



EVANGELIUM INSTITUTE

TEACHING TRUTH - INSPIRING FAITH

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Session 4: Prayer of the heart: Expressions of prayer and the battle to pray

Key themes:

1. Our tendency to forget that which is our animating principle, God and prayer.
2. The three major expressions of prayer
3. The spiritual battle
4. The efficacy of prayer

CCC Paragraphs: CCC 2697 – 2758

Key Scripture Verses: Mt 11:25-26; Mk 14:36, 4:4-7 & 15-19; Songs 1:7 & 3:1-4; Lk 7:36-50, 8:24, 19:1-10; Jer 31:33; Eph 1:10, 3:16-17, 5:20, 6:18; Mt 26:40 – 41, 28:20; Mk 10:22; Mt 6:21 & 24; Ps 27:8; Jn 12:24; Lk 8: 6 & 13; Jn 15:5, 15:16-17; Jn 17 all; Rom 5:3-5, 8:26 – 27, 10:12-13, 8:26-39; Mt 6:8; James 5: 1-10 & 16; Heb 5:7, 7:25, 9:24; 1 Thess 5:17; Gal 5:16-25

Definitions:

Meditation: Meditation can be defined as a reasoned application of the mind to some supernatural truth in order to penetrate its meaning, love it, and carry it into practice with the assistance of Grace.¹

Prayer: The elevation of the mind and heart to God in praise of his glory; a petition made to God for some desired good, or in thanksgiving for a good received, or in intercession for others before God. Through prayer the Christian experiences a communion with God through Christ in the Church (CCC 2559 – 2565) (CCC glossary)

Contemplation: A form of wordless prayer in which the mind and heart focus on God's greatness and goodness in affective, loving adoration; to look on Jesus and the mysteries of his life with faith and love. (CCC 2628, 2715) (CCC glossary)

Mystical Theology: The science of the spiritual life, with stress on the operation of divine grace. It deals with the higher forms of mental prayer and with such extraordinary phenomena as are recorded in the lives of the saints. It is the science of the study of mystic states. It is commonly distinguished from ascetical theology, which emphasizes free cooperation with and predisposition for divine grace. (John A. Hardon, SJ)

Mystical union: The union of a soul with God in deep contemplation. It is characterized by a deep awareness of the divine presence and has a variety of grades, not necessarily successive, but distinguished by spiritual writers. They are two nights of the soul (senses and spirit) before mystical union, the prayer of quiet, the full union, ecstasy, and spiritual marriage or transforming union.

Suggested Reading List:

Aumann, Jordan, *Spiritual Theology*
Dubay, Thomas, *Prayer Primer* and *Fire Within*
Philippe, Jacques, *Time for God*
Rohrbach, Peter Thomas, *Conversation with Christ*

¹ Aumann, Jordan, OP, *Spiritual Theology*, (Continuum Books, New York, 1980), 316.

Three major expressions of prayer (CCC 2699)

1. **Oratio** – Vocal prayer

“Reciting prayers without attention to God is not prayer at all” (St. Teresa of Avila)

2. **Meditatio** – Mental prayer/Meditation (CCC 2705 – 2708)

“Meditation can be defined as a reasoned application of the mind to some supernatural truth in order to penetrate its meaning, love it, and carry it into practice with the assistance of grace.” (Fr. Gregory Aumann, O.P.)

With mental prayer, either you will be made holy, or you will stop praying (St. Teresa of Avila)

3. **Contemplatio** - Contemplation (CCC 2709 – 2719)

Infused contemplation (grade of prayer 5 see stages worksheet)

This prayer is given as pure gift. (CCC 2713) We can do nothing to manufacture it. God gives this prayer when and where He sees fit to do so.

The prayer of contemplation helps greatly with seemingly insurmountable struggles with sin, eg. three lusts (1 John 2:16 lust for power, material things, flesh), impatience, imperfection, etc.

Sin can be likened to a malignant tumor... have to get at the roots. Cannot be removed by our own effort. We are in need of the divine physician.

“Even the operating room of a surgeon shows no trace of blood until he starts to work on the patient. Go then to this physician for now is the time to be healed.”

