

o6. Beginning to pray

Making a commitment to enter into the outer rooms ('Mansions' / 'Dwelling Places') of the Interior Castle, believing that God is present in the centre and is drawing us along a path to perfect love-communion



The following words of Blessed Marie-Eugène OCD (d. 1967) are worth recalling as we begin to look more formally at different practices that might prove useful as we commit ourselves to a regular discipline of prayer:

‘To turn towards God is already to pray, since prayer - a friendly conversation with God - is nothing else than the movement of grace which we experience as children of God who is our Father’ (*I want to see God*, page 182).

We experience moments of prayer. To develop the art of living in prayer we must want to be in communion with God who dwells in the depths of our hearts.

We must also desire that every feeling, thought, longing and action might have its source in this communion.

We will need courage and determination to enlist all the energies of our mind, heart, soul and strength as we begin the inner journey in response to God's call.

and we will need to learn perseverance and the patience not to be discouraged by distractions and darkness and a feeling of failure.

Teresa of Jesus urges us:

‘Let us exert ourselves, for the love of the Lord. Let us abandon our reason and our fears into his hands. Let us forget this natural weakness that can take up so much of our attention ... Care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord’ (*Interior Castle*, III.2.8).

Practices to help prayer

I. Reflective Spiritual Reading

‘The book to be chosen for reflective reading is not the book that is simply instructive or devotional, nor even the interesting book that holds one’s attention, but the book that suggests and provokes reflection, arouses the affections, or better still that awakens us and keeps us in the presence of God. Simply reading is not reflective reading. It must be interrupted for deeper reflections in the presence of God, to express to God our love, to enter into conversation with God. It will be short or prolonged according to need and will be resumed only when one falls again into dreaminess or inertia’ (Marie-Eugène, *I want to see God*, page 193).

‘I spent over fourteen years without ever being able to meditate except while reading’ (Teresa, *Way of Perfection*, 17).

2. Reciting Prayers

Besides spiritual reading, people often experience that they are helped to pray by repeating audibly a formula of prayer created by someone else, either alone or in community. This can be a source of inspiration for us and can assist our communion with God.

Therese of Lisieux tells us how she was helped in this way: ‘Sometimes when I am in such a state of spiritual dryness that not a single good thought occurs to me, I say very slowly the “Our Father” or the “Hail Mary”, and these prayers suffice to take me out of myself and wonderfully refresh me’ (*Story of a Soul*, x,163).

Saint Teresa of Jesus

‘If you are to recite the Our Father well, one thing is necessary: you must not leave the side of the Master who taught it to you’ (*Way of Perfection* 24.5)

‘While you are repeating some vocal prayer, it is possible for the Lord to grant you perfect contemplation ... You are enkindled in love without understanding how. You know that you are rejoicing in the one you love, but you do not know how. You are well aware that this is not a joy which you can attain through understanding. You embrace it without understanding how, but you do understand that it is a blessing you are receiving ... This is perfect contemplation’ (*Way of Perfection* 25).

God’s outpouring of love is constant. Our role in contemplation is to welcome God’s gift.

Marie-Eugène, *I want to see God*

‘Neglect of vocal prayer, which often pleads the excuse of not being able to pray in this way, proceeds very frequently from secret pride or a form of passivity which is mere laziness. In this case, vocal prayer will be an energetic exercise in humility and simplicity, fruitful for us and pleasing to God ... Those especially will have recourse to vocal prayer more frequently and for a longer time who, not being familiar with purely intellectual activities, need a formula to sustain their thought, or to arouse sentiments of devotion, and cannot give them their full force of prayer except by expressing them exteriorly’ (pages 185-186).

Another warning is in order. If saying prayers is really to be a prayer it is necessary that the words be not just rattled off. We must take the words first into our heart and if they find an echo there we must then pray them from our heart attentively.

Anthony Bloom has this caution: 'If we use "ready made" prayers (prayers made by others in suffering or in spontaneous enthusiasm) we must be careful not to lie to God under the pretext of offering prayers worthy of God' (*Courage to pray*, page 37).

3. Liturgical Prayer

Communion with God can be helped also by Liturgical Prayer, the prayer of the assembled Christian community: the Mass, the celebration of the sacraments, and the Divine Office (Prayer of the Church).

In promulgating the new form of the Divine Office (1970), Paul VI wrote: 'Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of mankind joined to Christ himself. Each individual has his or her part in this prayer which is common to the one Body, and it thus becomes the voice of the Beloved Spouse of Christ, putting into words the wishes and desires of the whole Christian people and making intercession for the necessities common to all mankind. It obtains its unity from the heart of Christ himself.'

'Our Redeemer, as he himself had entered into life through his prayer and sacrifice, wished that this should not cease throughout the ages in his Mystical Body, the Church, and so the official Prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father. Thus, when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his voice in us.'

