

The Essence
of
Contemplative
Prayer

Some Aspects of
Contemplative Prayer
in the Christian Tradition

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When and where can I pray?

Jesus of Nazareth said, "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Matthew 6:3-4 NRSV

Origen of Alexandria, Egypt, a third-century Christian scholar and mystic said: "Any place can be suitable for prayer: it becomes so as soon as one prays well it in....If we want to pray quietly without being disturbed, we may choose a particular place in our own house, if there is space – a consecrated place, so to speak – and pray there."

Yes, a suitable place for contemplative prayer can be anywhere. Wherever you pray is a sacred space. It is not always possible to have the solitude of your own home, the quiet of a church or chapel, or a secluded spot outdoors. Your suitable space may have to be a dormitory room, library, the workplace, a hospital room or hallway, a busy street, a forest, beach, or park. Choose the time and place and pray there.

The Essence of Contemplation is Being Present and Attentive to God

The essence of personal prayer is PRESENCE. This is true because the essence of God is presence: *"I am who I am..."* Prayer is a paradox because God, from our limited human point of view, is a paradox. On the one hand, God is, in essence, ineffable, transcendent and unknowable; a mystery. On the other hand, God is immanent, intimate and present in every context of human life; a companion.

We are tempted to use prayer as a time for thinking, and hope it will be a productive use of time. But prayer is not a time for thinking. It is a time for PRESENCE. Thinking is an integral part of human nature, but it is not our highest or most essential activity. The purpose of contemplative prayer is not hyper self-reflection or some type of progress in our spiritual life. Contemplative prayer is an opportunity to be *present and alert to God*. It is an opportunity to *experience God* rather than pray to God. In contemplative prayer we let go of control of our prayer and enter the relationship of Jesus with his Abba God. We empty ourselves in order to share Jesus' union with God.

Contemplation is a reminder that our primary vocation, as human beings, is to enter into the very life of God. It is a timeless presence – within time and space – where we *experience* the

transcendent being of God, who is love. In this type of personal prayer we place ourselves, intentionally and with openness, in the presence of the One who is the heart of reality. The daily practice of contemplative prayer is a choice to commit our lives to what is most fundamental. This mutual presence to and experience of God becomes the source of our love and the template that guides our actions and relationships.

The practice of personal contemplation places our lives in the hands of the One who “laid the foundations of the world and all that is in it”. It helps us walk in the light of God’s presence, whose energies bring forth righteousness and justice and whose foundation is love and truth. (Psalm 89:5-18 NRSV).

Two fundamental aspects of contemplative prayer are: *the presence of God* and *attentiveness to that presence*. It is a mutual seeing. There are only two prerequisites: *desire* and *persistence*.

“There is a deep foundation of silence in each of us in which the eternal Word is born. And therein lies our vocation: to listen to that Word and to live thereby.” (Evelyn Underhill, an Anglican spiritual writer, retreat leader, and mystic.)

Contemplation is a Conversation

As a human being you are a creature with whom God is constantly speaking and you have

been created to respond to God's voice in *sacred conversation*. This conversation takes place each day and in every situation of your life. There is nothing that will prevent this natural and life-giving experience of God except lack of desire or actions that inhibit the dialog. Even then, God remains within and all around you, speaking and inviting you to respond. Without your response the lure of divine love is incomplete. You have been created to participate in this love, and in the dynamic relationship of genuine conversation, God reveals the most fundamental aspect of your being. You were born to pray.

The foundation of this conversation is the variety of ways God is already present in your life and your desire to be in the company of God. This mutual *presence* will form your life if you remain open and attentive. It is the intimate environment where you will discover your true self and become one with God.

The essence and practice of contemplative prayer is your stewardship of this sacred *presence* and *conversation*. Every desire, thought, word, and action flows from this experience. Your daily life will reflect what is taking place within you.

