

# The Seven Pillars of Catholic Spirituality

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## THE SEVEN PILLARS OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY

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## What If?

What if everything the Catholic Church teaches is true? This is the one question most people never consider when it comes to the Catholic faith.

Have you ever paused to consider that possibility? Not just for a fleeting moment, but really taken some time to ponder the possibility. We live in a culture that assumes that the Catholic Church's teachings are unrealistic, false, or bigoted. It's time we seriously considered the other possibility. Because if it is all true—if everything the Catholic Church teaches is true—that changes everything.

What if God really does exist and created you out of love, for a purpose and with a mission that only you can fulfill? What if Jesus Christ really did come into the world, suffer, die, and rise again to save you? What if every Mass is a miraculous encounter where bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ to nourish your soul and draw you closer to eternity with God?

If everything the Catholic Church teaches is true, then your life is far more extraordinary than you could ever imagine. You're not a random accident. You're a child of God, called to greatness, created for eternity. Every choice you make, every act of love, every moment of prayer matters—infinity and forever.

What if the Catholic Church's teachings on the dignity of every human person, the sanctity of marriage, and the importance of forgiveness are not just ideals but divine truths? What if the sacraments are not just ancient rituals but deeply personal encounters with God's grace that can heal you, transform you, and guide you through life? What if Heaven is real and you are destined for it? What if God does have dreams and plans for your life that far exceed anything you could imagine for yourself?

If all of this is true, how you live your life matters. It means you are called to something greater than pleasure, comfort, and worldly accomplishment. It means your faith is not just one part of your life but the very foundation of everything.

And what if you lived as though it were all true? What if you prayed with the confidence that God hears you? What if you approached the Eucharist as the most important moment of your week? What if you loved others, forgave others, and served others believing anything you did for them, you did for Jesus in his most vulnerable moments?

If everything the Catholic Church teaches is true, then it's not just about going to Mass on Sunday, and it's not about following a set of rules.

It's an incredible gift. An incomprehensible blessing. A striking alternative to the meaninglessness secularism offers. It's an invitation to live a life of meaning and purpose, rooted in the reality of God's incredible plan for you. And the fruits of living this way are found in the lives of the saints: peace, even in the midst of chaos and turmoil; joy, even in the midst of suffering; a heart that loves deeply and aches compassionately for others; and a soul that delights in anything that is good, true, right, just, and noble.

In a culture that is dehumanizing people in a thousand different ways, Catholicism seeks to restore the very best of our humanity, ennobling us to live as children of God.

So, what if it's all true? The question isn't whether it will change your life. The question is: Are you ready to let it?

Many years ago, I was meeting regularly with a young man who was considering becoming Catholic. For three years, I answered all of his questions. Each time we met, he would bring a list of questions and objections. We would delve deep into each one, but he always returned with new objections. It seemed he was searching for reasons not to believe, rather than for reasons to believe.

Finally, I got frustrated. Not because I felt he was wasting my time, but because I felt he was wasting his time. So, this was my advice to him—and it is my advice to you today: “Live as if everything the Catholic Church teaches is true for a few months. Stop thinking about it and start living it. Live as if it were all true. That will change your life, and more importantly, it will transform you into a thoughtful, generous, wise, deeply compassionate, and loving person who is living with astounding intention.”

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That was seven years ago, and he has never looked back. I don't think you will either. Live as if it were all true and the fruits will speak for themselves.

You were made for more. You know it. You have more to offer. You are capable of so much more. Somewhere deep inside you know this is true. You sense it. Your intuition has never been so right. That persistent inner voice isn't lying. Listen to that voice. Don't ignore that quiet voice calling you forward. Trust that voice within and allow God to reveal your true potential.

But to awaken the God-given potential that is sleeping within you will need to acquire some new ancient habits. They may be new to you, but they have ancient origins. You may have some experience with these spiritual practices in the past, but establishing them as habits is something altogether different.

The Seven Pillars of Catholic Spirituality are ancient. But age doesn't make something less valuable or irrelevant. Our culture feels superior to anything old and infects us with a bias toward what is new. But our bias should be toward what works—and these seven spiritual habits work. This is an indisputable fact. These are the habits of the saints.

Stop wasting your life. It's time to find a new way. It's time to walk a different path. The path I propose is a well-trodden path. I wasn't the first to walk it. Faithful Catholics have been following it for centuries. It is the path that transformed my life.

It's been nearly forty years since I first set out on this path and these seven habits have enriched my life every day.

Twenty-five years ago, I wrote *Rediscover Catholicism*. What you are about to read was one part of that book. It describes the path my spiritual mentor invited me to walk in my teens, and I consider myself astoundingly blessed that by some grace I had the courage to step away from the crowd and follow his counsel.

