

How to Practice "Mental Prayer"

Have you noticed how some longtime friends can communicate without words? A gesture, a glance, a movement conveys all the information they need. The truth told in a handshake or an embrace perhaps could never be put into words.

In our relationship with God, our words are invaluable. But they are not everything. Our recited, formal prayer is sometimes called "vocal prayer." There is another kind of prayer that is offered in silence. For vocal prayer has its limits, and sometimes words and forms can be more of an obstacle than a help. In addition to vocal prayer, we must also communicate with God in a way that does not primarily depend on words.

This is "mental prayer." In mental prayer, the mind and heart do the work of communication. Perhaps this sounds exotic, but it really shouldn't. You've probably already experienced mental prayer without being fully aware of it. Perhaps you were trying to understand the seemingly senseless suffering of a friend, and you found yourself mentally raising the situation up to God, asking Him to give you light.

Or maybe you experienced mental prayer while looking at a crucifix. You began to think about the sacrifice of Jesus — that He became a man and bore our sins. You considered the love He showed to you in submitting Himself to men and carrying the cross. As you considered those facts, your heart stirred with love. Your affections reached out to embrace the God Who has done so much for you. This is mental prayer. Although words may play a part, it is your mind, heart, and will that communicate directly with God.

The Word of God

"Here we are going to read the words, not of a lord of this world, but of the Prince of Angels. If we prepare ourselves in this manner, the grace of the Holy Spirit will guide us with all certainty and we will reach the very throne of the King, and we will attain all good things through the grace and love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory and power, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen."

— St. John Chrysostom

"Read very often the divine Scriptures; never abandon the sacred reading."

— St. John Chrysostom

"Divine Scripture is like a field in which we are going to build a house. We cannot be lazy and be happy to build just on the surface; we have to dig down until we reach the living rock, and this rock is Christ."

— St. Augustine

*"As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the Lord our God."*

— Psalm 123:1-2

your unworthiness to receive the all-holy God. You heart again is moved to revulsion toward your sins and gratitude for the mercy of God. As you consider God's love for you, your affections "speak" love to Him. You experience a strong desire to be more faithful. Almost imperceptibly you recommit yourself to God.

Mental prayer is the conversation with God that takes place in the quiet of your own mind and heart. It is more than running down a mental list of gratitudes and grievances; it is speaking one's mind, speaking from the heart — and it is giving God the time and the silence to answer you in the depths of your soul.

Mental prayer is something we can cultivate. Sometimes, it just seems to "happen," as in the above examples. For, in all prayer, God is taking the initiative. We enter into the communication that He has already begun. Yet we should never see prayer as a passive activity. We can set specific times when we engage in mental prayer. During these times we specifically turn our hearts and minds to God. At the beginning of our time of mental prayer, we make an act of the will, giving our full attention to God. We acknowledge His presence and His love. Then we open our thoughts to God and allow our heart to respond. We are moved to godly intent, decisions, and action. This type of focused mental prayer is sometimes called "meditation" and will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

We have said on several occasions that prayer is a two-way relationship — God speaks to man and man speaks to God. Often the question is: "How do I hear God?" It

probably won't be by audible words. Yet, we can and should expect to "hear" God in our mental prayer.

Consider the one person to whom you are closest. Don't you sometimes communicate without words — by a smile, a wink, a nudge? Some communication transcends words. Communication from God to us *normally* transcends words. Moreover, communication from God normally transcends the senses of sight and touch as well. That link between you and your friend, although deeper than words, still depends on the senses. Your communication with God, on the other hand, can go beyond all senses. He can communicate fully at the level of heart and mind.

Most people have experienced this to some degree. For example, you may be prayerfully reading a passage from the Bible when some line seems to jump off the page. You experience urgency about the passage, or you come to a new level of understanding. Is it merely your mind working on the Scripture? Maybe, but it is also quite possible that the new insight has its origin in the Holy Spirit working within you — God speaking to your heart and mind.

At other times, maybe, you've prayed intensely about something, but received no discernible answer to your prayers. Then, days or weeks later, while you are going about your business, you suddenly "see" the solution you had sought weeks before in prayer. It is entirely possible that God had "planted" His response in your soul during your prayer, only to have it "blossom" in season.

