Culture



Detail of a portrait of Jane Austen, from an 1870 memoir by her nephew J.E. Austen-Leigh and based on a sketch by her sister, Cassandra Austen (Wikimedia Commons)



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It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen's novels are all about finding a husband. Except for one thing: They were more about her characters finding God. Elizabeth Bennet may have landed the dreamy Mr. Darcy, but Austen, spinster to the end, watched the world go by and shared her clever, gentle observations from the heart of her family's home. And what she observed was a cast of characters who reflected deeply on their faith and tried wholeheartedly to live it out.

Now, as we mark her 250th birthday on Dec. 16, it's good to remember that not only was Austen a brilliant novelist and a witty observer of the customs of her time — she was also a devout Christian with a few lessons for Christians today.

You've probably read *Pride and Prejudice*, and maybe *Persuasion* or *Mansfield Park*. You might have seen Hugh Grant in the film version of *Sense and Sensibility* or watched "Clueless," the modern retelling of the novel *Emma*. But you may never have come across Austen's little volume of prayers.

The granddaughter, daughter and sister of Anglican rectors, Austen could be critical of the institutional church and famously turned her wit on the horrible cleric Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. But she was intimately familiar with the clergy and the church and she liked them anyway.

Austen was born and bred — and lived her life — within the Anglican tradition. The brainchild of Queen Elizabeth I, it was a simple, understated faith, guided by the Book of Common Prayer, and "all about living out your Christian faith by the way you live your life," said the Rev. Paula Hollingsworth, chaplain of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and author of *The Spirituality of Jane Austen*. "In Jane's books — and in society in general — God very rarely gets mentioned. But that doesn't mean God isn't there."



St. Nicholas Church at Steventon in Hampshire, England, where Jane Austen grew up. Her father and subsequently her brothers served as clergy at the church. (Wikimedia Commons/Dr Neil Clifton)

Anglicans didn't tend to find God in the lofty, soaring mysticism of an Avila or a Bingen, or through the extravagant devotions that may have been popular in 18th-century Catholicism. "Anglicanism was all about the simplicity — and the persistence — of developing holy habits," Hollingsworth explained. "After the Inquisition in Europe, Elizabeth insisted, 'We will not be a window into men's souls.' That led to Anglicans not talking very intimately about their faith — their faith-talk was never terribly personal."

But if you look at the characters in Austen's novels, you'll see that deep faith in action.

Take Elizabeth Bennet, perhaps Austen's most well-loved character, in *Pride and Prejudice*. A paragon of good sense (especially compared to the rest of her family), she struggles to recognize the virtues of humility, constancy and generosity in Mr.

Darcy. It's only through deep reflection — a crucial part of a holy life — that she comes to see Darcy as a worthy Christian partner.

"Reflection is really important in Austen novels," said Hollingsworth. "Her heroines are the ones who examine their lives and make changes where they need to."

In many ways, Austen's characters are surprisingly modern. Take Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*. She's 17 and addicted to the social media of her time — the Gothic novel. It's only when she realizes how shallow they are — and reflects on how they keep her from developing a more substantial inner life — that she's able to toss them aside. TikTok, anyone?

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It's very unlikely that Austen ever met any Catholics; in her time, they lived very much outside the society where she found herself. "Everybody in her world," says Hollingsworth, "would have been Anglican."

But as Catholics today, we can find inspiration in Austen's simple spirituality, especially in her practical and unadorned prayer life. One of the prayers in her little book even seems like a nod to the daily Jesuit practice of examen. The evening prayer that she shared with her family reads:

> May we now, and on each return of night, consider how the past day has been spent by us, what have been our prevailing thoughts, words, and actions during it, and how far we can acquit ourselves of evil. Have we thought irreverently of thee, have we disobeyed thy commandments, have we neglected any known duty, or willingly given pain to any human being? Incline us to ask our hearts these questions, O God.

It resonates with practical 21st-century Christianity, whose adherents are eager to put the Gospel into action. When you think about it, Austen's Christian understanding is surprisingly contemporary.

Her characters, like Elizabeth Bennet and *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny Price, seem to reflect their creator's desire to live a Christian life, measuring their own success (and that of those around them) according to their faith. And like the Gospel story we all share, Austen and her beloved characters have developed the deeply Christian habit

of looking within and conforming their hearts and their lives to Christ.