

# **Six Weeks in Gethsemane**

## **A Lenten Prayer Survey**



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**Center for Transformative Prayer**  
**First United Methodist Church**  
**McKinney, Texas**

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# Curriculum Overview

**“They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples,  
‘Sit here while I pray.’”**

**–Mark 14.32**

## **Preface**

Throughout the Gospel record, Jesus modeled deep, abiding prayer as essential to the spiritual life. Sometimes he prayed alone in the “deserted places” or the “mountains,” even through the course of the night. In other instances, he shared his prayer time with his disciples, as he did in the garden of Gethsemane at the outset of his passion. Regardless of how he did it, Christ treated prayer as an integral part of life. This approach of integrating prayer into the daily machinations of our being is known in Christian circles as contemplation.

We can define contemplative prayer as “a grace-filled attentiveness to God that initiates and sustains a change of consciousness, leading to deepening love of God and neighbor.”<sup>1</sup> It is an attitude more than anything, with contemplation being a part of our Christian heritage for centuries. And while the “technical” names of these prayer types may be foreign to us, we practice many aspects of this prayer life on a weekly basis. Understanding the shape of these prayer styles helps us keep an *intentional* eye on our practice.

The late author and mystic Henri Nouwen asserted that it’s through prayer that we arrive at “the highest level of spiritual life, in which the created world is transcended and we experience directly our being lifted up into God’s inner life.”<sup>2</sup> Given this lofty appraisal, we would do well to better understand this vehicle of divine intimacy. The remainder of this text is designed to provide a general overview of contemplative prayer in its various forms, specifically attuned to the Christian season of Lent.

## **Intended Use**

This manual’s intended use is fourfold. First, the chapters that follow represent a foundational curriculum structure that may be used for an *instructor-led, six-week*

*overview of different types of prayer, specifically targeted for the Lenten season. Second, while the opening portions of each week will be informational, this study is intended to be pragmatic in its application; that is, the participants will learn both intellectually and experientially, with emphasis on experience. Third, the body of this text is primarily constructed for course leaders. However, the central section of each week's content is perfectly suitable for both leaders and the participants, and those sections can be readily reproduced and distributed for greater preparation and interaction. Lastly, this material is meant to be introductory in nature. The myriad forms of prayer and the variations thereof are basically innumerable. This study merely attempts to survey a handful of prayer types, hopefully enticing the participants to learn – and practice – these and other methods in greater depth during the preparatory period of Lent and beyond.*

## **Study Format**

The six lessons sample various types of prayer from the Christian tradition. Each week's content assumes a maximum allotment of sixty (60) minutes per class time. These classes will share the same general structure of *background, methodology, practice, reflection, and supplemental resources*.

*Background.* The background sections of the study are meant to ground the leader and the participants in the biblical, theological and historical aspects of the week's prayer method. These sections are relatively brief, but they should be robust enough to set the tone for the method and practice to come. (~10 mins)

*Methodology.* Each week the group will examine and practice a different prayer methodology. This section is intended to serve as a written guide to the various steps, postures, prayers, etc. that are related to the approach. Also, the text will provide one or more variations to the method as applicable. (~5 mins)

*Practice.* The entirety of this study is primarily concerned with the *experience* of prayer. As such, the majority of the class time should be spent on this portion of the lesson. Instructions on imagery, postures, timing, etc. should be kept to a minimum so that participants can maximize the prayer period. (~25 mins)

*Reflection.* This segment of the study is intended to garner the participants' experiential feedback. This post-prayer dialogue is unrestricted, but the study does supply several questions to help guide the discussion. The leader may choose to preview these

questions prior to the session, as some may be useful to “set the tone” for the experience to come. (~15 mins)

*Supplemental resources.* Resources are supplied within the lesson for those who want to learn and/or experience more about the week’s content.

Paraphrasing a bold claim of the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic John of the Cross, Harvard theologian Sarah Coakley says that through deep contemplation, our souls “can actually breathe with the ‘very breath’ of the Spirit that moves between the Father and the Son.”<sup>3</sup> It is for the participation in that divine breath that this study is intended.

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<sup>1</sup> David Keller, “Reading Living Water: The Integral Place of Contemplative Prayer in Christian Transformation,” in *Spirituality, Contemplation and Transformation: Writings on Centering Prayer*, ed. Thomas Keating (Brooklyn NY: Lantern Books, 2008), 132.

<sup>2</sup> Nouwen, 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 89.

## **Week 1: Mental Prayer – The Examen**





***“Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”***

**–1 Peter 2.5**

## **Background**

The method we explore is known as the *Examen prayer*. The Examen is a process of introspection promoted by and credited to Ignatius Loyola, a sixteenth century nobleman-turned-religious who founded the religious order known as the Society of Jesus, more commonly referred to as the Jesuits. In Ignatius’ worldview, humanity was created for one singular purpose: “to praise, reverence, and serve God.”<sup>1</sup> To that end, he created the now classic *Spiritual Exercises*, a treatise that outlines a strict regimen for refining the spiritual self. The Examen prayer is intrinsic to that methodology.

Ignatius believed that we encounter God not “out there” somewhere, but rather in our day-to-day goings on. To truly attain this spiritual state of being requires a discipline of awareness, and that awareness begins with a mindfulness of our own selves. As the name implies, the Examen prayer serves as a daily means of exploring our inner and outer lives, and then holding ourselves accountable for what we encounter. This introspection is an appropriate way to begin the Lenten season.

## **Methodology**

The Examen involves a review of the day, with gratitude being the cornerstone of the approach. The “traditional” five steps that Ignatius promoted include 1) inviting God’s illumination of the prayer, 2) giving thanks for the day just lived, 3) reviewing the day, both ups and downs, 4) confessing the shortcomings that were reviewed, and 5) asking for guidance in the day to come.<sup>2</sup> The entirety of the prayer is meant as an utter release in God’s presence.

Several modifications are possible, and many tailor the Examen to something that is uniquely personal. One such variation is an “emotional inventory” and reflection; this is the method employed for this week’s practice.<sup>3</sup>

## Practice

Participants may be seated, with feet flat on the floor and backs as vertical as possible. As the leader speaks through each step, it may be useful for the participants to close their eyes as they are able. The leader will also act as the time keeper.