The General Instruction on the Prayer of the Church reminds us of the following statements from the New Testament:

‘Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them’ (Hebrews 7:25);

‘Where two or three are gathered in my name I am there with them’ (Matthew 18:20).

The General Instruction includes the following: ‘The Fathers of the Church rightly heard in the psalms Christ calling out to his Father or the Father speaking to the Son. They even recognised in them the voice of the Church, the apostles and the martyrs’ (n.109).

Marie-Eugène, *I want to see God*

‘Liturgical prayer, like every other prayer, is to be vivified by interior prayer. If the external movement that it imposes, the art that it cultivates, the sustained attention that it requires, should hinder or even destroy the contemplation that it is meant to serve, the devotion that it should stimulate, or the interior spirit that it wants to express, it would be mere external worship that God could not accept, according to the words of Scripture: “These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Isaiah 29:13, quoted by Jesus in Mark 7:6)’ (page 191).

Marie-Eugène (continued)

‘The beginner must learn to pray with the Church, to enter into the majestic beauty of her ceremonies, to penetrate their symbolism and delight in her liturgical texts. We must above all seek in liturgical prayer the movements of the soul of Christ in the Church, listening to the movements of his Spirit of Love, and so learn in the school of Jesus Christ our Master his daily intimate and silent prayer’ (*I want to see God*, page 191).

The Psalmist did not know Jesus. It is to be expected that some of the sentiments expressed in the psalms do not fit with the communion Jesus has with his Father. The sentiments cannot be prayed by his Body, the Church.

(see my “Praying the Psalms with Jesus” (Chevalier Press 2018; 453 pages).

4. Meditation

Another practice that can lead us to prayer is setting aside time to reflect on the truths of our faith, learning more especially about Jesus and so of God as revealed by Jesus. We offered an example in the previous presentation when we meditated upon the scene of Jesus at the pool of Beth-zatha. Teresa offers the following advice.

‘At this stage people work almost continually with the intellect, engaging in discursive thought and meditation. And they do well ... although it would be good if they engaged for a while in making acts of love, praising God, rejoicing in God’s goodness, that God is who God is, and in desiring God’s honour and glory. These acts should be made as far as possible, for they are great awakeners of the will. Such souls would be well advised when the Lord gives them these acts not to abandon them for the sake of finishing the usual meditation’ (*Interior Castle* IV.I.6).

Different temperaments need to find different ways to meditate. In every case Teresa insists that what matters in prayer is our love: 'Not everyone has the kind of imagination that makes meditating possible, but everyone is capable of loving ... Progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much' (*Foundations* 5.2).

Teresa describes her prayer when she found that she was unable to engage her mind.

‘This is the method I then used. Since I could not reflect discursively with the intellect, I strove to picture Christ within me, and it did me greater good - in my opinion - to picture him in those scenes where I saw him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and afflicted, as someone in need, He had to accept me. I had many simple thoughts like these. The scene of his prayer in the garden, especially, was a comfort to me. I strove to be his companion there. If I could, I thought of the sweat and agony He had undergone in that place. I desired to wipe away the sweat He so painfully experienced, but I recall that I never dared to actually do it, since my sins appeared to me so serious. I remained with him as long as my thoughts allowed me to, for there were many distractions that tormented me’ (*Life* 9:4).

Way of Perfection 26:5-6

‘If you are experiencing trials or are sad, behold him on the way to the garden: what great affliction He bore in His soul. Having become suffering itself, He tells us about it and complains of it. Or behold Him bound to the column, filled with pain, with all His flesh torn in pieces by the great love He bears you. So much suffering: persecuted by some, spat on by others, denied by His friends, abandoned by them, with no one to defend Him, frozen from the cold, left so alone that you can console each other. Or behold Him burdened with the cross, for they didn’t even let Him take a breath. He will look at you with those eyes so beautiful and compassionate, filled with tears. He will forget His sorrows so as to console you in yours, merely because you yourselves go to Him to be consoled, and you turn your head to look at Him.

Way of Perfection 26:5-6 (continued)

‘O Lord of the world, my true Spouse! Are you so in need, my Lord and my Love, that you would want to receive such poor company as mine, for I see by your expression that you have been consoled by me? Well then, how is it Lord that the angels leave You and that even Your Father does not console You? If it is true, Lord, that you want to endure everything for me, what is this that I suffer for You? Of what am I complaining? I am already ashamed, since I have seen You in such a condition. I desire to suffer, Lord, all the trials that come to me and esteem them as a great good enabling me to imitate You in something. Let us walk together, Lord. Wherever You go, I will go; whatever You suffer, I will suffer.’