Excerpt from Augustine’s Sermon 87

The Cloud of Unknowing – unknown 14th Century author

This is what you are to do: Lift your heart up to the Lord, with a gentle stirring of love desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts. Center all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart. Do all in your power to forget everything else, keeping your thoughts and desires free from involvement with any of God’s creatures or their affairs whether in general or in particular. Perhaps this will seem like an irresponsible attitude, but I tell you, let them all be; pay no attention to them.

What I am describing here is the contemplative work of the spirit. It is this which gives God the greatest delight. For when you fix your love on him, forgetting all else, the saints and angels rejoice and hasten to assist you in every way – though the devils will rage and ceaselessly conspire to thwart you. Your fellow men are marvelously enriched by this work of yours, even if you may not fully understand how; the souls in purgatory are touched, for their suffering is eased by the effects of this work; and, of course, your own spirit is purified and strengthened by this contemplative work more than by all others put together. Yet for all this, when God’s grace arouses you to enthusiasm, it becomes the lightest sort of work there is and one most willingly done. Without his grace, however, it is very difficult and almost, I should say, quite beyond you.

And so diligently persevere until you feel joy in it. For in the beginning it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a cloud of unknowing. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being. Try as you might, this darkness and this cloud will remain between you and your God. You will feel frustrated, for your mind will be unable to grasp him, and your heart will not relish the delight of his love. But learn to be at home in this darkness. Return to it as often as you can, letting your spirit cry out to him whom you love. For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud. But if you strive to fix your love on him forgetting all else, which is the work of contemplation I have urged you to begin, I am confident that God in his goodness will bring you to a deep experience of himself.²

We fall short due to our sinfulness...fallen human nature

Fast as much as you like, watch far into the night, rise long before dawn, discipline your body, and if it were permitted – which it is not – put out your eyes, tear out your tongue, plug up your ears and nose, and cut off your limbs; yes chastise your body with every discipline and you would still gain nothing. The desire and tendency toward sin would remain in your heart...³

That is, the roots of sin remain. Only the divine surgeon can get to the roots.

Why contemplation?

...the contemplative work of love by itself will eventually heal you of all the roots of sin.⁴

A tree is judged by its fruits. (Matthew 7:15–20)

“If growth in the virtues is lacking, so, too is the contemplation”

² Unknown 14th Century author, *Cloud of Unknowing & the Book of Privy Counseling*, William Johnston, ed., (New York, Image/Doubleday, 2005), 40 – 41.

³ *Cloud of Unknowing*, 55.

⁴ *Cloud of Unknowing*, 55.

MENTAL PRAYER

Normally when we pray we like to speak a lot but we don't like to listen. Prayer in itself is as necessary for our spiritual life as breathing is necessary for our bodily life. Our spiritual life depends on God's Grace, and He has, so to speak, given us the power to breathe it in prayer. Not to pray will have the same results for the life of the soul as not to breathe would have for the life of the body, which are sickness and death.

By example and word, Christ taught the necessity of prayer. Prayer means to be with God and sometimes speak with Him. The majority of people know only one kind of prayer called vocal prayer because we do it with our voices (i.e. standard prayer like Our Father..., Hail Mary..., or spontaneous prayer...). These prayers are wonderful. We need to practice them. However they are not enough to nourish our soul. Sometimes, if we don't pay attention, we run the risk of saying prayers without praying.

The majority of people like to speak to God but very few speak with God. To speak with God implies that we also listen, not only speak.

How can we listen to God?

God speaks to us first of all through His Word which is the Holy Scripture and the Tradition of the Church (Teaching of the Church, writing of Popes, of the Saints..). He speaks also through the events of our lives, through the people that we meet, through the circumstances, through the inspiration that He sends to us. We need to listen more. It is very hard for us to listen. Besides vocal prayer we need mental prayer which is our way of listening to God.

Mental prayer is also called meditation.

According to the Catechism, meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking.

Meditation can be defined as a reasoned application of the mind to some supernatural truth in order to penetrate its meaning, love it, and carry it into practice with the assistance of Grace.⁵

Meditation has a double finality, one intellectual and the other affective and practical. The intellectual purpose is to arrive at firm convictions concerning some supernatural truth; hence, the importance of the intellect in meditation. But one could acquire firm convictions by speculative study, and therefore this cannot be the principal finality of meditation nor that which makes meditation true prayer. The most important element in meditation is the act of love aroused in the will on the presentation of some supernatural truth by the intellect. As St. Teresa points out, meditation consists not so much in thinking a great deal but in loving a great deal. When the will bursts forth with acts of love, an intimate contact is established between the soul and God, and then it is that the soul can truly be

⁵ Aumann, Jordan, OP, *Spiritual Theology*, (Continuum Books, New York, 1980), 316.

said to be praying. To read something spiritual is merely a preparation for the arousal of love.