Contemplative Prayer is Simple

Here are two examples of the many forms of contemplative prayer:

- **Simple Sitting:** Find a relatively quiet place, if you can. Otherwise use the space available. Sit comfortably with your back straight, but not rigid. With your eyes closed or partially open, begin breathing slowly in and out. Be conscious of your pattern of deep breathing. Let your body and your mind become as relaxed as possible. As your mind becomes relaxed you will experience many thoughts. Let them come and go. Try, as best you can, to let your mind and inner being become empty. Let your whole being be an open vessel for God's presence and voice. Avoid expectations or hoped-for outcomes. Simply be present to God. Some persons repeat a word or short phrase in their mind to help let go of distracting thoughts and bring themselves back to silence of mind. You can choose a word that has special meaning to you. Some persons repeat a name for God such as "Holy One" or a short request such as "Come Holy Spirit" or "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." When you have sat in silence for about 20 minutes, open your eyes, wait for a minute or two, give thanks to God and then resume activity.
- **Contemplative Walking:** (This description of contemplative walking is influenced by the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh and Thomas Hand, S.J.)

Find a place where you can have relative quiet and space for walking. Or simply use the space at hand. Stand motionless, begin a deep rhythm of breathing and let yourself become relaxed in body, mind and spirit. When you have become centered begin walking. Take small steps with your feet about shoulder's-length apart. Step slowly with a rhythm that allows your feet to alternate touching the ground without stopping between steps. (Remember, there is no right or wrong way.) Continue your deep breathing as you walk.

Remember that each step is the only step and that each moment is the only moment to be in the presence of God. Be aware of each foot's gentle contact with the earth, carpet or floor. Relax your mind and become aware of objects that appear as you walk. Do not try to appreciate or analyze them. Let them be what they are as you encounter them.

Relax your jaw muscles by assuming a half smile. Continue walking without intention, purpose or destination. When distractions or thoughts appear try counting the number of steps you take as you inhale and exhale. This may help restore you to a relaxed attentiveness.

When you wish to end the walking, stop and continue your deep

breathing for a minute or two. Offer thanks to God and resume your other activities. Contemplative walking can be very short, but it is best to allow 15-20 minutes. Once in a while try this form of contemplative prayer for an hour.

Do Not Worry About Results

The purpose of contemplative prayer is to place your self in the presence of God without agenda or expectations. Do not worry if thoughts come, especially if you are worried, pressured by work to complete, or anxious about a friend of loved-one. Just rest in the quiet of God's love for you. That is enough, even though it may feel that nothing is happening. Entrust yourself to God.

The Uniqueness of Christian Personal Prayer

Every human being is called to experience God. Life with God is a pilgrimage on which we discover what it means to be human. Contemplation and meditation are parts of almost all religious traditions. Yet each tradition, while sharing basic similarities regarding the purpose and practice of contemplative experience, has its unique understanding and disciplines. These differences reflect the diversity of human cultures as well as the limitlessness of God's intercourse with human

beings. Although very different and sometimes impossible to reconcile, each tradition can enlighten the others. Authentic experience of God is not the possession of any single religious tradition.

What is unique about Christian contemplative experience? The question must be answered with the understanding that uniqueness does not infer exclusivity. We can live within, be committed to, and desire to share our unique experience of God without insisting that our experience is the only venue for life with God. In fact, our Christian experience can only be enlightened by God's presence in the wisdom and practice of other traditions.

The primary uniqueness of Christian contemplative life is its focus on Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Christ. In Christian experience it is Jesus who manifests and leads us to the Holy One, the reality of God. Therefore, most of our desires to experience God and manifest God's presence in our lives are focused on and led by our contemplation of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as presented in the gospels. Our contemplation and meditation are Christ-centered. Our consciousness of God, of ourselves and our world is fully developed as we seek oneness with God in Christ. Jesus Christ is the window through which we look into the heart of God, where we experience love and are freed and empowered to love our neighbors.

Another unique aspect of Christian contemplative experience is our understanding of *incarnation*. We believe it is natural for God to be manifested in creation and, in our experience, the most real and compelling manifestation of God's presence is in Jesus Christ. At the same time, Jesus himself realized that we, also, are called to be manifestations of God in the world through union with God. Therefore, in contemplation and meditation we desire union with God in the context of our humanness. We do not try to lose our humanity in God or to become God. It is a mystery, just as the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are a mystery. The important thing is to live into the mystery rather than try to explain, contain or control it.

Many people in the West use a variety of contemplative techniques for relaxation, therapy, personal improvement, or just to relax after a hectic day. There is nothing wrong with these practices. But Christian contemplation and meditation have no other goal than simply being with God and letting go of our needs, in trust. We do not always succeed, but that is our desire. We do not deny that "simply being with God" affects our lives in a variety of ways. But ultimately we seek contemplative experience without personal expectations or controls. In this way, Christian contemplative experience is not better than most other practices; it is different.