

## People: guides to others along the 'uncharted waters' of prayer

By Katharine Bird

Every morning the couple gets up at 5:30 a.m. While the children sleep, the husband goes to the basement of their home and spends an hour doing calisthenics.

His regimen includes weight-lifting for 15 minutes. As he pushes the weights rhythmically up and down, he prays: "Lord God, have mercy on me a sinner," or "Lord God, help me be a more patient and understanding father."

The woman, too, combines exercise and prayer, but in a way more suited to her temperament. First she does warm-up exercises. Then she says morning prayers, using a shortened version of the church's Liturgy of the Hours. Finally she goes outside and jogs.

The story of that couple was recounted by Neil Parent, who knows of many similar stories of prayer. He thinks such stories illustrate why it is that people themselves so often can serve as a resource about prayer. Parent is the representative for adult education in the U.S. Catholic Conference.

The religious educator values other people's prayer experiences highly, he said, because he is convinced that "prayer life is unique to the individual." Figuring out how to incorporate prayer into one's daily life is like "walking into uncharted waters," he says.

Fortunately, Parent continued, there is great interest now in spirituality and prayer. He said the amount of space devoted to this on the shelves of the bookstores and retreat centers he visits in his travels is striking. There are also many workshops on spirituality today in parishes, colleges and continuing education centers, he noted.

To find out how people can help each other with prayer, I talked with Father James Bacik, who does "a good deal of spiritual direction" as a campus minister serving the University of Toledo.

The Ohio priest explained that typically, a youth comes to him complaining that he can't pray and sees this as a failure. Often, Father Bacik said, it quickly becomes apparent that the youth is quite prayerful but needs to develop some "trust in his own experience" of praying.

In that situation, the priest said he encourages the youth "to let life provide the trigger for prayer." Father Bacik said he does this by helping the person develop "a

sense of God" and how he is working in the youth's life.

Often Father Bacik advises people to take advantage of patterns in their own lives that provide time and space for prayer. For example, if a person has to wait for a commuter train or bus, Father Bacik will suggest using that time to think about God.

The good things that happen in life can readily become connected to prayer. Often, even without consciously realizing it, people address their thanks to God, Father Bacik suggested.

But negative experiences also can be an entry to prayer, Father Bacik remarked. Perhaps prayer is already happening, he thinks, if negative experiences in life lead people to ask, "Could life be better?"

Sometimes people come to the priest with a "protest against life." Perhaps their jobs have become a dead end, or there is a gap in their lives because children have grown up and left home, or they "can't handle sexuality" as they would like. He then encourages people to use the experience to move more directly into praying.

Father Bacik thinks that books are helpful prayer resources too. One that he recommends is "The God Who Fell From Heaven," by Father John Shea. The author's "introduction on prayer is excellent," the priest said, as are the prayer-poems in the book.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

## Scripture helps when you 'just don't know how'

By Father John Castelot

Not knowing how to pray is a source of distress for many people. They really want to pray, but often feel at a loss.

St. Paul recognized this problem. Since "we do not know how to pray as we ought," the Spirit helps us, he assured his audience (Rom. 8:26).

But how? By direct illumination, some special inspiration? That sometimes happens, when a person stands before God, opens an empty heart and cries: "Lord, teach me to pray!"

But most often the Spirit chooses to guide people by means of the helps that are all around. These might even be called resources for prayer.

At its most basic, prayer is a dialogue with God; if it is not

spontaneous, it sometimes becomes strained and even painful.

Still, resources for prayer need not rob prayer of spontaneity. They can make the dialogue more interesting and fruitful.

I don't need any helps when I go to talk to a close friend. But if I have read a fascinating book or seen a good movie or had a particularly moving experience, these things do aid our conversation. Sharing them brings friends closer and helps them get to know each other better.

What is most important is to bring ourselves into prayer with all of our experiences, good and bad. Sharing them with God openly, unaffectedly, brings us closer together. In the process we are changed, subtly perhaps, but really.

Scripture is a gold mine. The

Psalms, for instance, are ready-made prayers. Can their sentiments give voice to our sentiments?

