

Styles of Prayer

Active Contemplation/Ignatian Contemplation

Active contemplation, or Ignatian contemplation as it is sometimes called, was developed and taught by St. Ignatius Loyola. As a person who valued rational thought, Ignatius intuitively understood that his imagination held the key to communication with God.

There was no way for him to control his imagination, as he did his thoughts. By valuing his imagination and its place in prayer, Ignatius has given us a way to immerse ourselves in the Scriptures and interact with the person of Jesus.

The Ignatian form of contemplation is alluringly simple. You take a scene from the Gospels and place yourself in it. You watch it unfold before your eyes. You see, hear, smell, and touch all the things that are happening in the scene. As you get caught up in the scene you move beyond the role of observer and become a participant. Insight is gained from our experience of living this scene. In the *Exercises*, Ignatius has the retreatant pray over the same scene multiple times a day. In our lives, it may be helpful to prayer over the scene multiple times during a week to gain the insight and wisdom that this form of prayer has to offer us.

Centering Prayer

Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, a Trappist monk, developed and popularized the form of contemplation known as Centering Prayer. This form of prayer is done completely in silence, using a sitting position, and without any sharing. Although groups of people gather to do Centering Prayer together, it is not a form where verbal sharing occurs. The “sharing” is the outward manifestation of the inward peace that has come through the discipline of this prayer. The steps for Centering Prayer are:

- Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
- Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
- When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
- At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

This prayer is similar to the Buddhist sitting meditation called zazen. It is different from the mantras (Jesus prayer) in that the word for centering is used only when other thoughts arise in the mind. If the mind is still, the word is not used. Mantras use the word or phrase in a repetitive and ceaseless manner. A fine resource for this prayer is <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>

Examen of Consciousness

The Examen of Consciousness is a prayer and reflection tool developed by St. Ignatius Loyola. It assists us in reflecting over our day, the blessings and the shortcomings, and placing our intentions and desires for change in the hands of God (Christ, Spirit). This prayer is the one prayer Ignatius told his followers they must do every day. Through this daily prayer you will come to know yourself and your relationship with God (Christ, Spirit) in a deeper way. Journaling during the Examen is often helpful for people as they learn to use this form of prayer. It is also an aid for reflecting back during the year on patterns of behavior, deepest desires, and intentions.

The five points of the Examen:

Recall that you are in the presence of God.

You have spent the day in God's presence, but you may not have been consciously aware of that presence at every moment. This is the time to place yourself intentionally in God's presence and to be aware of God's loving presence with you.

Look at your day with gratitude.

Look at the movements and events of your day. Recall the foods you ate, the people you met, the times of peace and quiet, conversation and companionship. Take stock of the graces you received and gave to others during the day. Thank God for the day and its many blessings.

Ask help from the Holy Spirit.

Now you ask the Holy Spirit to be with you as you prepare your heart and soul to review the day again. The Spirit will come and open your heart and soul to review the day in a deep and penetrating way.

Review your day.

This is the longest of the five points. During this time you review your day like a movie, playing it over in your mind. You take time to notice what happened and how you reacted to people and situations during the day. As you look over your day, pay special attention to your motives and feelings. Notice those times when you were your best self, offering others care and concern, love and support. Notice, too, those times in which you failed to be your best self. When you were unable or chose not to respond in loving, care or compassionate ways.

Notice and note (in mind or journal) your patterns of behavior, feelings and motives. Are there patterns of anger, depression, frustration, or disillusionment? Is there a tendency to be short-tempered, agitated, or negative toward others? Do you often help others in their time of need? Are you spending your day sharing love, laughter, joy or excitement?

Reconcile and resolve.

This is when you have a heart-to-heart talk with Jesus. Looking upon yourself with love and compassion, you speak with Jesus about your day. During this time you ask for forgiveness for your shortcomings and resolve to do better the next day. You point out the good that you have done. Once that is completed, you state a specific intention or focus for the next day. This practice will assist you in changing or strengthening patterns of behavior for a healthy spiritual life.

