

# **Contemplative Prayer Leading to Spiritual and Moral Conversion**

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## **EDITOR'S NOTE:**

All internal references in this document are to the *Credible Catholic Big Book* ([www.crediblecatholic.com](http://www.crediblecatholic.com)). The majority of references are to Volume Twelve of that 20-volume series. The *Credible Catholic Big Book* is a free resource produced by the Magis Center dedicated to explaining the rationale for the doctrines of the Catholic Church through evidence provided by contemporary science, social science, philosophy, exegesis, historiography, archaeology, and literature.

## **Introduction**

I am using “contemplative prayer” here in the most general sense – that is, any form of prayer open to direct connection with the Lord for enough time to establish intimacy. In my view, this would have to be for more than fifteen minutes continuously per day. By “intimacy” here, I mean personal familiarity, closeness, and caring, but not necessarily the tender or even romantic affections intrinsic to some forms of Christian mysticism.

I cannot exaggerate the importance of personal contemplative prayer because it complements the public forms of prayer (i.e. the sacraments, liturgy, and penance services) by opening our hearts to the Lord in deep and close personal relationship. This relationship brings freedom, peace, and wisdom into our active lives which ultimately transforms us in virtue and holiness. There is a spiritual adage that expresses this explicitly: “A person can live for a while both praying and sinning, but eventually he will get rid of one of them.” This shows the power of personal prayer in our active lives, for it is radically opposed to sin (a turning away from God). If we assent to the power of close relationship with the Lord in prayer, then it will eventually lead us away from sin. However, if we assent to sin, it will eventually lead us away from close relationship with the Lord in prayer.

We will address contemplative prayer in three sections:

1. Getting Started on Personal Contemplative Prayer (Section I).
2. The Second Stage of Contemplative Prayer (Section II).
3. The Third Stage of Contemplative Prayer (Section III).

### **I.**

#### **Getting Started on Personal Contemplative Prayer**

I devote the majority of Volume 18 to this topic, and so I will be quite brief here. My purpose is to give a simple overview of how to get started in personal contemplative prayer, and will save the explanation and elaboration of this presentation for Volume 18. There are three

major principles of the spiritual life that are essential to doing this. I will briefly discuss each in turn.

## I.A

### The First Principle of Contemplative Prayer -- Consistency

First, *consistency* is the most important dimension of establishing a personal relationship with the Lord. In this respect it resembles all personal relationships. We need dedicated time and presence to others to get to know and appreciate them better. Normally, this brings us closer to them, and we begin to commit ourselves more fully to them. Eventually our commitment becomes strong enough to prioritize them in our lives, to care about their welfare, to care for them, and ultimately to sacrifice ourselves for them. The more time and presence we consistently bring to our relationships, the stronger our bond in friendship and love becomes. The same holds true for our relationship with God.

One might object that our human friends are visible and affectively responsive, but the Lord is invisible and frequently silent, so there must be some difference between the dynamics of divine and human friendship. True enough, but make no mistake about it – the Lord’s presence, though invisible, can be quite palpable. As we acknowledge His presence and love to us and proceed to our contemplative prayers, we might feel relief from emptiness, loneliness, and alienation, or feel a subtle sense of peace that calms us and leads to trust. We might also have a subtle awareness of God’s sacredness and/or love. These are some indications that we are not alone, and that another profoundly transcendent interpersonal consciousness has drawn close to us in His compassion and peace. If we remain close to Him for the set time of our prayer, day after day, we can be sure that He will make His presence more profoundly felt, and above all, He will transform us through our relationship with Him.

Now, take a few moments to consider what a good time might be for consistently committing yourself to a minimum of fifteen minutes of personal prayer every day. It is just as important to avoid making your prayer time too long as making it too short. Fifteen minutes is a great starting time for those who are beginning personal contemplative prayer, but avoid any time period that is too long to be sustained over the course of time. If you select an initial prayer time of say thirty minutes, and you suddenly find yourself bored, distracted, or sensing that it is unmanageable, then back away from this, and go to twenty minutes, and then test it. Consistency and manageability is far more important than the initial length of time given to prayer. Don’t worry – your prayer period will grow over the course of time (see below).

If you are anything like me, there is no substitute for the morning – immediately after getting out of bed. Be sure to wake up early enough so that you will not feel rushed by the impending requirements of the day, and if possible leave a little extra time for your prayer to go longer than you might have thought. Slip away to a place where you have some privacy, and then *stick to it every day*. There may be some days when this will be difficult, because of early morning commitments – such as plane travel at early hours. If you do have to sacrifice this time for such occasions, provide some way of making up for it during the day. If we are to be contemplatives in action – the ideal of Christian life – we must protect the time to be with the

Lord in prayer so that our activities won't eclipse the contemplation that will bring us closer to Him in love and transformation.

## I.B

### **The Second Principle of Contemplative Prayer: Freedom and Grace for Moral Conversion**

The second principle requires considerable nuance – the majority of the positive effects of prayer will occur after your contemplative time. Sometimes, people who initiate personal contemplative prayer expect to feel intimacy with the Lord almost immediately during their time of prayer. Though this certainly can and does occur, it frequently does not. Instead of feeling the Lord's presence, we become more familiar with Him, at ease with Him, and more comfortable with His healing hand amidst our sin and imperfection.

Sometimes when we begin the contemplative life we might have a sense of shame, guilt, or fear that makes us very uncomfortable – even ready to bolt – when we allow the Lord to draw close to us. Though shame, guilt, or fear might be appropriate from the vantage point of our actions or lifestyle, do not avoid being in personal relationship with the Lord. When He comes close, He means only to heal us and save us – to draw us away from our enemy, the evil one, who will use every suggestion of your unworthiness to incite shame so that you will want to avoid the One who can save you. Remember, it is not the Lord who is screaming, “You unworthy wretch – I'm disgusted with you.” This is the accuser – your enemy, the evil one.

