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OPENING
TO GOD

Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer

Expanded Edition



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MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE

IF WE ARE HONEST, MOST OF US HAVE to admit that prayer is often more of an obligation than something arising spontaneously from desire. Part of the reason for this, I think, is that prayer is frequently presented as a spiritual discipline. Disciplines are things that we do not naturally do but feel we should do because they are supposed to be good for us. As you will have noticed, most children don't need to be told to play. It is only adults for whom play as a discipline might be necessary and potentially helpful! However, as we will see, prayer is the natural language of the soul. So there is something seriously wrong when it feels like something we should do.

But our problem is deeper than merely thinking of prayer as something we should do. The real problem and the core of the misunderstanding lies in thinking of prayer as something that we *do*. Understood more correctly, prayer is what God does in us. Our part has much more to do with consent than initiative. That consent, as we shall see, is most simply saying yes to God's invitation to loving encounter.

Prayer is so much more than we could ever imagine because God is so much beyond what we can ever contain in our understanding—even in our imagination. This is why the apostle Paul prayed to the God who, “working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20). And it is why Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, encourages us to think of the incredible beauty of a field of wildflowers when we worry about what to wear (Matthew 6:25-34). His point is that since not even Solomon was clothed in regalia as splendid as those wildflowers, we should trust that, since this is how God clothes the grass in the field, God’s care for us will be even more unimaginably extravagant.

Prayer includes saying things to God—either silently or vocally, whether this be worded petitions or intercessions that we put together ourselves or formal prayers that have been written by others. But it is so much more than this. It can also include

- reading a passage of Scripture and listening for God’s personal word to you in it
- meditatively walking the stations of the cross
- lighting a candle in church or your home
- allowing music to draw your spirit toward God’s Spirit
- affirming your beliefs by reading or reciting the creeds
- reviewing your day and noticing where and how God was present to you in it
- meditating on Scripture and thinking about its meaning for your life
- fingering beads as a framework for meditation

- allowing your hunger during a fast to draw your attention toward God
- recalling your blessings and responding with gratitude
- subvocal repetition of a mantra (e.g., “Come, Lord Jesus” or “My God and my all”) that moves prayer from consciousness to the unconscious and from mind to heart*
- celebration of the Eucharist (Communion)
- going for a long, rambling walk while repeating the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner”)
- confessing your sins and asking for forgiveness
- smelling incense during a liturgy and having your spirit drawn toward God
- a contemplative walk in the forest that moves you from self-preoccupation to God consciousness
- making the sign of the cross or bowing before an altar or crucifix
- sitting in silence—allowing your heart to be drawn back to God by the periodic gentle repetition of a love name for God
- reading liturgical or other written prayers
- meditatively speaking the Lord’s Prayer
- attending to your breathing—drawing in God with each

*I discuss mantra prayers in chapter seven. But in case you are surprised to see this term applied to a form of Christian prayer, I should quickly say that, as we will discover, these prayers are Christian in content even if the form is most commonly associated with non-Christian religions. They are a deeply Christian way of being prayerfully open to God.

inhalation and releasing God to the world with each exhalation

- allowing your mind and spirit to turn toward God as you hear church bells or see a lit candle or any of an infinite number of reminders that can call your attention back to God
- singing or pondering the words of a favorite hymn or song
- meditating on an icon or a work of biblical art
- allowing your heart to soar in unworded praise in response to a sunset, a storm, a flower or a tree

Some of these may seem strange to you, possibly so far outside your spiritual comfort zone that you may wonder if they are worthy of being called Christian prayer. But all have been richly rewarding for Christians across the major divisions of the church and across the centuries of Christian history. All therefore are Christian forms of prayer, and because of this all have much to teach the person who desires to be attentive and responsive to God.

However, it is very important that we acknowledge that none of these things is automatically prayer. Nor, even, is addressing words or thoughts to God automatically prayer. But all these things—actually, all of life—can be prayer when offered to God in faith and with openness. It is the underlying orientation of the heart that makes something prayer. Without a heart that is open to God in faith, it may look like prayer and it may sound like prayer, but it won't be genuine Christian prayer. Genuine prayer always begins in the heart and is offered by an act of opening our self as we turn toward God in faith.