Extemporaneous Prayer

Extemporaneous prayer is the speaking of prayers in a spontaneous, unscripted way. An example of this form of prayer is when someone is asked to share grace before a meal and speaks from the heart – extemporaneously – over the food and those gathered for the meal. Generally speaking, this form of prayer is used to call down God's blessing upon someone or something, raise prayers of petition to God, or begin or end gatherings.

Guided Reflection

Guided meditation is a way of prayer that allows the one praying to be lead through various experiences. Unlike active contemplation, where the movement is from the imagination of the one praying and the movement of the Holy Spirit, guided meditation is deliberate in its intention

of taking someone to a different place, space, or situation. Guided meditation is often best accomplished in a setting where one person reads the meditation out loud and others allow themselves to be lead into the meditation..

Labyrinth Walk

Labyrinths fascinated the medieval mind. Because walking to and fro could be a dangerous and risky endeavor, the labyrinth as symbol of the spiritual journey, also a risky journey in a world filled with evil and temptation, arose. In days of old the labyrinth walk served as a penitential practice as well as a substitute for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, hence the name for labyrinths as “Chemin de Jerusalem” the Road of Jerusalem. Today labyrinths are used as meditation walks. They allow the one praying to focus on the steps along the journey, to center oneself in the meditative act of walking and to learn about themselves and their spiritual life as they walk the path. Labyrinths developed in Europe, and one of the most famous is found in the Cathedral of Chartres. However, slow, meditative walking is also found in the various traditions of Buddhism. This reality allows us to grasp the universal nature and practice of slowing oneself down to focus on the path, both literal and spiritual, of one’s life.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is the slow, reflective reading of Sacred Scripture. There are four steps to this form of prayer.

- *Lectio* is reading or listening to the Word of God. At this time the one(s) at prayer read or listen to the Scripture passage. Generally, it is read through twice.
- *Meditation* is meditating on the word or phrase that has taken hold of the mind and heart during the reading.
- *Oratio* is having a conversation with God over the meditation on the word or phrase. It is the bringing of our thoughts and feelings around the word or phrase to God in prayer.
- *Contemplatio* is contemplation, the sitting in silence and listening to God’s. It is the time to let the word or phrase go and to be in silence waiting on God’s word.

Lectio Divina may be used for personal or communal prayer. A wonderful website with a more expansive explanation on both personal and communal uses of the prayer form is www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html.

Mantras/Jesus Prayer

Mantras are a prayer form based on repetitive words or phrases that are said or thought in an endless cycle. The basis of this form of prayer is twofold. First, it fills our mind with the thought, phrase or word of the mantra. Over and over the mind is forced to focus on the mantra awhile “tapes” or thoughts that generally fill our mind get pushed aside. Secondly, in the Christian tradition the mantra fulfills the Scripture passages to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes. 5:1) and to “be constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12). One well-known mantra from Orthodox Christianity is the Jesus prayer. The Jesus prayer is, in its complete form “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of David, have mercy on me, a sinner.” A more common recitation is “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” The prayer has three steps of progression. First, it begins as an oral prayer that is recited very softly throughout the day. Second, the prayer settles in to rhythm with the breath and is done without sound or distraction to the one praying. Third, the prayer becomes a prayer of the heart that is done without sound, distraction, attention or effort. It has become a prayer of the heart.

For more information on this form of prayer, www.goarch.org, then click Our Faith, then click the Jesus prayer. This is the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Pilgrimages/Stations of the Cross

Pilgrimages have a long and illustrious history in many faith traditions. The visiting of sites where prophets, sages, and enlightened people were born, spent time, or died crosses all religions. In Christianity, the practice of making a pilgrimage began in earnest after Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, discovered the “true cross” of Christ while visiting the Holy Land. The Holy Land became a destination for pilgrims wanting to see the places Jesus had been during his lifetime. Many cities, e.g., Bethlehem, Capernaum, Bethany, become stopping points for holy travelers. In the Middle Ages, pilgrimages became less frequent among the faithful. Local wars and the crusades in the Holy Land made travel an unsafe venture. At this time the custom of making the Stations of the Cross began. Praying the stations became a way of making the pilgrimage without leaving your own village.