If you allow the Lord to draw close to you in your sin and imperfection, you will feel a sense of shame that will no doubt be uncomfortable, but this is not because the Lord is angry or disgusted with you, but only because He wants to heal you and rescue you from your enemy. Instead of avoiding the Lord or finding some way of distracting yourself from your prayers, make an act of trust, such as, “Lord Jesus, I place my trust in you,” or “Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am a sinful man/woman.” Repeat it again and again until the urge to flee or find a distraction lessens. When you can sense God's benevolent, loving, and healing presence, consider what He is suggesting to you. Be sure of this – He will suggest something to you in a very non-judgmental way that is quite manageable. It may seem like a hurdle, but it will be a manageable one. This is the critical moment of free choice, if the suggestion truly is manageable, then ask the Lord for the grace to undertake it. Don't worry – the Lord does not expect you to be perfect. He knows you will likely fall many times, but the important thing is to try to accommodate His suggestion. I assure you that if you stay faithful to your contemplative prayer, and try to accommodate the Lord's suggestion, *it will* get easier and easier to the point where you will find yourself becoming freer and freer from the sinful proclivity that was undermining your relationship with Him.

The reader might be thinking, “I have a hundred questions about that last paragraph.” I cannot answer all the questions now, but I must address one question whose answer must be correct if we are to advance in contemplative prayer and moral life -- what do I mean by “the Lord making a suggestion?” Will the Lord be as it were, standing outside of me saying, “Bob here is what I am suggesting to you”? Obviously not. Instead, the Lord is likely to incite a thinking process that culminates in a desirable course of action – “*I would really like* to be more patient or compassionate or generous or chaste, etc. in certain specific situations.” Notice that

this is quite different from, “I *should* be more compassionate,” or “I better be more compassionate” which implies judgment by the Lord.

The Lord is not interested in judging you, and then pushing you or forcing you to obey lest He bring down the hammer. Any such suggestion is from the evil one. Instead, the Lord wants you to see that some mode of conduct is leading you into darkness and endangering your soul – even to the point where you would actually choose the darkness over the light of love and even over the light of His heavenly Kingdom. He wants you to sense the danger posed by your enemy’s grip on your freedom, and after recognizing it, to call to Him (the Lord) for help to lead you out of the darkness. At this juncture *you* will desire to change your conduct precisely because it is so dangerous to your state of being and even your salvation. If you resolve to follow your desire to get out of the darkness, the Lord will give you the grace to keep that resolve going. Yes – you might fail many many times, but if you get up, ask for forgiveness, make an act of trust in the Lord, and continue to follow your resolve (all the while maintaining your daily practice of contemplative prayer), then I guarantee you will get better at what the Lord is suggesting to the point where you will be able to leave the darkness behind and enter more fully into His light.

I recall my novice master, Fr. Gordon Moreland, telling this sage story about how the Lord feels as we begin the process of personal contemplative prayer, spiritual conversion, and moral conversion. As we begin, the evil one sweeps in immediately and plants the image of a really angry parent who discovers that we have habituated ourselves to some form of darkness and sin, and screams at us that we better get our act together right now or he will abandon us or even condemn us. In contrast to this, the Lord – through the Holy Spirit – presents the image of a parent who walks into a room and sees a snake lying in the bassinet next to us – His beloved, precious, and fragile child. Instead of being angry, judgmental, and condemnatory, the parent is terrified by the impending danger lying next to us, and has only one thought in mind – to remove the danger. This is precisely how the Lord of unconditional love feels – just like the father of the Prodigal Son – yet in the case of our moral lives, He must operate within the contours of our freedom. He can’t simply pick up the snake and get rid of it, He has to show us how dangerous the snake is so that we *will want* to avoid it, even though the snake has convinced us that he is quite harmless, and wants only to make us happy and fulfilled.

Does the Lord always present such suggestions to us during our contemplative prayer? Sometimes, but by no means, always. Sometimes, the Lord will influence a dream in which an image or a narrative informs us of the mortal danger of a specific kind (or kinds) of conduct or attitude. When we awaken from that dream, we will likely remember it and be quite disturbed by it. Notice that we are disturbed not by the Lord’s anger or judgment, but by the impending danger and darkness into which we have entered into our conduct or attitude. When the Lord has made the point about the danger, it is incumbent upon us to recognize the gift we have been given (even though it is disturbing), and then to pray the prayer of St. Peter as he sank into the water while attempting to walk – “Lord, help me!” If we recognize the danger (instead of running from it) and ask the Lord for help to overcome a destructive form of conduct, He will help us by *gradually* leading us to little improvements in our attitude or conduct. If we really follow through on these small steps, away from the sin and danger, your desire for that sin becomes tempered – and eventually you will lose interest in what had formerly fascinated you,

and even transfixed you. Again, it may take many attempts and subsequent failures, but eventually the desire for the sin will lessen to the point where it is no longer desirable.

When I began this discussion above, I mentioned that the majority of the positive effects of prayer occur outside of prayer. The above discussion shows how the Lord accomplishes this. So long as we remain faithful to our daily contemplative prayer and follow through on the suggestions from the Lord that come to us during prayer, in our dreams, when we are awakened at 3 o'clock in the morning, or by the voices of other people, we can be sure that our desire for the darkness (of sin) will gradually subside, while our desire for the light will intensify. When this occurs, our love for the Lord will also intensify, and we will want to draw near Him in contemplative prayer for additional time, which in turn will motivate us to separate ourselves from the darkness even more – and the cycle will continue. Contemplation leads to reform within our active lives while reform of our active lives leads to deeper contemplation and love of the Lord. We might conclude this discussion by reiterating three points. First, the above life of grace and sanctity begins with fidelity to contemplative prayer every day – even if it is for only fifteen minutes. Secondly, we should expect that the majority of the fruit of prayer will occur outside of prayer. Finally, as we begin the contemplative life, contending with feelings of shame, guilt, or fear, we must trust that the Lord's sole intention is to love and heal us, and then to make acts of trust in Him so that we can remain faithful to our contemplative prayer (instead of fleeing or finding a distraction). We must then be alert to the suggestions the Lord will make through our contemplative prayer, our dreams, our feelings of cosmic emptiness, loneliness, and alienation, and through the voices of others. When we sense the impending danger and darkness of our conduct or attitudes, we will want to respond with the plea, "Lord, help me!" And the Lord will infuse His grace into our desire to flee the danger of our sin. We will ultimately succeed, because the Lord's grace will not be insufficient to flee from the darkness.