- *Pray for illumination (1 min).* The leader or a participant invites God's Spirit to be present:

*Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit into the desert: Come quickly to help us as we examine our lives. And as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one of us find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.*

- *Review the day in thanksgiving (5 mins).* We review the day that has come before, making a mental checklist of all the things that we are grateful for, regardless of how small or large. We let our minds flow in and out of memories, all in a spirit of thanksgiving.
- *Review the day again (5 mins).* We re-run the day again. We are now being mindful of the feelings that may have emerged with events as we recalled them. Whether positive or negative, we don't judge them; we simply allow them to surface, and we take note of their presence.
- *God counsel (10 mins).* Now we make a mental note of the feeling that was the strongest, and pray on it. This is like a "counseling session" with God around this emotion. Again, positive or negative, we review it, discuss it, and understand it as something we would like to welcome or avoid in the future.
- *Look forward to the coming day (4 mins).* Finally, we are looking forward to the day to come. If there are anxieties associated with tasks, we pray on them. If there is positive excitement, we pray on it. We pray that our day will be a day in which we reflect the Kingdom that God has willed for all of us.

## Reflections

Possible questions for group reflection:

- Which segment of the Examen resonated most strongly with you? Why might that be the case?
- Did you find the timing of the segments adequate? If not, what changes would you make in your private prayer time?

- Did you come to a “resolution” during your “God counseling” time? If comfortable sharing, what did that outcome look like?
- Did you find this prayer type useful? If so, will you pursue it further? If not, what changes would you make to tailor it to yourself?

## Supplemental Resources

<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>

Thibodeaux, Mark. *Reimagining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh Ways to Pray from Your Day*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2015.

Collins, Christopher. *3 Moments of the Day*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2014.

Harter, Michael. *Hearts on Fire: Praying with the Jesuits*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2005.

Loyola, Ignatius. *The Spiritual Exercises*. New York: Magisterium Press, 2015.

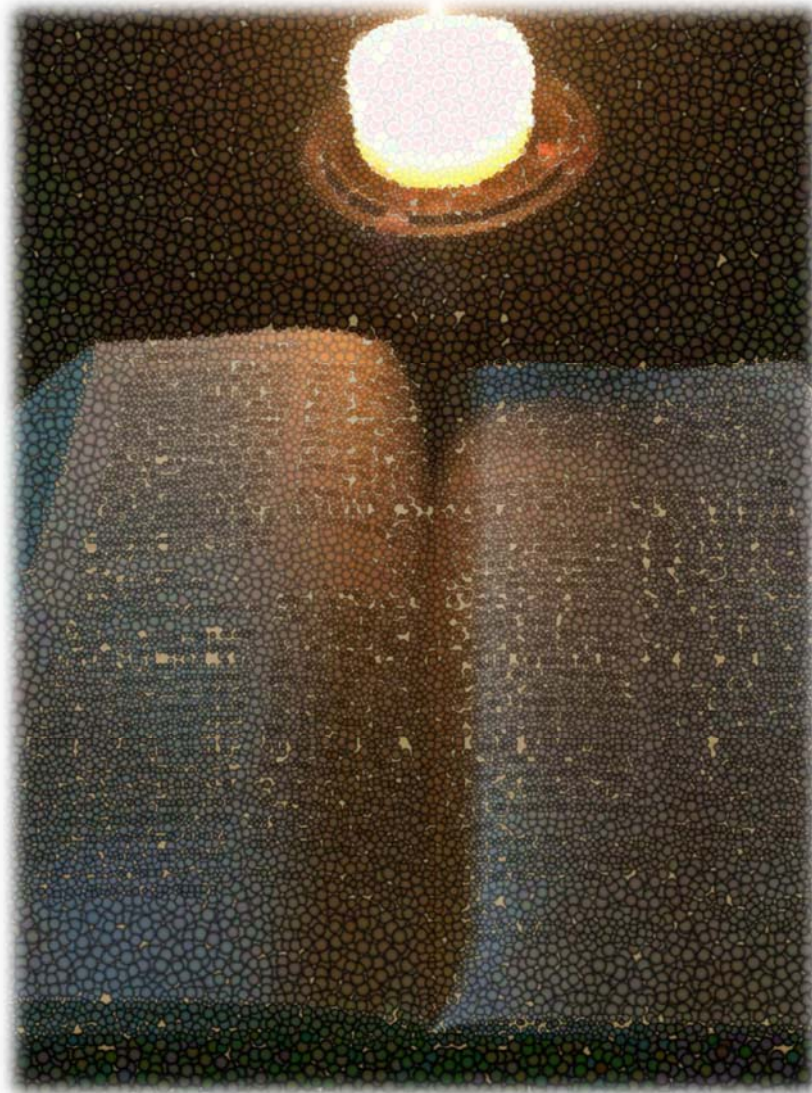
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<sup>1</sup> Ruben Habito, *Zen and Spiritual Exercises* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 41.

<sup>2</sup> “The Examen Prayer Card.” <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/19076/examen-prayer-card/>, accessed March 10, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Borrowed from Dennis Hamm, “Rummaging for God: Praying Backwards through Your Day,” <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/rummaging-for-god-praying-backward-through-your-day>, accessed March 10, 2016.

## Week 2: Scriptural Prayer – *Lectio Divina*



**"I revere your commandments, which I love, and *I will meditate on your statutes.*"**

**–Psalm 119.48**

## **Background**

*Lectio divina* ("divine reading") is an ancient practice of "praying" the scriptures. Hints of this form of prayer spring up as early as the third century in the writings of an ancient Christian thinker named Origen of Alexandria. In his "Letter to Gregory," he admonishes that we not only "knock and seek" the mysteries of the text, but that we also pray, for it is in "seeking" and "asking" that God allows us to find.<sup>1</sup> Later in history, we see a similar allusion to Jesus' words from Matthew 7.7. In his "Sayings of Light and Love," the sixteenth century mystic John of the Cross alludes to the four-part structure of *lectio* still in use today: "Seek in *reading* and you will find in *meditation*; knock in *prayer* and it will be opened to you in *contemplation*" (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> For some time this methodology faded from the mainstream of Christian practice, yet it was kept alive by various monastics and other devout believers.

Meditation is a practice that directly applies the intellect to ponder the object of consideration. Contemplation, on the other hand, implies a state of being, relying less on brainpower and more on the unmediated experience of God. The practice of *lectio divina* uses both, moving from the mindfulness of meditation to the centered "being-ness" of contemplation.

*Lectio* is traditionally composed of four parts: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. In this practice, a passage of Scripture is read and meditated upon for some time. Unlike typical biblical study, however, we are not looking to "dissect" the text for theological insight or knowledge. We don't apply interpretive tools such as historical, literary, or formal analysis to draw meaning from the passage. Instead, we imaginatively enter the passage and simultaneously let it enter us, experiencing the connection to divine presence. We allow ourselves to experience the sensual world of the text – sights, sounds, smells, and sensations. We encounter the characters of the stories, and we wander in the world that the biblical writers have constructed for us. By approaching (praying) the Bible this way, we participate in the very inspiration that guided those authors.