The Stations as a form of prayer and devotion use multiple styles simultaneously. Walking from station to station in a church or outdoor area makes engages the body in the prayer. Singing a hymn between the stations uses music, the recitation of formulaic prayers at each station frees the mind for meditation, and the descriptions of each station offers reflection to those praying. At this time in history there are 14 approved stations. A fifteenth, the Resurrection, is not an approved station but is making its way into use among the faithful.

For a complete listing of the Stations of the Cross and their history in the Catholic Church, you can check out this website: www.newadvent.org.

Prayer Symbols

Symbols are elements that have two distinct natures. The first is that they are what they are. A cross is a cross; a white candle is a white candle. The second is that they point the way and lead us from the here and now of our secular world toward that which is a part of our religious and supernatural experience. In this case, a cross isn't just a cross. The cross symbolizes the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. A white candle isn't just a white candle. It symbolizes the purity and light of Christ. The use of symbols is an ancient practice. Until the Middle Ages, symbols spoke for themselves and required little explanation among the faithful. Symbols were an intrinsic part of one's experience of life and religion. Once the Scientific era dawned, symbols lost some of their inherent meaning. And with the changes in religious instruction after Vatican II, some symbols have lost their meaning and power through lack of adequate instruction in the faith. For this reason, it is important to explain the use of a symbol when gathering for prayer. It is equally important to use symbols so that this language of the faith is experienced and understood by our Jesuit Volunteers.

Rituals

Rituals are a powerful way to mark time, space, or one another. In our everyday lives we participate in a myriad of rituals. Reading to a young child before they say their prayers and go to bed is a ritual of parenting. Packing a suitcase before a trip is the ritual of a traveler. Baking a cake and placing slender candles on it is the ritual of honoring another's birthday.

There are also rituals that help us mark time, space, and one another in a religious context. There is the ritual of receiving Communion at Mass. There is the ritual of praying every morning. There is the ritual of attending burial services with extended family.

Rituals are by their very nature powerful actions. Although they may or may not be daily occurrences, they are actions that mark time, space, or one another. The joining of hands to

recite a prayer together is a ritual. The laying on of hands as a blessing is a ritual. An example of a ritual that can be used during the JV year is the marking of doorways on the Feast of Epiphany (the feast of the three kings).

In brief, the ritual involves saying prayers at each doorway in a house and placing in chalk the letters M, G, and B. The letters symbolize the three kings – Melchior, Gaspar, Balthasar. The ritual on this feast day (time) marks the doorway (space) in blessing of the occupants and their coming and going from the room/house (one another).

Rosary

Tradition has it that St. Dominic received the rosary from Our Lady in a vision. Whether that is true or not, the rosary is a form of prayer that has many nuances and practices. Most people know the rosary as a length of cord with beads in five groups of ten. A popular form of praying the rosary is to dwell on a mystery while reciting Hail Marys corresponding to the beads. This method has for many years had three sets of mysteries: Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious. Recently, Pope John Paul II issued a fourth set of mysteries: Luminous. These mysteries, unlike the others, focus attention on the public life and ministry of Jesus. Another way to pray the rosary is to replace the mysteries with a passage from Scripture as the focal point for reflection. The rosary, as a form of prayer, is tactile, meditative, contemplative, personal, communal, and repetitive. The moving of the beads in our fingers makes this prayer a physical-bodily action. The coupling of the movement of the beads with the mantra said on the lips or in the heart is a powerful method of opening one up to contemplation. The rosary may be said alone or in a group. It is a prayer for young and old alike. A website for the prayers and practice of the rosary is www.rosary-center.org.

Taizé Prayer

The Taizé Community of brothers was founded by Brother Roger in Cluny, France after World War II. Its members come from many nations and many Christian denominations. The purpose of the community is to find ways to live peacefully and bring peace to a troubled world. Their style of prayer, with its chanting and prayer around the cross, has touched people of all ages and nations.

A Taizé prayer service consists of chanting one or two line phrases. A typical service might include chants in Latin, French, Spanish, and German. The music is intended as prayer, so a chant is sung over and over again until it moves past singing and begins to take on a life of its own. The service usually includes a psalm reading, a gospel reading, a 10-20 minute period of silence, prayers of intercession, and ends with prayer around an icon of Christ on the cross. Those who wish to, come forward to kneel and touch, kiss or pray at the icon.