### **I.C**

#### **The Third Principle of Contemplative Prayer – Selecting Times and Prayers**

The third principle of the spiritual life is more practical than the previous one. It concerns setting out the kinds of prayers you will want to say as you begin the spiritual life, and progress in it. As you begin your contemplative prayer life, you might find that praying an entire rosary or the Divine Office is difficult to engage in a time period of 15 – 20 minutes. Since the objective of contemplative prayer is to come into loving connection with the Lord and open ourselves to His suggestions, I would recommend shorter prayers that can do this in a relatively short time. Therefore I would recommend five kinds of "short prayers:"

1. Snippets of the rosary.
2. Spontaneous prayers (a list is given in Volume 18, Chapter Three).
3. Common Catholic prayers (a list is given in Volume 18, Appendix I).
4. Some profound, well-known Psalms of praise, thanksgiving, petition, and repentance (a list is given in Volume 18, Appendix II).
5. The prayer of gratitude for all blessings.

I would recommend using combinations of these prayers and Psalms sufficient to fill about 75% of your allotted time of contemplation. Leave 25% of your time for conversation with the Lord

about some concerns of the day or week as well as responding to some of the suggestions you sense He is giving to you.

As you can see, beginning a contemplative life requires a bit of homework, because you will want to familiarize yourself with the spontaneous prayers, Psalms, and common prayers on the lists in Volume 18, and then make a selection of an appropriate number corresponding to the time you have allotted for contemplative prayer. Stay with the same prayers each week. If you want to change them every week, feel free to do so. But staying with the same prayers means that you can devote yourself to connecting with the Lord in prayer instead of spending time and psychic energy on deciding what and how to pray.

Before moving to your selection of prayers, you will want to begin with the first step of all contemplative prayer -- recognizing the presence of the Lord or the Blessed Virgin. I typically use the prayer, "Lord, I know you are here and that you love me" (or if praying to the Blessed Mother -- "Mother Mary, I know you are here and I know you love me)." I repeat this prayer until my consciousness is open to His (or her) presence -- and He is filling me with it. This "being filled" with the Lord's presence need not have any emotional content, but oftentimes does -- a feeling of peace or the sense of being near a profound friend. At the very least, I have a tacit awareness that I am not alone. When you are in this connected interpersonal state, proceed to your selection of psalms and prayers. Remember, the point is not to get through all of them, but rather to say them deliberately and lovingly while recalling His presence and love for you.

As noted above, most of the grace of prayer occurs after your prayer session is completed. Keep alert to clues about where the Lord might be leading -- interior clues as well as exterior ones. If you sense new freedom to detach from the world or one of the 8 deadly sins, take note of it and bring it back to your contemplative prayer to ask for the grace to increase that freedom until the attachment has subsided.

Some people may find themselves in a state of "prayer block" (much like writer's block). The reason for this might stem from sinful proclivities or habits that may have been a problem in the past and continue to be so in the present. This may require a turning moment *to begin* the process of opposing those sinful proclivities or habits. The best way of doing this is to avail oneself of the sacrament of reconciliation (confession) which has the particular grace of quickening our resolve to oppose a sinful proclivity -- though such opposition may only be partially or even minimally successful at the outset. If you go to confession with the intention of beginning a process of opposition to a sinful proclivity, and find that you have only a little success in contending with it, do not grow discouraged, but instead resolve to go to confession on a monthly basis. The combination of the sacrament of confession and the contemplative prayer life you are initiating will help you to break the spell and the habit of that particular sin which will in turn decrease its influence in your life. Confession tends to lessen the "prayer block" which in turn enables you to initiate a habit of contemplative prayer, which in combination with the grace of confession, tends to lessen the influence of sinful proclivity. Repeated confessions, fidelity to contemplative prayer, and speaking to the Lord about your struggles with a sinful proclivity during contemplative prayer, weaken sinful proclivities and habits. The longer we engage in the process the more we gain freedom in resisting the proclivity.

There are some other complementary steps we can take from contemporary psychology – namely, visualizations and affirmations – which have proven to be quite successful in changing our subconscious identity (discussed in detail in Volume 16 – Chapters 2-3). When these are combined with the sacrament of reconciliation and a contemplative prayer life, success in breaking the spell of the proclivity is likely to occur – though it may be a long process. As the proclivity weakens, your relationship with the Lord through contemplation will strengthen – and as a result, you will bring that relationship into your active life – your apostolate, your family, your workplace, etc. At this point, you will be progressing toward the Ignatian ideal of being a contemplative in action.

If you are anything like me, the time of your contemplative prayer will begin to *naturally* expand. If you start off with, say, 15 minutes, you may notice that you *desire* to finish your prayers, after which you discover that it took 20 or 25 minutes – and you did not notice the extra time. When this begins to consistently happen, add an extra 5 or 10 minutes to your allotted prayer time to accommodate what you desire – to be lovingly in the presence of the Lord. Do not force yourself to move to 25 minutes. Wait until the 25 minutes happens naturally. If you force yourself, you will turn your “*wanting* to pray” into “*having* to pray,” which will undermine the relationship with the Lord you are trying to cultivate. Remember -- when you have completed your selection of Psalms, spontaneous prayers, and common prayers. Devote at least 5 minutes to loving conversation with the Lord. Asking Him what His desires are for you – your spiritual development, moral development, as well as life and relationship issues. When your conversation is complete, conclude with a “Glory Be.”

