

Tuesday Evening Series
Series #12: Prayers for Living
Session #1: Contemplative Prayer
Tuesday, March 6, 2018

Contemplative Prayer

An exercise long used among Christians for acquiring contemplation, one that is “available to everyone, whether he be of the clergy or of any secular occupation,” is that of focusing the mind by constant repetition a phrase or word. Saint John Cassian recommended use of the phrase “O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me.” Another formula for repetition is the name of Jesus or the Jesus Prayer, which has been called “the mantra of the Orthodox Church,” although the term “Jesus Prayer” is not found in the Fathers of the Church. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in the 14th Century) recommended use of a monosyllabic word, such as “God” or “Love.”

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a receptive method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God’s presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship. Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer. Rather, it adds depth of meaning to all prayer and facilitates the movement from more active modes of prayer—verbal, mental or affective prayer—into a receptive prayer of resting in God. Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Christ.

What is the difference between the contemplative prayer tradition and centering prayer?

There are many levels of relation with God that can be manifested by the way we pray. There is vocal prayer (the saying of your prayer), there is meditation (the thinking about and reflecting on your prayer), there is affective prayer (responding from your heart), there is centering prayer (a receptive silent prayer of consenting, which also can express a desire to be gifted with contemplation), and there is contemplative prayer (the gift of resting in the Lord). Another way of expressing it is: meditation is thinking about God, Centering Prayer is consenting to God and contemplative prayer is loving God. I hope this helps. Be open to the spirit working in your life on all levels; each level of prayer is necessary in relationship with the Almighty.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is an ancient practice from the Christian contemplative heritage. It was made a regular practice in monasteries by the time of St. Benedict in the 6th century. The classical practice of *Lectio Divina* can be divided into two forms: monastic and scholastic. The scholastic form was developed in the Middle Ages and divides the process of *Lectio Divina* into four hierarchical, consecutive steps: reading, reflecting, responding and resting. The monastic form of *Lectio Divina* is a more ancient method in which reading, reflecting, responding and resting are experienced as moments rather than steps in a process. In this form, the interaction among the moments is dynamic and the movement through the moments follows the spontaneous prompting of the Holy Spirit. To allow for this spontaneity, *Lectio Divina* was originally practiced in private.

The current resurgence of *Lectio Divina* owes much to the reformations of Vatican II and the revival of the contemplative dimension of Christianity. Today, *Lectio Divina* is practiced in monasteries and by laypeople around the world. New practices have also been inspired by the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*, such as praying the scriptures in common, which uses the scholastic form of *Lectio Divina* for a group experience of praying the scriptures. Though the method of *Lectio Divina* has taken slightly different forms throughout the centuries, the purpose has remained the same: to enter into a conversation with God and cultivate the gift of contemplation. *Lectio Divina*, literally meaning “divine reading,” is an ancient practice of praying the Scriptures. During *Lectio Divina*, the practitioner listens to the text of the Bible with the “ear of the heart,” as if he or she is in conversation with God, and God is suggesting the topics for discussion. The method of *Lectio Divina* includes moments of reading (*lectio*), reflecting on (*meditatio*), responding to (*oratio*) and resting in (*contemplatio*) the Word of God with the aim of nourishing and deepening one’s relationship with the Divine.

Like Centering Prayer, *Lectio Divina* cultivates contemplative prayer. Unlike Centering Prayer, *Lectio Divina* is a participatory, active practice that uses thoughts, images and insights to enter into a conversation with God. *Lectio Divina* also is distinguished from reading the Bible for edification or encouragement, Bible study, and praying the scriptures in common, which are all useful but separate practices.

Lectio Divina and Centering Prayer

Lectio Divina and **Centering Prayer** are two distinct prayer forms. **Lectio Divina** is a reading, reflecting, responding and resting in the word of God that helps one grow in relationship with God.

Centering Prayer is a method of prayer in which we consent to rest in God's presence. It is a prayer that moves us beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him. It prepares us to receive the gift of contemplation.

Lectio Divina is a gift to **Centering Prayer**. As our relationship with God deepens we will be renewed in our intention to rest with God in **Centering Prayer**.

Centering Prayer is a gift to **Lectio Divina** as it frees us from obstacles to hear the word of God on a much deeper level in **Lectio Divina**.

