

Learning to pray

A rationale for prayer

The essence of personal prayer is PRESENCE. This is true because the essence of God is presence: “*I am who I am...*” Prayer is a paradox because God, from our limited human point of view, is a paradox. On the one hand, God is, in essence, ineffable, transcendent and unknowable; a mystery. On the other hand, God is immanent, intimate and present in every context of human life; a companion.

We are tempted to use prayer as a time for thinking and hope it will be a productive use of time. But prayer is not a time for thinking. It is a time for PRESENCE. Thinking is an integral part of human nature, but it is not our highest or most essential activity. The purpose of personal prayer is not hyper self-reflection or some type of progress in our spiritual life. Personal prayer is an opportunity to be *present and alert to God*.

Prayer, in its many forms, is a reminder that our primary vocation, as human beings, is to enter into the very life of God. It is a timeless presence – within time and space – where we *experience* the transcendent being of God, who is love. In this type of personal prayer we place ourselves, intentionally and with openness, in the presence of the One who is the heart of reality. The daily practice of personal prayer is a choice to commit our lives to what is most fundamental. This mutual presence to and experience of God will become the source of our love and the template that guides our actions and relationships.

The practice of personal prayer places our lives in the hands of the One who “laid the foundations of the world and all that is in it”. It helps us walk in the light of God’s presence, whose energies bring forth righteousness and justice and whose foundation is love and truth. (Psalm 89:5-18 NRSV).

Two fundamental aspects of contemplative prayer are: *the presence of God* and *attentiveness to that presence*. It is a mutual seeing. There are only two prerequisites: *desire* and *persistence*.

When and where can I pray?

Jesus of Nazareth said, “But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Matthew 6:3-4 NRSV

Origen of Alexandria, Egypt, a third-century Christian scholar and mystic said: “Any place can be suitable for prayer: it becomes so as soon as one prays well it in . . . If we want to pray quietly without being disturbed, we may choose a particular place in our own house, if there is space – a consecrated place, so to speak – and pray there.”

Yes, a suitable place for prayer can be anywhere. Wherever you pray is a “holy place”. It is not always possible to have the solitude of your own home, the quiet of a church or chapel, or a secluded spot outdoors. Your suitable space may have to be a dormitory room, library, the workplace, a hospital room or hallway, or a busy street. Choose the time and place and pray there.

A way to begin personal prayer

In our fast-paced culture it is not always convenient to make time for prayer at the beginning and end of each day. The world will come rushing in soon enough, especially if we turn on the TV or our smart phones right away. Your “holy place” is anywhere you choose to experience God’s presence.

The beginning of each day

Where is your holy place at the beginning of the day? How much time can you spend there? It is important to begin simply. Soon after waking and rising, let your body express a physical sense of gratefulness for the new day and your desire to be in God’s presence. Even if you know a specific day will be difficult, gratefulness and a prayer for God’s love and guidance will influence your relationships and tasks.

Quiet listening first thing in the morning can be a simple prayer, sitting in silence, or reflecting on a passage of scripture from the Bible or another religious tradition. Perhaps you already have a pattern for prayer in the morning from a prayer book or your own composition.

If this is something new for you, try this at the beginning of your day:

- Get out of bed and stretch, thanking God for the new day and the gift of life: “This is the day God has given me; I will rejoice and be glad in it.”
- In your “holy place” recite this prayer of verses from Psalm 63:

O God, you are my God; at dawn I seek you;
for you my soul is thirsting.
For you my flesh is pining,
like a dry, weary land without water.
I have come before you in the holy place,
to behold your strength and your glory.

Your faithful love is better than life;
my lips will speak your praise.
I will bless you all my life;
in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul shall be filled as with a banquet;
with joyful lips, my mouth shall praise you.

- End with one of these short prayers:

Bind my head and my heart in you, Holy One,

and may I remain in your company this day.

Bless the Lord, my soul
and bless God's holy Name.
Bless the Lord, my soul,
who leads me into love.
Into your hands I commend my spirit.

The grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the companionship of the Holy Spirit be with me each moment of this day.

At the end of each day:

- Toward the end of your day, in the evening or at bedtime, recite this prayer from the Celtic Christian tradition:

I offer to You, O God, the troubles of this day;
I lay down my burdens at your feet.
Forgive my sins;
Give me your peace, which I need not understand;
And help me receive your Word.

Into your hands I commend my family, my neighbors,
My brothers and sisters in Christ,
And every person I have met today.

The guarding of the God of life be on me,
The guarding of loving Christ be on me,
The guarding of sheltering Spirit be on me,
Every night of my life,
To aid and enfold me
Each day and night of my life.

Quiet listening does not always mean personal prayer in total silence and may take place at different times throughout your day. Eventually you will find it a natural and vital part of each day, regardless of the time. But whatever you decide, be sure to make it *a consistent pattern and discipline each day*. This will not be easy because our smart phones, email, Twitter, and Facebook keep us constantly accessible. There is nothing wrong with communication, conversation, and entertainment. At the same time, it is possible to fill our lives with so many things that we empty life of its richness. In the midst of all the noise and distractions we may lose our ability to listen to each other and to life, itself. We don't need experts to help us. We need some quiet and time to listen.

Over the years – and it has not been easy – I have learned that personal prayer and quiet listening make space in me to experience and be formed by God's presence. It opens the possibility for my desires, words, and behavior throughout each day to have their origin in God's presence. Another way of saying this is that personal prayer and quiet listening help form me as a person whose life bears manifestations of the mystery and goodness of God.