

## **MISSION: Prayer 7**

### **“Meditation”**

The life of prayer resembles human interaction. In order for us to grow in our relationship with God, we have to be present with him in an ever-growing, more personal way. While vocal prayer continues for the duration of our earthly lives, it isn't enough. To move into closer union with our Lord, we must engage in meditation – mental prayer. This is the next step in our maturation as children of God as we get to know the Father.

The Catechism teaches that meditation is nothing more than the quest of the mind seeking “to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking” (2705).

Union with God is our final destiny, but meditation is where we begin to move into that union even now. And it's so important that St. Alphonsus Liguori declared, "Short of a miracle, a man who does not practice mental prayer will end up in mortal sin."<sup>25</sup> I don't know about you, but when I first read those words I got a little nervous. Unfortunately, he was just getting warmed up. Referencing St. Teresa of Avila, he stated: "He who neglects mental prayer needs no devil to carry him to hell. He brings himself there with his own hands."

As I said, I don't particularly enjoy the smell of burning flesh, so I've made meditation a staple of my daily activity, and you should, too. Everyone should. In his classic *The Spiritual Life*, Adolphe Tanquerey states that meditation is the "most effective means of assuring one's salvation."<sup>27</sup> It isn't an option. Meditation is a necessary part of our spiritual development and will save your skin, literally.

### ***The "How-To" Meditate Part***

So what is meditation? Basically, it's prayerful reflection on Our Lord aided by spiritual input. It's interior prayer where we revel in God's presence and allow him to seep not just into our bones, but into our marrow. "That sounds nice," you're thinking, "but how exactly do you do it? What does it look like, Padre?"

There's a lot to say about the ins and outs of meditative prayer, but since we only have a class, we'll stick with the basics. Frankly, that's all we need. Moving forward, we'll see that complicated explanations are too, well, complicated.

Because it's been around a long, long time, many different methods of meditation have developed over the centuries. Still, there is a kind of classic structure in the tradition of the Church. In my book *Louder Than Words: The Art of Living as a Catholic*, I list it out, using perhaps the most unhelpful acronym for meditation ever - "PRMRR." It stands for: Pick a time and location - Recollect yourself - Meditate - Respond - Resolve

This simple list is the basic process of meditative prayer. Find yourself a place and time that allow you to quietly recollect yourself. I always encourage beginners to start with ten to fifteen minutes. It doesn't sound like much time on paper, but when you first begin it can be like watching turtles run a marathon.

Because of original sin we don't "naturally" take to spending quiet time with God. But the more you do it, the easier it becomes. After all, this kind of relationship with God is what we were made for. It's our divine destiny. So the more time we spend with God, stripping away the effects of sin, growing in virtue and love, the more the supernatural becomes the new "natural." Prayer becomes something we desire.

When practicing mental prayer, start by slowing down and focusing. All of our faculties - intellect, will, and memory - need to be fully engaged for this kind of prayer to be fruitful. You can't just bop in and bop out. This can require a Herculean effort even for those more inclined to a little slower pace than I am.

I tend to be an "A to B, there's nothing to see" kind of guy. I find out what has to be done, and I do it. Sometimes this is a virtue, and sometimes it's a vice. When it comes to mental prayer, it's both. My goal-driven personality generally rises to the challenge of making sufficient time for prayer, but I have to guard against treating it as something to be checked off my spiritual to-do list, a faulty approach that can create serious problems with regard to talking to God.

Recollection is paramount. Just as you must be in the same place with someone to have a real face-to-face, we must put ourselves in the presence of God if we're going to have a truly personal conversation with him. I once read a spiritual writer who said even if the majority of your time in prayer is spent recollecting yourself, it's worth it. You simply can't pray if you're not present with the Lord.

There are many practical ways to accomplish recollection. But before we get there, we need to remember an important point. God is always with us. So, turning away from the world and putting ourselves in the presence of God isn't just something that happens when it's "go time" in our local adoration chapel or prayer corner. It's an attitude that must permeate every aspect of our lives long before we enter into active prayer. It's something we need to practice. And, again, it takes time. It's a habit that must be formed, just like bad habits take time to break.

