

Prayer app Hallow sees huge increase in popularity

When the developers of the Catholic meditation app Hallow launched it in 2018, they hoped to attract young Catholics, but what is now the No. 1 Catholic app in the U.S. has a bigger reach than that.

Hallow has seen a dramatic increase in popularity and getting more and more users each day.

The No. 1 rating is based on “Apple’s algorithm, which they don’t disclose,” Jones told Catholic News Service.

“It’s based on how many people have reviewed it in the last few weeks, how many people are downloading it, how many have viewed. We started off on the bottom of the list, went to No. 3, then jumped to No. 1 about six months ago.”

Hallow is based out of Chicago even though the company started off in California’s Silicon Valley. Creation of the app is integrated with Jones’ own faith journey. His family raised him as a Catholic, but he strayed from the faith in high school and college. He went to the University of Notre Dame but he was going through a “relatively dark time in life,” he told Catholic News Service.

After he graduated from college, he wanted to figure out what he believed in. One thing that had always fascinated him was meditation. He noticed that whenever he meditated, his mind would be pulled to something spiritual.

He said he’d ask priests, nuns and others in religious life if there was a specific connection between meditation and faith. They told him that indeed there was a connection: It was called prayer.

When he was growing up, Jones said, he only thought of prayer as a way to ask for certain things or that it was just basic memorization of words. He only felt that he was talking to himself and going through the motions.

A priest friend encouraged him to listen more during prayer, Jones said, and he began to study the Catholic faith more and he tried Lectio Divina, a meditative reflection on the Scriptures.

Jones said this process actually led him to tears and eventually brought him back to his faith.

“It was a beautiful combination of this deep sense of peace and love, deeper than any other secular mediation or mindfulness meditation. It was this deep sense of peace combined with this real purpose that calms our head space,” he

said.

Jones recalled meditating on the Lord's Prayer and the word that stuck out to him was "hallow" from the beginning of the prayer: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." He knew what hallow meant, to make holy or sacred, but he didn't know how it pertained to his life. He pondered if he should be helping others grow in holiness.

That's how the Hallow app came to be.

"If Headspace and Calm can be successful helping people learn secular meditation and (be) done through an app" he thought, "why can't the same thing be done and be done better through teaching Catholic contemplative prayer?"

Headspace is an app that teaches you how to meditate; Calm is a leading app for meditation and sleep.

"It's very important to us that everything on the app is 100 per cent authentically Catholic and in line with church teachings," Jones told CNS about Hallow.

He said the app's developers have worked with priests, bishops and theologians to ensure they are conveying Catholic teachings correctly. He added that Hallow is a resource to people of all backgrounds, especially people who have fallen away from the faith. Its primary audience is Catholic, but users of the app include Protestants, Jews and even atheists.

It also is hard to ignore the impact of COVID-19 on Hallow's popularity. According to Jones, there was a large increase in usage and downloads when Easter came around since everyone was advised to stay at home.

While the pandemic has been terrible and brought so much sadness to people's lives, with loved ones and friends dying from COVID-19, Jones said, it provides us with an opportunity to work on our spiritual lives from home.

The app has a "Family" feature that allows users to connect with family and friends and share prayers, reflections and prayer intentions with them even while being physically separated.

It also has a feature called the "Daily Minute Prayer Challenge." Users are encouraged to build a habit of prayer by spending at least one minute in guided prayer with Hallow each day.

"The hardest part about praying is just doing it. It's easy in the seasons of Lent and Advent when it's top of mind, but over the summer when you've got a lot of other things going on," Jones said, "it's easy to fall off that. We do a bunch of things. You can set goals on the app. You can add members of your family and friends to the app to hold yourself accountable. You can set daily reminders."

Hallow, which has over 5,000 five-star reviews, tries to be “an app that helps you disconnect from apps and technology,” according to Jones, which he admitted sounds like a contradiction.

But he explained that while other religious apps have users glued to their screen to read the Bible, Hallow allows its users to press “play,” close their eyes and listen to audio of a prayer.