But a meditation is not completed by arousing love for the supernatural truth on which one has speculated. Any meditation that is properly made should terminate in a practical resolution for the day. Love cannot be idle; by its very nature it urges us to action. Failure to make efficacious resolutions is the reason why many souls who practice daily meditation get little or no practical benefit from this exercise of prayer. They pass the time in spiritual reading or speculation, but they do not make acts of love, nor do they make any practical resolutions.

According to theologians, one can recite vocal prayer and even go to Mass and still remain in mortal sin. But no one can meditate daily and remain in mortal sin. Vocal prayer and mortal sin sometimes go together (sad to say). Mental prayer and mortal sin cannot go together: either you will leave mental prayer or you will leave mortal sin. When you really reflect on the truth and you relate what you read with your life you can't go on with your sinful conduct. You want to reform your behavior.

Mental prayer engages the mind with its thoughts, the will with its desires, and the heart with its feelings. The mind knows the truth, the will desires the truth, the heart falls in love with the truth.

Mental prayer transforms the person so that he/she can reach the fullness of Christian life: Holiness that is true and everlasting happiness.

Composed by the Apostles of the Interior Life

Meditation and Reflection questions

Three simple steps to prayer:

Before you begin, ask the Holy Spirit to help you in your prayer, to show you the things that God wishes for you to hear.

Step one: Read the meditation. As soon as something strikes you, stop reading.

“Meditation is only the introduction, the initiation into what should become a profound contemplative communion with the indwelling Trinity.”⁶

Step two: Reflect or think about what struck you as long as it nourishes your soul. Talk to God about it and pay attention to the things He inspires within you. If your mind wanders, simply go back to the point that struck you or move on to another. God is not hindered by your distractions.

Step three: Before you conclude, pick one thing to remember or to do today based on your meditation – this is a resolution. By the resolution we turn our meditation into action and live the meditation all day. Choose something practical and concrete to remember or do through the day. It may be helpful to write down your resolution and keep it with you.

Consider underlining that strikes you, or write your own thoughts in the margins, etc.

Without a life of prayer there is no holiness⁷

First, we need to be convinced of the vital importance of mental prayer. “He who avoids prayer is avoiding everything that is good,” said St. John of the Cross. All the saints have spent time praying. Those who were most involved in the service of their neighbor were also contemplatives. St. Vincent de Paul began each day with two or three hours of mental prayer and meditation.

There is no spiritual progress without contemplative prayer. Even though we may have had a powerful conversion experience, felt great fervor, and received immense graces, without fidelity to mental prayer our Christian life will soon reach a plateau and stall there. This is because without mental prayer we cannot receive all the help from God that we need to be transformed and sanctified in depth. The testimony of the saints is unanimous.

Now, some people might object that sanctifying grace also – indeed, mainly – comes to us through the sacraments. Mass is in itself more important than mental prayer. This is true, but without a life of prayer even the sacraments will have only a limited effect. Yes, they will give us grace, but that grace will remain unfruitful in part because the “good soil” it needs is missing. Why, for instance, are so many people who receive Communion frequently not more holy? The reason often is that they do not have a life of prayer. The Blessed Eucharist does not bring all the fruits of inner healing and sanctification that it should, because it is not being received with an attitude of faith, love, adoration, and total receptivity – an attitude that can only be created by fidelity to mental prayer. The same is true of the other sacraments.

⁶ Thomas Dubay, *Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel – on Prayer*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1989), 49.

⁷ Jacques Philippe, *Time for God* (Scepter Publishers: New York, 1992), 24 – 27.

If someone, even someone very devout and committed, has not made a habit of mental prayer, something will always be lacking for the growth of his or her spiritual life. People like this will not find true inner peace but will always be subject to anxiety, and there will always be something too merely human in what they do: attachment to their own will, traces of vanity, self-seeking, ambition, narrow-mindedness, and so on. There can be no deep, radical purification of the heart without the practice of mental prayer. Otherwise, our wisdom and prudence will always remain on the human plane, and we will never reach true inner freedom. Otherwise, we cannot know God's mercy from the inside, nor can we bring other people to know it. Our judgment will remain narrow and uncertain and we will be unable really and truly to enter upon the paths of God, which are very different from what many people – even committed Christians – imagine.

