

A.M.D.G. A Brief Introduction to Mental Prayer

Q.1. – What is Prayer?

Prayer as Relationship with God

Many of us remember the oldest and best definition of prayer: *raising the mind and heart to God*. I suspect that most of us practiced the first part, raising our mind to God, better than the second part, lifting up our hearts. That imbalance can too often make the experience of praying *dry* or *unfulfilling*.

What this definition probably intended to say was that prayer involves our whole person in a relationship with God. Using the various relationships of our lives as a guide, we can come to new insights about prayer.

A wise spiritual guide once said, *We are as good at praying as we are at the other relationships of our lives. If you want to get better at prayer, work on the key relationships in your life.*

Take a close friendship or marriage, as an example. We wouldn't imagine that what makes the relationship work is trying to find a half an hour, early in the morning, to sit in a chair and close our eyes and think heavy thoughts about the other person. We know instinctively, even if we hadn't ever put it into words, that a key relationship in our life is a matter of the heart. The other person means a lot to me. I'm not just attracted to the other, but the other is someone whose desires and dreams and vision are very important to me. And, if this relationship is one that is growing in love, the other is one I want to serve - give of myself for.

Relationship always involves a strong desire to *be with*. A relationship will fade if we have no continuing interest in spending time with the other, or connect with the other. Even when our time together might be limited, we have feelings for the other which sustain the relationship. The closer the relationship, the stronger those feelings. In a marriage relationship, I might not see my spouse as much as I'd like, but I know that my job or my care for our children or time shopping - whatever I do when we are apart - is all done because of our relationship, to further the goals of our life together and our mission together. Intimacy in the bedroom is an important, but small part of the relationship's bond. If the other intimacy and connections are there, then the bedroom time is wondrous. If the relationship of the heart is not connecting us when we are apart, intimacy in the bedroom can become quite problematic.

Words, gestures and rituals express and give shape to the relationship of the heart. "I love you." "Thank you." "You are wonderful." "I need you." "I'm sorry." A smile, an embrace, a gesture of vulnerability, a self-revealing story, a gift full of meaning, doing something together. Our song, our favorite place, a special reading, a special menu, a tradition we've developed. These are just a few examples of the hundreds of ways a relationship develops and grows.

How could prayer be a relationship with God, if it only remains a lifting of our minds to God? We need very special times of intimacy with God, but that time needs to be prepared for and built up to. To enrich our relationship with God, engages our hearts. That involves finding intimacy with God in the midst of our everyday busy lives,

much like we do with the other important relationships of our lives. Perhaps as we pay more attention to what gives life and intimacy to these relationships, we might grow in the affective side of our relationship with God.

If this tip stirs a desire for that kind of relationship with God, one place to begin is to let God tell me about how much God loves me. The God who says, "You are precious in my eyes and I love you." [Isaiah 43:4] If I'm open to God's expressions of affection toward me, that can open my heart to stir up affection in the form of grateful response. Love needs only a spark to get started. It takes ongoing care to keep the fire from going out. With special care, it can become a long lasting, warm and comforting, life-long relationship.

Consolation and desolation

In silent prayer, one feels **consolation** when God comes near. Consolation takes different forms: peace, inspiration, bravery, joy, affection, and tears of emotion. One should take note of consolation, and pay attention to the words, thoughts or images caused that feeling.

Desolation is the opposite of consolation: anxiety, fear, laziness, sadness, desperation, and distance from God. They are like spiritual stormy weather. In desolation, remain firm in your commitments, and continue with your prayer. It will pass.

When consolation points toward God's will for you, we call that a **motion**. A vocation is a conglomeration of motions that point in the same direction.

Q.2. – What are the different methods of prayer?

	Type of Prayer	Primary Human Faculty	Goal of the Prayer
More external	Vocal Prayer	Voice, hearing	Petition, Praise, etc.
	Liturgical Prayer	Physical Senses	<i>Experience of Grace</i>
↓	Contemplation	Imagination	<i>Encounter with Christ</i>
	Meditation	Intellect	<i>Understand and savor the truth</i>
More internal	Affective Prayer	Will	Love of God
	Contemplative Prayer	Soul/Being	Divine Union

Q.3. – What is meditation?

