



Pray  
to  
Your Father  
in Secret

Jean Lafrance

Pray to Your Father  
in Secret

# Pray to Your Father in Secret

Jean Lafrance

Translated by  
B. Green and R. Jollett



**Pauline**  
BOOKS & MEDIA  
Boston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lafrance, Jean.

Title: Pray to your father in secret / Jean Lafrance ; translated by B. Green and R. Jollett.

Other titles: Prie ton Père dans le secret. English

Description: Boston : Pauline Books & Media, 2016. | Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015037843 (print) | LCCN 2015037324 (ebook) | ISBN 9780819860248 (epub) | ISBN 9780819860255 (mobi) | ISBN 9780819860262 (pdf) | ISBN 9780819860231 (pbk.) | ISBN 0819860239 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life--Christianity. | Spiritual life--Biblical teaching. | Prayer--Christianity. | Contemplation. | Salvation--Christianity. | Catholic Church--Doctrines.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 .L33513 2016 (ebook) | DDC 248.3/2--dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015037843>

Originally published as *Prie ton Père dans le secret* by Jean Lafrance, Paris, France © 1987 Édition Paulines 250, boul. St-François nord, Sherbrooke, Qc, J1E 2B9 (CAN-ADA)

The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1993, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Rosana Usselman

Cover photo by [istockphoto.com/](http://istockphoto.com/) © Marcus Lindstrom

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

“P” and PAULINE are registered trademarks of the Daughters of St. Paul.

Copyright © 2016, Daughters of St. Paul

---

Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Paul's Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491. [www.pauline.org](http://www.pauline.org)

Printed in the U.S.A.

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

20 19 18 17 16

# Contents

Preface . . . . .	vii
I. The God of Dialogue . . . . .	1
II. The Way of Salvation . . . . .	37
III. The Working Out of Salvation . . . . .	93
A Note Concerning the Experience of the Believer . . . . .	126
IV. The Dialogue with God . . . . .	133
Conclusion . . . . .	195
Appendix: Self-Surrender . . . . .	199



# Preface

This book contains a series of short reflections of equal length, primarily intended as an aid to prayer. Many of the readings are presented as reflections on the Gospels, as a means of introducing prayer to those who have had a “prayer experience.” Sometimes after a retreat people have asked me for a souvenir text, something to help them renew in their everyday prayer what they experienced in their short retreat experience. I have written this book to meet that need.

Let me tell you something about the book, the people for whom I wrote it, and the way in which it can be used to help us pray.

This is *not* a series of meditations, written at random, which propose various themes to encourage prayer. Rather, this book is, above all, concerned with a well-directed prayer experience. When we speak of “experience,” we mean growth and direction of a specific nature. This is not an abstract, subjective structure. The spiritual experience joins the Christian experience, which is the objective experience of salvation through the Chosen People, the prophets, Jesus Christ, and, finally, the

Church. We can see it as a progressive revelation of the love of God, who calls humanity to enter into deep communion with him, until the day when he fulfills this communion in Christ. Such an experience is given to us in the Bible, and the Church invites us to relive it today in the liturgy and in our daily lives.

We have followed the path of God's revelation, which calls us to live with him on friendly terms. The union of God and the human person is so intimate, so firm, so complete that from now on, to talk of God without at the same time talking of the human person is to leave something out, and to talk of people without talking of God is, again, to leave something out. We cannot read the word of God like a curious tourist or like someone looking for pictures and ideas. We are involved and challenged by the word of God, which reaches out to the depths of every person.

This book is divided into four parts that try to set out, by successive approaches, the stages of the story of salvation. First of all, we place ourselves before God, who comes out of silence and speaks to us, to tell us of his wish to join with us in a union of love. It is in this dialogue that God reveals himself as the Entirely Other, the One who is near, and also as the Creator. This revelation of God as thrice holy, God Friend, and God Host plunges us into adoration and love, calling us to live before God, with God, and in God. This contemplation of the God of dialogue is the first stage in the story of salvation.

But this salvation is made completely and fully evident when the Word of God becomes flesh and comes to live among us. We are thus placed before Jesus Christ and called upon to recognize him as the revelation of God's love. At the heart of faith there is a well-defined choice for or against Christ, the



Word of God. On this level of welcome or denial of Christ the deep feelings of the heart are revealed.

In Christ's loving look upon us, we feel our sin and our need for salvation. If we refuse to be penetrated by his gaze, we are like the willfully blind who refuse to see in Jesus the revelation of the Father's love.