Hearing is a sense that functions automatically. Truly

"Those that seek shall find, and finding Him they will praise Him."

listening, however, requires a conscious effort on our part. When a teacher speaks to us, we need to pay attention, focus, and integrate what we hear into our experience and understanding. It is the same way with nonverbal communication. We learn over time what our friend means by a certain facial expression or action. The parallel continues in our relationship with God. We need to be active listeners when we pray. We need to learn to sense the movement of His Spirit in our hearts and minds. This comes only by our sustained, disciplined, loving, and faithful efforts at prayer. Mental prayer grows as we develop a deeper relationship with God; our relationship with God grows deeper as we remain faithful to spending time with Him in mental prayer.

Consider This

Inner silence, reflection, and stillness of spirit are essential components of mental prayer. These are commodities that are often difficult to find in our busy days. There are many demands on our time and energies. We must often fight for the opportunity to practice regular mental prayer. Setting a fixed time is very helpful. First thing in the morning is often the best time, because we are rested physically and our minds are relatively uncluttered. The concerns of the day have not begun to consume our thoughts. But, for some people, the time immediately after work provides the best opportunity for mental prayer. Use this simple rule as your guide: The best time for you to pray is the time when you'll pray. Consider your circumstances and your own mental rhythms; then set a time that works for you.

The right place is also important. There is no better place for mental prayer than before Our Lord in the tabernacle. Twenty minutes of daily, quiet meditation and mental prayer before the tabernacle is a powerful practice that

will certainly strengthen your relationship with Jesus. If time in church is simply impossible, then a quiet room at your home or workplace may suit you.

We said that mental prayer is an opportunity to "hear" God speaking to us or to gain a sense of how He is working in our lives. We must raise a caution here. First, we should always remember that God reveals Himself to those who seek Him. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide us in the way of truth. So it's healthy to expect that God will communicate with us. But we should always temper that expectation with humility. We are all subject to deception. Even in prayer, we can deceive ourselves or we can allow the devil to deceive us. Mental prayer, like all forms of prayer and devotion, fits into an overall plan of life (more on this later). Spiritual direction can help us best discern what God is saying to us.

"Crying to the Lord is not done with the physical voice, but with the heart. Many whose lips are silent cry out with the heart; many are noisy with their mouths but with their hearts averted are able to obtain nothing. If, then, you cry out to God, cry out inwardly where He hears you."

— St. Augustine

Conversations With God

"As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul
longs for You, O God.
My being thirsts for God, the living God. When can
I go and see the face of God?"

— Psalm 42:2-3

"Mental prayer . . . is the soul's personal contact with
God. It is our private audience with God."

— Rev. Frederick T. Hoegger

"Who can doubt but that cries raised to the Lord in
prayer sound in vain if uttered only with the voice of the
body and not with the heart fixed on God? But, if they
come from the heart, then, they may escape any other
man's notice if the physical voice be silent, but they will
not escape the notice of God. Therefore, whether we cry
to the Lord with the voice of the body — when occasion
demands it — or in silence, we must cry from the heart."

— St. Augustine

"To Thee I lift up my eyes,
O Thou Who art enthroned in the heavens!
Behold, as the eyes of the servants look to the hand
of their master,

As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the Lord our God."

— Psalm 123:1-2

How to Meditate

Meditation is an important and fundamental form of
mental prayer. Since it is "mental," it involves our mind
and will. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines
meditation as "a prayerful quest engaging thought, imagi-
nation, emotion, and desire. Its goal is to make our own,
in faith, the subject considered, by confronting it with the
reality of our own life" (no. 2723).

This is a powerful definition; and each word is packed
with meaning. "A quest" conveys the sense of seeking,
pursuing an honorable goal. Like a medieval knight, the
believer on a quest needs vigor, determination, and pur-
pose. The goal is to "know Jesus Christ." As St. Paul says
in his letter to the Philippians: "I count everything as loss
because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus
my Lord . . . I press on toward the goal for the prize of the
upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who
are mature be thus minded" (Phil 3:8, 14-15).

Meditation is that pursuit of God, His ways, and His
"upward call." It involves the use of thought, imagina-
tion, emotion, and desire. Many people begin meditation
by the use of some spiritual book, and there is no better
instrument to use in beginning meditation than the New
Testament.

You might begin your time of meditation by acknowl-
edging God's presence and asking for the guidance of the
Holy Spirit. Next, read a short portion of the Scripture —
just a few lines at most. Then prayerfully consider that
passage with the realization that God wishes to lead you
in the ways of life. There are many ways to approach this
consideration. You might imagine what it would be like
to be one of the participants in the scriptural drama. Or
you might imagine that you are present there as an ob-

"Whoever aims at arriving at interior and spiritual things, must, with Jesus, go aside from the crowd."