Lectio Divina and Bible Study

Bible Study is the reading of the scriptures for information and an understanding of the context of the passage. It provides a solid conceptual background for the practice of **Lectio Divina**.

Lectio Divina is a reflective reading of scripture. It is a method of prayer that leads us into the deeper meaning of scripture and the transformation of our lives. A contemplative reading of the Scriptures is compatible with well-grounded interpretation of the Bible.

BECOMING A WORD OF GOD

Being transformed into the Word of God is a process that happens as we faithfully read, reflect, respond and rest in God's Word.

An attitude of resting in God's presence becomes a part of our daily lives. We become a channel of God's presence to others.

Living in union with God we are able to transcend ourselves as the "center" and experience all in God and God in all.

Our energy becomes one with the Divine Energy. We become merciful, compassionate and loving as God is merciful, compassionate and loving.

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LECTIO DIVINA



LISTENING TO THE WORD
OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is one of the great treasures of the Christian tradition of prayer. It means Divine Reading, which is reading the book we believe to be divinely inspired. This tradition of prayer flows out of a Hebrew method of studying the Scriptures which was called *haggadah*. *Haggadah* was an interactive interpretation of the Scriptures by means of the free use of the text to explore its inner meaning. It was part of the devotional practice of the Jews in the days of Jesus.

Listening to the Word of God in Scripture

Listening to the word of God in Scripture (**Lectio Divina**) is a traditional way of cultivating friendship with Christ. It is a way of listening to the texts of Scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and He were suggesting the topics of conversation. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on His word leads beyond mere acquaintanceship to an attitude of friendship, trust, and love. Conversation simplifies and gives way to communing. Gregory the Great (6th century) in summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition expressed it as "resting in God." This was the classical meaning of Contemplative Prayer in the Christian tradition for the first sixteen centuries.

Monastic Form of Lectio Divina

The monastic form of *Lectio Divina* is an ancient method that was practiced by the Mothers and Fathers of the Desert and later in monasteries both East and West. The monastic way is unstructured. One listens to the word of God in a particular passage chosen for the occasion and then one follows the attraction of the Spirit. This method can also be prayed in a group.

Guidelines for Monastic Lectio Divina

Moment One: (Lectio) Read the Scripture passage for the first time. Listen with the "ear of your heart." What phrase, sentence or even one word stands out to you? Begin to repeat that phrase, sentence or one word over and over, allowing it to settle deeply in your heart. Simply return to the repetition of the phrase, sentence or one word, savoring it in your heart.

Moment Two: (Meditatio) Reflect, relish the words. Let them resound in your heart. Let an attitude of quiet receptiveness permeate the prayer time. Be attentive to what speaks to your heart.

Moment Three: (Oratio) Respond spontaneously as you continue to listen to a phrase, sentence or word. A prayer of praise, thanksgiving or petition may arise. Offer that prayer, and then return to repeating the word in your heart.

Moment Four: (Contemplatio) Rest in God. Simply "be with" God's presence as you open yourself to a deeper hearing of the Word of God. If you feel drawn back to the scriptures, follow the lead of the Spirit.

The Method of Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is the most traditional way of cultivating friendship with Christ. It is a way of listening to the texts of scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and He was suggesting the topics of conversation. It is listening with the "ear" of the heart. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on His Word leads beyond mere acquaintanceship to an attitude of friendship, trust and love. *Lectio Divina* leads us to communion or as Gregory the Great (6th c.), summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition says, "resting in God."

Growing in Relationship

Growing in relationship with God is a process like any other **relationship**. We need to begin by listening and entering into dialogue with God's word. As the dialogue unfolds we will discover different ways of being in **relationship**; different moments of being with God.

There are the moments of listening to the other and pondering the meaning of his/her words. There are the moments of responding and dialoguing, as well as being with the other when no words need to be said.

A **relationship** with God is also made up of many moments. These moments may come in any order.

Begin by walking through each moment, taking as much time as needed. There are no "shoulds, oughts or musts." Listen with the ear of your heart and let the dialogue with God unfold in its own time and let the Holy Spirit take the lead.

We need to trust that God is eager to be with us and to share with us the inner peace and freedom we desire.