Step by step I was taught how to establish a vibrant spiritual life. The result was a joy that defies explanation and is unlike anything the world has to offer. It is a joy that isn't dependent on fortunate circumstances. It is a joy that can coexist with sorrow, walk hand-in-hand with suffering,

and sit quietly in the shadow of pain. It does not vanish in the presence of grief or uncertainty. It is a joy that reminds us that something wonderful is about to happen.

I've spent my life trying to help others experience this deep and abiding joy. I've done this by helping them establish vibrant spiritual lives in the same way I was taught. The words you are about to read are those of a hopeful twenty-seven-year-old desperate to help as many people as possible experience that same joy.

Every era is arrogant about itself in different ways. The people of this age have a tendency to look down on things that are old, and have a particular way of dismissing ancient wisdom as irrelevant to modern life. The Catholic faith has suffered at the hands of this foolishness. Many people, Catholic and not, dismiss Catholicism and its practices as irrelevant. They believe the faith has nothing to offer simply because it is old. You are about to prove that to be wildly untrue.

You hold in your hands a treasure map. Is it old? Yes. But a treasure map does not become worthless because it is old. Its value is determined by two factors: Does it lead to treasure and how great is that treasure? And I assure you this treasure map will lead you to an unimaginable bounty. You cannot even begin to conceive how different your life will be one year from now if you have the courage to live as if everything the Catholic Church teaches is true and ingrain these seven habits in your life.

Transforming people one at a time is at the heart of God's plan for the world. Are you willing to let God transform you?

## Prologue

Yesterday I was visiting a friend in Atlanta. He lives in a beautiful neighborhood and as we drove past these magnificent homes, one after another, I began to ask myself, “If your spiritual life were a house, what would it be like?”

I would like to place the question before you now. If *your* spiritual life were a house, what would it be like? What street would it be on? What part of town would it be in? What would it look like? Would it be a house or a home? Is it in need of renovations? Is it peaceful, noisy, distracting, well organized, messy?

I must admit, these questions make me a little uncomfortable, but at the same time, they ignite a desire deep within me to begin the spiritual renovations that are necessary at this time in my life. Wherever you are in your spiritual journey, it is my sincerest hope that the next seven chapters will help you to begin the work you need to do on your spiritual life. Whether you are in need of a complete spiritual overhaul or some minor renovations, or you are just beginning to build your spiritual life, I hope these pages help you to begin that work.

When I read the Bible it strikes me with alarming importance that in the course of the entire Gospels, the disciples make only one request of Jesus as a group: “Lord, teach us to pray.” (Luke 11:1)

The people of every age yearn for God. I yearn for God, though for the longest time I did not recognize it as such. Even now I often confuse my yearning for God with a yearning for other things and experiences. I suspect you have also come to recognize your yearning for God. We have a longing to draw nearer to God, a desire to be in communion with him.

My favorite passage from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* appears as the first line of the first chapter, and it reads, “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.”

The request modern Catholics have of Jesus alive in the Church today is the very same request the disciples presented to the Master: “Teach us to pray.”

One of the greatest tragedies of modern Catholicism is that as Catholics we are no longer considered a spiritual people. If you polled people on the streets of any city in America today and asked them to list five words to describe Catholics, I suspect only a small percentage would say *prayerful* or *spiritual*. The tragedy, however, is not how people perceive Catholics, but the possibility that the perception may reflect the reality. It is a generalization, but as Catholics in this modern climate, we tend not to take our spirituality seriously.

The seven pillars of Catholic spirituality that we will discuss in this section combine two thousand years of spiritual wisdom into a handful of spiritual exercises. They may be ancient practices, but don’t let that fool you into believing that they are not relevant to your life in the modern world. These practices are dynamic and ever fresh. I don’t think it is a coincidence that you find these seven pillars so common in the lives of the saints. Is it not, then, a logical and reasonable conclusion that if we apply these practices consistently to our own lives we will grow in holiness?

Every now and then we read about a natural disaster devastating a city in some part of the world with enormous waves. Watching the television footage, I am always amazed that some trees are able to withstand the wind and waves, while everything else is blown away. How do they do it? With strong, deep roots.

A tree with deep roots can weather any storm. In your life and mine it is only a matter of time before the next storm gets here: an illness, the death of a loved one, unemployment, financial difficulties, a troubled child, a natural disaster, marital strife, or any number of other things. The storms of life are inevitable. The question is not whether there will be another storm. The question is: When will the next storm get here? And when the next storm gets here, it’s too late to sink the roots. When the next storm gets here, you either have the roots or you don’t.

Sink these roots, the Seven Pillars of Catholic Spirituality, deep into



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your life and you will weather any storm. But more than that, so much more than surviving the storms of life, you will come to know the abundant life that Jesus invites us to experience here in this life and in eternity.

Our spiritual heritage is rich in wisdom and practice. If we can embrace this heritage and adapt it to the modern context, we will begin again to thrive as the spiritual people God intended us to be—individually and as a Church.

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