

## Learning to Pray – with James Martin!

*The Cloak*, September 2022

On our breakfast table is a recently published book authored by James Martin. Full disclosure: At the breakfast table we read, and this is when I do a lot of my spiritual reading. The title of Martin's latest is *Learning to Pray: A Guide For Everyone*. (Harper One, 2021.)

Martin is a Jesuit priest and a prolific writer, and he and I go way back. When I published my first of three books on the meaning of being human from our genes to Kingdom come (*Imagination and the Journey of Faith*), my publisher, William B. Eerdmans, sent him a copy, and he and I corresponded by email for a while after that. Over the years I have read several of his books and he has remained one of my favorite spiritual authors. I can recommend to you his *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*; *My Life with the Saints*; and interestingly, *A Jesuit Off-Broadway: Behind the Scenes with Faith, Doubt, Forgiveness, and More*.

The latter is a reflection on Martin's time with an off-Broadway theater group that needed a theologian as a consultant for a play concerning the life and death of Judas. A sermon or two came out of that writing.

Anyway, getting back to my current breakfast table reading, Martin opens the first chapter, "Everyone Can Pray," with the following words:

*Everyone can pray.*

*Let me put that another way. If I can learn how to pray, then so can you. If you've never prayed before, or have had trouble praying, or think that you're praying "wrong," that opening statement might seem hard to believe. Or too good to be true. But it is true, even though it took me a long time to understand this simple fact: Prayer is for everyone.*

In the third chapter he gets to the heart of the matter:

*Where does the desire for prayer come from? From God. The most common way God draws you closer is by placing within you the desire to be closer, the desire that drove you to think about prayer and to read this book. Strange as it sounds, your reading of these lines at this moment is a sign of God's call. ... Prayer reminds us of our need for God. It reminds us that we are not the center of the universe and that we are not God. Sometimes when things are going well, we can grow arrogant and complacent in our self-sufficiency. Prayer, which places us in the presence of God in an intentional way, reminds us of Who is in charge, or rather, who is nurturing us.*

In this rich book, Martin describes many ways of praying and all the attendant difficulties that prayer can cause us. But in fact it is our lifeline. Starting with three common ways of prayer – petition (it’s OK to ask because we are essentially dependent creatures), conversation (God calls us into relationship), and mystical experience (or a sense of God’s nearness wherever we may be) – Martin covers it all.

In my family I was always designated the family pray-er. And over the years I’ve traveled both the easy and hard roads in my prayer life, hanging on nevertheless as I believe God is hanging on to me. So let me close this Cloak piece with letting Martin have the last words.

*At various points in our prayer life, something happens. God communicates with us. ... There is no better response than gratitude. We can do nothing without God, least of all pray. After all, it is God who created us. Places within us a desire for God, calls us to prayer through our desires, helps us pray, and offers us the fruits of prayer. God is the beginning, middle, and end of prayer. Our gratitude to God is the best response for the life of prayer.*

And he ends the book with the following:

*Now that you have experienced prayer, this question can be asked of you: “What difference will it make in your life?”*

*You have a lifetime to answer.*

*And the answer is your life.*

Whether you are a beginner or master pray-er, I couldn’t recommend Martin’s writings to you more highly. So ... take and read!

Blessings on your journey.