### ***Cold Turkey***

Have you ever met someone who - cold turkey - gave up smoking? The process is generally not a pretty sight. Sure, there are a few hearty souls who seem to possess superhuman abilities in this regard, but for most smokers quitting is less appealing than a toothpick in the eye. They go from two packs a day of Lucky Strikes to feeling like they're sheer out of luck. (And they're not afraid to let the rest of us know how they feel.) Only a few can pull it off.

Most smokers stop in degrees. They begin by reducing the number of cigarettes per day, then slap on a couple of nicotine patches, and later graduate to furiously chomping nicotine gum until their jaw muscles resemble Arnold Schwarzenegger's biceps. Finally, that overwhelming desire for another drag is vanquished and they're free! That's kind of what it's like when we decide to renounce the world to ensure our eternal health. It happens by degrees. And the more we reduce the amount of "world" in us, the more God fills us up, until we're finally free of our bondage to solely natural things.

Like everything else, this desire to free ourselves and move toward God is a grace. The very fact that a person begins to have a greater interest in spiritual things is already an indicator that God is at work in him. This is all important because deciding to renounce the world and embark upon spiritual study is what Father Edward Leen calls "remote preparation" for meditative prayer. It's a bit like that moment when the artificially colored *creme* of your oversized donut is squishing through your teeth and you finally realize, "This thing is going to kill me!" and vow, "Never again!" Ending your relationship with Little Debbie is remote preparation for physical health.

Spiritual health begins with turning away from sin and the distractions that keep us from God. This move prepares us for deeper prayer.

But for this to actually happen, and so that we don't fall back into the miry *creme* filling of this world, we must constantly seek more grace from God. Living off the fumes of our initial desire won't pay the spiritual bills. We have to continually fan the flames of love for God in our hearts. St. Teresa of Avila warns not to slack off because "there are many things which may deprive us of this holy liberty of the spirit which we seek."

In other words, it's not easy because we're as distractible as a little girl in a princess dress-up store with her daddy's credit card. We want everything on the rack and are drawn to the glitz and glitter of this world. We have to constantly stir up our wills so that our desire for God remains steadfast.

Mental prayer won't work unless we can sufficiently detach from this world. God moves us to pray, but it is a habit we must develop, a muscle we must strengthen.

Practically speaking, I've found that entering into some semblance of silence before I ever arrive at my local adoration chapel (where I often pray) always helps. Sometimes I'll pray a decade of the Rosary as I'm driving, or perhaps I just start talking to God. If I happen to have my silence-challenged children present in the car, I attempt to find a happy, quiet place deep inside the abyss of my interior self — which is nearly impossible.

When I can't start recollecting myself beforehand, I resort to other methods once in my prayer spot. Often I'll repeat the name of Jesus slowly and deliberately, thanking him for all he's done in my life. Other times I'll break open the Bible and read a passage that helps put me in the presence of the Lord. Most important, I ask the Holy Spirit to help me pray.

### ***Listen Up***

It's always a good idea to begin prayer with an act of humility so as to remember who we are before God. The Lord said to St. Catherine of Siena, "I am who I am, thou are she who is not."<sup>29</sup> Follow the act of humility by telling God you're sorry for your sin, and, then tell him how much you love him. In other words, repent and adore. This is how to crush pride, the main obstacle to grace.

After you put yourself in the presence of God, meditation begins. This isn't chanting mantras or assuming the lotus position clad in a pair of Zubaz pants you found buried in your closet from the nineties. Rather, it generally consists of slowly perusing a portion of spiritual reading like a saint's book, the Bible, or some other spiritual classic. You can also meditate on an image, nature, or any number of other things that point to God, but we'll stick with books for explanatory purposes.

When choosing materials for meditation, remember that the focus is always Jesus Christ. Even when reading about saints, virtues, or other aspects of the spiritual life, everything ultimately leads us back to him. If I were a finger-wagger like my elementary school teachers, that's what I'd be doing right now. Jesus Christ is everything. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," says Christ, "no one comes to the Father, but by me" (Jn 14:6). The whole point of the Christian life is to become like Jesus. He is our path to God. He is our salvation. We want to get back the likeness to God that Adam and Eve lost through original sin. "Prayer," says the *Catechism*, "restores man to God's likeness and enables him to share in the power of God's love [see Rom 8:16-21]" (2572).

