

Praying With The Manger, A Lectio Divina

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Hi, I'm Michael Gormley, and today we're going to talk about one of my favorite subjects, which is mental prayer or meditative prayer. But before we go into that subject, let's pray, seems rather appropriate. Let's begin.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost, amen. Heavenly Father, we bless you, praise you, adore you. We sanctify your holy and sacred name. We thank you for the gift of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We thank you for the hope that He gave us by rising from the grave, by triumphing over death and Satan. He gave us hope. He gave us a path home to you, heavenly Father. And then he breathed out upon his holy church, the spirit of adoption, the spirit of sonship and daughterhood that he made us new so that we could walk home to our father's house.

Lord Jesus, inspired by the fact that you never cease to make intercession for us sitting at the right hand of your Father. I ask you, Lord Jesus Christ, to send the fullness of your spirit on me and all those who will listen today, that they might be enriched by this conversation in prayer, and that their own relationship with you might deepen. Jesus, I trust in you, Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you. And in your matchless name we pray, amen. In the name of the Father and the Son of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

An Encounter With Mental Prayer

This is going to be exciting because not a lot of Catholics know how to engage in mental prayer, nor do they do it. They don't pray this way at all. In fact, a lot of people, when we talk about Christian prayer, we talk about the reality that many people, it's dry and it's boring, or it's something that you begrudgingly do. And that's so sad. You know, at Pray More Novenas like the point is to go and recapture some of the great treasures of our Catholic prayer life, right? Like these great saints and all this stuff that we're missing out on. But memorize prayers belong to what we call vocal prayer.

Vocal prayer is important, but it's not the whole thing of Christian spirituality. In fact, there's a whole new level from vocal prayer called mental prayer. And in mental prayer, there's basically two categories, meditative and contemplative. Contemplative, traditionally understood is mystical prayer. That is the action is mostly God doing it to you, not necessarily you being the active one. He's acting upon you. You're receptive, but it's not you doing it. Meditative prayer on the other hand, is your participation with your intellect, your imagination, your memory. It's your participation in the mysteries of God.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, vocal prayer, as Thomas Merton said famously that Bishop Baron quotes all the time, and I have found this to be absolutely true, is saying your prayers, that is vocal prayer is an excellent way to begin praying.

You know, I do prison ministry as well, and one day, it was my first retreat, there was a guy who was a former neo-Nazi, white supremacist guy. And he had gone on a Protestant retreat about 18 months earlier, you know, and changed his whole life, massive conversion. He started doing some work with Catholics. They invited him on the retreat, and he's like, cool, I had a wonderful retreat. This will be great.

So we taught them things like the rosary, and we did a lot of apologetics and stuff to make sure they understood what they were getting themselves into. And he stood up at the end and he said, you know, when they were sharing reflections, he said, you know, I'm in prison because I my mind is disordered. And he is like, anyone else agree? And they're all like, yeah. And then he said, but when I pray this, he's like, I'm so little shaky on the whole Mary thing, but the divine Mercy chaplet, he's like just saying those simple words over and over again and meditating he's like thinking about God and what He did for me on the cross, it's like Tetris and all the blocks finally aligned. It puts my mind in order.

Your Biggest Distraction

And I don't know about you, but for me, when I pray, I am the biggest distraction. It's not things going on in my environment. It's not the car driving by or the kids or the dog barking. It's me. I'm the one who's wrong, right? And it's this noise that's constantly going in the back of my head that's like, did you think about this? Did you do that? Do, do, do do. There's like a bear with a fez on a unicycle. Like that's all I think about, right? These things are just going through my head. And one of the things that I realized was if I saturate my life in noise, when I finally get quiet, I will still only hear the noise. So part about having a rich prayer life is learning how to enjoy solitude, stillness. And the thing I'm worst about, silence.