As noted above, when your life of contemplation becomes more habitual, you will naturally desire to spend more time in prayer. Sometimes affective desolation may cause dryness which may increase distractions. This is explained in Volume 15 (Chapter Two, Section III). Prescinding from affective desolation, the desire to be with the Lord in contemplative prayer tends to increase (along with detachment from sinful proclivities). As this occurs, you will probably experience little moments of affective consolation (see below) and will be drawn to additional spontaneous and common prayers.

Let us now return to the subject of selecting particular prayers. The saints of the Catholic Church throughout the centuries—such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ignatius Loyola, and many more -- have written literally hundreds of prayers and litanies that constitute the vast repertoire of Christian devotional prayers available today. There are many excellent prayer books that provide a large number of these prayers at a reasonable cost.<sup>1</sup> I recommend that readers purchase one or two of these prayer books and mark the pages of prayers that have potential to connect you intimately with the Lord during your daily prayer session. I have provided several of these prayers in Volume 18 to get you started, but these barely scratch the surface of our huge Catholic repertoire.

The prayer of gratitude is particularly important and has been recognized by virtually every spiritual master as foundational to the contemplative life. Gratitude is an acknowledgement

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<sup>1</sup> A simple web search for “Catholic Prayer Books Amazon” will give at least 40 excellent reasonably-priced prayer books from which to choose. The descriptions given indicate fairly clearly whether these are more traditional or contemporary prayer books.

that we have been blessed by the Lord which makes us aware of His presence and love in our lives. When we say “thank you Lord,” it is generally infused with the recognition of His love as well as our love for Him. When we are grateful, we take nothing for granted which frees us from the entitlement mentality and from resentment toward others and God for what we do not have. There is much to be grateful for in all of our lives if we focus on what we have rather than what we do not have – our families, friends, opportunities at work and in community, and above all for our creation, redemption by Jesus, and the Church community. Though suffering can reach critical points in our lives, this too can become a blessing to help us toward our salvation – and even to help others toward their salvation.

It is best to begin the prayer of gratitude with recent blessings – perhaps the success of a child at home or an accomplishment at work or a new opportunity in the community or work, or a spiritual insight from Church or from a book. We can also be thankful for natural beauty or the weather or little acts of friendship and love.

You might also see the blessings in some of the challenges of life, particularly how those challenges led to detachment from a sinful proclivity or caused a change in life’s meaning or direction. Don’t force yourself to think of things for which to be grateful if nothing is coming to mind. Instead, focus on some more general dimensions of your life, such as your spouse, children, friends, gifts and talents, faith, residence, and even the blessings you have received in the past. I recommend making a little “Book of Gratitude” that details the many areas where we may find the Lord’s providential hand helping us. Volume 18 has a detailed explanation of both the prayer of gratitude and Book of Gratitude that will help reader’s engage in this practice on a regular basis.

When you become accustomed to some of these prayers (common prayers, spontaneous prayers, psalms, and the prayer of gratitude), you may notice little lucid moments of the Lord’s (or the Blessed Virgin’s) presence and love (called “affective consolation”). This presence may be quite subtle—like a tacit awareness or a memory of a past moment when His presence was evident. Sometimes His presence will be more than tacit, and you will be aware of a sense of peace or “being at home” that goes beyond purely natural manifestations of these feelings. Sometimes you may feel a sense of holiness, sacredness, and unity that is quite other worldly, and sometimes you may feel a combination of these feelings along with a sense of supernatural love and joy. You may also notice that when these feelings occur, they incite desire for more within you—and when they fade, you are left longing for the divine presence that so animated and fulfilled you. C.S. Lewis described this profound combination of feelings, filled with intense desire for the Divine Presence as “a stab of joy,” using the following words:

As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me without warning, as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's 'enormous bliss' of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to enormous) comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but of desire for what? Not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past---and before I knew



what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing which had just ceased. It had taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.”<sup>2</sup>

Most of the time, our contemplative prayer will not elicit this type of profound feeling, but it is not unusual for the Lord to provide a tacit awareness of His presence and Love when we recall His presence and pray in the words the saints have given us. Though this feeling can be quite subtle, it deepens our conscious and subconscious sense of the Divine Presence that carries over into the rest of our day, and provides the basis for detaching ourselves from the things of this world (moral freedom). It might be helpful to scrutinize one or more Catholic prayer books and study some of the prayers given there until you land upon one or more that resonates with you. Remember, before praying, call to mind the presence of the Lord or our Blessed Mother and affirm their love for you, using a prayer similar to this—“Lord, I know you are here and I know you love me.” Do not think about your feelings or how the Lord might be interacting with you during the prayer, simply pray it, trying to intend what its saintly author meant to express. Even if we do not notice the above feelings or effects on a daily basis, we may be sure that we will notice them over the long term, for contemplative prayer provides a very powerful foundation for transformation in the heart of Christ, catalyzing the transformative power of the Holy Eucharist.

If you remain faithful to this contemplative prayer life, whether it be 15 minutes or 45 minutes, you will begin to make spiritual progress – more aware of the Lord’s love for you and even your love for Him, a greater sense of freedom to detach oneself from the world and deadly sins, a greater sense of the Lord’s presence to you during the day, and a transformation in the quality of your actions -- most especially with the virtues of love mentioned by St. Paul in Corinthians 1:13 – greater patience, kindness, and compassion as well as greater control over anger, boasting, rejoicing in evil, etc. Regular contemplative prayer is a game changer, because simply being present to the Lord or the Blessed Virgin makes their presence “rub off” on us. Their presence and love transform our hearts precisely in the manner described by John Henry Cardinal Newman – “*Cor ad cor Loquitur*” – “heart speaking to heart.”