5. Simply Being with God: Choosing to 'Be-lieve'

As we get to know those we love, our relationships tend to become more simple. We don't have to continually go over the same ground. So it is with Jesus. We find ourselves with him, sharing his communion with God. This can happen when we pause during our Spiritual Reading, or when a particular phrase touches our heart during our vocal or liturgical prayer.

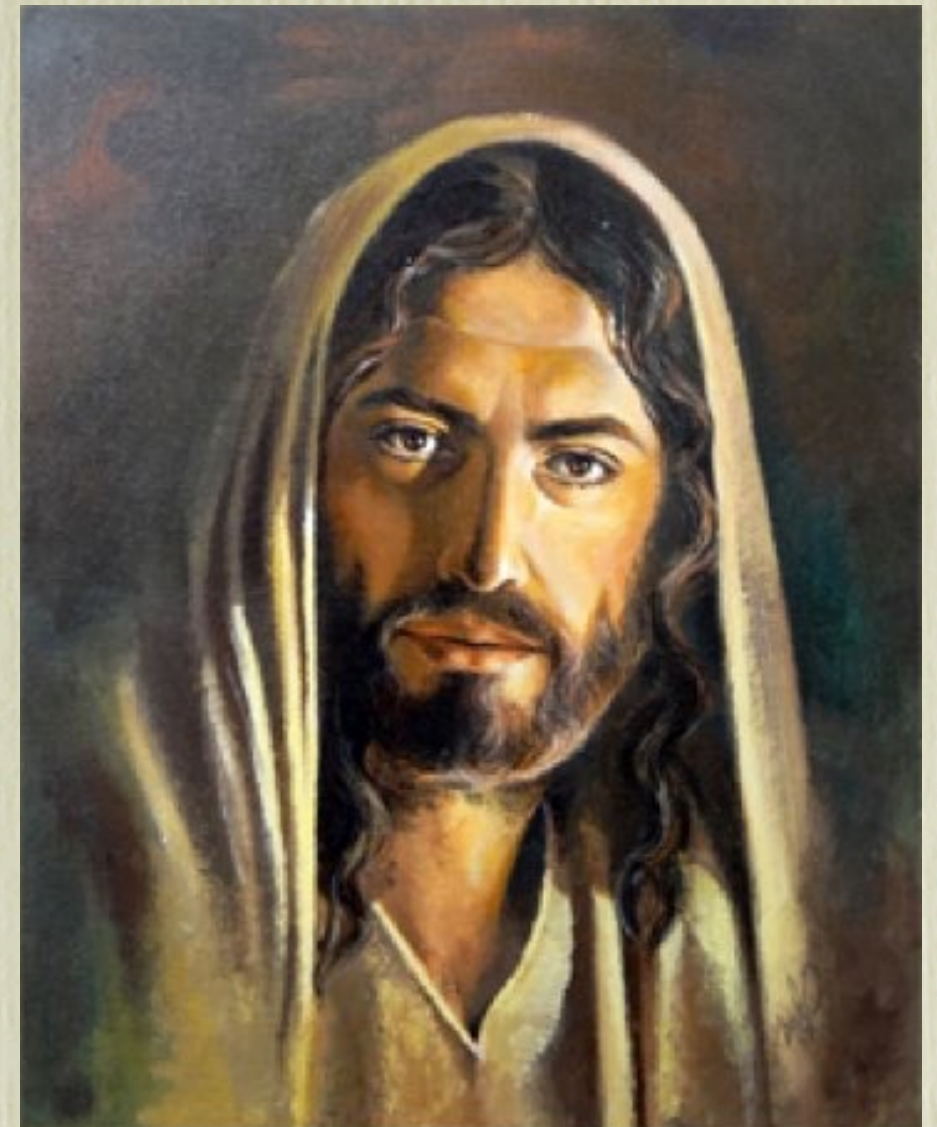


Healing Touch, Mary Southard, CSJ, Photo of print.

Recollection

Teresa recommends a very simple form of prayer: ‘**Collect your faculties** [memory, imagination, mind and will] **together and enter within yourself to be with your God**’ (*Way of Perfection* 28.4).

‘I am not asking you now that you think about him, or that you draw out a lot of concepts, or make long and subtle reflections with your intellect. I am not asking you to do anything more than look at him. Who can keep you from turning the eyes of your soul towards the Lord? ... In the measure you desire him you will find him... He never takes his eyes off you’(*Way of Perfection* 26.3).



Source Unknown

‘It is good to reflect for a time ... but we must sometimes remain by his side with our minds hushed in silence. If we can, we should occupy ourselves in looking upon him who is looking at us. Keep him company. Talk with him. Pray to him. Humble ourselves before him. Delight in him’ (*Life* 13.22).