Meditation is a form of ‘mental prayer’ or ‘discursive prayer’. St. John of the Cross defines meditation as: ‘to move the thought from one point to another, to allow the free will to move.’ Fr. Louis Lallemand, SJ explains, “In discursive prayer, which is commonly called meditation, each of the three powers of the soul has its use. Memory proposes the subject, and imagination sometimes provides a painting of it. Understanding studies it and draws practical conclusions. From it, the will draws affections and resolutions.....For each point, one works out considerations, affections, reflections, and resolutions.

1. If one is meditating about a mystery, one imagines it in detail, and one develops all the circumstances, in order to instruct oneself and convince oneself about what one should do, or avoid, or endure. If one is meditating on a sentence from the scripture or on a truth of faith, one tries to penetrate the meaning; and from it one draws moral conclusions for one’s conduct. And in all this reasoning, one relies especially on faith, which one uses as the base and foundation of all the acts of the understanding and the will that are done during the prayer.
2. The affections spring from the considerations, according to the subject of the meditation. The principles are: admiration, gratitude and thanksgiving, trust and surrendering the self into God’s hands, love, desires, joy and readiness to oblige, compassion, fear, hate, horror, and so forth.
3. Reflecting on one’s past life in relation to the subject on which one is meditating, one recognizes the unruliness of one’s conduct, and one expresses a holy shame and a humble and loving contrition.
4. Following the sentiments in one’s heart for the present, one tries to put oneself in the best disposition possible and to strengthen it, in conformity with the subject of the meditation and the lights that God is giving.
5. Turning one’s eyes toward the future, one makes strong resolutions, for either practicing good or fleeing evil. One foresees the occasions for it, one encourages oneself, one offers one’s good desires to God, and one makes a thousand protestations of fidelity to him.
6. Thus the prayer ends with an affectionate conversation that is called the colloquy, where one sometimes addresses God, sometimes one of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity in particular, sometimes the Blessed Virgin, or the angels, or the saints whose help one is invoking.” (*Spiritual Doctrine*, Principle 7, no. 2, Article 2)

Here is an example of how a meditation would proceed:

“In meditation, beginners should use the easiest kind of discourse, which is reasoning from more to less, or from less to more. For example, whether the first angel fell; if a creature so perfect, exempt from concupiscence and from the corruption of original sin, and having more grace than I shall ever have, not being attacked by any temptation, was nonetheless unfortunately lost, how much I should fear falling, whatever the degree of perfection to which I have lifted myself! If God has pardoned a creature so noble and from which he could draw so much glory, should I think that he will pardon me if I fall

into his hands with a mortal sin?" Fr. Louis Lallemand, SJ (*Spiritual Doctrine*, Principle 7, no. 2, Article 1)

Q.4. – What is Ignatian contemplation?

Another way to pray in silence is called *contemplation*. Some people believe that this must be a very complicated way to pray. On the contrary, it's very simple. It requires humility and simplicity, nothing else.

In meditation, you use your memory, understanding and will. Contemplation is done with the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. It is a method that depends on the *imagination*. In that sense, you must become like a little child.

We contemplate the narrative stories in the Sacred Scriptures, especially, the gospels. The Spirit of God becomes present to the visual imagination. We hear the events, as if we were there. Touch, taste and smell, are not to be forgotten, as they are the most intimate senses, with a direct line to the heart.

If you want to contemplate, the last supper, for example, you must imagine the room, the people, and the words they say. Hear the melodies of the hymns that are sung, and taste roasted lamb, the unleavened bread, and the wine. Sometimes, you imagine details that aren't in the gospel: a look from the Lord, or an important hug.

Sometimes, we contemplate from the outside, as if seeing a movie. Other times, you are involved in the events. There is no right way. You have to let yourself get carried away.

The silence is very important for contemplation, because it makes you sensitive to the subtle movements of the imagination. It also protects you from distractions. It can be difficult to contemplate the gospel after a hard day, because bits of memory from the day intervene. It's easier to do in the silence of a retreat, on a weekend, or after a rest.

Distraction, in and of itself, is not bad. It just happens. You respond to it by focusing on the narrative, without self-recrimination. With practice, it gets easier. And, as you grow spiritually, there is more interior peace, and that makes contemplation almost second nature.

