

Bishop Sullivan once boarded an airplane and worked his way down the aisle to his seat. When he was in place the woman next to him turned and seeing his black suit she exclaimed, "Oh thank God there's a priest on board this flight! I feel so much safer now." The bishop smiled and asked her a peculiar question, "Have you ever made the nine first Fridays?"

Now, to understand this question recall that in the late 17th century a French nun Margaret Mary Alacoque reported seeing visions of Christ. It was she who popularized devotions to the Sacred Heart. Margaret Mary tells us that Jesus made certain promises to those who prayed devotions to the Sacred Heart on nine consecutive first Fridays. Many Catholics follow this devotion, others do not--it's fine, there are many ways to pray.

Still, Bishop Sullivan chose to ask this perfect stranger had she ever made the nine first Fridays. This woman who was afraid to fly, already becalmed by the mere presence of a clergyman, proudly announced, "Why, yes, Father, I've made them several times." "Oh," said the bishop, strapping on his seatbelt. "Then you remember that one of the promises made by the Sacred Heart is that those who keep the nine first Fridays will have a priest present with them when they die."

Over many centuries, the Catholic Church has developed a number of devotional practices. Often these practices have a certain number attached to them. As good as the prayers are, they can lead people into rituals that are more magic than Catholic. Some people think if they pray a prayer exactly so many times it will achieve exactly a certain result. That may or may not be true. Numbers occur in prayer not as agents of magic but as agents of symbol. The numbers themselves carry a symbolic meaning.

As an example, take the number 9. It occurs in the Sacred Heart devotions, and in a practice we call the novena. A novena is usually a period of nine days of prayer leading up to the celebration of a particular feast.

Why is the number 9 a symbolic number for a period of prayer? Because according to the Acts of the Apostles there were nine days between the Ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit--Nine days during which, we heard in today's first reading, the community was at constant prayer. To this day, many of the prayers we hear in the liturgy during this period re-echo the prayer of the first Christians for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

I've said before there's no magic in the number 9, but what the first Christians did for us was to leave us an example, an example of intense prayer for a particular intention. Jesus was gone, and they needed some direction. They didn't know where that prayer would bring them or how long they would be praying, but they responded to their desire for a period of intense prayer.

I just want to hold up this example for you, for times in your life when Jesus is gone, when you need some direction. Most people can't take off nine days, but maybe you can pray what would be for you a long time--an hour, maybe more, but give yourselves two things: an opportunity to respond to that need for prayer, and an openness to whatever God does when you're done.