As your contemplative prayer life expands, you may want to move into one of the more lengthy forms of contemplative prayer listed below.

## II.

### **The Second Stage of Contemplative Prayer – Extended Discursive Prayer**

As we advance in contemplative prayer, we become progressively more aware of the loving presence of the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Blessed Virgin to the point where we desire (are drawn into) deeper prayer – beyond 20 minutes (as might be the case with the prayer methods mentioned above). At this juncture, we will probably want to add a more extended form of prayer and meditation to the spontaneous prayers, common prayers, and familiar psalms mentioned above. What kinds of prayer can lead to an intimate (close and caring) connection with the Lord? There are literally dozens upon dozens of such prayer forms, but I will

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis 1966 *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich) pp 22-23.

address two that have been particularly helpful to me – the rosary (Section II.A) and the divine office -- Liturgy of the Hours (Section II.B).

## II.A The Rosary

The rosary is one of the most powerful vehicles for initiating and maintaining contemplative prayer. Every recent pope and canonized saint has recommended it repeatedly, and it has been part of every major Marian apparition of the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – e.g., Lourdes, Fatima, and Medjugorje. The Catholic spiritual tradition has, since its inception, integrated Marian spirituality into the foundation of its prayer – both communally and individually. Icons and prayers to Mary are found in the art and inscriptions of the catacombs – and in every artistic era since that time. The rosary does not exhaust Marian spirituality in the Catholic Church. There is a richness of Marian reflection (Mariology), Marian feast days, litanies, novenas, hymns, special prayers, and extra-liturgical celebrations. Several of the Marian pilgrimage sites – particularly Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe have miracles associated with them (see Volume 3, Chapter 9) – and Lourdes has a permanent medical-scientific commission (the Lourdes International Medical Bureau) permanently set up to assess and archive those miracles (see Volume 3, Chapter 9, Section I for details on this).

In the midst of this plentitude, the rosary still stands out as spiritually significant, because it is so helpful for initiating and maintaining a contemplative life. It incorporates the motherly love of the Blessed Virgin into praise and prayers to the three persons of the Holy Trinity in a simple, repetitive, and diverse way. The presence, love, and assistance of the divine persons and the Blessed Mother are evident – which makes it an ideal foundation for contemplative prayer.

The rosary is also an invitation into meditation on the major events in the life of Jesus and the Blessed Virgin. There are four major sets of meditations, called “mysteries” that most of us are familiar with and can focus on while reciting the “Hail Mary”:

1. The Joyful Mysteries—The Annunciation, The Visitation, The Birth of Jesus, The Presentation, and The Finding of Jesus at the Temple.
2. The Luminous Mysteries—The Baptism of Jesus, The Wedding Feast at Cana (First Miracle), The Preaching of the Kingdom of God, The Transfiguration, and The Holy Eucharist.
3. The Sorrowful Mysteries—The Agony in the Garden, The Scourging of Jesus, The Crowning with Thorns, The Way of the Cross, and The Crucifixion.
4. The Glorious Mysteries—The Resurrection, The Ascension, The Gift of the Holy Spirit, The Assumption, and the Coronation of Mary

There is much to be said about meditating on these mysteries and familiarizing yourself with them, but that is beyond the scope of this short explanation on one of the Church’s foundational forms of extended contemplative prayer. I would recommend getting one of the many books written on this, such as, *Scriptural Rosary* (by Christianica), *The Contemplative Rosary with St. John Paul II and St. Teresa of Avila*, or *Pray the Rosary* (St. Joseph Edition).

It is more important to pray the rosary thoughtfully and intentionally than to “get it all done.” Though meditating on the mysteries can be an excellent complement to the prayers of the rosary, the prayers themselves are more than sufficient to establish intimate connection with the

Father, Jesus, and the Blessed Virgin. As I am praying the well-known words of the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be, all kinds of other words, feelings and intuitions seem to pop up through inspiration of the Holy Spirit or through my subconscious mind. Thus it is not unusual for me when I am saying, “Hail Mary full of grace,” to be thinking or feeling, “Gentle Mary full of grace,” or when I am praying, “the Lord is with thee” to be thinking or feeling that the Lord is with *me* through her. Similarly, I can be saying or feeling that “I love you” or “I thank you” or “I am happy to be with you” as I am saying the seemingly unrelated words, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” The point I am trying to make here is that we need not focus on the precise discursive words of the prayer, but on the spirit of giving praise to the Lord or the Blessed Virgin through the prayer which opens us in turn to the inspirations coming from the Holy Spirit or from our own conscious or subconscious inclinations. When this happens, we are making an intimate connection – establishing familiarity, close friendship, and care for those to whom we are praying.

Sometimes contemplative prayer goes beyond the feelings and intuitions of intimate connection with the Lord or the Blessed Virgin – because *they* make their presence felt in a more evident way than simple tacit awareness. Sometimes we can feel the immensity of their presence or the beauty of their holiness and virtue, and sometimes we can feel the intensity of their love filled with unity, joy, mystery, and holiness. These more intense experiences are more rare than the less passionate awareness (or tacit awareness) of the Lord, but their episodic occurrence assures us of the Lord’s deep love and care for us. Though these more intense experiences are important for our close connection with the Lord, they are not necessary for moral freedom and moral action. The simpler kinds of awareness or tacit awareness are sufficient for this.

