News
Spirituality



Sr. Monica Umeh Uchechukwu reflects with nature. Her favorite time for prayer is early in the morning, waking from her night's sleep. "I love beginning my day with the Lord, because from experience, I have learned that the practice sets the direction of the day for me," she said. (Courtesy of Monica Umeh Uchechukwu)

by The Life Panelists

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We asked this month's panel to share their reflections on the following question, and their responses were deeply personal, poetic and moving:

What is your favorite time/place to pray? How has your prayer "evolved" in your lifetime?

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Monica Umeh Uchechukwu from Anambra State, Nigeria, is a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame. She joined the community in 1991 and began her nurse's training and later studied midwifery. She has served as novice director and is currently on the leadership team for her community.

My favorite time for prayer is early in the morning, on waking from my night's sleep. I love beginning my day with the Lord, because from experience, I have learned that the practice sets the direction of the day for me. I discovered that any day I fail to start my day with prayer, I usually become restless, and irritated by minor things — in short, I do not function effectively. I also have some other "pocket" times of prayer, whenever I feel the Spirit moving in my heart.

When it comes to the place of prayer, it varies. I love praying before holy reminders of faith like a crucifix, a lighted candle, images of Jesus and Mary, before the Blessed Sacrament, and with nature. Sometimes I may take a long distance (about 45 minutes) to attend morning Mass and pray on my way in the quietness of the early morning.

My prayer has evolved like St. Paul describes in his first letter to the Corinthians (13:11): *When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child, but now I have become an adult, I put aside childish things.*

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It has been like climbing a ladder for me. My prayer style changed as I mounted the ladder of life. As a child, I was always imitating my elders' ways of praying. I went to Block Rosary centers to recite the rosary and other prayers with other children. I attended Mass with my parents and siblings on Sundays and learned many written prayers and songs, some of which had no meaning to me then until I was able to reason better as an adult.

As I continued to grow up, gradually I began to learn some other teachings I received on prayer, and experiment with them. I learned to pray on my own, believing that God was listening to me.

Initially, deep in my heart, I believed that God says "*yes*" to all prayers without wasting time, because I learned that everything about him is good. I have grown to realize that not everything revolves around me. I now know that God answers our prayers in his own way and at the right time according to his plans for us. Sometimes the answer could be, "*No*," and sometimes, "*Yes*," and at other times, "*Wait*!"

Praying for the needs of other people and the world at large has formed part of my daily prayer. Our good God continues to relate with us wherever we are at any given moment in life.



Judy Dohner is a Sister of the Humility of Mary from Villa Maria, Pennsylvania. She has worked with migrants and immigrants for the past 30 years. She returned to the United States in 2018 after ministering in Haiti for 16 years and currently works with Haitian immigrants and refugees in Immokalee, Florida. She has written for Global Sisters Report and the National Catholic Reporter.

I am sitting at a car dealership getting my community vehicle serviced for the first time (a free service!). I say this because one can pray anywhere! For the past few years, I have become more and more aware that I am always in God's presence, as is all of creation and all God's people. So, I find myself sitting here, or in an airport, or at a restaurant — anywhere really — and asking myself, "Do all these people know how deeply loved they are by God?" and I pray for them.

Prayer has become an evolving adventure during the 60 years of my religious life, starting even before I entered my community, with daily prayer and daily 6:30 a.m. Mass with my mother, plus 12 years of Catholic education. Of course, my initial image of God was *judge*, so I had better follow the rules!

Through ongoing religious formation and annual retreats, prayer became more listening and following. Then, after 25 years of religious life, I went on a sabbatical and made a 30-day retreat where I met the God who loved me intimately, as if I alone existed. And this God of Mystery and Awesomeness introduced me to Jesus. I came to know the Jesus of the Gospels who was teaching me how to become a disciple. The Scriptures came alive to me and became the source of my daily meditation.



Sr. Judy Dohner's prayer space (Courtesy of Judy Dohner)

Meditation has led to contemplation and to centering prayer — the "prayer of the heart" — simply being in quiet emptiness, allowing God to fill me. Today, my personal prayer is joined with the Liturgy of the Hours to start and end each day. Morning and evening prayer connect me with the prayer of the church with everyone who prays in praise and supplication all over the world.