— St. Thomas Aquinas

the salvation of mankind — on your own salvation and that of your friends and family. Turn the passage over in your mind and give it the opportunity to sink in. Gradually, perhaps, you'll see the application of this passage to your life, and you can make appropriate resolutions for future action. In the end, then, your meditation should change the way you think and the way you live.

When, with the help of the Holy Spirit, your mind has finished the slow review of the particular passage of Scripture, you can move on to another short passage and repeat the process. When you have completed the time you had set aside for meditation, give thanks to God for the thoughts and inspirations He has given you in your meditation, and ask for help to implement them in your life.

Other spiritual works can also be used for meditation. Or no books at all. Some people find it useful just to focus on a sacred image of some scene from the life of Christ: a Madonna and Child, or a crucifix. Others find riches just by turning over some mystery of faith, such as the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, or the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper.

Few people have achieved instant success at meditation. To be effective, meditation needs to become a longstanding habit. Sometimes, it will seem easy, exciting, and invigorating. At other times, it will leave us feeling dry and barren. As any medieval knight would tell you, a quest is not all smooth roads and open gates by daylight. But our goal — growth in divine life — is worth the effort. For with that goal come peace, clarity of pur-

to persevere in the practice even if our meditations seem fruitless, labored, or even boring. Humble and prayerful discipline will bring us long-term benefits. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta said again and again: "God does not require success but faithfulness."

Right now, our mind, imagination, and desire all play vital roles in our communication with God. But in heaven we will no longer see dimly in a mirror, but face to face. The saints unanimously teach us that a taste of this intimacy with God is possible for us, even here on earth. Meditation can lead to this deeper form of prayer, which is called contemplation. In meditation, words play a minimal part because the mind and heart are the primary means of communication. In contemplation, the mind and heart play a minimal part, as the lover achieves a union with the Beloved at the level of the spirit.

None of these concepts yield easily to the vocabulary of everyday life. But the entry into contemplative prayer is normally through the channel of sustained and disciplined meditative prayer.

Hold That Thought

Anyone who practices mental prayer and meditation will have to struggle against distraction. If we are not on guard, our time of prayer can easily turn into a session of merely planning our activities or agonizing over our problems. There are several ways to deal with distractions. Sometimes we can view the distraction as a temptation. In that case, we dismiss it, refocus on the Lord, and continue with the meditation. Other times, an impending event will intrude itself upon our thoughts. Here, perhaps, it might be more helpful just to jot down a note for later consideration, so that the urgent matter will no longer be a cause for distraction. Sometimes, we can make the dis-

family member is distracting you from meditation on a scriptural passage. Take the occasion to pray for that person — maybe in the context of what you have just read in Scripture. Entrust the individual to the mercy and love of God and then return to your meditation. If you find that distractions are a regular problem, you may need to change the circumstances of your prayer. A different time or location may help. You should also discuss such difficulties with your spiritual director, confessor, or someone more mature in the faith.

You might also find it helpful to keep a journal. Place a notebook nearby during your meditation. At the end of the time of prayer, make some note on your reflection. What comes to mind could be something that Christ was teaching you. It may be a new insight. It could be a question or a resolution. Over time, as you review your journal, your notes can help you discern what God is telling you and where He may be leading you.

"Prayer is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart — it is the orientation of our whole body, mind, and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration."

— Thomas Merton

In God's Presence

"Seek a proper time to retire into yourself, and often think of the benefits of God If you will withdraw yourself from superfluous talk and idle visits, and also from giving ear to news and to reports, you will find time sufficient and proper to employ yourself in good meditations."

— St. Thomas Aquinas

"Practice meditation for a fixed period and at a fixed time. Otherwise we would be putting our own convenience first."

— Blessed Josémaría Escrivá

"(Meditation) is necessary in order that we may have light to go on the journey to eternity. Eternal truths are spiritual things that are not seen by the eyes of the body but only by the reflection of the mind. He who does not meditate does not see them; and thus he advances with difficulty along the way of salvation."

— St. Alphonsus Liguori

A prayer after personal meditation:

"Take, O Lord, into Your hands my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my will. All that I am and have, You have given me, and I surrender them to You, to be so disposed in accordance with Your holy will. Give me Your love and Your grace: with these I am rich enough and desire nothing more."

— St. Ignatius of Loyola