Contemplative prayer brings us close to the Lord and to the Blessed Virgin, assuring us of the fact that we are loved and cared for by an affectionate, humble, gentle, compassionate, and forgiving Father, mother, and brother. This is essential for letting go of our fears, need for control, and obsession with establishing “our place in the world” (moral freedom). It should be noted that contemplative prayer and the Eucharist go hand in hand. The Eucharist connects us with the love of Christ in the depths of our hearts (transforming us and filling us with spiritual gifts) while contemplative prayer explicitizes this connection with the heart of Christ, making conscious (or at least tacitly conscious) the profound reality of Christ lying in the depths of our hearts. As such, contemplative prayer explicitizes the profound loving and transforming power of Christ in the Eucharist while the Eucharist deepens the intimate loving presence of the Lord coming from contemplative prayer. When the Eucharist and contemplative prayer complement one another, they provide a strong foundation for the detachment needed for moral freedom. It should be remembered, that spiritual conversion – even this very powerful kind of spiritual conversion – is not enough for detachment and moral freedom – we must also concertedly direct our awareness of Christ and His loving way to the process of detaching ourselves from the things of this world.

The rosary is not the only way to make an intimate connection with the Lord in contemplative prayer. The Divine Office (Section II.B) and non-discursive contemplative prayer (Section II.C) also provide a meeting space for the Lord to manifest his familiar caring presence. Just as the words of prayer in the rosary incite words, feelings, and intuitions of God’s mysterious, holy, and loving presence, so also the words of the psalms and devotional prayers go

beyond themselves. Though we can concentrate on the words of these psalms and devotional prayers – they will frequently lead – thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the memories of our subconscious psyche – to new layers of awareness of the Lord’s love that elicit responses instead of expressions of gratitude and love in return.

## **II.B** **The Divine Office and Psalms of Praise**

Though the Divine Office (sometimes called the “Breviary” or “Liturgy of the Hours”) is a part of the Church’s official public worship, it can also be said individually, and can be used as a part of our contemplative life. The Divine Office has been an integral part of the Church since the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and took its inspiration from the Jewish division of a day into “hours of prayer.” Though priests are obligated to pray the Office, and most monastic religious communities pray it in common, the laity is not so obliged, but is invited to do so if they wish.

The Divine Office is split into four parts – (1) Advent and Christmas, (2) Ordinary Time I, (3) Lent and Easter, and (4) Ordinary Time II. It is a terrific resource for seasonal readings, antiphons, and prayers. It is organized into a four-week cycle called the Psalter, but the prayers for the Season can be substituted by psalms, prayers, and antiphons for feasts, the memorial of saints, and other occasions. The majority of the prayers are psalms with some Old Testament canticles and New Testament canticles interspersed throughout. For readers who do not have the time to pray the Divine Office, there are a few publications that provide an abridged psalm-based resource with seasonal antiphons and reflections, the most popular of which is the *Magnificat*.<sup>3</sup> For readers seeking a non-psalm based prayer cycle based on the mass readings and meditations on them, see *The Word Among Us*.<sup>4</sup>

Since the Divine Office is psalm based, it is incumbent upon readers to learn how to read the psalms in their historical context, and to “update” some of the images of ancient Israel in the psalms to reflect the reality of the modern Christian church.<sup>5</sup> For example, you can substitute the Catholic Church or the Mystical Body of Christ for the many references to the City of Jerusalem or to the nation of Israel.

Why does the Church still use these ancient psalms as the basis for its official public and private prayer? Beyond the fact that the psalms are part of Divine Revelation and the Catholic Canon of the Old Testament, they are truly inspired hymns of praise, gratitude, and trust. The psalmists almost always seem to be in a state of wonder and awe at God’s creation, His providential care for Israel (and the Church), and His desire to lead all of us to justice, virtue, and piety. It is inconsequential that the psalmists’ view of nature is non-scientific and his view of God’s providential care lacking the revelation of Jesus and the Church. The revelation and view of creation he does have is marked by wonder and awe, which is precisely the view we should all have of nature and human beings which is especially seen through the lens of modern science.

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<sup>3</sup> There is a free app for the daily Breviary. Go to the app store on your smart phone and subscribe to the breviary app. Simply put in the date you are using it, and the rest is automatic.

<sup>4</sup> <https://wau.org/>

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Charles Miller 2004 *Together in Prayer: Learning to Love the Liturgy of the Hours* (Wipf and Stock Publishers).

Furthermore, his view of God's providential care is intimate and filled with thanks, which again is precisely the view we all ought to have. In light of the many documented and undocumented miracles and healings which are quite prevalent. I am unbothered by what a scientist would consider a naive view of nature because I am overwhelmed by the psalmists' passionate correct view of nature and human beings as mysterious, wonderful, and crafted with love. If readers can overlook some of these anachronistic features and update the psalmists' images of Israel, the Temple, and Jerusalem, the experience of praying the psalms will likely be significantly enhanced.

I tend to personalize the psalms (when I say the Breviary by myself) by changing the impersonal "the Lord" into the personal, "you Lord." Hence when the psalm says "the Lord is my rock and my shield," I substitute, "you Lord are my rock and my shield." I have been doing this so long that I don't have to think about it anymore, and it helps me to make a personal connection with the Lord by speaking my praises directly to Him. As noted above, it does not take long for certain phrases of the psalms to leap off the page as personally meaningful, and sometimes, I feel the Lord's presence and consolation welling up through my prayer. These feelings of consolation may or may not be related to the words of the psalms, because they are caused by the Lord who chooses to make His presence felt on the basis of many factors beyond the words of the psalms and my capacity to understand. Invariably, when I feel His loving presence—even if it be as slight as a gentle breeze—I respond with closeness, trust, and love.

For those who are not used to praying the psalms, it is important to recognize that some parts and phrases in the psalms were constructed during the time when Israel was a warrior society, and so there might be stanzas that appear to be quite violent and incongruent with the teachings of Jesus. These phrases probably *are* incongruent with the teachings of Jesus because they were formulated within a cultural context that did not know the fullness of Jesus' revelation of the unconditional love of His Father or His unconditional self-sacrificial love for the world.

