

ON THE THREE BASIC WAYS TO PRAY

Are there various ways to pray?

Yes, there is vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplative prayer. All three of these basic ways of prayer presuppose recollecting one's mind and heart. cf. CCC 2699

VOCAL PRAYER

What is vocal prayer?

In the first place, prayer is lifting the heart to God. And yet Jesus himself taught his disciples to pray with words. With the Our Father he left us the perfect vocal prayer as his testament to show how we should pray.

While praying we should not try to think pious thoughts. We should express what is in our hearts and offer it to God as complaint, petition, praise, and thanks. Often it is the great vocal prayers the Psalms and hymns of Sacred Scripture, the Our Father, the Hail Mary that direct us to the true substance of prayer and lead to a kind of free, interior prayer.

cf. CCC 2700-2704

What is the essence of meditation?

The essence of meditation is a prayerful seeking that starts with a sacred text or a sacred image and explores the will, the signs, and the presence of God.

We cannot "read" sacred images and texts the way we read things in the newspaper that do not immediately concern us. Instead, we should meditate on them; in other words I should lift my heart to God and tell him that I am now quite open to what God wants to say to me through what I have read or seen. Besides Sacred Scripture, there are many texts that lead to God and are suitable for meditative prayer.

cf. CCC 2705-2708

What can a Christian accomplish through meditation?

In meditation a Christian seeks silence so as to experience intimacy with God and to find peace in his presence. He hopes for the sensible experience of his presence, which is an undeserved gift of grace; he does not expect it, however, as the product of a particular technique of meditation.

Meditation can be an important aid to faith that strengthens and matures the human person. Nevertheless, techniques of meditation that promise to bring about an experience of God, or even the soul's union with God, are deceptive. On account of such false promises, many people believe that God has abandoned them just because they do not perceive him. But God cannot be compelled to show up by particular methods. He communicates himself to us whenever and however he wishes. cf. CCC 2720-2724

CONTEMPLATION

What is interior or "contemplative" prayer?

Contemplative prayer is love, silence, listening, and being in the presence of God. For interior prayer one needs time, resolve, and above all a pure heart. It is the humble, poor devotion of a creature that drops all masks, believes in love, and seeks God from the heart. Interior prayer is often called the prayer of the heart and contemplation. cf. CCC 2709-2719

Why is prayer sometimes a struggle?

The spiritual masters of all times have described growth in faith and in love for God as a spiritual, life-and-death combat. The battlefield is man's interior life. The Christian's weapon is prayer. We can allow ourselves be defeated by our selfishness and lose ourselves over worthless things or we can win God.

Often someone who wants to pray must first conquer his lack of will power. Even the Desert Fathers were acquainted with spiritual sluggishness ("acedia"). Reluctance to seek God is a big problem in the spiritual life. The spirit of the times sees no point in praying, and our full calendars leave no room for it. Then there is the battle against the tempter, who will try anything to keep a person from devoting himself to God. If God did not want us to find our way to him in prayer, we would not win the battle. cf. CCC 2725-2728

Is prayer just a sort of conversation with yourself?

The distinctive feature about prayer is precisely the fact that one goes from self-centered to other-centered, from selfishness to radical openness. Someone who is really praying can experience the fact that God speaks and that often he does not speak as we expect or would like.

Those who are experienced in prayer report that a person very often comes out of a prayer session different from the way he went in. Sometimes expectations are met: you are sad and find consolation; you lack confidence and receive new strength. It can also happen, though, that you would like to forget pressures but are made even more uneasy; that you would like to be left in peace and instead receive an assignment. A real encounter with God, the kind that occurs again and again in prayer, can shatter our preconceptions about both God and prayer. cf. CCC 2729-2733

What happens if you do not feel anything when you pray or even experience reluctance to pray?

Distractions during prayer, the feeling of interior emptiness and dryness, indeed, even an aversion to prayer are experienced by everyone who prays. Then to persevere faithfully is itself already a prayer.

Even St. Thérèse of Lisieux for a long time could not sense God's love at all. Shortly before her death she was visited one night by her sister Céline. She noticed that Thérèse's hands were clasped together. "What are you doing? You should try to sleep", Céline said. "I cannot. I am suffering too much. But I am praying", Thérèse replied. "And what do you say to Jesus?" "I do not say anything to him. I love him." cf. CCC 2738-2739