The ways God can communicate with us are infinitely more creative and diversified than we could ever imagine. Because of

this, the ways we can communicate with God are correspondingly broader and richer than most of us ever experience. Growth in prayer is learning to open more and more of our selves to God.

PRAYER AS CONVERSATION

But what is prayer? The answer I was given as a young child was that prayer is a conversation with God. To encourage me to practice such conversational prayer, my parents gave me my first book on prayer for my thirteenth birthday. It was called *Prayer: Conversing with God*, and in it I learned that prayer could be as simple as speaking, silently or audibly, to God—just as I did to other people.¹ This was quite a powerful awareness. It became the foundation of a practice that has served me extremely well since then, the practice of frequently talking with God as I go through my day. Often this is a quick prayer of intercession, asking God to bless someone who comes to mind or whom I encounter. Or it may take the form of a few words of gratitude as I become aware of some blessing—like, for example, just now as I thanked God for my parents, who gave me that book on prayer, and for its author, who taught me so much. Sometimes it involves only a single word—*Help!* But, regardless of its length or content, what I have learned through conversational prayer is that my relationship with God is strengthened as I speak with God throughout the day because it reminds me that I am, in fact, in relationship and that God is with me no matter where I am or what I am doing.

I must say, however, that it took me a long time to begin to truly treat the interaction as conversation. For decades my prayers were nothing more than a monologue. I did all the talking, and I never once considered that God might be doing more

than listening. The problem was not with my understanding of prayer, but that I didn't take it seriously enough. If I had really believed that prayer was conversation, I would not have been nearly as rude as I was. I would have talked less and listened more.

The good news is that God is ever reaching out in self-revealing love and has no more ceased being Revelation than being Love. The prayer conversation always begins with God. It does not begin with us. Prayer is our response to a divine invitation to encounter. The prayer conversation has already begun because God has already reached out, seeking our attention and response. Until we learn to attend to the God who is already present and communicating, our prayers will never be more than the product of our minds and wills. But prayer has the potential to be so much more. It can be the response of our spirit to God's Spirit as we open the totality of our being to the God who resides in our deep center and longs to meet us there.

The problem with understanding prayer as conversation is that prayer is so much more than communication. Reducing it to conversation makes it simply a mental activity—words and thoughts being a product of the left hemisphere of the brain. Prayer includes the mind, but is not limited to it. God invites engagement with more of our brain and more of our being. The glorious truth is that I can be praying to God without speaking to God, or without even consciously thinking of God. If this wasn't true, how could we ever hope to realize the ideal of continuous prayer that is encouraged in Scriptures (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:18)? Obviously we cannot be thinking about God all the time. Nor can we be talking to God all the time. But prayer can be as foundational to our daily life as

breathing. It can become a part of living, not just a religious practice or a spiritual discipline.

PRAYER AS COMMUNION

A better starting point for an adequate understanding of the breadth of prayer is to view it as communion with God. Communion includes conversation but is much broader. Because it involves union, not just closeness and connection, it also entails much more intimacy than mere conversation. We are, as Paul reminds us, in Christ, just as Christ is in us. That language reflects the intermingling that is part of true communion. It does not get much more intimate than this—an intimacy that is based on the reality of a mystical union with Christ, in the present moment, not simply something to be hoped for in the future. Our experiential knowing of this reality may be limited. But the union is real, even now. And the communion that we can experience in prayer is also real—so real that, more so than anything else that I know of, this prayer communion has the power to transform us from the inside out.

The good news is that we do not need to be talking to God or even thinking about God to be in prayer. We can simply be with God. That is the nature of communion. It is not dependent on constant communication. Think, for example, of being with someone you love and with whom you experience deep communion. Words are undoubtedly part of your being together, but notice how easily they can also fall away as you slip into a comfortable experience of simply being together in unworded presence. The same can be true of prayer.

Love makes this possible, and it is love that makes prayerful communion so fulfilling and transformational. Communion with God is the answer to our heart's deepest longings, because

God is love. Prayer is a relationship. It is dialogue that is based on a deep personal encounter. And since God is love, God can only be truly encountered in love.