And I know this, I know that if I watch a movie late at night on Saturday night, maybe me in the misses or go out to a movie, it is harder for me to focus at morning mass on Sunday morning. It is harder for me to enter into prayer before mass. And so meditative prayer is a next level that actually takes more work and more preparation. You know, we have all said Hail Marys that we don't even remember saying them. I remember one time I was doing the sign of the cross and I said, one, two, three, four and then I stopped and I was like, get your woman on the floor. Like, you don't need to do that. That's not helpful. That's not healthy, right? It's certainly not holy. I get so distracted so easily. Don't even remember saying the Hail Mary.

But with meditative prayer, you can't really meditate unless you are at least 80% focused on the task at hand. The sad thing is, so many things distract us. So often what I will do is I will go to one place where I do my meditation, and I will stay in that one place. I will recreate the event so that my body doesn't become an obstacle, right? My mind doesn't become an obstacle. I also do it early in the morning. I never thought I was a morning person, but I started waking up early and wouldn't you know it, my body just shifted to mornings. So I wake up typically before my wife so that I can get the coffee going, and then I start my scriptural meditation, and then she comes downstairs, she begins hers, and then I deal with

the kids. My kids are a little bit older now, so they know that, well, we have the chant music playing, don't come knocking. So as we're sitting at the kitchen table and we're praying through scripture individually, and I'm safeguarding her prayer time, and she's safeguarding mine. This is where I've entered into the deep levels of Christian maturity.

But it's always preceded by preparation. And often that preparation is the rosary. I have to pray something like the rosary because it's like, I need Our Lady and I need to be saying holy words and holy things surrounding myself with holy concepts, just to bring my mind into focus. But once it's at focus, then I can begin Christian meditation.

Now, I do want to make one note that I kind of already said at the beginning, that Christian meditation is not the same thing as Buddhist meditation. That's so in vogue today. This fake pseudo Buddhism that's so popular with like Hollywood people. Now, Christian meditation involves your full faculties. If you and I are rational animals, that's a very classical definition. The rational part is what sets us apart from the animal part, right? So the highest within us is our reason. Why would we want to make our minds go blank? Not engage our intellects, not engage our reasoning capacities, not engage our imaginations and our memories? Why would we not want to do that when we come to prayer? You know, there's so much stuff about mindfulness meditation and about emptying your mind and just, you know, receiving, okay, there might be a point or place for that.

But it's not prayer. It's not prayer. When we Christians pray, we are speaking to the logos, the word of God, who communicates the truth about God to us, who says, I am the truth. And so you and I need to walk in the way of the truth, and there be life. And so meditative prayer starts with saying your prayers. That's usually the way that most people need to do it, to focus. But then it's about using your intellect, your imagination, and your memory, your higher capacities in order to enter into that prayer.

Two Forms of Prayer

So let me give you a for instance. When I was just out of college, I was struggling at work. I was a youth minister, had a lot of things to discern, marriage, priesthood, all this stuff. So I went on a four day silent retreat, and the beginning of that silent retreat, it was nothing but noise in my head. So I was in an environment of solitude, stillness, and silence. And yet my brain was still doing all the things. So it took about 24 hours for that to go away, but it went away. It turns out when you don't feed the wolf, it goes away or it dies. I don't know what the analogy is there. So for me, I kept at bay all my need for entertainment and all this stuff. I had silence of the ears, the eyes and the mouth. I didn't look for conversation. Ooh, what's going on over? I didn't daydream. And that noise went away. And so when I sat there for a holy hour, my first day, the holy hour felt like 15 hours, I'd be like, oh, I'm about done. And it's been five minutes. Oh man. By the end of the retreat, I would enter into prayer for two hours and think an hour had passed.

And it was a really beautiful experience because when I used my imagination and I combined it with my memory of my own sinfulness, my own recollections of things I was thinking about, all of a sudden these gospel stories came alive. And I can still to this day remember the green grass meditating on Jesus going from His baptism into the wilderness of temptation. And I accompanied him as like a disciple, like 20 yards away. So as He's walking, I'm

following Him. The green grass that surrounded the Jordan River, I can still see in my prayer. See, this is the type of prayer.

