

Prayer and the life of meditation

Dear Pilgrim Friends,

You have left the city, the noise of the world, and its relentless rhythm to come on this pilgrimage. Each of you has come for a particular reason, unique to yourself: a need to recharge, being dragged along by a friend, curiosity about the pilgrimage, the desire to take on a physical challenge, the hope of making new encounters, etc. Whatever the case, God has brought you here for a very specific reason: to meet Him, to reconnect with Him, and to strengthen your friendship with Him during these three days.

Now that we are well into our journey, that penance has begun to take effect, that our hearts are freer and perhaps more attentive, it is time to talk about prayer—what Pope Benedict XVI called "a matter of life or death." Just as the body needs air and food to stay alive, the soul needs prayer—it is its breath, its condition for remaining alive, that is, simply staying united to Christ and maintaining the bond of friendship with Him, which is the only truly necessary thing in our existence.

A Condition for Prayer: Silence

Without silence, one cannot pray. God speaks in silence, which is why we do not normally hear Him. Silence is His language, and we must quiet ourselves—externally and, even more so, internally—to be properly disposed to listen to what God wants to tell us. Silence is a fundamental condition for prayer.

It does not mean creating an absolute emptiness within us, as in certain yoga methods, but rather setting aside distractions to grasp a presence, to find within us the place where God reveals Himself. Dom Guillerand, a Carthusian monk, tells us that the emptiness the world leaves in the heart is the place of God. However, this emptiness can only manifest in silence.

Trying to fill this void with worldly things—social media, TV series, frenetic social activity—only makes it deeper and more concealed.

A Definition of Prayer?

There is no single definition of prayer, as prayer is a relationship between us and God. Since each person has a unique relationship with God, some will emphasize one aspect of prayer more than others. However, there are common elements found in all souls who pray. Here are a few quotes from saints about prayer:

- **Saint John Damascene (as cited by Saint Thomas Aquinas):** *"Prayer is the raising of the mind to God."*
- **Saint Teresa of Avila:** *"It is a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us."*
- **Saint Thérèse of Lisieux:** *"I do as a little child who does not know how to read; I simply tell God what I want to say, without making beautiful phrases, and He always understands me... For me, prayer is an impulse of the heart, it is a simple glance toward Heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in times of trial as well as in times of joy; in short, it is something great, supernatural, that expands my soul and unites me to Jesus."*
- **Saint Charles de Foucauld:** *"To pray is to think of God while loving Him."*

The Four Ends of Prayer

A helpful way to approach prayer is to consider the four main purposes for which we pray.

1. **Adoration** – The simple act of thinking of God first leads me to adore Him, to recognize His greatness and my own smallness, my complete dependence on Him.
2. **Thanksgiving** – Seeing that my Creator cares for me and loves me, I naturally respond with gratitude, thanking Him for this love.
3. **Expiation (Repentance)** – At the same time, I realize that I do not always correspond to this love, which saddens me because I have offended Him. With a humble heart, I ask for His forgiveness.
4. **Supplication (Petition)** – Finally, I ask Him to heal me, to sanctify me, and to bless those I love. I do this with confidence, knowing that God listens to those who love Him. However, I also pray with great humility, understanding that God will not change to fulfill my will; rather, He will conform my will to His.

Thus, the four purposes of prayer are: **adoration, thanksgiving, repentance, and supplication.**

An Essential Element: Gratuitousness

You see, prayer is not primarily about asking for things for ourselves. Certainly, that is a part of it, but it is not the essence of prayer. In fact, we do not pray primarily for ourselves—we pray for God!

Prayer should not be a selfish desire that awakens only in moments of material or spiritual distress.

As in any true friendship, a real friend gives himself freely to the other. A true friend is not a merchant or a mercenary but a giver, a benefactor. Likewise, the true friend of God gives Him time and life—freely. Thus, meditation becomes time given to our greatest friend, Jesus Himself.

The foundation of prayer is first and foremost about giving time to God. This is perhaps the hardest part! Because we never seem to have time—we always have things to do! That is why we must **make** time for God—offer it to Him. A few minutes set aside for God each day is the first act of love and generosity in prayer.

This idea that prayer is a gift, a gratuitous act offered to God, can help us avoid the common pitfalls that often discourage us from praying:

- *“I feel like it’s not working... I don’t feel anything when I pray...”*

By thinking that prayer is about feeling deep emotions, some people despair when they no longer feel anything. However, as in any friendship, prayer is not about feeling much but rather about **loving much**—giving our time to God in the silence of His presence.