## Methodology

The typical steps of individual *lectio divina* practice include reading (*lectio*), reflection or meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and finally a contemplative “being” in the Word (*contemplatio*). For the *reading* portion, we select a relatively short passage, and begin to read slowly and intently. We are reading with our whole selves, meaning we bring a proper reverence to the activity (posture, mindset, intent, etc.). As we survey the words, we allow ourselves to be open to what they have to say to us.

After the text is consumed visually, we pass into the *meditation* phase. In this stage of reflection, we “enter” into the text with our imaginations. We relate to characters; we sense the environment; we are privy to conversations. We fully experience what is happening in the scene in a participatory way. We also listen and repeat various words that seem to call to us in our own context. We consume the passage one delicious word at a time, and then let it digest in our minds and hearts.

The third step is *prayer*. At this point, we continue to open ourselves to God in direct dialogue around our meditations. We pray that God would open us, diminish us, and come to us so that our desires begin to align with God’s will for us. We are content to wait; we still our souls. And as we do so, we pass from active “speaking” to a passive “listening.”

The last stage of the *lectio* process is *contemplation* — a complete and utter stillness in God. It is here where our active imagination and reasoning faculties begin to shut down. We no longer “seek” to find God; we are still and quiet in the very presence of the One who seeks us. This is the place that is “too deep for words,” where faith truly becomes “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11.1).<sup>3</sup>

One variation of the prayer is designed for group practice. It maintains the essential elements of this structure, albeit in abbreviated form. In this version, the text is read aloud on three separate occasions, preferably by three different participants. Each iterative reading has a different intention associated with the listening. The first reading involves listening for a word or phrase that resonates strongly with the hearer. There then follows a period of silence for 1) meditation on that word or phrase, 2) prayer centered on that meditation, and 3) peaceful contemplation. Once the five minutes is up, members are encouraged to share their experiences around their selected word or phrase. The second reading invites the members to “hear” or “see” Christ in the text, while the third iteration asks what Christ calls us to do or be in the world based on our

interaction with the text. Both the second and third readings follow the same pattern of silence and sharing as the first.<sup>4</sup> This methodology is used for our practice below.

## Practice

All participants are seated with feet flat on the floor, shoulders relaxed, and spine duly straight. The leader selects a brief Scripture passage prior to beginning, such as Luke 4.1-2 (or Mt 4.1-2, or Mk 1.12-13). If available, three readers are identified before the start of the exercise, and they all should be equipped with the focal text at the outset. It is desirable to have genders alternate the readings if possible; this diversity helps the group “hear” the Word in nuanced ways. Before each reading, the leader will remind the group of that iteration’s intention for listening.

- *1<sup>st</sup> Reading (1 min)*. One person reads the Scripture selection aloud.
- *Silent reflection (5 mins)*. All participants savor the read text in silence, mulling the words and determining *what word or phrase is most prominent for them*. All take time for prayer, and ultimately contemplation.
- *Verbal reflection (3 mins)*. If desired, one or two in the group can share personal reflections. All should be mindful of the time so the group can complete all three iterations of the practice. (This is also a lesson on being present, as there is *no discussion of the reflections*, only intentional listening. Abbreviated feedback on the entirety of *lectio divina* can happen at the end.)
- *2<sup>nd</sup> Reading (1 min)*. The passage is re-read aloud.
- *Silent reflection (5 mins)*. All participants again reflect on what was read, but for this second iteration the *members are invited to “hear” or “see” Christ in the text*. Whatever is “heard” or “seen” is prayed over and contemplated.
- *Verbal reflection (3 mins)*. The group can take time for a short reflection again.
- *3<sup>rd</sup> Reading (1 min)*. Someone reads the passage aloud for a third time.
- *Silent reflection (5 mins)*. In this final pass, the group is encouraged to *ask what Christ calls us to do or be in the world* based on their interaction with the scripture. Prayer and contemplation are still in order.
- *Verbal reflection (3 mins)*. Repeat the short reflections if desired.

- End the prayer time with the Lord's Prayer spoken aloud as a group.

## Reflections

Possible questions for group reflection:

- Before this encounter, had you considered reading Scripture as part of your *prayer* life?
- How does this method of reading/praying Scripture impact you? Were you able to enter the text from your individual situation?
- In what ways did you freshly reimagine Christ's temptation in the desert?
- In what ways might this prayer practice be useful for your going forward? How would you change it for yourself/others?

## Supplemental Resources

"How to Practice Lectio Divina,"

<http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/catholic/2000/08/how-to-practice-lectio-divina.aspx> (accessed April 2, 2016).

Hall, Thelma. *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*. New York: Paulist Press, 1988.

Douglas-Klotz, Neil. *Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original Meaning of Jesus's Words*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

Boff, Leonard. *The Lord's Prayer: The Prayer of Integral Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 198

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, *Church Fathers: From Clement of Rome to Augustine* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 23.

<sup>2</sup> John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 97.

<sup>3</sup> Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 49.

<sup>4</sup> "How to Practice Lectio Divina," <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/catholic/2000/08/how-to-practice-lectio-divina.aspx> (accessed April 2, 2016).



## Week 3: Iconic Prayer—*Visio Divina*



***“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”***

**–Colossians 1.15**

## **Background**

While the Western church was developing and refining its versions of *lectio divina*, the Orthodox (or Eastern) tradition was simultaneously concerned with sacred *images* as a means of mediating God’s presence. These “icons” (Greek *eikon* or “image”) were the visual counterparts to the Holy Text, telling the story of salvation history as worshippers pondered the messaging they conveyed. In fact, for many the visual representations of figures from the faith tradition conveyed the very presence of God, not unlike the sacramental elements of water and oil or bread and wine. The Orthodox considered these revelations as no less inspired than the written text itself. As such, these religious icons were not said to be *drawn* (or painted), but *written*.<sup>1</sup>

As we might imagine, seeking God through iconic media has encountered its naysayers in Christian history. To some, this practice amounts to nothing short of idolatry, strictly forbidden by the second Commandment. But others have argued a counter-position for centuries. John of Damascus was one such defender from the eighth century. He saw the worship of God as something to be done with the whole self (Matt 22.37), and so he boldly claimed that “just as words encourage *hearing*, so do images stimulate the *eyes*” (emphasis added). For John, letters and words themselves were nothing more than “images” (icons) of verbal expression.<sup>2</sup> Directly to the question of idolatry, John and others argued that in the Incarnation, Jesus himself represented the perfect “image” of God, “the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1.15). Thus to “see” God through images is parallel to contemplating the living Christ – the ultimate icon.<sup>3</sup>

*Visio divina* (“divine seeing”) is a practice closely related to *lectio divina*. However, instead of contemplating God through Scripture, here we look to encounter the divine through imagery. Unlike the structured and regulated icons of Orthodox worship, any form of media may be used, including paintings, drawings, photographs, sculpture, digital images, etc.