So want to talk about two different forms. I don't know what I did with my hands there. I want to talk about two different forms of mental prayer. One is called Lectio Divina, and the other one's called composition of place. Composition of place is associated with St. Thomas or St. Ignatius of Loyola. It informs a lot of Jesuit spirituality. Pope Francis and a lot of his writings used this composition of place to paint a really vivid image of whatever gospel passage he was meditating on.

Composition of Place

So let's go through composition of place first. Composition of place means you read, you reread, and you reread this passage to understand all the little elements in it. Sometimes what I would do is I would journal, I would write down the different components like, oh, there are people here. Actually, no, on my third rereading, I realized there's two groups of people. There's crowds and then there's disciples. Right now, funny side note, if you go through my Bible, because of that retreat I did 18 years ago, every time it says crowds followed Jesus or whatever, I would write crowds ain't disciples. And it's important to realize that, they ain't disciples. And it was the first time I made that distinction right there. And so I began to see like, oh, there are different people here. And the story as it unfolds, when Jesus gives a teaching or heals someone, different people react in different modes.

So composition of place is like, I'm going to use my imagination and I'm going to use my intellect in what I understand about first century Israel, all that stuff, the geography of the day, the words of the gospels. And I'm going to put myself into that story and I'm going to recreate it as best as my mind will allow me. And then once I'm inside that story, I think about being one of the characters in the story watching Jesus as he says these words.

So I'd have the gospel with me, and I'm reading through, right? Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is a kingdom of heaven, okay? The crowds are following him. He goes up the mountain, then he sits down with his disciples and says to them, he opens his mouth and says to them, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, huh? So then I imagine myself as a bystander watching, or maybe as one of the disciples, maybe I would imagine myself as Peter listening, as one of the disciples sitting at the feet of the master. You know, you read different stories. Maybe you could imagine yourself as Herod or someone in Herod's court, seeing the wise men come in, the tumult of the people, all Jerusalem's a buzz, right? And then watch them as they, you know, as he lies to them. Like, what are your thoughts? Like you know that Herod has nothing but ill will towards this child. This immerses you into the story. And then it allows you to see the story from the inside out.

Lectio Divina

The other type of mental prayer, there are many types of mental prayer, but this other one that I want to talk about it's called Lectio Divina. It's very popular. Many of you probably know what it is. And Lectio means reading. So it's divine reading. You take the divine scriptures, right? The sacred scriptures, the Bible, you take a small passage, sometimes people use chapters. You don't want to do that. You can, but you don't want to, you want to take a small

portion. Sometimes when you read a chapter, a smaller portion will kind of stand out to you. Usually for a lot of people, it's the end of a story where the characters like get what Jesus was saying in the teaching or in the healing. So you take a story and you sit there with it, and you read it, and you read it slowly and you read it over and over again so that the story you soak in it like a warm tub, or as the rabbis used to say, you ruminate on it, right? Like a cow chewing the cud. That was like their analogy.

You just constantly chewing on this scripture passage. And as you take it into yourself, you understand like, oh, this one part is sticking out as I read it for the fifth time. Let me apply it to my life. So this is where your memory comes in. This is why it's so important to have an intellect and to use it, right? So we're not just intellectually processing the words, the environment, the historical narrative, but now we're taking a word that stands out. You could call this the charismatic meaning or the moral meaning of the Bible. And you're analyzing. You're saying, okay, well why did this word stand out? Maybe it was God, maybe it was me. Maybe it's my guardian angel, who knows, I'm going to look at this word because it's scripture, it's anointed, it's God breathed, and I'm going to take this anointed word and apply it to my life. And then you apply it to your life.

You say, okay, well that doesn't make sense. That doesn't make sense. Oh, when I think about my marriage, yeah, that word right there, that does make sense. And so you begin to look at these things from a different perspective. You begin to see that the words of Jesus have just as much impact on our lives today as they did way back then. See, when they heard Jesus way back then, they wanted to give their lives to him, or they wanted to take his life. When I preach the gospel afterwards, people want to serve me coffee, right? Like no one wants to take my life, nor give their lives to me.