Prayer, this intimacy with the Beloved, must extend beyond self. God surprises me every day with the realization of God's presence in people and events all around me, especially with people who are poor and disadvantaged. The other day at Catholic Charities, where I volunteer with the immigrant Haitian community, some people started arguing loudly about their places in line. I calmed them, organized the line, and walked away quoting Scripture: *Blessed are the peacemakers*. At Mass last week, Jesus said in the Gospel: "*Trust in God and trust in me.*" I looked around the church filled with Haitian immigrants and asylum-seekers and I thought, "These people believe that what they are hearing *is* good news even though they have suffered so much. They simply trust in God!"

Prayer is life. Life is prayer. Times of quiet reflection and openness are needed. But, if we just look around, God reveals God's presence and love everywhere all the time.

> 'Prayer is life. Life is prayer. Times of quiet reflection and openness are needed. But, if we just look around, God reveals God's presence and love everywhere all the time.'

> —Judy Dohner

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Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk is a Ukrainian sister of the Order of St. Basil the Great (Province of St. Michael the Archangel, Croatia). Her academic background is in Ukrainian and English language and in religious pedagogy and catechetics. After final vows in 2018, she worked in parish ministry in Eastern Catholic parishes in Prniavor, Bosnia, and Kyiv, Ukraine. Currently, she is doing her licentiate studies in church history and teaching religious education in secondary school in Osijek, Croatia, and has contributed several columns to Global Sisters Report.

The two important characteristics of prayer for me are calmness and simplicity. Therefore, my favorite place to pray is a prayer bench which represents stillness, freedom and presence.



A prayer bench represents stillness, freedom and presence for Sr. Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk. (Courtesy of Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk)

Looking back on my life history, I see how God led me down the path of prayer. As a child I went to church every Sunday. Even until now, some parts of the Eastern liturgy — such as the blessing of water on Epiphany or the Christmas hymn — have been clearly imprinted in my memory in the voice of the priest who performed them.

Moments spent in the church in silence in front of the cross have also been significant to me. And it is the same with nature. I was born and raised in a village, so I spent hours contemplating the starry dark night sky, the thick gray fog, the sunset, the pale face of the huge moon, and the long summer rains. Although I was not aware that it was a kind of prayer, God spoke to my soul through nature as well.

At the age of 18 I felt the same deep, personal, and close presence of God in the chapel of the Basilian Sisters monastery. This feeling of God's closeness convinced me to become a religious.



"Although I was not aware that it was a kind of prayer, God spoke to my soul through nature as well," Sr. Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk said. (Courtesy of Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk)

In my 30s I attended courses in contemplative prayer. I sat down on a wooden prayer bench, felt my body straighten up, and was filled with a sense of freedom. My lungs breathed freely. My breathing became a prayer.

These courses were a preparation for the next stage of my prayer life — Ignatian retreats. Silently meditating on God's word, on the beauty of the created world, and the history of my own life made me able to meet the living God, God as a person who acts in my life.

My favorite sacred places are those that call for stillness and simplicity, like the Basilica of Santa Sabina, Tre Fontane Abbey in Rome, and Orthodox churches in Macedonian Ohrid. Of course, I am far from seeking God only in silence. The beauty of divine creation can also be felt among the crowds of tourists that fill Rome in the spring, in parents who hold the hands of their children, in the music that comes from a nearby balcony in the evening. God is everywhere, He is alive. For me prayer is an invitation to look at this world through the eyes of God. By the heart of God.



Gifty Atampoka Abane is a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus from Ghana. She is a teacher in a Catholic girls' high school in Ghana and serves their province in leadership.

Prayer as an integral part of the Christian life is a continuous encounter that evolves and grows over time, and results in a kind of spontaneity. Structured time and space might provide the ambience and still our interior feelings, which greatly enhances the experience. The church's typical structured prayers and situations of the Christian's life — coupled with routine family prayer patterns — formed the faith foundation of my earlier years.

In practicing self-discipline to grow deeper in prayer, the early morning hours of the day and late evenings before bed are part of my best daily routines. The Spirit blows where she wills and helps to embody God in my life as an incarnational-oriented member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

With time, I began to realize that the Spirit of God is fluid and cannot be contained in a rigid space, restricted to the precincts of a church, or bounded by time. During my initial years of religious formation, I was helped to gradually seek for more profound

and versatile ways of communing with God as a religious — beyond physical space, materials and time.