‘There is nothing to hinder you and your Spouse from remaining alone together, when you desire to enter within yourself, to shut the door behind you and to dwell in that Paradise with your God ... This is something you can do if you resolve to do it’(*Way of Perfection* 29).

‘Do you think the Lord is silent? Even though we do not hear Him, He speaks to the heart when we beseech Him from the heart’ (*Way of Perfection* 24.5).

It may not be at all easy to recollect oneself in this way and it will require discipline and persistence. However it is important to remember that recollection cannot be forced. ‘**but must come gently**’ (*Interior Castle* II,1).

As soon as we find ourselves alone we should seek Jesus and converse with him. Teresa suggests that an image of Jesus might help: ‘**You will find it very helpful if you can get an image or a picture of the Lord - one that you like - not to wear around your neck and never look at, but to use regularly whenever you talk to him. He will tell you what to say**’ (*Way of Perfection*, 26).

This Recollection can extend over the entire day, helped by little reminders, by reflective spiritual reading, by vocal prayers, by participating in the liturgy and by meditation.

Later we will be speaking of another and a more mysterious kind of stillness. Here we are speaking of the kind of stillness that we can bring about by an effort of our will. It is a matter of remembering that God is in our depths and of deciding to gather our faculties and focus within.

A warning: because this kind of stillness is partly a matter of technique, we must beware of laziness here and of thinking that the peace and stillness that we manage to achieve is necessarily communion with God. To be prayer it is essential that the centred and stilled soul be alert and attentive to God.

‘If you would progress a long way on this road and ascend to the Mansions of your desire, the important thing is not to think much, but to love much’ (Interior Castle IV.1.7).

6. Reviewing one's day

Saint Ignatius of Loyola (d.1556) is a good guide for those of us who are beginning to make a commitment to the above practices, which provide spaces conducive to prayer. He insists on the importance of reviewing one's day. He recommends that once or twice a day we set aside a short period to reflect on our life with a view to noticing where God has been moving us and how we have been responding to this movement. God is constantly speaking God's Word to us and inspiring us through his Spirit. How attentive have I been, or how inattentive?

These few minutes of reflection scheduled into our often busy and potentially very distracted lives offer the opportunity to note and relish moments of communion, which, because they were so fleeting, would otherwise leave no trace.

It also provides the opportunity to note and express our sorrow for the times when we were inattentive. It is only perhaps upon reflection that we notice the gentle movements of grace inviting us into communion with the Indwelling God – movements which were there but which went unnoticed at the time.

The practice of this form of prayer makes us more sensitive to the action of God in our lives and we get to know God more intimately. We also become more sensitive to our habitual ways of responding to God, both positive and negative. We get to know ourselves better, always in the atmosphere of trusting prayer. You may find the following five steps helpful in structuring these moments of reflection.

i) Whatever you are feeling and whatever is happening to you, place yourself trustingly in God's presence and search your memory for something, anything, however apparently insignificant, for which you can feel grateful. This will sometimes be difficult, but there will always be something. Find it, focus upon it, savour the moment and express your thanks to God. Can you say: 'Whatever you may do, I thank you'. Open your heart to receive the Giver of all gifts.

ii) Pray to God to be able to see your day in the light of faith. Ask Jesus to look into your eyes and show you what he sees. Ask his Spirit to reveal your heart to you, remembering the words of Jesus: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'. I will also see myself as God sees me.

iii) Now, with Jesus, look back over the day at the places you have been, the activity you have been involved in, the people whom you have encountered. Open your heart to God's Presence and action in your life. Our attention is on God, on wanting to see what God is revealing; on what God wants to show me.

This is not a time for remembering what happened as though we were an outside observer. It is important to remember from the inside. Pray to recall the feelings, the movements of heart (or lack of them). We are not simply remembering, we are asking the Spirit of Jesus to shine gently in our hearts and to reveal how God was present in the moments of our day. Even when the surface of our lives is being whipped up by storms, there is an under-current drawing us into communion with God and 'guiding us along the right path.'

You will recall moments when what Saint Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit will be apparent. You will recall moments of 'joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22). These are moments when you were in communion with God and were responding to God's love. Thank God for them.

You will also recall moments when the fruits of the Spirit were absent. You may also recall moments when you rejected grace, when you sinned, when you followed a habitual line of self-gratification, neglecting the deep longing of your heart. These are moments when you were not in communion with God. Express your sorrow and open your heart to God's healing and forgiving mercy.

iv) Take what you have learned into prayer. Sometimes we become aware of something quite significant, either positive or negative. Delay over it, savouring either your gratitude or your sorrow.

v) Pray to be more alert to the grace that God is certainly offering you to continue listening attentively and to take steps to avoid the inattentive or sinful behaviour that you have observed. Finish the prayer with an act of longing and love, looking forward with expectation to the wonderful ways that God will be loving you in the time before the next reflection.