

Contemplative Prayer



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**Anglican
Fellowship of
Prayer (Canada)**



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What is contemplative prayer?

This way of prayer has been given many descriptive names. Among these are:

- ✘ the practice of the presence of God
- ✘ the prayer of silence
- ✘ the prayer of stillness or recollection
- ✘ centering prayer

Common to all is the attentive turning of one's whole being in love towards God in a longing for some form of union: it is attempted without thought or images, the person simply endeavouring "to be" in God's presence as fully as possible, here and now. In contemplative prayer we are not asking God for gifts, apologizing for our faults, detailing our shortcomings or even our joys. We are simply being with the One who loves us. That consciousness of the presence of God will begin to extend into the rest of our life after a while. Many great contemplatives have been busy, active people in this world. Those who practise the presence of God may expect to be used in the world, and for its good.

Who may attempt this kind of prayer?

People from all walks of life are drawn to contemplative prayer. The practice of communion with God in silence can enable us to live in the world more fully aware of God at work in us and in creation. Sometimes it has been presented as too advanced, too difficult for ordinary Christians. If you find yourself longing for silence, if some experience of silence makes you want more, or if your prayer life seems to have too many words in it, God may be drawing you to contemplative prayer.

How can I learn contemplative prayer?

There are several different ways of approach for beginners. Methods can be learned through books, or, ideally, with a group which is already practising. Most people find they need a simple method to help them begin. Such methods can enable the learner to be more open to God's presence in silence.

These statements about the truth on which one particular method is based apply also to the others described:

- ✘ the object of our practice is to draw closer to God, to grow more like Christ.
- ✘ we cannot bring about this growth through our own efforts: it is due to the ceaseless activity of the Holy Spirit's creative power of love in us.
- ✘ we can learn to co-operate with the Holy Spirit's power because part of our nature is like it and is responsive to it.

We could add to these points from Marian Dunlop's teaching about Contemplative Meditation, that the love of God draws us into silence, making us restless and unsatisfied until we find a way of responding to the need we feel. St. Augustine said that "*our souls are restless till they find their rest in Thee.*" [See page 7 for a list of resources which describe methods and give us instructions.]

What is involved in learning the suggested methods?

The methods advocated for becoming still are fundamentally very simple. They are not easy to practice. They aim at enabling the whole self - mind, body, will, spirit and emotions - to be held in an attitude of loving attention for brief periods. Normally, we live in a continuous distraction of thought, action and feeling which often provokes negative reactions in us. In contemplation, we focus all that we have and are, on becoming still so that we can experience a different way of being.

A Mantra, such as the "Jesus prayer":

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.

The methods suggested often consist of the gentle repetition of a given sentence containing a truth about God, or a single word, or mantra, or a short prayer like the "Jesus prayer" (*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*). All distractions and interruptions are met by a constant, gentle, firm return to the given words or sentence. We learn to let go of strain, guilt and anxiety. The focus we have chosen is not something to *think* about during silence; it is a base or centre of truth upon which we rest our minds and to which we return constantly as we endeavour to bring

ourselves to internal and external stillness. We need to remember that the only effort we make is the effort of turning towards God. The rest is God's gift.

What may I expect if I pray in this way?

People who begin to practise silence, either out of their own felt need or on behalf of others, (for it is a powerful way of intercession) often begin to notice gradual changes in their physical, spiritual and emotional health. As we pray to deepen our consciousness of the presence of God, our entire self is released to become more whole. Gradually we find ourselves reacting differently to stressful situations. Negative thought and feeling is a pervasive habit not easily responsive to change or transformation, but with persistent practice, *we may find ourselves able to respond more peaceably and constructively to stressful happenings*. When we can't focus our hearts and minds the way we want to or as fast as we would like, we may struggle with feelings of unworthiness, anger or frustration. Then, it is important to turn simply and plainly to God, asking for help and expecting it to come. As *Brother Lawrence* says in his book **The Practice of the Presence of God**, *“when we have done that, we should let go and take no further thought about the situation. We learn gradually to deal with ourselves gently and with less anxiety, to love ourselves more and berate ourselves less. God, who knows all about us, accepts, loves and cares for us as we are now”*.

How long should I spend in this kind of prayer?