The objective, in contemplation, is to know the Lord from up close, to love him more and serve him better. Even though it is imaginary, you are really getting to know Jesus. When you know someone better, you do love him more. When you love him more, you want to know him better. It's a way to become fill with the Lord.

Without realizing it, through contemplation, you get to a knowledge so profound that you begin to adopt the same feelings that Jesus had. You see people and situations from his point of view, and you respond, in real life, as Christ would have, if he had been in your place.

Like hot wax, we are left with the impression of his way of doing things, and we reflect his action, in the world. The objective of contemplation is to follow Christ.

Q.5. – What is the method for learning to meditate and contemplate?

The attitude of prayer

This outline is adapted from *Vida y contemplación en la vida diaria* by Manuel J. Fernández Márquez, sj. Its purpose is to improve the quality of your silence and the depth of your prayer as you enter into the Exercises.

- 1. Prayer is a gift of God** that depends far more on grace than on our industriousness and our labor. The Holy Spirit is the author and master of it. (L. Lallemand)
- 2. Holiness of life:** We can nonetheless, on our side, prepare ourselves for it by purity of heart, by recollection, by practicing the virtues that make souls capable of dealing with God. (L.Lallemand)
- 3. We must create an interior climate** that disposes us to prayer. When we speak of deep prayer, we take into account every possible level of our humanity. You must become available to God, for a deep encounter. You must go deep inside yourself. We pray from that inner space some call the heart. It is impossible to pray with depth if you don't go into your heart. It is important to create silence and harmony at every level of your humanity. This means a quiet atmosphere-- peace, serenity, recollection and vulnerability-- in order to center the heart in that place where the Lord is, and there become one with him in a communion of love. You must take every level of your being into account: body, senses, emotions, mind, and personal center.
- 4. The body in prayer.** Some believe that we pray with the mind, or the heart, but not the body. The truth is that the whole person prays. The Spirit manifests itself through the body. The senses are the window through which we receive what is around us. Many difficulties in prayer stem from the body: nervousness, tension, fatigue, and drowsiness. We are habitually tense, driven by urgency. We live in a hurry, to produce more, do better, and take on more stuff. We gradually accelerate and never slow down. We waste a tremendous amount of energy on useless muscular movements and tensions. Tightened hands, drawn shoulders, nervous tics, vocal tics, facial tension, drumming fingers, and tapping feet are just a few. Tension tends to gather in the shoulders, neck, jaw, abdomen, forehead, and arms. Then we get headaches, bad temper, emotional disorders, physical and mental fatigue.
- 5.** It is necessary to integrate the body into prayer. What can you do? How do you use your body in a practical way? You must learn some steps that lead you on a process of peace, quiet and harmony. It is a road of pacification and tranquility.
- 6. The right posture.** Physical posture leads to self-possession. Relax the nerves, pacify the senses, and harmonize the self. You need a base rooted in the earth, a straight back, relaxed shoulders, head upright, a flexible neck, hands close to your core, gently resting, eyes focused or closed, and stillness. Muscular tension is the enemy of deep prayer. A correct posture (this can be done in a variety of different ways) creates a receptive attitude, open to deep prayer. You must try to avoid internal scatter, to be present and attentive, to center concentration. You might begin with an exercise in personal relaxation, pausing on each part of the body, moving through from head to toe, letting go of tension, breathing deeply, and creating silent peace.
- 7. Emotions in prayer.** Only when the lake is peaceful and serene can we see the bottom. Only when you are at peace, in harmony, can you open up to the depth of

your being where you find yourself with God. You must be aware of emotional distortions. We live with negative feelings or moods: aggressiveness, insecurity, rejection of ourselves, resentment, anxiety, etc. When we live this way, we move away from our center. You must return to that peaceful climate. *Only in the quiet, in the peace and harmony of our being, can we find God at the center of our heart.* (St. John of the Cross.)