There is a principle of New Testament interpretation that we might call "Asymmetrical Hermeneutics" ("one-directional interpretation") (see Volume 7, Chapter One). This principle recognizes the development of doctrine from the Patriarchal period to the Mosaic period to the period of the Judges (a warrior society) to the Davidic kingdom to the exile to the Second Temple and finally to the fullness of revelation in Jesus. It declares that we can look *backwards* from the fullness of New Testament Revelation to the partial revelation of the Old Testament, but not vice-versa. There is no problem with seeing the Old Testament within the much fuller framework and categories of the New Testament, because we can interpret the places of tension in favor of the New Testament. However, we cannot do the opposite—that is, interpret the fullness of Revelation in the New Testament through the much narrower framework and categories of the Old Testament. This would be like putting new wine into old wineskins. The old wineskins cannot hold it, and the new wine will burst the old wineskins leading to the loss of both (see Mt 9:14-17).

For example, Psalm 139 is one of the most beautiful, spiritual, loving psalms in the Old Testament Psalmody. However, one stanza appears incongruent with the teaching of Jesus and the rest of the psalm: "If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not

hate those who hate you, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies” (Ps 139:19-22). How can we reconcile this stanza of the psalm with Jesus’ command to love our enemies and do good for those who hate us in imitation of His heavenly Father (Mt 5:43-48)? We must give priority of interpretation to Jesus’ commandment, and mitigate the importance of this stanza accordingly. I use this principle when I encounter these kinds of stanzas not only in the psalms, but in other Old Testament passages that are clearly incongruent with Jesus’ teaching. The Breviary (and the *Magnificat*) does most of this editing work for us, but occasionally some phrases stand out as dissonant. When this occurs, I simply skip over them and proceed to the next stanza of the psalm. If you are praying the psalms in community, you cannot do this, but when you are using the psalms for your own contemplative prayer to connect intimately with the Lord, it could prove quite helpful.

For the most part, the psalms are inspired prayers that manifest a pure love and trust of God, and honest portrayal of emotion, and a beautiful insight into His providential care. This is why the Church still uses them as the foundation for priestly and religious prayer, and recommends them wholeheartedly to the faithful. If you are not used to the psalms, you might want to start with a few psalms that are familiar and can be said on a daily basis, such as Psalm 8, Psalm 23, Psalm 51, Psalm 103, and Psalm 139. I have provided these “starter psalms” for your convenience in Volume 18 of this book.

### III.

#### **The Third Stage of Contemplative Prayer from Discursive to Meditative and Silent Prayer**

The third stage of contemplation is constituted by one of the following three prayer forms:

- *Lectio Divina*,
- meditation/contemplation on the gospels (e.g. Ignatian meditation) or other suggested themes from spiritual masters,
- the prayer of silence (listening and intimate connection).

*Lectio Divina* was originally a Benedictine practice to hear the word of Christ speaking specifically to an individual through the scriptures. It was not intended as a method of study or exegesis, but as a way to deepen communion with God and to follow His way through reading, meditation, and listening. The Benedictines and others have articulated several steps to help individuals orient themselves toward the message in the scripture passage for them from the Lord. There are several popular works that might help readers to enter into this meditative practice such as Michael Casey 1996, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, and also Dr. Timothy Gray 2009, *Praying Scripture for a Change: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*.

*Ignatian meditation* provides a good method for entering into an encounter with Jesus in the gospels. The point of the contemplation is to be with Jesus in the scene, to recognize the quality of His love for others (as manifest through their reaction to Him), and to love Him in return. His love for us is infectious, and induces us to imitate Him, because we enjoy being like the one we love. There are several excellent books on this subject that help beginners enter into several gospel narratives through the Ignatian method of meditation, such as, *Meditation and*

*Contemplation: An Ignatian Guide to Praying with Scripture* by Timothy M. Gallagher, and *An Ignatian Introduction to Prayer: Scriptural Reflections According to the Spiritual Exercises* by Timothy M. Gallagher.

*The Prayer of Silence* is described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as follows:

Contemplation is a *gaze* of faith, fixed on Jesus. "I look at him and he looks at me": this is what a certain peasant of Ars in the time of his holy curé used to say while praying before the tabernacle. This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. <sup>6</sup>

Since this prayer form is virtually non-discursive, few books are written about it. The only way to truly understand it is to experience it. The objective of this kind of prayer is simply loving and trusting communion with the Lord which opens us to His suggestions and graces, His love and holiness, His peace and unity, and sometimes His silence. The Lord's silence should not be interpreted in any way as rejection by Him or indifference to us, but rather as a call to trust Him radically as He leads us and purifies us of our ego-centricity and self-concern so that we can enter more fully into the mystery of His love, holiness, and home.

There are several doorways into the Divine Mystery through silent prayer--simply resting with the Lord, adoring Him in the Blessed Sacrament (see Eucharistic Devotion—Chapter Four, Section V of this Volume), adoring the Lord in an image of the Sacred Heart or a sacred icon, or simply sitting in a sacred place to sense the Holy Mystery of the One who comes to us. These doorways lead us to the Lord who can manifest Himself in many affective and intuitive ways—both subtly and explicitly. As we rest in His presence, we open ourselves to Him in an act of self-surrender and attentiveness.

As we rest in the Lord and open ourselves to Him through self-surrender, we let Him come to us and lead us to where we cannot lead ourselves. Sometimes we will have a subtle experience of His loving holiness and sometimes a powerful one; sometimes a sense of His call or guidance, and sometimes mere silence. As noted above, the Lord's silence does not mean indifference or rejection, but instead, purification of our egos to enter more fully into His loving mystery. Christian mysticism is focused on this journey into the mysteriously loving heart of the Lord through the fluctuations between silence and the experience of loving holiness, between desolation and consolation, being emptied and being filled, and being alone and being at home.