Standing before Christ, we have no alternative except to follow him or to run from him. But to follow Jesus Christ is to go with him into the mystery of the glorious cross and the kingdom of the Beatitudes. It is only on these terms that we can become his disciples. So we have to empty ourselves, to enter into the poverty of Jesus without illusions, accepting what is at stake as a result of his love. When we have reached this second stage, we are invited to enter with Jesus into the way of salvation.

Jesus carries out this salvation in the paschal mystery made present today in the sacraments, especially in Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. In a third stage, called the "carrying out" of salvation, we are asked to contemplate Jesus giving up his life to the Father in the glorious passion and giving his body to us in the Eucharist. As we follow Jesus, having thus become part of his death-resurrection, our life takes on a new dimension. It becomes life for the Father in Christ. Jesus teaches us to give ourselves completely, without reservation, keeping nothing back. The paschal mystery brings us directly into the mystery of the Trinity, making us adopted children of God.

Lastly, in a fourth and final stage, we put ourselves in the place of humanity to come close to the mystery of this dialogue with God. God speaks to us to express his love. He expects a loving response from us, expressed in prayer and the

unconditional gift of our lives. Simply put, we have returned to the essentials of learning how to pray, which permit us to relate to God on every level of our being. Much more than a method, this is an anthropological essay on prayer. We do not learn to pray by attending lectures and seminars on prayer, but by practicing prayer in our everyday lives.

The whole person is committed to a relationship with God. Prayer, then, raises the problem of the Christian experience. Certain expressions used in this book must not be wrongly interpreted. We often speak of “prayer of the heart,” “tasting the word,” or of experiencing the working of God within us. Such exercises also allow a large place for the movement of the Holy Spirit within a person’s heart, what Saint Ignatius called “consolations” or “dryness.” These movements are seen as signs of spiritual understanding. They have nothing to do with emotions or impressions that are experienced passively. Rather, movements within the heart relate to the act by which a person lays hold upon God. This is why, before the last section, we have tried to assess briefly the Christian experience. The fine book of Jean Mouroux\* should be read on this subject as well as the writings of Karl Rahner on the experience of grace. These studies, describing the essence of the Christian experience, are what prompted me to write these notes.

These pages are primarily for those who have lived a continuous experience of prayer, who feel the need to deepen their understanding of their prayer, and who want to rediscover their

---

\* See Jean Mouroux, *The Christian Experience: An Introduction to a Theology* (Sheed and Ward; first edition 1954). Ed.

reasons for living according to the Gospel. It is clear that our experience of salvation unfolds in the same rhythm as our personal life. During a retreat, this experience is lived in a concentrated and synthetic way, but it must also be, above all, the very thread of our lives. I have put together these short reflections to facilitate a steady assimilation of and pondering on the word of God. It can only be done little by little, as time is a very important factor in spiritual experience.

That is why the following reflections must be prayed rather than read. They should not be approached as accounts of prayer, to furnish the mind with fresh ideas to consider later. Let me repeat, it is not by describing prayer that we learn to pray, but by practicing it in our daily life. For this reason, I have deliberately chosen to address the reader directly, so the reader will feel personally called by Another in a real dialogue. You should take up these themes in continuous prayer, appreciating them fully rather than finishing them at any cost. You should not go on to the next reflection unless you have completely absorbed the previous reflection into your prayer life.

Although these notes are frequently used in a retreat of about a week, they can also serve as a guide for anyone who wishes to have a self-directed experience of prayer in a personal retreat. However, nothing can replace a real experience under the guidance of someone who has followed the discipline of these exercises, who is certain of the path, and who can bear witness to prayer. Once the prayer experience has been made with a trained director, it can easily be done again by oneself. That is why these notes may serve as a guide for a self-directed prayer experience.

One last question may be considered: How should these texts be used for prayer? First, there should be a certain gradual

pattern of growth, whereby one goes deeper into the prayer experience, penetrating into all the stages, not trying to do everything from the start. This, in essence, is the same as the path of baptismal initiation. Baptism sets a person, as sinner, before God the Holy One. The newly baptized person allows himself or herself to be enlightened by the word of Christ and is ultimately united with Christ in the mysteries of salvation.

Above all, I cannot emphasize enough that those who take part in a retreat must practice an uncompromising fidelity to prayer. Success is not required, but you must put yourself resolutely into complete interior silence and be faithful to the hour set apart for contemplative prayer. Apart from these moments of explicit prayer, it is good to live simply in the presence of God, pondering freely the themes used. Special care should be taken not to have too many readings, but to select a few fairly short ones from the Bible or any other book that is relevant to the stage through which one is living. A single truth absorbed in a serene atmosphere and calm concentration opens all other truths to us without our knowing it.