8. **In order to promote affective serenity**, be conscious of it. Center your attention on your breathing. Observe your feelings, your moods, your emotions, without rejecting them, without judging them. Look upon them with understanding and gentleness. Remain silent. Try to visualize your emotional diffusion, your concerns, your fears and your anxiety. Now, go deeper into yourself, where there is a peaceful place, a light, and a presence. *That is where love is.* There is security there, in the welcoming presence of Jesus.
9. **The mind at prayer.** Only through mental silence can you reach prayer of the heart, beyond all thought and image, beyond all intellectual reflection, in the supreme simplicity of silent contemplative mysticism. The ordinary conscious mind is noisy, like the village idiot, an acute seeker of reasons, a constant talker. It's like a wild horse, because it goes running off wherever it wants, going and coming, continuously out of control. With such a scattered, noisy mind, it is impossible to concentrate on prayer. We are victims of parasitical ideas and obsessions that enslave us, tire us, and crush us. We don't know how to be free of them. Anxious thoughts distort our inner selves. The mind tends multiply superficial ideas. It takes us from right now to the future. It doesn't allow us to live in the present moment.
10. **It is important to silence the noise in your head.** It is imperative that you get free of your negative thoughts, that you stop the continuous movement, in order to center on *here and now*. You must awaken your intuition, the wisdom that guides you to a living contemplative experience of God. This is not an effort, or a violent act of the will. It is not done by frontal assault on the mind's chatter. It's transforming the distracted mind into a mind that is *awake and attentive*. It's converting the worried mind into a *watchful mind*. It's making the scattered mind into a *centered mind*, and the noisy mind into a *silent mind*.
11. **You can practice this.** These are three images that illustrate an attitude of *watchful attention*.
 - Imagine a shepherd, standing and leaning on his staff, watchful and silently attentive to his flock. The flock moves here and there, but the shepherd stays perfectly still, straight, peacefully alert, without ever changing his position even for a moment.
 - Imagine a person by a river, contemplating the water. The current of the river (his *thoughts*) run before his eyes, but the person stays at peace in the same place, quietly on the shore, looking quietly at the passing water.
 - Imagine a housewife at the window. Domestic chores have been interrupted, and she rests for a moment, at the window. The scene outside may change quickly, but she stays calm and quiet, observing everything.

"See, I am at the door and I'm calling. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house, and he will eat with me, and I with him." Rev. 3:2

The Structure the hour of prayer from the *Spiritual Exercises*

1. **Preparation.** Before praying, chose the text you will be using. Mark it in your Bible. Write the grace that you will be asking for, and decide where and how you will pray. Prepare your heart for what you are about to do. (5-10 min.)
2. **The hour of prayer consists of five parts:**
 - a. **Find God's presence.** Attention to physical posture, relaxation, disposition, and concentration. Then focus on God's presence with you. Wait for it. (5 min).
 - b. **Preparatory prayer.** Entrust this hour of prayer in God's hands. Ask grace of God our Lord *that all your intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of His Divine Majesty.* (3-5 min)
 - c. **Preludes.**
 - i. **Recall the Mystery:** Read over the Scripture text of the prayer slowly (2-3min).
 - ii. **Composition, seeing the place.** Imagine the place where the narration or meditation might happen, applying all five of your senses internally (seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting) (5-7 min)
 - iii. **Ask for the grace** that you seek in this hour. This is given by St. Ignatius. Prayer the grace. Long for that grace with all your soul. Ask for an open heart to receive the grace that comes from the Lord, and for the patience to wait. (2-3 min)
 - d. **The points of the text.** Divide the story into three or four main focus points. Read, imagine, feel, see, hear, taste, think, and read again. Become involved in the scene. Seek new insights, deeper understanding, personal knowledge, movement of the emotions and the will. (30-40 min).
 - e. **Colloquy.** Enter into dialog with the Lord. This is done properly speaking, *as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master*, now asking some grace, now communicating one's affairs, and asking advice in them. Listen, and wait for an answer. Finish with the *Lord's Prayer*, or another appropriate one. (5-10 min).
3. **Write about your prayer** in your notebook. This is done in the manner of a captain's log, for a ship, in order to discern where you are and where you are going. What happened? What did you feel? What strategies helped? Which ones would you change? What were the causes of your most important moments of consolation or desolation? Can you see movement in any particular direction?
4. **Rest in silence.** This can be done walking, or reading.