Columns
Spirituality



School Sisters of St. Francis singers receive St. Cecilia socks at their final rehearsal before their "Gathering on Holy Ground" concert in November 2022 to celebrate the reopening of St. Joseph Chapel in Milwaukee. (Courtesy of Jane Marie Bradish)



by Jane Marie Bradish

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Scripture reminds us that "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). We have stories of Jesus teaching his followers to pray, praying alone, and praying with others both publicly and privately. The Hebrew Scriptures tell of the prophets encountering God in multiple ways including wind (Elijah), fire (Moses), and angels (Joseph and Mary are the most famous of those encounters).

Our Catholic tradition offers us many wonderful ways to pray: eucharistic liturgy, sacraments, devotions (Holy Hour, adoration, Benediction), Liturgy of the Hours (and its variations), retreats, pilgrimages and more. Many people also speak of prayer experiences in less conventional ways and places as well, such as nature, spending time with someone significant in our lives, music, or other aesthetic experiences.

All are profound prayer experiences, and, to be completely honest, from time to time they do nothing for me. To be clear, that does not mean I stop participating or trying to pray, but I've found I have to do things a little differently. I've had supervisors, colleagues, friends and even GSR editors tell me something along the lines of "You take a left field approach." I take that as a compliment, and it serves me well when traditional prayer isn't working for me.

I recently took a trip to the car wash to clean months of Canadian wildfire and general pollution off the car. As the car was sprayed with the foam cleaner, I felt the presence of God. Soap, scrub, rinse and dry, and then driving out of the dark tunnel into the sunlight again, all sparkly. That three minutes was profound and unexpected and prayerful in a way that would have never occurred to me.

In the summer of 2023, Harley-Davidson celebrated its 120th anniversary with a homecoming in my hometown. Harley-Davidson is a maker of serious motorcycles, known for a distinct sound and lots of shiny chrome. My grandmother, before she was married, worked in Harley's office in their early history. That, and them being a local business, is my only connection; I've never driven or ridden on one of their bikes.



Staging area for the Harley-Davidson 120th anniversary parade, July 2023 in Milwaukee (Jane Marie Bradish)

The anniversary celebration ended with a parade through town. Thousands of bikes from around the world participated. On a whim, I went to the staging area for the parade, and discovered spectators could walk around and look at the bikes and chat with the drivers while the cue lines formed (Note: from first to last, it took two hours to clear the staging area and get everyone onto the parade route). Seeing flags from around the world and bikers communicating across cultural and language barriers was a prayer experience, a celebration of our global existence when gathered

around a common theme.

The community choir I've been a part of since before I entered my congregation was part of a sacred concert on the feast of St. Cecilia (patron saint of musicians). We practiced long and hard to be ready, as the concert was also the symbolic reopening of our chapel after more than two years of COVID-19 shutdowns. I found St. Cecelia socks and presented them to everyone at the last rehearsal. It was a spur-of-the-moment idea on my part. The surprise on people's faces and the number of choir members who wore them for the actual concert can best be described as a prayer experience. We sang beautifully — Cecilia was with us for sure.

A good meal, homemade or not, can be a prayer experience for me. Aromas and flavors and textures awaken all the senses. Franciscan that I am, I'm conscious of all who brought the food to the table and all the work that went into producing it. When I am able to take time and do nothing else, the food that nourishes my body also allows my soul to be nourished.

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A trip through town found me at a railroad crossing with a very long and slow-moving train. Other cars around me tried to wiggle their way out of line to turn around and find another route. I turned off the car's ignition and simply waited. The rhythmic sound of the railcars passing by was almost hypnotic. I found my heartbeat matching the train warning signal and felt very much at peace. Again, an experience of prayer.

Lest you think all of my "alternative" prayer experiences are "warm and fuzzy," I've had some that have knocked me off my feet. A trusted coworker shifted blame from tasks not completed from him to me. I was called in to explain, but it was clear the supervisors had made up their minds, and no amount of explanation on my part would suffice. That experience brought to prayer my need to reflect on when my own interactions are less than transparent. Ouch.

The landlord did some trimming of trees and bushes. We walked the yard together beforehand so he knew what he shouldn't trim. I came home to find the climbing vine that always blooms for my birthday cut down to the ground. Tears welled up instantly. As I looked for any possible shoots he may have missed, my prayer shifted

toward understanding the need for letting go and embracing forgiveness. (Note: The vine sprouted a few shoots a month later so there is hope for next season.)

I invite you to look at the ways you pray, especially when what’s "customary" isn't working. If I want to or not, for me formal prayer or my own "left field" variety is a call to be attentive.