Volume 20 (Chapter Three) gives an explanation of this journey called "Christian

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<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Section 2715

Mysticism” through the works of the two great Carmelite mystics—St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila.

Let us now return to the subject of the third stage of contemplative prayer.

As the reader may have discerned, these three forms of prayer are *less discursive* than the ones mentioned in the first two stages of contemplative prayer, and shift the focus toward meditation, non-discursive contemplation, and reverent silence.

Most lay people who are constrained by family and work commitments will find it difficult to move into this stage of contemplative prayer because it requires additional time and private space if one is to maintain a commitment to some spontaneous prayers and the rosary or the Divine Office. If lay people are serious about making this kind of commitment, they might want to do it on a retreat or devote some time to it on a weekend once per month – or whatever may work in their schedule.

It might be best to ease your way into the third stage of contemplation by retaining some of the more discursive prayers from the second stage, and then adding a time for *Lectio Divina*, Ignatian meditation, or the Prayer of Silence. Stay with this combination of discursive and non-discursive prayers until you sense a distinctive call from the Lord to move further away from discursive prayer to more meditative or silent prayer. Some of the signs of the Lord’s call to do this are mentioned in Volume 20, along with an explanation of these three prayer forms.

One way of initiating a less discursive, more meditative kind of prayer through either *Lectio Divina* or Ignatian meditation is to focus on the Passion of Jesus. This meditation has been central to Christian spirituality since the apostolic age, because it manifests clearly the unconditional love that the Lord has for each of us, and His desire to save us. When we personalize the Passion, it is one of the most intimate communions we can have with the one who spared nothing to rescue us from evil and bring us into the light of His salvation.

The Passion Accounts are by far the most detailed narratives in all four gospels, and the Passion itself lies at the heart of the Pauline and Petrine epistles. Reverence for the crucified Christ is expressed not only in the New Testament, but in practically every form of religious art from the Crucifix (positioned at the center of the Church) to the Stations of the Cross that adorn its walls. During the Middle Ages, Christ’s Passion was fixed at the center of art and iconography—and the wounds of Christ factor prominently into every image of the Sacred Heart (see the explanation of these images below in Chapter 5). Christ’s complete self-sacrificial love manifest in the Passion lies at the center of the spirituality of almost every Catholic saint, providing the impetus to follow and love Him out of sheer gratitude. When we realize that He truly is the Son of God, and that He truly wanted to completely sacrifice Himself in love for us, it is difficult to resist His call to follow. Each dimension of the Passion Accounts reveals yet another length to which the Lord was willing to go to reveal His love and salvific intent. As we consider what He was thinking and feeling as He endured the pain and humiliation to give Himself totally to us, we are moved to respond with thanks and love.



The centrality of the Passion is not restricted to the saints—it is everywhere present in the Church itself. There are so many devotions to the Cross, the Sacred Heart, the Crucifix, and the Stations of the Cross that an outside observer could not help but notice it. Why is this? As implied above, the Passion is not only the ultimate symbol, but the ultimate reality of the love of Jesus—which is unconditional and totally self-sacrificial. If we want to know how much we are loved by God, we need only gaze upon the Crucifix or a picture of the Sacred Heart. As we do this, His love for *us* leaps out of the symbol upon which we are gazing. The time between the actual event and the current age seems to collapse as the crucified Christ gazes on us—as He did to St. Francis in the Church of St. Damiano. The symbol connects us with His actual crucifixion 2000 years ago and if we attend to it, we are almost like the women and the beloved disciple standing at the foot of the Cross. It is not difficult to hear Him saying to us that He is willingly doing this for us because He loves us. We can hear echoes of the mystical vision of St. John of the Cross in which Christ makes known to him the love He has for us:

...[S]ince He is the virtue of supreme *humility*, He *loves you* with supreme humility and esteem and *makes you His equal*, gladly revealing Himself to you in these ways of knowledge, in this His countenance is filled with graces, and telling you in this His union, not without great rejoicing: *'I am yours and for you and delighted to be what I am so as to be yours and give myself to you.'*<sup>7</sup>

The meditation on the Passion of Christ is so central to my own spirituality that I would recommend it to anyone as the subject of prayer at least one time per week. Some people believe that the place to start is contemplation on the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary. If this helps to galvanize the momentousness of the Passion Event and the love of the Lord within it, then by all means do it. I have also derived great benefit from slowly reading the Passion Account in one of the Gospels.<sup>8</sup> I take only one scene at a time starting with the Garden of Gethsemane, and as I slowly reflect on what is taking place, I pause to give thanks to the Lord who did this for me and all humanity. I then proceed to the betrayal by Judas, pausing once again to thank the Lord for enduring this humiliation and betrayal. I don't rush to finish the whole account but take only as much as I can fruitfully contemplate in one session of prayer. When my prayer session is completed, I express my love for His self-sacrificial redemptive love for me, and then pick up the Passion Account where I left off in my next prayer session. If you are anything like me, this meditation will bear fruit in connecting you to the Lord, helping you to sense His loving presence, moving you to gratitude and love, and inspiring you to imitate and follow Him. This will provide a strong basis from which to pursue detachment from the world (moral freedom), which will in turn provide the foundation on which to ground resistance to the deadly sins and the pursuit of moral actions.

An extended explanation of the above three meditative prayer forms -- *Lectio Divina*, Ignatian meditation, and the prayer of silence – is given in Volume 20 of the *Credible Catholic Big Book*.

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<sup>7</sup> Saint John of the Cross. 1979. "The Living Flame of Love." In *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications), p. 613 (*italics mine*).

<sup>8</sup> Some of you might know that I am nearly blind and maybe wondering, how does he meditate on the Gospel narratives? Simple answer is -- I have audible recordings of the New Testament that I can easily access.