Because Christ is the center, the Gospels are generally a good bet when it comes to preparing to converse with God in meditation. You can't love someone you don't know, and Scripture is the Word inspired (see 2 Tm 3:16). As St. Jerome famously declared, "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." Jesus actually modeled for us what it means to be perfect. Train your thoughts on him. Since he is not only saintly but sanctifying, it makes sense that the ordinary method of meditation centers on the life and words of Our Lord in Scripture.

At the risk of repeating myself, remember: meditation isn't rushing willy-nilly through whatever material we choose to meditate on. The spiritual life isn't a sprint. It's a marathon. Take your time. It's about soaking in the presence of God as in a hot tub after a long day of hard work.

As you prayerfully read and open yourself to the presence of God, he will begin to quietly speak to you. And this is an important point. In vocal prayer you're always the one talking. But in meditation, it's a conversation in which you must learn to listen, too. Sometimes God will talk to you about a certain area of your life which

needs work. Other times he may bring to mind a person with whom you've been struggling to get along. Maybe you'll simply be overcome by how amazing he is and thank him in your heart for all the good he has done for you. Whatever God is showing or teaching, your main job is to respond. This is vital.

Just as cooking is not the same as eating, *methods* are not prayer. And when I say "methods," I'm referring to the different prayers or routines we get into during our time of meditation. Whatever we're doing, these are merely preparation.

Technically speaking, recollection, reading, and reflection on divine things are not prayer. Rather, they show us what we should be seeking and present us with areas which require action. True meditative prayer consists in the movement of our heart and will to God. True prayer is "adoring, praising, thanking, and sorrowing with inner, quiet words," says the great spiritual writer Father Thomas Dubay. Prayer isn't process; it's relationship with a person.

Meditation is supposed to lead to interior action that affects your exterior behavior. That's the goal. Once your heart is moved toward God and the real conversation has begun, it's time to stop reading or reflecting. The method has done its job. Too often people get hung up on their method and lose the forest for the trees. We have to be ready to modify or even stop a particular method if it is no longer helping us talk with God. Be on guard against developing a routine and plowing through it no matter what. Prayer isn't about getting through your checklist of litanies and devotions. The goal is relationship with the person of Christ. And just as in any personal relationship, things change.

Think back to when you were dating. You didn't go to the same restaurant and movie every Friday or Saturday night, did you? ("Pizza and *Pretty in Pink* again? Of course, honey. I love Ducky") No way! You were always thinking of something fresh, something new. (Tacos and *Top Gun!*) You wanted to do something that would lead to good conversation and growth in the relationship. It's the same with God.

On one hand, you don't want to stop doing a particular prayer routine because you're just not "feeling it." Remember, prayer isn't about emotion or feelings. On the other hand, if you're growing and your method or routine is no longer actively helping you engage God, dump it. ("Don't take it personally, Ms. Litany. It's me,

not you.") Because the life of prayer is somewhat fluid, there may well be a time when you go back to some of these routines. ("We can still be friends. I'll call you later.") But if they're not useful right now, get rid of them. People who keep slogging through their method of choice no matter what will eventually wear out. Prayer will become a burden because they're not allowing the relationship to grow.

### *Pure and Simple*

This danger is one of the reasons many spiritual greats encourage uncomplicated methods. Simple is generally better because grace is the prime mover of our prayer. We don't want to get in the way of the Holy Spirit. In fact, as time goes by and the Spirit works more and more deeply in our lives, the way we pray "naturally" begins to change. It actually gets simpler. There's "less" to it because the acts of faith, hope, and love brought on by our prayer finally fuse into an ardent love for God that doesn't require a lot of activity. The more docile we are to the Holy Spirit, the more our prayer becomes a prolonged spiritual communion instead of a series of steps we go through. God gives us grace, and we give him love.