Scholastic Form of Lectio Divina

This way of practicing *Lectio Divina* developed in the Middle Ages at the beginning of the Scholastic Period. At this time, there began a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual life. As this tendency grew, the emphasis was placed more upon rational analysis and less on personal experience. The scholastic form divides the process into stages or steps in a hierarchical pattern. The scholastic method is a good way to learn *Lectio Divina* whether privately or in a group.

Guidelines for Scholastic Lectio Divina

Step One: Read the passage, encouraging everyone to listen with the "ear of their heart." What phrase, sentence or even one word stands out to you?

Step Two: Read the passage again and **Reflect** on the word of God. Encourage everyone to be aware of what touches them, a thought or reflection that is meaningful. Allow a minute or two of silence.

Step Three: Read the passage again and **Respond** spontaneously to the word of God. Be aware of any prayer that rises up within that expresses the experience. Allow a minute or two of silence.

Step Four: Read the passage a final time and **Rest** in the word, reflect or pray and allow God to speak in the silence. Allow three or four minutes of silence.

To Extend the Practice: After the resting, take the phrase, sentence, or word into your daily activity and listen to it, reflect on it, pray over it, and rest in it as time allows during the day. Allow it to become part of you.

THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER

by Thomas Keating

Theological Background

The grace of Pentecost affirms that the risen Jesus is among us as the glorified Christ. Christ lives in each of us as the Enlightened One, present everywhere and at all times. He is the living Master who continuously sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and to bear witness to his resurrection by empowering us to experience and manifest the fruits of the Spirit and the Beatitudes both in prayer and action.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is the most traditional way of cultivating friendship with Christ. It is a way of listening to the texts of scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and he were suggesting the topics of conversation. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on his word leads beyond mere acquaintanceship to an attitude of friendship, trust and love. Conversation simplifies and gives way to communing, or as Gregory the Great (6th century), summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition, put it, “resting in God.” This was the classical meaning of contemplative prayer for the first sixteen centuries.

Contemplative Prayer

Contemplative Prayer is the normal development of the grace of baptism and the regular practice of Lectio Divina. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. Contemplative Prayer is the opening of mind and heart – our whole being – to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions. We open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing – closer than consciousness itself. Contemplative Prayer is a process of interior purification leading, if we consent, to divine union.

The Method of Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier time (e.g., The Cloud of Unknowing) in an updated form and to put a certain order and regularity into it. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. During the time of prayer we consent to God’s presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God’s presence everywhere.

Explanation of the Guidelines

- I. “Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.”

- A. The sacred word expresses our intention to be in God’s presence and to yield to the divine action.

THE GUIDELINES

1. CHOOSE A SACRED WORD AS THE SYMBOL OF YOUR INTENTION TO CONSENT TO GOD’S PRESENCE AND ACTION WITHIN.
2. SITTING COMFORTABLY AND WITH EYES CLOSED, SETTLE BRIEFLY, AND SILENTLY INTRODUCE THE SACRED WORD AS THE SYMBOL OF YOUR CONSENT TO GOD’S PRESENCE AND ACTION WITHIN.
3. WHEN YOU BECOME AWARE OF THOUGHTS, RETURN EVER-SO-GENTLY TO THE SACRED WORD.
4. AT THE END OF THE PRAYER PERIOD, REMAIN IN SILENCE WITH EYES CLOSED FOR A COUPLE OF MINUTES.

- B. The sacred word should be chosen during a brief period of prayer asking the Holy Spirit to inspire us with one that is especially suitable to us.
 1. Examples: Lord, Jesus, Father, Mother, Mary; or in other languages: Kyrie, Jesu, Jeshua, Abba, Mater, Maria.
 2. Other possibilities: Love, Peace, Mercy, Silence, Stillness, Calm, Faith, Trust, Yes; or in other languages: Amor, Shalom, Amen.
 - C. Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period, for that would be to start thinking again.
 - D. A simple inward gaze upon God may be more suitable for some persons than the sacred word. In this case, one consents to God’s presence and action by turning inwardly to God as if gazing upon God. The same guidelines apply to the sacred gaze as to the sacred word.
 - II. “Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.”
 - A. By “sitting comfortably” is meant relatively comfortably; not so comfortably that we encourage sleep, but sitting comfortably enough to avoid thinking about the discomfort of our bodies during the time of prayer.

Resources

Contemplative Outreach, <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>

“Christian Contemplation,” [#Eastern_Orthodox_Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_contemplation)