While usually associated with meditating on “religious” imagery, we can also extend *visio divina* to the natural canvas of creation. The natural world represents the most primordial expression of God’s love, and experiencing that creation in all its

wonder encourages the sense of awe that is appropriate in prayer. Likewise, being in nature reminds us of our integral connection to the created world – and its Creator.

## Methodology

Given its similarity to *lectio divina*, divine seeing comprises the same fundamental steps. The exception, of course, would be the first stage. Instead of reading a biblical passage, we now encounter a visual image (*visio*). The remaining steps are identical: meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*). Like the sacred reading, we view the image slowly and intently with a reverential approach. We allow the icon to speak to us, and we open ourselves to what it has to say.

After a careful viewing, we move towards meditation. Using the imagination, we enter the icon, taking care to notice expressions, colors, scenes, proximity of characters, or anything that draws our attention into the piece. If something in particular calls to us, we pause and reflect on that element. We unite our heart and mind in meaningful connection with the icon.

Also like *lectio divina*, the third iteration of the process is prayer. Whatever has drawn us into the image becomes a gateway between us and the Divine will. We pray that we be shaped by that will, desiring insight into God's way of seeing. We are careful, however, to be silent in our pursuits. We await God's presence and are content to be still. From this stillness, we ebb into contemplation.

Again, the contemplative state has no active "thinking" or analysis. We no longer need to "process" what we see; we have moved into the place where that which God would reveal is shown to us. This purity of union requires no human faculties or aid; we simply accept what is given.

A variation on this overall process involves using multiple images as the source of focus. The same steps are taken as above, but in a more iterative approach. As the different icons appear, different aspects of the images emerge into our consciousness, which in turn evokes various thoughts, emotions, memories, etc.

## Practice

As with previous practices, participants are seated with feet flat on the floor, shoulders relaxed, and backs straight. Since this is a Lenten study, the leader should choose a crucifix or an image of Christ on the cross, placing it in plain view of all present.

- *Pray for God's perception (1 min).* As we prepare to view the icon, we take a brief moment to invite God into the exercise:

*O Lord, as we ponder your crucifixion, let us see beyond the imagery and encounter your unbounded love in a new way. Help us to examine our own hearts and test the quality of our love for you. We pray this through the one who offered himself for us. Amen.*

- *Take in the whole image (3 mins).* All slowly scan the icon, letting the eyes survey the entirety of the image. We are examining the whole of the item, careful to inventory both what's presented and our emotional response to it.
- *Secondary scan (10 mins).* Now we scan the image again, but this time we pause on details. We notice nuance in the icon. We linger. If an attachment is particularly strong, we should stay with that detail and converse with God around its significance.
- *Closing prayer (1 min).* As we bring the exercise to a close, we remain silent and open our inner selves to God and the experience.
- *Group reflection (10 mins).* If the participants are open to it, listen to two or three personal reflections on the exercise. These are sacred moments where we are designated *listeners*, careful not to critique or dialogue with the ones who are reflecting.

## Reflections

After the personal experiences are shared, the group enters an overall discussion of *visio divina*. Possible questions for group reflection:

- Before this encounter, what were your perceptions on icons in worship? Has this experience changed that perception? Enhanced it?
- How did it feel to *visually* experience prayer, especially meditating on Christ's crucifixion?

- Could you imagine yourself having the same experience with “secular” images? Stated differently, can this practice be extended to see God in the “mundane” scenes of our daily lives?
- What variations on this type of prayer might be useful for you?

## Supplemental Resources

<http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Praying-with-Art-Visio-Divina>

<http://alivenow.upperroom.org/2012/08/15/visio-divina/>

Binz, Stephen J. *Transformed by God's Word: Discovering the Power of Lectio and Visio Divina*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2016.

Paintner, Christine and Lucy Wynkop. *Lectio Divina: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness*. New York, Paulist Press, 2008.

Nes, Solrunn. *The Mystical Language of Icons*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Paintner and Lucy Wynkop, *Lectio Divina: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness* (New York, Paulist Press, 2008), 121. Cf. Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), 6.

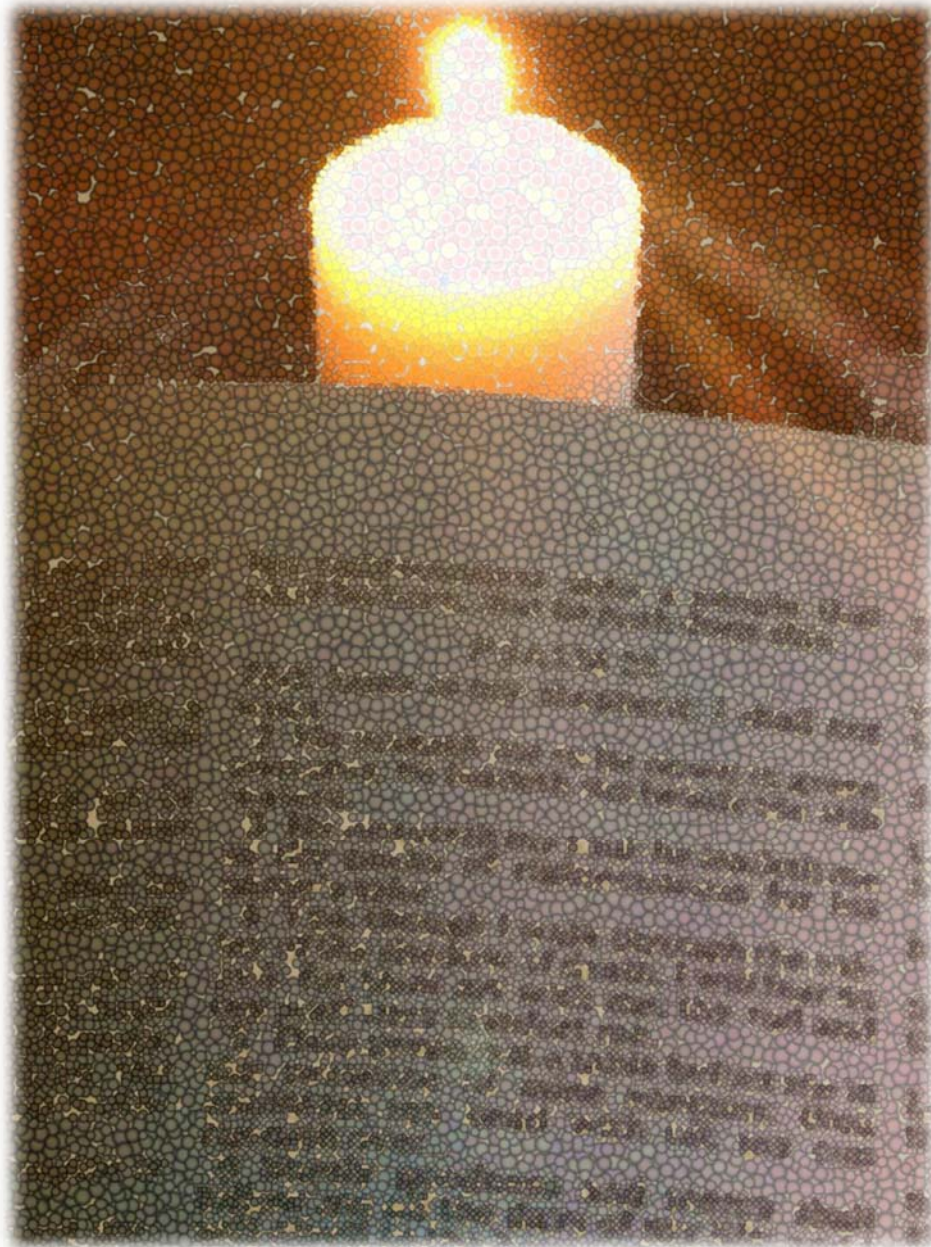
<sup>2</sup> Solrunn Nes. *The Mystical Language of Icons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), Kindle Locations 147-148.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Tomkins, “John of Damascus for Icons.”

