

**Homily for the First Sunday of Lent
February 26, 2023**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

There is an old joke about the person who is looking for a parking place in a packed parking lot. In desperation, he offers a prayer to the Blessed Mother with a promise: “Mary, if you find me a parking space, I promise to go to Mass every Sunday from now on.” Miraculously, as he turns down the next aisle, behold! There is an open space! The driver immediately says, “Never mind, Mary, I found one myself!”

The joke comes to mind when we think about how often we pray for something we need or want, but then do not offer thanks to God when we receive it. Worse yet, perhaps we do not even acknowledge that Divine Providence may have played a role in receiving what we had prayed for.

Earlier this year at a Monday night football game on January 2, 2023, Damar Hamlin, a football player for the Buffalo Bills, suddenly collapsed and went into cardiac arrest after a seemingly routine tackle. Hamlin lay

motionless for more than eighteen minutes while receiving medical attention on the field before an ambulance arrived to take him to the hospital. What happened next was described in an article by Ruth Graham in *The New York Times*:

As the ambulance carrying the injured Buffalo Bills player Damar Hamlin rolled slowly off the field in Cincinnati Monday night, a huddle of players and team staff knelt in a massive yet intimate circle on the field. They bowed their heads, some placing hands on each other's shoulders and others with tears streaming down their faces, in a moment of spontaneous prayer led by the team's chaplain, Len Vanden Bos. The hushed crowd at Paycor Stadium burst into applause as the players knelt and again as they rose. . . .

Video circulated online of Bengals fans reciting the Lord's Prayer in the stands. On ESPN on Tuesday, the analyst Dan Orlovsky, a former N.F.L. quarterback, told his colleagues on the live broadcast that "it's just on my heart that I want to pray." Bowing his head and closing his eyes, he did so. "God, we come to you in these moments we don't understand," he said. "I believe in prayer, we believe in prayer, and we lift up Damar Hamlin's name in your name." His co-anchors murmured, "Amen."

“Please pray for our brother,” the Bills’ quarterback, Josh Allen, wrote on Twitter, where players and coaches across the league shared similar messages. All 32 N.F.L. teams changed their Twitter profile pictures to a message reading “PRAY FOR DAMAR,” in the style of Mr. Hamlin’s blue jersey. Fans huddled in vigils outside the hospital in Cincinnati and outside Highmark Stadium in Buffalo, where Jill Kelly, the wife of former Bills quarterback Jim Kelly, led a crowd in prayer.

Troy Vincent, the executive vice president of football operations at the N.F.L., told reporters, “I think we all have to recognize the power of prayer from coaches, players, the staff and the fans that was in that stadium, and the people watching from around the world. There is power in prayer.”¹

There is indeed power in prayer, as Damar Hamlin made a miraculous recovery. One week after many people feared he was dead, Hamlin was released from the hospital and returned to his home in Buffalo. Hamlin, who attended Catholic schools as a youth, is a devout Christian. In his first public appearance after being released from the hospital, Hamlin said, “What happened to me on ‘Monday Night Football,’ I feel, is a direct example of God using me as a vessel to share my passion

and my love directly from my heart with the entire world.” He thanked God, friends, family, and medical professionals who “saved [his] life.”²

At the NFL Honors event in Phoenix, Arizona, a few days before the Super Bowl, Hamlin said, “First, I would just like to thank God for being here. Every day I’m amazed that my experiences could encourage so many others across the country and even across the world – encourage them to pray, encourage to spread love, and encourage to keep fighting no matter the circumstances. ... My entire life, I felt like God was using me to give others hope, and now with a new set of circumstances, I can say he’s doing what he’s always done.”³

Not everyone may be as quick to thank God for the gifts we receive. Though provided with so many blessings from God, people often choose to overlook those blessings and instead credit themselves for their accomplishments. It is refreshing to see the faith of this young man and his gratitude to God expressed publicly in a time when nonbelievers and skeptics scoff and ridicule Christians who offer their thoughts and prayers after some tragedy or misfortune. His example reminds us to offer thanks to God in our prayers.

As we enter upon our Lenten journey, our instructions are clear: Jesus tells us to pray, fast and give alms. We are told this in our liturgy, and we read it in the scriptures and the teaching of the Church. These are practices that will lead us to heaven. Beginning with the pillar of prayer, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 2623-2649) teaches us that there are various forms of prayer. These various forms include prayer of blessing or adoration, prayer of petition, prayer of intercession, prayer of praise, and prayer of thanksgiving.

Since our natural tendency seems to focus on prayers of petition, that is, asking God for something we need or want, it is important remember to include prayers of gratitude in our prayers, which is what we do every time we gather for the Eucharist, thanking God for all the gifts He has given us and the many ways in which He answers our prayers.

Our Lenten practices should have one singular goal: how can I grow closer to Jesus Christ? Prayer is the best way to do this. Saint Teresa of Avila said that "Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God." This is the key point, for it is in right relationship with Jesus Christ that we find true happiness, as He leads us to the joy of eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Ruth Graham, "Prayers for Damar Hamlin Show Bond Between Football and Faith," *The New York Times*, published Jan. 5, 2023, updated Jan. 7, 2023, accessed online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/05/us/damar-hamlin-prayers-football-religion.html>.

² Remso Martinez, "Damar Hamlin Thanks God, Friends, Family, And Doctors In First Public Appearance Since Collapsing," *Bounding Into Sports*, January 30, 2023, accessed online at <https://www.boundingintosports.com/2023/01/damar-hamlin-thanks-god-friends-family-and-doctors-in-first-public-appearance-since-collapsing/>.

³ Steve Warren, "Damar Hamlin Thanks God, Medical Teams for Saving His Life During Speech at NFL Honors," *CBCNews.com*, February 10, 2023, accessed online at <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2023/february/damar-hamlin-thanks-god-medical-teams-for-saving-his-life-during-speech-at-nfl-honors>.