Why is that? Why is that? Anglican Bishop famously said that when Paul preached, city's rioted, when I preached, they serve me tea. I think that's apt to describe a lot of our sermons. But when Jesus spoke, lives were changed. Why is it mine? Well, maybe I'm not attentive. Maybe I'm treating it like words on a page instead of the living word of God that can pierce the heart, separating soul from spirit. Like this is the two-edged sword of the word of God. And I'm not giving it, its due. Lectio Divina takes the word in, first we read, then we meditate and we take that word in and apply it to our life. And then when we feel like we understand how this applies to our life, then we form a vocal prayer based on that. That's step three. We take that vocal prayer and we offer that to God. Maybe we have to ask for grace and assistance in something. Maybe we're repenting of something. Maybe we're thanking Him for something that He's done.

And then finally, we just rest. We read, we meditate, we pray, and we rest in what God has given us. Composition of place. I create the scene and I let it unfold as a character or observer in the scene. And then Lectio Divina focuses less on the scene and more on the words. And you let the words impact your life today. So this is how we begin to do this. And when you develop the habit of this over and over, your advent is set on fire by the glory of God hitting these words. So for instance, let's just take an opportunity to pray right now.

A Prayer Exercise

In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Now I'm going to tell you something you might not know. St. Francis of Assisi popularized the stable manger, that whole scene. And so he used what he had, wooden stables, animals coming in. But in Jerusalem and in Bethlehem, there wasn't a lot of wooded areas that we have in Italy or Europe or whatever. What they have is caves.

And so in Bethlehem, probably the stable was a hewed out cave. There would obviously be animals in there, penned in, right? Bethlehem is where they kept the sheep, the lambs that were going to be offered in the temple in Jerusalem. There's a lot of shepherds there. That's why the angel spoke to the shepherd. So recreate the scene in your mind. There's the blessed Virgin Mary, there's St. Joseph, and there is the Christ child laying in a manger. What does he look like? What does our lady look like? What does St. Joseph look like? What do the animals look like? What is the stable? Do you see the wise men coming and laying their gifts? Or are you focusing instead on the shepherds coming.

Come Holy Spirit, let's take this opportunity to picture is it at night dimly lit by a torch or a fire? Is it during the daytime? Can you clearly see things? Who are you in the story? For instance, you could think of the wise men bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, a story that we're all so familiar with. Lord Jesus. There you are, a babe in a manger, a food trough. You are the king of kings, the Son of God. And yet you're laid in a food trough in a stable because we could not create room for you in our hearts, in the inn. Even from this moment you were the outcast. But this was the life that you embraced, Lord. The the Son of God came into the world to be the bread of life.

So you were born in Bethlehem, which means house of bread, and you were laid in a food trough. And there our blessed mother watched as kings of the East, as Pagans came and laid down their gifts of gold, frankincense, a gift for a priest. Myrrh, something you would use to anoint a dead body, bizarre gifts to give to a poor babe born in a stable. What do the faces of Mary look like as they open their chest of gold, their fortune of frankincense, their barrel of myrrh? What do you want to do seeing these men give these gifts? Do you want to give him something as well? Maybe you have something that you need to give up. Maybe you have something you want to share. Maybe you want to give Him yourself.

The star is overhead, even though it's might be the middle of the night. That star is burning so bright. It's like a full moon just for you to make your play, to give yourself to the Christ child, hold nothing back. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be world without end. Amen. In the name of the Father and the Son of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When you do meditative prayer, the prayers that you pray almost never leave you. Imagine praying every day like this for a year. 365 deep meditations that are woven into your imagination, your memory, your intellect, and your will, so that when you go about your day, you're thinking, I gave myself to the Christ child today. And it doesn't leave you. God bless you all, and I hope you have a fruitful advent.