Usually as we grow in prayer, it becomes easier for us. If it is impossible to pray, we must look for the reasons. These are not necessarily due to bad will, but sometimes to faulty human conditions apart from prayer. Here it is a good idea to find an experienced spiritual director in order to examine your prayer life and, with his or her help, discern the weak areas.

All this advice about prayer might seem complicated and tedious to anyone looking at it from the outside, but it should be tried before being dismissed as useless. You discover how helpful something can be only by doing it. In the beginning, you have to analyze any action so that you do it well. Later, you do it easily. Like any skill, prayer demands that you do it

patiently, even utilizing setbacks. But having said this, we must not ask too much of these reflections, for they have only one aim: to introduce us to prayer and to help us to develop it. All human techniques are only a crutch in training us in prayer. The Holy Spirit alone is the true master of prayer. Once we can walk alone, we must give up the crutch. The Holy Spirit can make of us poor human beings people of prayer. When we have finished these pages, we will begin our real search for a life in the presence of God.



# The God of Dialogue

*Do not come forward to look at God as though you are looking at some strange sight. Take off your sandals before him.*

If you want to know God, you should walk in the steps of the people of prayer in the Bible, those to whom God revealed himself. Think today of the picture of the burning bush and Moses (see Ex 3:1–6). Take off your sandals to see God, and he will reveal himself to you as a consuming fire.

First, when we see Moses going deep into the desert, it is always in some “beyond” that he will reach the mountain of God. But there again, Moses must change his ideas and be converted. He goes forward to examine this strange sight, to see why the bush is not consumed. Moses is curious. He is attracted by the sensational, and he wants to examine the question of God: “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up” (Ex 3:3).

Moses tries to understand the “why” of God from the outside, using rational means. But you cannot reach God as a curious onlooker, since God does not let himself be enclosed on human terms. He is always above and beyond your ideas, unyielding to your grasp. God is not a problem to be resolved but a mystery to discover. A personality cannot be grasped in a psychological study. It will escape when you want to hold onto it or explain it. God is the Unknown, the Unexplainable. “A thing once explained ceases to interest us,” wrote Nietzsche, “so God will always interest us!”

This is why the Lord takes the initiative in the meeting when he calls Moses by his name. The only attitude before God is to say to him, “Here I am.” This is an act of humility, of poverty, of assent, of being at God’s disposal. The Lord asks Moses to take off his sandals, which implies that Moses gives up his security, his protection, his idea of God. The Lord is the thrice-holy One who reveals himself in a dialogue of freedom and adoration.

To know God is to recognize that he is there, unyielding to your ideas, that he will reveal himself when he wishes and to whomsoever he wishes. In prayer, reject any image of God. You are operating under the system of faith, not that of clear sight. Saint Paul says that the mystery of God surpasses all knowledge (see Eph 3:9–19). You grasp the essential of God as “in a mirror, dimly,” adds Saint Paul (1 Cor 13:12).

Do not try to approach God to inventory him. Stop treating him as an object. Call upon him as a free person. The first step to this end is to humble yourself, to take off your sandals. The decisive moment of real encounter with God begins not in the movement you make toward him but the movement of withdrawal, of humility, where you see yourself as unimportant



before him. God is not a conquered country but a holy land where you must tread barefoot.

When you realize that you have no ideas on the matter, then God reveals himself. Again, you will not be able to express the experience in clear and precise terms. The Lord reveals himself to you, as to Moses, like fire, something that cannot be grasped or held in our hands. He gives himself as a consuming fire. Fire is a strange and fascinating thing. It lights up and changes everything it touches. When Saint John of the Cross wanted to call to mind the greatest heights of union with God, he compared it to a wood log being burned away by fire.

In prayer, remain poor and empty before the burning, glowing bush. Say nothing, but offer to this consuming fire the emptiness of your very self. God is the one who wants to consume you. You form one being with him, and you will share his divine nature. He transforms into himself those who humbly offer themselves to his transforming grace. By your union with him, he is strong enough to light up the world with the fire of his love.

*Be filled with wonder at God who speaks to you. He always reinitiates the conversation you have cut short.*

Each day you feel Adam's loneliness in the Garden of Eden: "The man gave names . . . to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner" (Gen 2:20). Like Adam, you are filled with wonder when someone like you looks at you, smiles, or says something that pulls you out of the misery of your loneliness. You have been made to meet others, to smile, to see them, to relate to other people, to have a lasting love. As at the Annunciation Mary, seeing

herself loved by God, was overwhelmed with joy; so you too know the experience of the fullness of love. Suddenly you are alive, since you are known and loved by another.