The *Catechism* references a story of a peasant in Ars, France, whom St. John Vianney noticed coming daily to pray in front of the tabernacle. Upon being asked what he was doing the peasant stated, "I look at him and he looks at me" (CCC 2715). This is the prayer of love, the prayer of simplicity — our methods of meditation prepare us for this. We're moving into a deeper relationship with Our Lord. We're at the point where we know each other so well that sometimes words get in the way. The prayer of simplicity indicates our transition to a new level of prayer - contemplation - that we'll discuss in the next chapter.

As we consider these different stages or kinds of prayer, it's important to bear in mind that they don't exist separately. In other words, you don't complete one type of prayer and move on to the next as you would a finished assignment. Growth in prayer is organic and gradual, not moving in only one direction. Even when you have advanced into the higher forms of prayer, there may be times when you dust off some old routine of meditative prayer because you feel the need to jump-start your interior life.

Of course, there are many reasons for the somewhat fluid nature of prayer. Chief among them might be you. It's impossible, for instance, to roll into an adoration

chapel and slide into simplified prayer when you're habitually committing serious sin. Much of the way we pray is determined by how well we're living the spiritual life in general.

### ***Greasing the Skids***

Before we move on to a discussion of contemplative prayer, I want to make one final point about prayer in general, particularly meditation: it doesn't exist on its own. Prayer doesn't operate in a spiritual vacuum. It is ultimately tied to the sacraments, the "masterworks of God" which save us (CCC 1116).

The sacraments are central to the Catholic faith because they are the ordinary means Christ uses to extend salvation to the world. In other words, they give us grace. Through the power of Christ they save us. And since they are our biggest channels of grace, everything we do is ultimately ordered to them, particularly the Eucharist. For this reason St. Irenaeus of Lyons declared back in the second century, "Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking."

Prayer prepares us for the sacraments. It paves the way for God's grace to have its maximum impact on our lives. There is enough grace in one consecrated Host to save the whole world. The only thing stopping it is us. Prayer gets "us" out of the way. It keeps the fire of love smoldering in our hearts so that when the wind of the Holy Spirit blows through the sacraments, the flame is ignited. We see this movement in Scripture.

### ***Meditating on Emmaus***

Hanging on the wall of many a Christian's home is the famous painting *Way to Emmaus* by Robert Ziind. It depicts the story from the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus joins two of his disciples on the road to the town of Emmaus on Easter Sunday (see 24:13-35). Without revealing his identity - they didn't recognize him - Jesus asks what they're discussing. They sadly recount that their hopes for liberation through Jesus of Nazareth, "a prophet mighty in deed and word," had been dashed by his crucifixion. And to confuse matters, earlier that very morning there had been reports of an empty tomb - no body was found.

After listening, Jesus chided them, "O foolish men ... was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (w. 25-26). He then began with Moses and the prophets and explained all that was in Scripture concerning him, the Christ.

Beginning to understand that Christ's sacrifice was for their eternal, spiritual salvation and not merely political liberation, the disciples excitedly asked if he would stick around for dinner. So he did. Celebrating the second Mass in the history of the Church (the first being the Last Supper), Jesus "took the bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?'" (w. 30-32).

What does this story have to do with prayer? A lot. The conversation between Jesus and these disciples was preparation for a celebration of the sacrament where an even deeper encounter with Christ occurred. This conversation is what we mimic in meditative prayer. Meditation is where we acquire Christ's spirit of love and sacrifice so we are more open to grace when we directly encounter his sacrificial love in the Mass. Prayer purifies our faith so that our spiritual eyes can be opened and the power of the Holy Spirit can move freely through the sacraments. The Spirit has to have room to work.

We can't underestimate the role of the Holy Spirit when it comes to prayer. Without him we couldn't converse with God. He is the grace poured into our souls which makes prayer work. Similar to his role as the love shared between Father and Son in the life of the Trinity, he moves us into union with God. Father Garrigou-Lagrange, the great Dominican theologian, says the breath of the Holy Spirit sustains our prayer and helps it go farther than it could be based on its own virtues. And how far it goes is nothing short of incredible.