Long periods of time in concentrated silence alone are not encouraged when beginning to learn Contemplative Prayer. Most of us will be wise to make our times for contemplation regular and brief. We are beginning to learn one particular kind of prayer. It is not that other approaches to God are less good. Imaging, discursive meditation, prayer time with Scripture and spoken prayers are all authentic ways of approach to God. However, they are not contemplation. Contemplative prayer requires only the silent turning of ourselves to God within us, our complete attention, nothing more, nothing less. The methods suggested are intended to help accomplish that turning.

The consistent attempt to become still within a brief time frame is of great value in our contemplative prayer life.

What do I need to begin?

If you cannot find a suitable group, you may begin on your own, with a friend or perhaps with the help of one of the books mentioned in the book list on page 7 of this pamphlet. You will need a quiet place to sit, where you will not be interrupted. Be

A quiet place

realistic; if you can manage ten minutes a day regularly, but not thirty, then keep the ten minutes daily. Two periods of ten

minutes a day are often helpful. You need time to settle down and prepare yourself, time for the silence, and time to emerge from it. You may sit on the floor on a

Prepare yourself

cushion, or use a prayer stool, or sit in a comfortable, upright chair which will support your back (and your head too, if

possible). You may place your feet flat on the floor, your hands can be in your lap or along the arms of the chair. Hold your head erect, your eyes may be closed gently. You will

need some moments to become aware of your body through your breathing, and to relax tense muscles as far as you can. Turn your

Focus on God

attention towards God with a brief prayer, asking for a blessing on the time you spend in silence. Don't worry if you go over the

time you have set, but aim to keep the suggested period. End each time of silence with a prayer of thanksgiving for God's presence with you, and for the opportunity given. Don't try to judge whether

or not your prayer time has been "successful". The most important thing you do is to spend the time in silence, offering yourself to God as fully as you can in this moment.

Specific periods of time

Be comfortable

Be patient



Relaxation

People often find they need help in relaxing their bodies as they begin the practice of silence. In prayer, we relax in order to concentrate. Anyone who prays will find some simple breathing and other relaxation techniques helpful. Most of us are slow to learn that our bodies also wish to pray. They should not be driven, or subjected to discomfort so that "I" can pray. It may help to remind ourselves that our bodies are marvellous creations which are made to praise their Creator. Learning how the body prays or wants to pray will bring us closer to God who made us.

What may develop from my attempts to contemplate?

Naturally each person's experience will differ. We may develop a more vivid sense of God in creation, or experience a deeper peace or a sense of joy. We may be led to discover new gifts in ourselves which can be offered to God. Later, as our reliance on God increases little by little, and our tensions and defences lessen, we may find old fears or painful memories beginning to arise in us, interrupting our efforts to pray. If this happens, we need to be aware that perhaps the pain is now being drawn to the surface so that cleansing and healing may take place. ***We may need to find an experienced spiritual guide at a time like this.***



Becoming more open to the Holy Spirit's action in us often means painful work at some stage. When beginning to pray in this or any new way, it is good to keep to our usual worship practice. Sunday worship, prayer group, Bible study, healing service, mid-week Eucharist or house-church all help to keep us anchored in the wider fellowship. It is not wise to isolate ourselves, though we may need more time in solitude. Many of us do learn to pray by ourselves. We struggle alone, perhaps because when we find something precious we do not want to expose it to others too early. It is difficult to take the step of sharing an experience like contemplative prayer unless we know a person we can trust to listen to us sensitively.

What if I can't pray this way?

In the words of *Gerard Hughes*, in his book of spiritual guidance, **God of Surprises**, “*if you find that the methods described do not help you to pray, it does not follow that you cannot pray, but only that you are unable to pray using these methods*”. Be of good courage, there are other methods which may be more fruitful. You may be certain that God seeks you persistently and lovingly.

Notes or comments on your journey with contemplative prayer:
(e.g. *Methods tried, expectations, periods of prayer, body comfort, etc.*)

***“Prayer is the doorway through which
God’s greatest gifts enter our soul.”*** *Teresa of Avila*

For further information or pamphlets please contact your Diocesan Prayer Representative or the Resources representative for A.F.P. Canada.
Internet Web Site: www.anglicanprayer.org

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