In a congregation whose main charism is the Incarnation and which embraces Ignatian spirituality, one cannot be bounded by routines but seeks and finds God in all creatures in all forms.



The Society of the Holy Child Jesus community chapel in Cape Coast, Ghana (Courtesy of Gifty Atampoka Abane)

Desiring to be in tune with God through the action of the Spirit within and without, I prefer the serenity of my room and chapels for quality and grace-filled moments with the Lord. Finding God in all things and in all places — contemplation in action is key.

For this reason, I have learned to be docile to my inner teacher, the Holy Spirit, to put me at peace with myself, others, and God — a discipline hard to develop yet consequential in life. I feel a call to experience and encounter the word made manifest through Scriptures, persons and life events in a truly divine-led human life. The Christian life — and in particular religious life — is a life of contradiction in the eyes of the world: a life which demands unending decision-making based on values

that resonate with the Gospel. It is a call for a dynamic balance of authentic living of the Gospel — to be in the world and not of the world.

Finding God in our busy and chaotic world today, and achieving spiritual transcendence, can only be possible with exceptional grace. Now we can understand what our foundress Venerable Cornelia Connelly said: "It is precisely because you are called to live busy lives that you must lead lives of prayer;" in a sense, to pray unceasingly. Grace gained from sincere prayer empowers me to transcend beyond words to a conscious expression of the Gospel values in daily Christian living.



Maria Cecilia Sierra Salcido is from Mexico and has been a member of the Comboni Missionary Sisters for 32 years. She has lived in the United States, Italy, Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, and Guatemala. With a background in communications, theology, and nonprofit management, she has contributed to the establishment of sustainable organizations in communities affected by poverty, social conflict and cultural diversity. Presently, she has continued her missionary life in the eastern Arab world.

Everything is grace. Divine gratuitousness and beauty are values that define and guide my life and prayer. "Thank you" is the word that emanates from my depths when I contemplate his action and feel part of his loving work. This sense of grace and gratuitousness immerses me, connects me with the divine, and prepares me to discover his traces in the world. Truly, God has lavished me with an excess of gentleness, mercy, tenderness, grace,and goodness.

I began to discover the beauty and tenderness of God from a very early age. My awareness of his presence began to emerge when I was five, with my first Communion. At the age of 12 I was a catechist, participating in missionary activities in Indigenous towns. My parents' ranch, the land, the crops, the trees and the animals emanated the divine for me. I ecstatically watched the sunrise and sunset. Isaiah's words of comfort in Psalm 138, and the person of Jesus in the Gospels have

been dominant sources of inspiration.

Grace and the Spirit of God have led my steps to sacred spaces in Italy, the United States, Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan and Guatemala. As a Mexican religious, I feel privileged and enriched by the affection lavished on me, the hearts that have welcomed me, and by so much cultural diversity that challenges and enriches me. I know that I was abundantly blessed.

But living in the Holy Land is another level.

I have been living in Israel/Palestine for a few months. The desert has become a sacred space for me. My ministry as a Comboni missionary is expressed in working in Bedouin camps in the desert between Jerusalem and Jericho. We visit families daily and promote education and development activities under a scorching sun.



Cecilia Sierra praying in the Judean desert near Mount Musa (Courtesy of Cecilia Sierra)

That's why it comforts me to stop at sunset. With the evening breeze, the soul regains its calm and is renewed. Also, at night — in the quiet of our little chapel — remembering the encounters, the faces and the action of God favors communion. From that space, prayer reconnects me with people and their stories, dreams and resilience; with the flowers that bloom and resist the intense heat; with the beautifully shaped stones that yearn to tell their ancient history; with the caves and shelters, the goats and shepherds. Having overcome the challenge of traveling up and down winding paths, of walking along lonely, tortuous, and narrow paths in the desert comforts and elevates the spirit.

The desert — its immensity and beauty, hardness and aridity — connects me with the *ammas* (wise women) of the desert. Bearers of the Spirit, they are inspiring icons in my longing for union and encounter with the divine. The beauty of the desert claims the heart: *I will take her to the desert and I will speak to her heart* (Hosea 2:16).

Feeling the constant call to interiority and recollection, my soul smiles happily and gratefully. Entranced by so much beauty and before such abundant grace, I only manage to sigh deeply and stammer a "thank you" that springs from the depths of my soul.

This story appears in the **The Life** feature series. View the full series.