

What Time Shall I Pray?

BY MARY ELLEN MCGINTY COLLINS

When my friend Barbara said she had a meeting later in the day that could result in a lucrative consulting project, my mother's stock response rolled right off my tongue.

"What time shall I pray?"

We both laughed — she at the unexpectedness of the question, and I at the fact that not too many years ago, I would have died before asking it.

I have never been a zealous Catholic. As a kid, I thought Mass on Sunday and most holy days seemed reasonable, but I viewed catechism as a nonessential event that messed up my Saturdays, and I tried to get out of going whenever possible. Our family said the blessing before meals, but I dropped my habit of kneeling down for bedtime prayers once I hit puberty. When Mom noticed and asked, "Aren't you saying your prayers anymore?" I assured her that I was saying them once I was under the covers. Sometimes.

Despite my hit-or-miss approach to religious practice, I took enormous comfort from my mother's synchronized marshaling of heavenly forces on my behalf. Whether I was worried about gym class or geometry, her response never varied. After telling her exactly what time I'd be facing whatever was making me anxious, I could relax and know that her timely invocation would result in God, Jesus, Mary and/or the appropriate saint aiming a laser beam of assistance in my direction at just the right moment.

Although I counted on this ritual, I never would have talked about it, much less repeated it, outside the family. If

someone other than Mom or my aunt, the nun, had ever offered to pray for me, I would have found it unsettling and intrusive. Overt displays of piety made me uneasy, and I didn't trust anyone who acted "too holy" — like the people who prayed with their faces buried in their hands or those who used the sign of peace as an opportunity to hug everyone within a five-person radius. I thought religion should be low-key and private, which probably explains why I never hung out with the "Honk if you love Jesus" types in college.

So, what caused my transformation into someone who's perfectly comfortable sitting outside at Panera Bread and offering a friend a little prayerful intercession? I credit email and the creation of a world in which our virtual mailboxes hold as many requests for spiritual assistance as they do messages about scams or viruses.

Hidden behind computer screens, people feel comfortable reaching out to circles of friends, and sometimes friends of friends, with urgent messages. "I have to go in for more tests." "My daughter is in trouble." "Our neighbor was in an accident." I got accustomed to getting multid denominational requests for prayers, good thoughts and good vibes from people who didn't care if I invoked the universe, Saint Anthony or Buddha. It was no longer about being

holy or religious — it was about offering whatever kind of help you could whenever someone asked.

It feels natural to respond to these messages with a quick, whispered prayer. Each time I do it, I think of the scene in *It's a Wonderful Life* when God hears various Bedford Falls townspeople praying on behalf of a despondent George Bailey. Who would have guessed that technology would facilitate worldwide cyber-prayer circles made up of faceless participants who take the time to add their voices to requests for assistance?

I'm still not religious in the church-going sense, but I pray a lot these days, and I've even found a website where I can

light virtual candles. It lacks the full sensory experience of hearing your coins drop into the offering tray and smelling the wax burning, but a click of the mouse makes the flame flicker realistically, and that works for me.

I pray for my own circle and for anyone else who asks. I pray about interviews, surgeries, business ventures and marriages.

For the people closest

to me, I check my watch and carry out Mom's ritual, like I did when my nephew left for a semester abroad last year. I am 100 percent certain that every member of my family knew exactly what time his flight left and what time it was due to touch down. Patrick might have thought that physics and pilot expertise kept that plane in the air, but we know he was riding on the wings of well-timed prayers. □



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