<https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/john-of-damascus/> (accessed January 30, 2017).



## Week 4: Hymnody – Praying the Psalms



**“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and *with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.*”**  
–Colossians 3.16

## **Background**

For over twenty-five hundred years people have engaged the Psalter. They’ve done this through singing, reading, recitation and interpretation. But regardless of how these sacred songs are used, all these worship forms can be counted as prayer.

The English word “psalm” originates from the Greek *psalmos*, which in ancient times meant a song or chant accompanied by a stringed instrument.<sup>1</sup> The collection of 150 “praises” (from the Hebrew *Tehillim* – “praises” – the traditional Jewish term for the Psalter) that we know is actually a “collection of collections,” a group of hymns composed by multiple authors over the course of time. The ancients attributed these compositions solely to David, but even the headings of the psalms themselves make that a somewhat dubious claim. Regardless, the Psalter is a body of work that has lasted and proved its worth for countless generations. The rationale for that longevity is shown in the accessibility of the poetry itself.

Regardless of the audience, the sentiments of the Psalms speak to the human condition. They transcend time and space, revealing the core of the human experience – in the Davidic courts, or the homes of suburban America. There are psalms of worship, praise, thanksgiving, and lament. There are words of wisdom, and songs of war. There are even curses and vengeance. And while some of these categories may make us “uncomfortable,” they nevertheless give voice to the breadth and depth of our emotional, psychological, and spiritual realities. The Psalms represent a time-tested tome to which we can turn to “hear” our inner-most selves expressed by “human” voices just like our own.

The twentieth century mystic Thomas Merton says that “nowhere can we be more certain that we are praying with the Holy Spirit than when we pray the Psalms.”<sup>2</sup> The Psalter represents God’s words given back to us to express the totality of our experience. Praying the Psalms allows the Spirit to intercede when “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rom 8.26), supplying the substance of symbols and concepts to voice our reality. But that prayer is not merely for our own catharsis; it links us to the very oneness of God. Merton adequately summarizes this notion of union and our overall purposes for this study:

God has taught us to praise Him, in the Psalms, not in order that He may get something out of this praise, but in order that we may be made better by it. Praising God in the words of the Psalms, we can come to know Him better. Knowing Him better we love Him better, loving Him better we find our happiness in Him.<sup>3</sup>

As we venture into the Psalms this Lenten season, let's allow them to "free" us into the Spirit of God.

## Methodology

Each of us can use the Psalms in our own particular way, meditating and praying in and for the situations that suit us. For example, if we feel the need for security, we may pray Psalm 57. Likewise, if we feel sorrow or persecution, we might seek out Psalm 5. Or we may simply need to give God the praise, and so we turn to Psalm 100, 105, or 150. Whatever our circumstance, we can find something in the Psalter that matches our station, and there are resources that aid in that search (see Appendix A). However, we might choose to pray the Psalms *systematically*, and for that there is some precedence.

In the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia formed a religious order that still remains, commonly known as the Benedictines. Their motto is "Pray and Work," and, true to that tag line, they dedicate a tremendous amount of time and energy to prayer. Their vehicle of choice is the Psalter. While the original monks chose to move through almost the entire Book of Psalms in one week, a more "relaxed" approach is taken in modern times. Now they have the "luxury" of moving through the text in two weeks! The Psalms are sectioned out in a methodical way, the monks praying them seven times throughout the day (see Appendix B).

A less "monastic" way of approaching the Psalms is by dividing all 150 chapters into groups of five, which produces thirty sets of five. Each day (there are about thirty days in each month) we scan that day's grouping, selecting one of the five that speaks most loudly to us. At that point, we read the prayer, simultaneously meditating and praying on the words. The process is not unlike *lectio divina*, except we consume the entirety of the Psalm. If we mark off each Psalm that we've read, we will have prayed the entire Psalter in five months. If we allow for duplicates, we can stretch it out over the course of the year.



## Practice

For this study, we will “chant” the Psalms (reading aloud is OK too!). The leader distributes a copy of Psalm 22.1-18, 25-31 from Appendix C. The group is seated, and divided into two halves, “A” and “B”. The format for this communal prayer will be antiphonal, meaning it will alternate from side to side.

- *Opening prayer (1 min).* The leader opens with this prayer:

*Almighty Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Always give us this bread that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.*

- *Stand and pray Psalm 22.1-11 (2 mins).* Side “A” speaks the lines that are in plain text; side “B” responds with the bolded lines. We speak the text slowly and with intention.
- *Seated silence (1 min).* We allow the solemnity of the moment to overtake us.
- *Stand and pray Psalm 22.12-18 (2 mins).*
- *Seated silence (1 min).*
- *Stand and pray Psalm 22.25-31 (2 mins).*
- *Remain standing and recite a doxology\* aloud together (1 min).* This prayer closes out the reading of the Psalm.
- *Seated silence (1 min).*

\*Appendix C

## Reflections

Possible questions for group reflection:

- Discuss the overall idea of “praying” the Psalms.
- In what ways did the *communal* speaking of the Psalms impact your experience? How did the rhythmic flow of the prayer effect you?
- What does the first line of Psalm 22 remind you of? Why might Jesus have these words on his mouth at this time?
- Does the praying of the Psalms seem to be a good practice for you? What would you do to enhance the practice?

