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A call to prayer

Among them. They are tuning in to God.

or inside a sacred place, they are attentive to a Presence within them, around them, to the Blessed Sacrament in an otherwise empty church. Alone or with others, outside around a cross, they sit and ponder, they make the Sign of the Cross, they pay a visit expressive of what is deep within — they bow, they kneel, they clasp hands, they squat ages, entering into the presence of God. Their postures vary, their gestures are

is more a habit of the heart than a formula of words.

say, if we say anything at all, is less important than being in the presence of God. Prayer call to prayer, “Let us place ourselves in the presence of God.”

phases, kneeling, sitting, standing — whatever enables me to respond to the traditional candle, gazing at the rising sun, contemplating a starry night, or a moon in its many Taizé chants, background easy listening, instrumental accompaniment. Lighting a

good moment as the day dawns, a moment of thanks for a new beginning. A silent

A call to prayer

recent holiday in Ireland left many memories. Among them were two contrasting approaches to prayer and praying.

Twice a day at noon and 6 p.m., RTE — the national radio and television station — broadcast the Angelus. The 3x3x3x9 chiming of the bells invited listeners and viewers to pause a while, to stop what they were doing, and be still. On TV the accompanying images depicted men and women, young and old, taking time out from ordinary activities, interrupting work, raising heads in recognition indoors and outdoors, just being silent and attentive. Without words, in a countrywide call to prayer, the bells of the Angelus invited listeners and viewers to tune in to God.

Sunday Mass in several parishes included the praying of the Glory to God and the Creed by the whole congregation. The Glory to God was short enough that I more or less kept pace, finishing only a sentence behind the general body. The Creed, however, left me breathless. By the halfway mark I was straggling, at the three quarters point I had lost even more ground. Only by eliminating two or three of the “I believe in …” did I succeed in finishing within speaking distance of those around me. They were on a roll, I was out of my class.

I got to thinking about prayer. What’s it all about? Words, formulas, set prayers? Silent attention, saying nothing, just being present to the moment? All of the above? I recalled a down-to-earth piece of advice: “Pray as you can, not as you can’t.”

Whatever form it takes, at its deep heart’s core prayer is placing myself in the presence of God. In most cases that means stopping what I’m doing, at least for a minute or two. Perhaps Psalm 46 says it best: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Or if you prefer another translation: “Let be then, learn that I am God.” Anywhere, anytime. A grateful moment as the day dawns, a moment of thanks for a new beginning. A silent moment before going to sleep, a moment to muse on the day gone by. Standing at the foot of a best friend’s grave. Dropping into a church for a visit. Having a few words with the Man Above about a son or daughter, a husband or wife, a sick neighbour or an upcoming surgery.

Such moments may include formal prayers, if they draw me into the presence of God. One of my early memories of going to bed was my mother’s question, “Have you

Our 2006 calendar, Praying, portrays human beings of many religions and different ages, entering into the presence of God. Their postures vary, their gestures are expressive of what is deep within — they bow, they kneel, they clasp hands, they squat around a cross, they sit and ponder, they make the Sign of the Cross, they pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament in an otherwise empty church. Alone or with others, outside or inside a sacred place, they are attentive to a Presence within them, around them, among them. They are tuning in to God.

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