Think of the impact of these words from Psalm 69 in times of distress:

*Save me, O God, for the waters threaten my life...*

*I am wearied with calling, my throat is parched; My eyes have failed with looking for my God.*

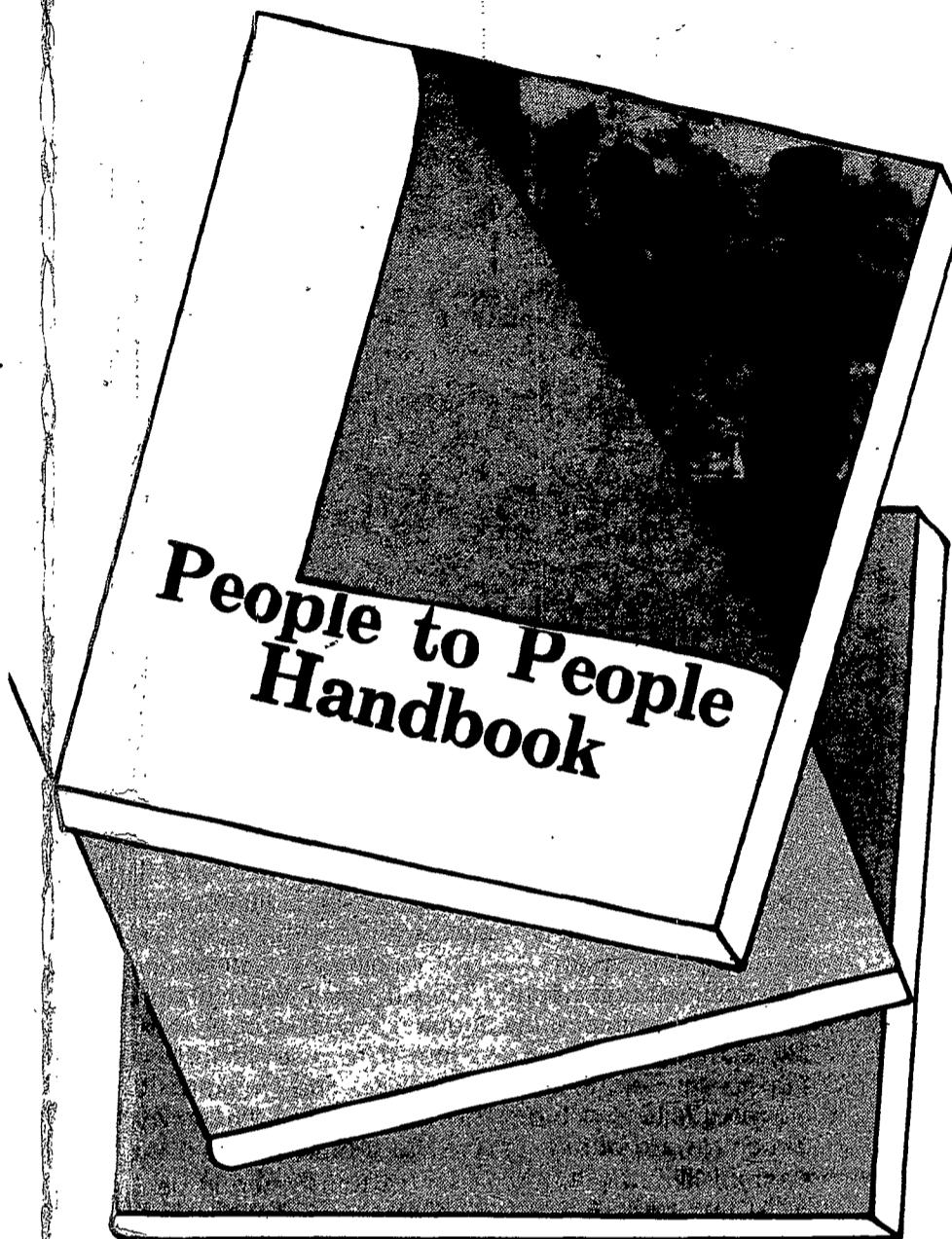
But then, to contrast with those images, read:

*Why are you so downcast, O my soul?*

*Why do you sigh within me? Hope in God! (Psalm 42:6)*

The possibilities are endless. We don't have to have just the right words. But words can help voice our feelings.

Ultimately, however, it is the



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