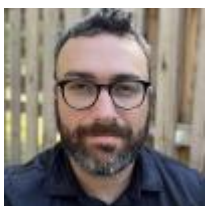


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It's December 2019 and all I'm reading is "best of the decade" lists about movies and stuff. I could not miss my chance to contribute to this important blog tradition, but I needed a good Catholic angle. So here are my 25 best prayers of the decade.

One caveat before I begin: Of course, only God can receive and, uh, judge and rank prayers. As such, the prayers here are presented in an arbitrary order — 1 is no "better" than 25. Think of this less as a true "25 best prayers" list, which is impossible for any human to assemble, and more of a "25 prayers that brought me closer to God over the past 10 years" list.

25. The backboard slaps in Brian Doyle's short essay "Elegy Against the Backboard"

This [little 2016 essay](#) by the late, great Brian Doyle framed the whole exercise for me. Doyle talks about playing basketball in a men's league with a quirky, massively talented player who liked to slap the backboard while shooting lay-ups in pregame warmups. The whole team took on this habit before, tragically, the player got very sick and passed away. After he died, a bunch of the guys were playing one night, and, without planning it, they warmed up in the same way, slapping the backboard one after the other. "I wanted to tell you about those few minutes, when we did that little thing that wasn't little. I bet every one of us remembers those few minutes, too," Doyle writes. "There are many ways to pray."

There are many ways to pray. A few different ones comprise this list.

24. The prayer card for unborn babies and their mothers I picked up in the back of a random church before our first daughter was born

My wife and I couldn't seem to find the words to pray for our first baby in the womb — I guess because it was such a foreign, miraculous, unspeakable experience. I found a little prayer card on the table in a church narthex and we used it for our first two kids before I lost it during our recent move, which was before the birth of our third kid. I don't remember what the prayer said. But it is such a relief to have words given to you for praying when you aren't able to handle it yourself.

23. Singing the Salve Regina in Latin with our 4-year-old for a few weeks before she got bored of it and requested a new song

That first kid is 4 now, and a few months ago, she let me teach her the Salve Regina in Latin, which we sung every night before she went to bed. She has a knack for language and pretty much memorized the hymn, which was a pure marvel to me. It got too long for her eventually and she requested other songs. Parenting victories are small and short-lived but still good!

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22. The Magnificat

My devotion to Mary has grown over the past 10 years, but not the docile Mary often depicted in popular church art. Instead, I am challenged and heartened by the Mary of the Magnificat, who sings that God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away. The only faith that seems worth practicing is this sort of radical faith.

21. The 2016 Christmas Mass at the bombed-out Maronite Catholic cathedral in Aleppo, Syria

I [wrote about this right after it happened](#). What an image of witness and faithfulness.

20. Thank you

First half of the decade for me was a "thank you, God" type of decade: Thank you for my education, for my new career, for my new wife. It's still a good prayer (and one that suffices all by itself according to the mystic Meister Eckhart). But the prayer I turn to more often now as a father of three is ...

19. Help

There was a period of my spiritual life when I sort of turned up my nose at simple prayers asking for help. So juvenile, I thought, like the kid praying for help on a final exam. Not so! Help, especially when accompanied by a good thank you, is really the best prayer for weary life wayfarers.

18. Any of the times on Catholic Twitter someone requested prayers for a special intention and hundreds of people would reply

Catholic Twitter — the community of believers who find each other on the social media platform — can be an argumentative cesspool of a gathering place, but the times when people ask for prayers and get hundreds of responses are such blessed, 21st century-only prayer connections.

17. April 2014 Mass at the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico

There were a bunch of Masses at the U.S.-Mexico border wall this decade, [but the one in 2014 I'm thinking of](#) included a photo of Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson distributing communion through the slats of the fence, a reminder of the subversiveness of prayer that stands up to emperors and their unjust laws.

16. The litany of the saints at a Jesuit ordination Mass in June 2017

Our friend Michael was being ordained a Jesuit priest, so we flew to Milwaukee for the Mass. Seeing all the guys ordained that day lying prostrate throughout the church, while we prayed for the intercession of saint after saint, made me so glad to be Catholic.