## Supplemental Resources

[http://www.redeemer.com/learn/resources\\_by\\_topic/prayer/prayer\\_and\\_fasting/praying\\_the\\_psalms/](http://www.redeemer.com/learn/resources_by_topic/prayer/prayer_and_fasting/praying_the_psalms/)

<http://unlockingthebible.org/eight-ways-to-use-the-psalms/>

Peterson, Eugene. *Praying with the Psalms*. New York: HarperOne, 1993.

Endres, John and Elizabeth Liebert. *A Retreat with the Psalms: Resources for Personal and Communal Prayer*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001.

Keller, Timothy and Kathy Keller. *The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Psalms*. New York: Viking Press, 2015.

Sire, James. *Learning to Pray Through the Psalms*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007.

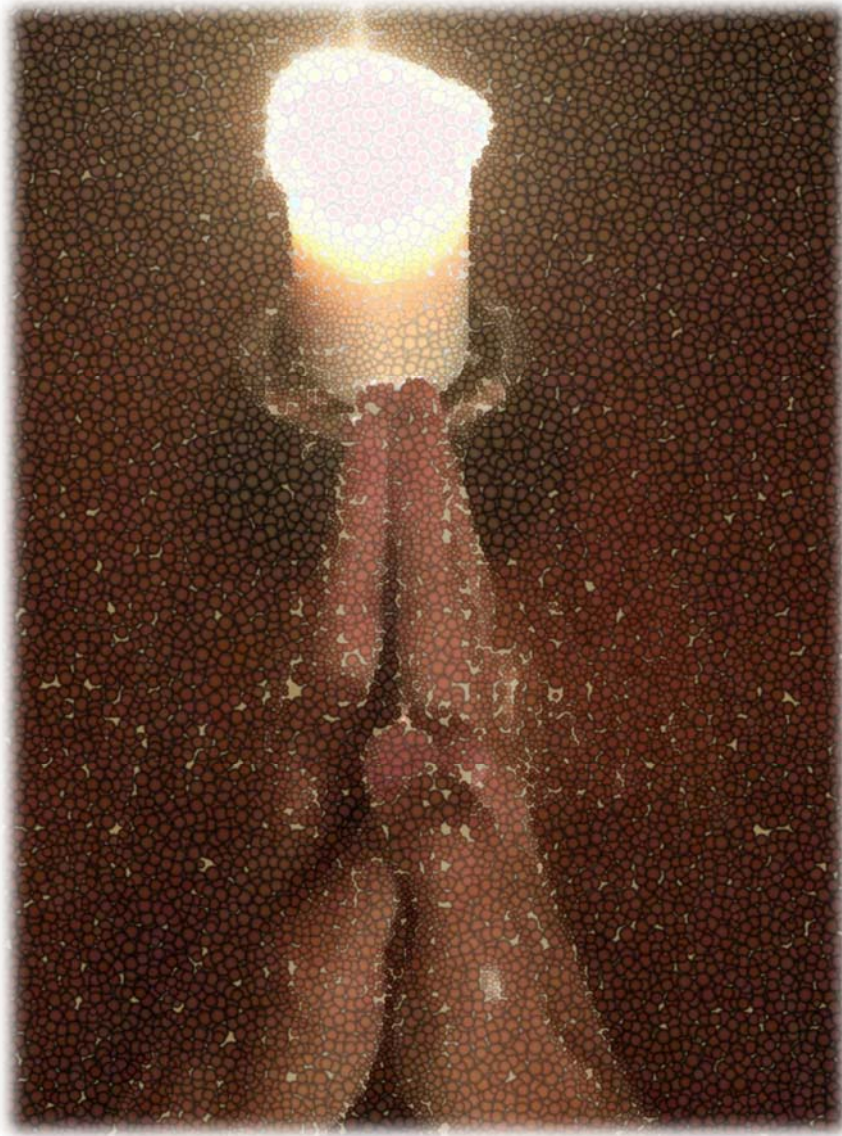
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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Ravenio Books), Loc 97. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Loc 51.

## Week 5: Silence, Part 1 – The Jesus Prayer



**“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”**

**–Luke 18.38**

## **Background**

We often consider prayer to be a conversation between God and ourselves. But before we can listen to others – especially God – we must learn to cultivate the discipline of silence. In a 2014 study at the University of Virginia, psychologists determined that their experimentation subjects “preferred to administer electric shocks to themselves instead of being left alone with their thoughts.”<sup>1</sup> It is no wonder that silence is often deemed one of the best negotiation tactics; since we cannot bear it, we are compelled to speak. But when we understand quiet as a means of discovery, it provides us with a contrast by which we can evaluate the “sounds” of our lives in a more spiritual way.

Intense introspection of this type not only affords us the time to evaluate ourselves more thoroughly – our shortcomings, our insecurities, our fears – but it also permits us to observe our perceived realities with fewer preconceptions and judgments. Because we are silent, our responses are muted. In turn, our hearts and minds are liberated to simply receive. Like Elijah at Mount Horeb, the sound we await doesn’t accompany the winds of whispering voices, raucous musical booms that rattle our eardrums like an earthquake, or even seemingly soothing tones that crackle like flames in a winter fireplace. The sound that brings us face to face with our ultimate reality is that of silence. Mother Teresa gets to the heart of it:

In the silence of the heart God speaks. If you face God in prayer and silence, God will speak to you. Then you will know that you are nothing. It is only when you realize your nothingness, your emptiness, that God can fill you with Himself.

*Souls of prayer are souls of great silence (emphasis added).*<sup>2</sup>

We are obliged to take the lessons of Zechariah, Elijah, and Teresa to heart – to hear God’s voice, we must “allow God to speak to [us] in the mystery of silence and quiet presence.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Methodology**

There is no single way of creating and maintaining silence. Some methods are “active” in nature as they require an overt effort on the part of the pray-er, while others are

“passive” in the sense that the effort is focused on “not focusing.” The “Jesus Prayer” that we practice this week falls mainly in the first category.

The Jesus Prayer is a brief but powerful means of settling ourselves within God. Early church members even prior to the fourth century would use quick “bursts” of prayer to keep themselves in the mindset of Christ. One such prescribed sentence became known as the Jesus Prayer. While there are variations on the words, a historic version in the Orthodox tradition is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” This short but powerful phrase represents a means of silencing the mind that can be spoken aloud or in silence; as a group, or in singular solitude.