For example, some people have a wonderful experience of conversion in Charismatic Renewal. The outpouring of the Spirit is a luminous, overwhelming encounter with God. But after a few months or years they cease making progress and lose their spiritual vitality. Why? Because God has withdrawn his hand from them? Certainly not. "The gifts of God are irrevocable." (Rom 11:29) It is because they did not learn to remain permanently open to his grace by making the experience of the Renewal bear fruit in a life of prayer.

The problem of not enough time "I'd really like to do mental prayer, but I don't have the time." How often this has been said! And in a hyperactive world like our own, the difficulty is a real one and should not be underestimated.

But time is not always the real problem. That real problem is knowing what really matters in life. As a contemporary author remarked, no one yet has starved to death because they didn't have the time to eat. We always find (or rather take!) the time to do what really matters to us. Before saying we don't have time for mental prayer, let's begin by reviewing our hierarchy of values, to see what our real priorities are.

One of the great crises of our day is that people are no longer capable of finding time for one another, time to be with one another. Here is something that causes many deep wounds. So many children are enclosed within themselves, disillusioned and damaged, because their parents never learned to spend time with them, with nothing else to do except be with their child. They look after the child, but they are always doing something else or are preoccupied, never entirely there, never totally available. And the child senses this and suffers. In learning to give time to God, we will certainly become more able to find time to be there for one another. Our attentiveness to God will teach us to be attentive to others.

Regarding this problem of time, we should make an act of faith in Jesus' promise: "There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or land, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time!" (Mk 10:29) It is legitimate to apply this to chronological time as well: whoever gives up a quarter of an hour of television in order to pray will receive a hundredfold in this life – the time will be returned to them a hundredfold, not in quantity but in quality. Mental prayer will give one the grace to live out every moment of life in a much more fruitful way.

Jesus on Prayer

1 "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. 2 "Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when 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. 7 "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. 10 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread; 12 And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors; 13 And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. 14 For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; 15 but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. 16 "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. 22 "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; 23 but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! 24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. 25 "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? 28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? 31 Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. 34 "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

W.R.A.P.

WRITE

Write down the word or verse(s) that grab your attention, inspire you, bother you, or speak to your heart. (Lectio)

REFLECT

Reflect on the word or verse(s) that you have written down? What thought, word, or emotion is stirred within you? Why? What message does God have for you in this? (Meditatio)

APPLY

Apply this to your life. What is going on in your life such that this is coming to mind. Let the Lord inspire you to see how this word/verse(s) speaks into your life and circumstances in a way that makes a difference. How can you apply this message beginning today? (More Meditatio)

PRAY

Write a prayer to God, telling him of what you have experienced in this time. Try to pray from your heart about what is stirred within you. (Oratio) When you are done writing, pause, and rest in His presence, let Him love you, receive grace and strength. (Contemplatio)

Questions for reflection / small group discussion

1. What struck you from today's topic on the expressions of prayer and the battle to pray? What challenged you or inspired you?
2. What message did you receive from the WRAP meditation on prayer?
3. What comes to mind when you look at the stages of the spiritual life graph? Do you find it discouraging, encouraging, confusing? Why?
4. When you think of your spiritual life/your interior life, what comes to mind? How could your spiritual life become a more important priority in your life? What obstacles do you encounter?
5. What areas of your life cause you to stumble? How can you get help in this area?
6. What struck you from the meditations on mental prayer? Did you find it challenging? Why? Insightful? How?
7. What is your favorite way to pray?
8. When was a time you experienced God in prayer? How has God spoken to you recently? In the past?
9. When was a time that you felt close to God? When in your life did you feel closest to God? Have you grown more on fire since then? Why or why not, do you think?
10. Have you ever practiced mental prayer? What was your experience?
11. Have you ever heard God speak to you in mental prayer?
12. How have you tried to incorporate prayer into your life?
13. Do you prefer to pray alone or with others?
14. On a scale of 1 to 10, where do you rate prayer as a priority in your life? How can you increase this number?
15. How do you feel God challenging you to grow in your spiritual life? Have you ever sensed a call to a deeper prayer life?