15. The solar halo that appeared over Oscar Romero's beatification ceremony in El Salvador in 2015

I don't really think God messes with the weather to express pleasure or displeasure. But when this [chill-inducing, rare "solar halo"](#) appeared over the beatification of now-St. Oscar Romero in El Salvador, I thought of Psalm 148: "Praise [God], sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!"

14. The sung Our Father at the funeral of a prophet who left us far too soon

I wrote about [this incredible funeral Mass a few years ago](#), when we mourners sang the Our Father together with palpable joy amidst the heartbreak.

13. "Come Darkness, Come Light" by Mary Chapin Carpenter

This song was recorded last decade, but I only discovered it this decade, so it gets grandfathered in. I'm a Scrooge when it comes to Christmas music, but this [one about seekers of every kind approaching the manger always gets me in the spirit](#).

12. The "Alleluia" at an Easter Vigil Mass I was at where the smoke alarms went off in the middle of the song due to the incense and they rang in perfect rhythm the rest of the alleluia and stopped the second the song ended

11. Vespers or Evensong

I saw [this tweet](#) this week: While church attendance is down (in Britain, I think, but the tweet isn't clear), attendance at evening services like vespers or evensong is up. I love vespers. Quiet, reflective, lots of music, darkened church. There's something to learn from in this liturgy's rise in popularity.

10. "How Great" by Chance the Rapper

One of the top comments on [this song's YouTube video](#), which is by the massively popular and deeply Christian recording artist Chance the Rapper, is "chance the type of person to make you go back to church after 10 years." Amen.

9. The rosary I could hear from outside a congressman's office while I met with him about immigration reform

A few years ago, I was part of a group meeting with a congressman to talk about the church's support of just immigration reform. A tiny, fiery Mexican religious sister had been bringing a couple dozen undocumented parishioners to this congressman's office for weeks to pray outside. They prayed the rosary in Spanish as the meeting happened, the sound reaching us inside. I'll never forget their resolve.

8. Any spontaneous prayerful singing, especially [that which happened outside the Notre Dame Cathedral as it burned](#)

7. Eucharistic Prayer IV

I still don't love the lion's share of the changes to the Mass in English that were instituted in 2011. But I'm a big fan of Eucharistic Prayer IV, which beautifully traces salvation history in just a few stanzas. Here's my favorite passage:

"And when through disobedience [humankind] had lost your friendship,
you did not abandon him to the domain of death.

For you came in mercy to the aid of all,
so that those who seek might find you."

6. The prayer of blessing at our 2012 wedding, during which our friends and families were invited to reach their hands out over us from their pews

I'm glad our presider, Fr. Kollman, invited our guests to extend their hands in blessing over us. It's the single image of our wedding that sticks in my head as a symbol of the community of support we're blessed to have around us. Our tall friend Paul had his arms up so wide and high, which totally cracked me up in a church-appropriate way.

5. The shockingly unbroken period of quiet during eucharistic adoration by first-time adoration participant high school kids in the youth group I ran in 2011

4. The [Taizé](#) song "[In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful](#)," which my wife and I have sung to all three kids to calm them down

It occasionally calms them down; it almost always calms me down.

3. The hymn "Blessed Assurance" and all the other prayers [at the first service held at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina](#), four days after the racially motivated slaughter of nine people there

"No evildoer, no demon in hell or on Earth can close the doors of God's church," said the presider, the Rev. Norvel Goff.

2. Psalm 139

At Confession once, when I was pretty hard on myself, the confessor suggested I pray Psalm 139 every day for a week: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Hard words to pray when you're down on yourself, but important ones.

1. Prayers for Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square when he introduced himself to the world for the first time in 2013

That first night of Pope Francis' papacy set the tone for the years since. Before he blessed the multitudes outside St. Peter's Basilica, he asked for their prayers first. Groundbreaking humility. Francis always seems to be asking people to pray for him. I should probably do that. Even more importantly, I should work to grow more comfortable with asking people to pray for me. Because if there's one thing pulling this list of 25 prayers together has reminded me, it's that prayer works and has no substitute.

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