus?
Prayer Isn’t Always Easy
Tips to help get you in the habit of praying!

1. Mind
In order to pray, you have to decide to pray. Making the deliberate choice to pray puts your mind in a good place to be able to both talk and listen to God. Making the choice to pray at a specific time and place will allow you to prepare you mind and your heart ahead of time!

2. Time
Prayers can be quick or they can last for days. Like any good conversation, good prayer takes quality time. You want to be sure to leave time to listen for the voice of God. Choosing a set time to pray each day can also be helpful in making prayer a “good habit” in your life.

3. Place
You can talk to God anywhere, but having a good place to pray can help you focus quickly and put you in the right frame of mind to meet with God. Consider creating your own sacred space. This could be in your bedroom, in the woods, or even in your car. Choose a place that that is free of distraction and that you can go to regularly.

4. Body
Figuring out what to do with your body during prayer can be very helpful. Using the body in prayer has been a part of our faith tradition since the beginning. Consider trying out one or more of these actions or postures in your prayer time: Sign of the Cross, bowing, sitting, kneeling, open hands – palms up, hands lifted in the air, dancing, laying prostrate (flat on the ground, face down).

5. What to Say
What do you talk about when you pray? Some find it helpful to use traditional prayers; others talk to God using their own words, and many people do both. Whatever you choose, remember that prayer is all about your relationship with God and others. Talk to God like you would talk to a friend. Don’t do all the talking; make sure you take time to listen! Remember others in your prayer as well. Include the needs of your friends and family, your local community, and even the world.

6. Ritual
There are many ways to pray and over the millennia, people have developed rituals and forms for prayer. Consider prayers like the Rosary, Centering Prayer, Stations of the Cross, Prayer with Icons, novenas, Ignatian Prayer, etc. Your church may even have prayer traditions of its own that you can learn and incorporate into your personal prayer time.
## FORMS of PRAYER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prayer Form</th>
<th>Write your own example of this kind of prayer.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blessing and Adoration</strong></td>
<td>“The prayer of blessing is [our] response to God’s gifts: because God blesses, the human heart can in return bless the One who is the source of every blessing.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2626)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“[Adoration] flows from an attitude that acknowledges we are creatures in the presence of our Creator. It is an act by which we glorify the God who made us.” (U.S. Catechism for Adults, p. 467)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td>“Blessed be the name of the Lord!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prayer of Petition</strong></td>
<td>“[Prayer of petition] takes many forms: to ask, to implore, to plead, to cry our… it acknowledges how much we depend on God for our needs, including forgiveness and persistence in seeking him.” (U.S. Catechism for Adults, p. 467)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td>“I’m sorry for my sins, please forgive me!”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Prayer of Intercession</strong></td>
<td>“This is the prayer that we make on behalf of the needs of others.” (U.S. Catechism for Adults, p. 468)</td>
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<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td>“Please heal my aunt of cancer.”</td>
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<td><strong>Prayer of Thanksgiving</strong></td>
<td>“This form of prayer flows from the Church’s greatest prayer, the celebration of the Eucharist…We are called to thank God for all the gifts we have received, including our joys and sorrows.” (U.S. Catechism for Adults, p. 468)</td>
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<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td>“Thank you for the gift of my friends!”</td>
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<td><strong>Prayer of Praise</strong></td>
<td>“Praise is the form of prayer which recognizes most immediately that God is God… It shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory.” (CCC, 2639)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td>“Holy is your name, Lord! You are the greatest!”</td>
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