

Freeing oneself of “spiritual clutter”



Dear Father Kerper: I have tried to deepen my prayer life during the last few years and sought direction from friends who seem to know about spiritual matters. Now I’m completely confused. Some push me toward specific devotions, like the Five First Saturdays, Nine First Fridays, Chaplet of the Divine Mercy, the Christmas Novena, Brown Scapular, Miraculous Medal and the rosary. I am told that these are truly traditional and are superior to other devotions. How do I decide which to do?

Bull’s eye!

You have identified an experience rightly called “spiritual clutter,” or “devotional overload.” Here’s what happens. In their sincere effort to enhance their spiritual lives, some people latch on to a variety of personal devotions. There is nothing wrong with private devotions. However, they can endlessly accumulate and, in extreme cases, actually destroy the person’s life of prayer. For example, some people say to me, “I don’t have time anymore to say my prayers.” This usually means that “spiritual clutter” has won the day.

“Catholic spirituality has always promoted unified communal worship — liturgical prayer — and private devotions, the realm in which people freely respond to the divine mystery in their own personal manner. Catholics thrive spiritually when they keep both forms of worship and prayer in balance.”

Jesus warned against this harmful tendency. He once said: “In your prayers do not babble as the gentiles do, for they think that by using many prayers they will make themselves heard. Do not be like them.” (Mt 6:7-8)

He then gave them the words of the Lord’s Prayer, the *only* prayer he ever passed on to us.

Jesus always commends forms of prayer marked by three traits: simplicity, brevity and rootedness in God’s word. These qualities always exist within liturgical prayer, the official worship of the Church. Some private devotions, however, tend to be overly complex, long and – worse – disconnected from sacred Scripture.

The Church’s public worship, notably the celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, must always hold center place in our spiritual lives. Unlike private devotions, liturgical prayer mystically unites the prayer of all baptized Christians with the unified voice of Christ. Moreover, this unity extends across time, embracing the prayer of the earliest Christians as well as our own.

While strongly emphasizing the supreme value of liturgical prayer, the Church also encourages private devotions, such as novenas, special prayers, and the use of religious objects like scapulars, medals and so forth. These are “private” in that they exist beyond the realm of the Church’s liturgical life.

By doing so, the Church affirms the uniqueness of each person, including his or her own spiritual life. Some people, for example, have a more emotional approach to God, while others tend toward the intellectual. Private devotions, then, accommodate the enormous variety of people within the Church. As to the spiritual life, “One size does not fit all.” And private devotions vary greatly in their spiritual value.

How does one choose from among the thousands of private devotions available? By consulting the *Manual of Indulgences*, a small book first published by the Holy See in 1999. The *Manual* contains prayers and descriptions of religious practices that produce plenary and partial indulgences. In effect, the *Manual* acts as a comprehensive exhibit of what the Church considers sound, beautiful and traditional, whether they be prayers or customs. Three points deserve attention.

First, the *Manual* exercises great reserve in its recommendations. For example, it says nothing about the First Friday and First Saturday devotions, which once enjoyed great popularity. Here, the Church recognizes that all private devotions are ultimately temporary, rising or falling according to changing needs.

Second, some private devotions receive stronger endorsements than others. For example, praying the rosary and doing the Stations of the Cross are highly esteemed because they have produced much spiritual fruit over the centuries. In the case of the Stations, the *Manual* has no approved text and it never

enumerates the mysteries of the rosary.

Third, in keeping with the Lord’s warning against “babbling,” almost all the *Manual*’s prayers are quite short, very ancient and come from within the liturgy and sacred Scripture. Moreover, the Church avoids devotions that involve excessive repetition, counting prayers and the direct linkage of prayers to specific times and days.

As to novenas, which imitate the prayer of the Church between the Ascension of the Lord and Pentecost, the *Manual* mentions only three: before Pentecost, Christmas and the Immaculate Conception. Though mentioned, these novenas have no specific texts.

Your reference to the “Christmas Novena” caught my eye. I had never heard of it until last November when some people asked about it. Though it purports to be “traditional,” it is less than 130 years old, hardly a blip on the Church’s timeline. It lacks two key traits expressed in the *Manual*: complexity replaces simplicity; and novelty replaces antiquity. For sure, some good people may benefit spiritually from that type of prayer; and its absence from the *Manual* is surely no condemnation. After all, the Church, like a good and gentle mother, accords broad freedom to her children to “test” things of the spirit.

Now let’s move from “devotional overload” that clutters our minds to material things that clutter physical space.

You mentioned scapulars, medals and other religious objects. These, too, definitely belong to our Catholic tradition, but may be misused.

Consider the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which is actually a miniaturized version of the brown habit of the Carmelites. Centuries ago, lay people who lived the contemplative spirituality of the Carmelites wore a brown garment in public. As the external brown garment shrank in size, its original link with Carmelite spirituality also dissolved, thereby reducing the scapular to a blessed religious object. For sure, it has worth but actual adherence to Carmelite spirituality, even without the scapular, far surpasses the value of the mere object.

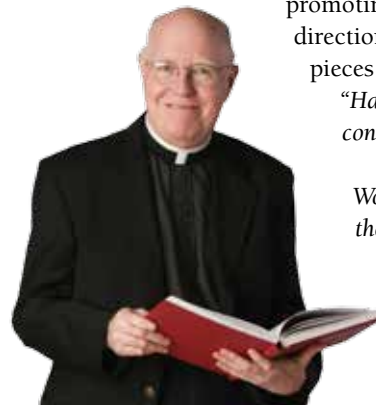
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St. Josemaria Escriva, who spent his life promoting and offering sound spiritual direction to Catholics, offered two pieces of simple advice:

“Have only a few devotions, but be constant in them.”

“Your prayer ought to be liturgical. Would that you were given to reciting the psalms and prayers of the missal instead of private or special prayers!”

By following this saintly advice you will surely discover the One whom you seek in all his glorious simplicity. ■



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