When you open your Bible to read the word of God, do you feel the same wonder? Or are you like the Prodigal Son, who is so intent on using the Father's gifts that feels no gratitude to the giver? He does not accept them as a gift or as a sign of the deeper giving the Father wishes to make of himself to his son.

You may rise early in the morning or even in the night to pray. God is already before you in your prayer. It is he who begs you to accept his proposal of love to you. To open the book of the word is to unseal a love letter addressed to you personally. You should be astonished by this overwhelming love of God that searches for humanity, watching for our slightest response.

You are not the one who goes seeking him. He is the one who keeps knocking at the door of your heart (see Rev 3:20), hoping you will open it to him and share the joy of his friendship.

God does not need you. He is above all; he is the Entirely Other. He is joy in himself, happiness, love, truth, and holiness. He wants to call you, to enter into a dialogue of love so that he can impart to you all that he is. God is hungrier for you than you are for him. When he speaks, it is not with empty words. It is just the opposite: God utters a word that expresses his deepest being. When God speaks to you, the most important thing is not simply what he says, but the very fact that he is talking to you. When someone speaks to you, it is always wonderful, as you see in that person's words the gift of one who expresses oneself freely, who communicates, who gives of oneself. As with Abraham, God shares with you his desire to create

a new covenant with you. His word tells again and again of the infinite love he has for you. He speaks only to say, *I love you*.

You will never finish your contemplation of this love. Some days it will seem like unbelievable folly to you. Do not be discouraged, whatever your sin, your forgetfulness, your lack of faith—it is always God who takes the first steps and reinitiates the conversation you have broken off: “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20).

To pray is to stay in the embrace of a Father moved with compassion at the sight of our wretchedness. Furthermore, in the depths of your poverty you find that God has never stopped wanting you. True contemplative prayer is born from this wonder before the love of the Trinity.

When you have felt a hint of the love that God has for you—for you can never grasp it completely—you will emerge a little from your meanness. Your heart will burn with the very fire of the burning bush: “Oh, a man like me would run a mile to get away if he felt that love around” (Graham Greene).

*The sign that you have begun to know God is your desire to know him better.*

Do you want to know whether you are on the way to knowing God? Ask the great people of prayer in the Bible and be willing to relive their long experience. Moses contemplated the unknowable God of the burning bush. He allowed himself to be won over by God and became one of his true, intimate friends: “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Ex 33:11).

Moses had come to such a deep knowledge of God who revealed his name to him, who revealed the substance of his innermost being. Moses is the Lord's friend. However, Moses asks for a still greater knowledge of God. Reread in silence the prayer of Moses (Ex 33:12–23). Make your own the prayer he made to God: "Show me your glory, I pray."

The sign that you have begun to know God is not the fine ideas you have about him, still less the pleasure your prayer gives you, but rather your ardent desire to know him better. You would not desire God if you did not know him. If you did not have God in you, you would not be able to feel his absence. It is in the ache of desire that God's presence is disclosed. It is presence in absence.

God is mystery. He discloses himself to you gradually. The further you go in the knowledge of God, the more you see that the mystery is still there and deepens. You will want to know even more of him: "If there is a real desire, if the thing desired is really light, the desire for light produces it" (Simone Weil).

Do you want to know the quality of your prayer life? Start by asking yourself what are your hopes and desires. Saint Paul says, ". . . those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (Rom 8:5). The more you are taken over by the Spirit, the more your desires will be in tune with the Spirit. Yet these desires must be real and have at least some fulfillment. So ask yourself these questions: "Do I thirst for God? Do my heart and my body cry out to him?" True knowledge of God cannot be expressed. God is indescribable. "Lord, make me desire you." The intensity of your desire for God is a mark of the quality of your love. Do you yearn to pray?

God responded to Moses' request by admitting him gradually into his mystery, but to do this Moses had to endure a

radical death. “‘But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live’” (Ex 33:20). At present you know God as in a mirror; later you will know him as you are known, face to face, when you have accepted death. You cannot imagine what you will see tomorrow.

For the moment, accept that you must stand in the cleft of the rock, immersed in deep shadows, hidden in the hand of God. Then, like Moses, you will see the Lord from behind, that is, in the signs of his presence. God is passing by. He cries out his name: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . .” (Ex 34:6). Each time God shows himself to you, he reveals himself as complete mercy.