Concentrating on the name of Christ in this way serves several functions. First, since the mind is prone to wander, invoking the Holy Name gives the mind a simple something to grasp and thereby be occupied. Second, the discipline of repetition helps order our intention for prayer. Thirdly, the plea for mercy keeps us in a penitent frame of mind, albeit not for self-degradation, but as an affirmation “that God’s loving kindness and compassion are greater than [our] brokenness and guilt.”<sup>4</sup> Fourth, and most importantly, uttering the name of Jesus keeps our focus on the source of our salvation, the place it should always remain. The prayer becomes a place where we find our location, “containing our minds within the words of prayer.”<sup>5</sup>

## Practice

Participants position themselves in a chair with feet squarely on the floor, shoulders relaxed, and backs upright. This practice will be tactile in nature, engaging the sense of touch and simultaneously giving the body “something to do” while the mind is preoccupied with the name of Jesus. Each practitioner should have some form of prayer bead set with at least ten (10) beads (or a length of rope with ten knots). Holding the “rosary” in the lap, the pray-ers will move from bead to bead for each prayer that is offered after the Lord’s Prayer.

- *Opening prayer (1 min).* The leader opens with this prayer:

*O God, you alone can bring into order our unruly wills and passions. Grant us grace to love what you command and desire what you promise, so our hearts may be fixed where true joy is to be found; we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

- Step 1) *Pray the Lord's Prayer aloud as a group (<1 min).*
- Step 2) Grasp the first bead.
- Step 3) *Pray aloud as a group, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us."\**
- Step 4) After one full breath cycle (in and out), move to the next bead.
- Step 5) *Repeat the "Jesus Prayer" of steps 3- nine additional times, for a total of 10 (~1.5 mins).*
- Step 6) Take three (3) full breath cycles.
- *Repeat steps 1-6 for two additional cycles (total of three).*

\* It may be useful for the leader to initiate the prayer, with the group following her or his lead.

## Reflections

Possible questions for group reflection:

- How did you respond to the repetitive nature of the prayer? How did the communal recitation add or distract from the practice?
- In what ways did the prayer beads enhance or distract from the prayer? If they were distracting, have you had occasion to use prayer beads in the past? Is there some other focal method you might choose?
- The ancients insisted that we should "contain our minds within the words of [the] prayer" as a means of silencing our random thoughts. Did you experience the Jesus Prayer this way at any point?
- How might the Jesus Prayer help us explore the mystery of Christ, especially during this Lenten season? In what way might you modify it such that it had a deeper impact?

## Supplemental Resources

Ware, Kallistos. *The Jesus Prayer*. London: Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, 2014.

<https://www.svots.edu/saying-jesus-prayer>

<https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Jesus%20Prayer.html>

Ware, Timothy (Kallistos). *The Orthodox Church*. London: Penguin Books, 1963, 1997.

Savin, Olga, trans. *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2001.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Wilson, David Reinhard, et al, "Just think: The challenges of the disengaged mind," *Science* 345, no. 6192 (2014), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Mother Teresa, *In the Heart of the World: Thoughts, Stories and Prayers* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1997), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Keating, Thomas Ward et al. "Lectio Divina as a Tool for Discernment" by Sarah Butler, *The Divine Indwelling: Centering Prayer and Its Development* (New York: Lantern Books, 2001), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Jesus Prayer* (London: The Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, 2014), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 23.



## Week 6: Silence, Part 2 – Centering Prayer





**“Now there was a great wind...but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”**

**–1 Kings 19.11b-12**

## **Background**

Contemplative prayer is a means of preparation to experience God. Like an orchestra that takes its tuning clues from the first chair violinist, contemplation is a time of shutting off the distractions of the world to attune our hearts to the perfect pitch of the Divine Concert Master. To remove these distractions, we must enter deep periods of silence and solitude. Contrary to popular ideas, solitude isn't about being alone, *per se*; it's about “being alone *with God*. It is not an escape from people but a deepening of one's heart in God so as *to be united with all that is of God*.”<sup>1</sup> Solitude of this type is about removing distractions – physical, psychological, or spiritual – to eliminate any background noise that may interfere with connecting with the Spirit of God. The practice of contemplative prayer not only welcomes but prescribes this isolation. It is an environment that is conducive to cultivating and maintaining inner quiet. And the discipline of stilling our inner selves mimics Christ's redeeming action.

In Philippians, Paul describes Jesus' self-emptying action of the cross. Through a “hymn” of the early church, Paul describes in a literal sense the process of Jesus' self-denial:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, *did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited*, but *emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he *humbled himself* and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Phil 2.5-8, emphasis added).

Christ shows humility through taking human form, suffering, and dying, while his selflessness is displayed in the release of his divine right. Certain forms of contemplative prayer emulate this Christ-like behavior, with the pray-er making room for the Spirit to claim its rightful ownership of the heart.

## Methodology

As we noted before, there are numerous ways of being silent. In the previous lesson, we uttered the Jesus Prayer to keep the mind occupied. There are other options, but for prayer to maintain its sacred character, the discipline and consistency of rigor is necessary. The approach we use this week emulates Jesus' action for us.

God's emptying of self and coming to us as Christ in selflessness and humility is known theologically as *kenosis*, or "emptying out." It is one of the most telling characteristics of God – the total denial of self out of unconditional love. Through Centering Prayer, we imitate this self-denial.

The two keys to Centering Prayer are *silence* and a *prayer word*. The *silence* creates an environment where we are alone with ourselves. Everything that can surface within us will – the good, the bad, and the ugly. During our practice, we don't engage these thoughts actively; we let them come, and we let them go.

The so-called *prayer word* is a mantra of sorts that gives the mind a small dose of what it's after – something to think about. The prayer word is brief and not overly religious (thinking about anything goes against the notion of emptying out). For example, Psalm 46.10a ("Be still and know that I am God!") could be abbreviated to "Be" on the inhalation, and "still" for the exhale. Unlike the Jesus Prayer, the prayer word in this practice isn't constantly repeated; when we notice that our minds are wandering, we use it to bring us back to "center." Note: The mind will wander! It's OK and completely natural. We won't fight it. We just use our prayer word to re-center ourselves. The overall goal is to keep silent and allow ourselves to be in the Divine Presence.

## Practice

Again, participants are seated with feet flat on the floor, shoulders relaxed, and backs straight. Hands may be positioned on the lap with palms up, cupped together, or clasped in prayer form. While the head is straight, the gaze is downward at forty-five degrees. (Note: It is not recommended to stare at a flame or other "animated" object; these have a hypnotic effect.) The tongue is placed in the roof of the mouth, and the participants breathe fully through the nose. The leader will serve as timekeeper.