God will repay us, in one way or another, at the right time. As Saint Catherine of Siena said: *“It is better to love the God of consolations rather than the consolations of God.”*

Let us not be discouraged if we feel nothing in prayer. Sometimes, that is a sign that our prayer is purer than ever—it is a pure gift to God.

A Method?

There are several schools of prayer, such as the Carmelite tradition with the great **Saint Teresa of Avila** and **Saint John of the Cross**, or the **Ignatian** method described in **Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises**. I encourage you to turn to these great masters of the spiritual life. However, here are some general guidelines for prayer:

1. Begin with an awareness of God's presence

- Once I have found a suitable setting and made external silence (turning off my phone, etc.), I should always start with an **act of presence before God**—a personal encounter with Him. Prayer is speaking **to God who is present with me** (in my soul, in the tabernacle), not speaking into the void or to a distant being.
- To help with this, I can make an **act of adoration** (considering God's greatness and my smallness before Him) or an **act of faith, hope, or charity**.

2. Let God speak first

- I can try to prolong this moment of awareness, but if I find my mind wandering or getting distracted, a **good practice** is to read a **short passage** from the Gospels or a spiritual book that resonates with me.
- The key here is to ask, **"Lord, what do You want to tell me today?"** This was the habit of **Saint Charles de Foucauld**: after recognizing God's presence, he would say, *"Lord, what do You have to say to me?"* and then read a passage from the Gospel.
- The essential point here is to **let God speak to us first**—through Scripture or a thought that arises—before we speak ourselves. This is **both respectful and the best way to ensure that our prayer is not just a monologue**.

3. Respond to God

- After slowly reading the passage, the next step is to respond, following **Saint Charles de Foucauld** again: *"Lord, what shall I say to You now?"*
- This response happens in two ways:
 - **An intellectual response**: This is called **meditation**—what does this text mean for me? How can I apply it in my life?
 - **A heartfelt response**: Prayer is not just about understanding a text better, but **about loving Jesus more** and growing in the desire to draw closer to Him.
- If I feel lost at this stage, I can **remember the four acts of prayer**:
 - The passage I read might lead me to **adore God**,
 - **Thank Him**,
 - **Ask for His forgiveness**,
 - **Request His grace**.

4. End with a concrete resolution

- To extend the effects of prayer throughout the day, it is helpful to **make a small, concrete resolution** based on what I prayed about.
- For example, if I meditated on **Jesus' gentleness toward sinners**, I can decide that today, I will try to be **kind and patient** with someone who usually annoys me—to **imitate Jesus**.

This way, prayer does not remain just a moment in the day but **transforms our entire life**.

Conclusion

The life of prayer is about living constantly in **the presence of God**. This is simply an extension of the special time (at least 15 minutes, ideally half an hour or more each day) that we dedicate to God in **meditative prayer (oraison)** each morning.

To pray is to do everything **under God's gaze**, to fulfill His **holy will** in all places and at all times. But it is through this **dedicated time with God**, commonly called **oraison**, that our **friendship with Christ grows and transforms us**.

I encourage you to **begin** or **persevere** in this beautiful practice of **silent prayer before God**, where we think only of Him, give Him all our love, and receive His love in return—a true "**exchange of friendship**," as Saint Teresa of Avila described it.

Some Recommended Books...

- **Fr. Jacques Philippe**, *Time for God: A Guide to Life in Prayer*, Éd. des Béatitudes.
- **Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard**, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, Éd. Artège.
- **Fr. Henri Caffarel**, *I Want to Learn to Pray*, Éd. Parole et Silence, 2015.
- **Fr. Henri Caffarel**, *Presence to God: One Hundred Letters on Prayer*, Éd. Parole et Silence, 2000.

Quotes - Prayer and the Life of Meditation

"Man has a beautiful vocation—to pray and to love: this is the happiness of man on earth. Those who do not pray are bent toward the earth, like a mole digging a hole to hide in. They are entirely earthly, entirely dull, thinking only of the things of this world..."

"My children, you have a small heart, but prayer expands it and makes it capable of loving God. Prayer is a foretaste of Heaven, an outpouring of Paradise. It never leaves us without sweetness."

"Sorrows melt away before a well-made prayer, just as snow before the sun."

— **Saint John Vianney (The Curé of Ars)**