Then notice Moses’ reaction when God has passed by. Moses falls to his knees, lies prostrate on the ground, and humbles himself completely. The result of love is adoration and self-abasement. Moses’ prayer of intercession follows: “If now I have found favor in your sight, O LORD, I pray, let the LORD go with us . . .” (Ex 34:9). You will recognize the truth of your prayer in the humility found in your whole life and in your care to serve your brothers and sisters and intercede for them. As with Moses, you can only intercede and be a mediator to the extent of your closeness with God. May the Holy Spirit deepen in you a soul of desire.

*Contemplate the experience of Elijah on Mount Horeb with a disciple’s heart. You will share Elijah’s intimacy with God.*

In contemplation, be careful not to leave in the shadows aspects of the mystery of God that seem inconsistent to you. Your sense of his holiness must blend with your knowledge of

his intimacy. You have already seen the closeness that existed between Moses and the Lord. In accompanying Elijah to Mount Horeb, you will share in his intimacy with God.

Men such as Abraham, Moses, and Elijah are not characters from the past. They are our fathers in faith, saints of the Old Testament. You can pray to them to act on your behalf as spiritual fathers. So Abraham will obtain for you the grace to root your life in faith in the word of God. As a disciple, contemplate the life of Elijah. He is the father of those contemplatives who live in endless search of God. He can pass on to you a share of that inner fire for God that consumed him: "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts . . ." (1 Kgs 19:14).

Place this experience in the context of the theophanies. In this very spot God revealed his name to Moses, that is, his inner being. He gave him the Law and the Covenant.

With terrifying thunder and lightning, God made apparent his holiness. But you must go beyond these violent manifestations to find his spiritual presence in gentleness and intimacy.

Elijah is the one who stands before God to serve him (see 1 Kgs 17:1). He works untiringly for God's kingdom. He has an apostolic heart filled with enthusiasm for the house of God. But Elijah prefers to say, ". . . the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand." You, too, burn for the mission, but God does not need your services. The only service he expects from you is your attentiveness and your presence. He wants you to stand before him. "This is a man who loves the family of Israel and prays much for the people and the holy city—Jeremiah, the prophet of God" (2 Macc 15:14).

God takes pleasure in being with you (see Pr 8:31). He expects you to live with him. To pray is to lose time freely

before him. It is a grace to be happy with him and to recognize his presence.

Before he revealed himself to Elijah, God had him pass through the desert: alone, weary, discouraged, owning nothing. Elijah knew the feeling of failure that is so often in your heart, both as a human and as an apostle: “I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kgs 19:4). “I am no better than the others . . .” Saint James draws this parallel: “Elijah was a human being like us” (Jas 5:17).

At the end of this long, painful desert road, Elijah found the love of a God who was close to him. Turn your tired face to that intangible breath of wind that expresses, as much as any symbol can, the spirituality and sweetness of God.

Elijah was given, in a vivid meeting, an additional revelation of God’s being. God is not only the Most High, the Almighty, but the God present in that intimacy that belongs to the Spirit. Prayer should let you taste emotionally the presence of God. Is his word sweet to the taste, more than honey in the mouth? Your eyes and your human heart should see and taste how good God is: “Your decrees . . . are the joy of my heart” (Ps 119:111).

Only the fullness of this revelation in the Gospel shows how far this intimacy goes. In the Holy Trinity, it is the close communion of the three divine Persons who greet and give themselves mutually to one another. In the degree that you listen and keep the word of Jesus, you live in this movement of communion, and the Trinity is present in you. Throw light upon this theophany, with the help of Saint John’s teaching (see Jn 16:23 and 15:1–17).

You can say, like Jacob, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (Gen 28:16). In your prayer, always go

down deeper into this indwelling God. He does not pull you away from the real world but makes you ever more present to it. When you come back among your brothers and sisters, you will see this mystery in their hearts, and you will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living.

*You exist and you live by God's look of love upon you.*

You know how modern atheism rejects a god that would stop you from living as a free person. On this, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote, "Metaphysical and moral consciousness dies upon contact with the Absolute." In a way, atheists are right. If God were indeed "other," you would have a real need to struggle to free yourself. But God does not fit into the category of *other* any more than he fits into the category of *same*.

For God, creating you does not mean putting you into existence in an impersonal way. He is not some "other" for you. In the same way, you cannot identify with him based on your relationship. You are not the same as God. To say you are created by him is to say that God is not you and that neither is he some "other."

This apparent contradiction is hard to express in words, but you can see it in your religious consciousness. This is why it is necessary to find in your prayer the link of creation that unites you with God. At the root of all prayer is this awareness of God's loving look, which creates you unceasingly. Many prayers fade away because they do not begin with this reality. Your whole spiritual and prayer life is based upon this bond of creation. That is why at the start of a retreat, after contemplating the Entirely Other God, you must contemplate God's