- *Invite God into the midst (1 min).* Be mindful that we sit not for "self-improvement," but to prepare ourselves for God's presence:

*Almighty and ever-living God, in your tender love for humanity you sent your Son to take on our nature, to suffer death on the cross, and by doing so giving us an example of his great humility. Be with us now as we imitate this holy action through prayer. Amen.*

- *Sit in silence (15 mins).* We are mindful of the breath and the present. If our minds wander, we are free to use our prayer word. We aren't anxious about the exercise; it isn't about us. It's about God. (It may also be useful to have a bell or a chime set for every three minutes; the ringing of the bell also helps to bring us back to center when we have occasion to drift.)
- *Pray: Glory to God in the Highest\** (1 min).

\* Appendix D.

## Reflections

Possible questions for group reflection:

- What were some of the challenges you had during the silence?
- If you tried it, did the prayer word help?
- If you enjoyed the practice, did you find that you didn't want to end it? (Caution: Silent sitting should always be for a set time. Allowing ourselves to go on and on is a sign that we are doing it purely for self-gratification.)
- Have you previously associated this type of prayer with other faith traditions?
- Can you see the connection between this type of prayer and Jesus' suffering and death?

## Supplemental Resources

Pennington, M. Basil. *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form*. New York: Image Books, 2001.

Finley, James. *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*. New York: HarperOne, 2005.

Bourgeault, Cynthia. *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2004.

—. *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> Ilia Delio, *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, and Consciousness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 156.

## Appendix A: Categories of Psalms<sup>1</sup>

<b>Lament Psalms</b>	
<b>Community</b>	12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89*, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129
<b>Individual</b>	3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27*, 28, 31, 36*, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, 52*, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89*, 120, 139, 141, 142
<b>Specialized Lament Psalms</b>	
<b>Penitential</b>	6, 32*, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143
<b>Judgment/Curses</b>	35, 69, 83, 88, 109, 137, 140
<b>Thanksgiving Psalms</b>	
<b>Community</b>	65*, 67*, 75, 107, 124, 136*
<b>Individual</b>	18, 21, 30, 32*, 34, 40:1-11, 66:13-20, 92, 108*, 116, 118, 138
<b>Salvation History</b>	8*, 105-106, 135, 136
<b>Songs of Trust</b>	11, 16, 23, 27*, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, 131
<b>Hymns</b>	
<b>Hymn &amp; Doxology</b>	8*, 19:1-6, 33, 66:1-12, 67*, 95, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150
<b>Worship Psalms</b>	
<b>Covenant Songs</b>	50, 78, 81, 89*, 132
<b>Royal</b>	2, 18, 20, 21, 29, 45, 47, 72, 93, 95*, 96, 97, 98, 99, 101, 110, 144
<b>Songs of Zion</b>	46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122
<b>Temple Liturgies</b>	15, 24, 68*, 82, 95*, 115, 134
<b>Community Psalms</b>	
<b>Wisdom Psalms</b>	1*, 36*, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133
<b>Torah Poems</b>	1*, 19:7-14, 119

<sup>1</sup> Modified from Dennis Bratcher, "Types of Psalms: Classifying the Psalms by Genre," <http://www.crivoice.org/psalmtypes.html>, last modified: April 23, 2014, accessed February 2, 2017.

## Appendix B: Divine Office Psalm Chart<sup>1</sup>

	Week 1							Week 2						
	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
<b>Vigils</b>	21A	1	10	30	38	45	54	17A	67A	74	79	95	104A	106A
	21B	3	11	33	39	46	57	17B	67B	76	80	96	104B	106B
	22	6	12	34	40	48	58	17C	68	78	82	97	105A	107
	23	7	16	36A	43A	49	59	20	70	77A	88A	101	105B	108A
	24	9A	28	36B	43B	51	60	26	72	77B	88B	103A		108B
	25	9B	29	37	44	53	61	27	73	77C	88C	103B		
<b>Lauds</b>	50	5	15	35	41	56	63	66	64	65	71	75	87	89
	8	85	91	92	42	98	99	19	100	102	142	148	149	150
	62				93			117						
<b>Terce</b>	119, 120, 121							119, 120, 121						
<b>Sext</b>	118:	118:	118:	118:	118:	118:	118:	118:	118:	118:	118:	122	122	122
	I-II	III-IV	V-VI	VII-	IX-X	XI-XII	XIII-	XV-	XVII-	XIX-	XXI-	123	123	123
				VIII			XIV	XVI	XVIII	XX	XXII	124	124	124
<b>None</b>	118:	125	131	125	131	125	131	118:	125	131	125	131	125	131
	VII-XI	126	132	126	132	126	132	XIX-XXII	126	132	126	132	126	132
		127		127		127			127		127		127	
<b>Vespers</b>	2 14	13	18	31	32	47	44	52 55	69	81	83	84	86	23
	109 111	113A	114	128	130	132	137	135A 136	138A	139	141	144	146	84
	110 112	113B	115-116	129	131	134	23	135B 137	138B	140	143	145	147	22
<b>Compline</b>	4, 90							4, 90						

<sup>1</sup> Modified from the Cistercian-Trappist Assumption Abbey in Ava, MO. Uses the Septuagint numbering system of the Psalms.

## Appendix C: Psalm 22.1-18, 25-31 & Doxology

### Psalm 22.1-11

A: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

**B: Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?**

A: O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

**B: and by night, but find no rest.**

A: Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

**B: In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.**

A: To you they cried, and were saved;

**B: in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.**

A: But I am a worm, and not human;

**B: scorned by others, and despised by the people.**

A: All who see me mock at me;

**B: they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;**

A: "Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver — let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"

**B: Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast.**

A: On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

**B: Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.**

### Psalm 22.12-18

A: Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

**B: they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.**

A: I am poured out like water,

**B: and all my bones are out of joint;**

A: my heart is like wax;

**B: it is melted within my breast;**

A: my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws;

**B: you lay me in the dust of death.**

A: For dogs are all around me;

**B: a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled;**

A: I can count all my bones.

**B: They stare and gloat over me;**

A: they divide my clothes among themselves,

**B: and for my clothing they cast lots.**

### Psalm 22.25-31

A: From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

**B: my vows I will pay before those who fear him.**

A: The poor shall eat and be satisfied;

**B: those who seek him shall praise the Lord.  
May your hearts live forever!**

A: All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;

**B: and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.**

A: For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

**B: To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;**

A: before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

**B: Posterity will serve him;**

A: future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,

**B: saying that he has done it.**

### Doxology

**ALL: Praise the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. The God who is, who was, and is to come, at the end of the ages. Amen.**



## **Appendix D: Glory to God in the Highest**

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth.

Lord God, heavenly King, Almighty God and Father,

we worship You, we give You thanks,

we praise You for Your glory.

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,

Lord God, Lamb of God, You take away the sin of the world:

have mercy on us; You are seated at the right hand of the Father:

receive our prayer.

For You alone are the Holy One, You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High,

Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of the Father.

Amen.