PRAYER AS BEING IN LOVE

We might say, therefore, that prayer is being in love.² We can understand this in two ways, both of which are true, and each points to the other for its fullest understanding. In the first sense of this phrase we could say that prayer is being in love with God. As noted by John of the Cross, since God is love, God can only be known in and through love. Communion with God leads naturally, therefore, to a deepening of our knowing of God's love for us and, in return, our love for God. But speaking of prayer as being in love also reminds us that in prayer we come to know our being-in-Love. Prayer is not simply what we do. It is a way of being. More specifically, it is resting in the reality of our being-in-God. This is our fundamental identity. It is the hidden but deepest truth of our existence. Our being has no meaning apart from its relationship to God's being. The only possibility of being who I most deeply am rests in the eternal *I AM*. Because of the *I AM*, I can be. Because the eternal *I AM* is love, I can experience communion with God in love. This is what makes it possible for me to become truly and fully human, for me to become truly and fully who I am in Christ. And doing so has everything to do with prayer—not simply something I do but as a way of being in love, being in God.

This is why Teresa of Ávila says that the important thing in prayer is not to think much but to love much.³ The head is not a bad place to start our prayer journey. But if prayer stays there too long and does not begin to sink to the heart, it will inevitably become arid and frustrating. However, when we allow prayer to

begin to seep from our minds to our depths, it gives God access to those depths. Then, and only then, can prayer spontaneously emerge as God's action in us. And when it does, prayer becomes the overflow of the living waters that spring up from our depths. It becomes us listening in on a loving conversation of God with God as that conversation passes through us.

Our relationship with God may not begin in love, but it never deepens significantly until we enter into a personal encounter with Love. The more our being is grounded in God's love, the more prayer begins to flow from our hearts, not simply our minds. This is why Paul's prayer was that we might know the depths, breadth, length and height of God's love so that we may thereby be filled with the utter fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14-19). Christian prayer is a personal encounter in love, with Love. It is loving communion with the source of all love, with the source of our very being.

Perhaps you have heard the apocryphal story of a man I will call Juan. Every day near dusk Juan would stop in a church on his way home from his work—hardhat in hand, often dirty or at least dusty, and obviously tired. He would sit quietly in the back of the church for five or ten minutes, then get up and leave. Seeing him do this day after day, month after month, the parish priest approached him one day as he was leaving and told him he was happy that he used the church in this way. Juan thanked the priest for leaving the church open so he could come in, saying that this was a very important time for him each day. The priest asked him in what way it was important. Juan replied that this was his time with Jesus. He went on, "I just come in, sit down and say 'Jesus, it's Juan.'"

"What happens then?" the priest asked.

"Well," he replied, "Jesus says 'Juan, it's Jesus,' and we're

happy to just spend some time together.”

Juan may not have known it, but he had come to know the essence of prayer. He loved God and loved to spend time with God. Prayer is not simply a presentation of petitions, although bringing requests to God is certainly a legitimate and important part of prayer. Nor is it a discharge of an obligation. In essence, prayer is being with the Beloved. It is relationship. It is accepting God’s invitation to loving encounter. It is, therefore, more like an echo than a self-initiated action. It is consent to God’s action in our hearts and in the depths of our being.

JOURNEYING INTO LOVE

As our love journey with God develops, so does our prayer. It cannot help but do so because prayer is right at the heart of our relationship with God. Prayer is God’s action in us. Our part is simply to allow divine love to so transform our hearts that love of God will spring forth as a response to love, not as the fruit of our determination.

The route to a life of prayer as loving personal encounter with God is to allow prayer to be God’s responsibility. We can no more manufacture a genuine encounter with love than we can transform our hearts of stone to hearts of love. For these matters we can do no other than turn our face toward God and receive the love for which our souls so desperately long.

The Christian spiritual journey is responding to God’s invitation to personal encounter in love. Prayer is our response. Prayer is the place of the encounter. Growth in prayer is growth in loving intimacy with God.

Thomas Green compares the stages of this growth to the stages in the development of a romance.⁴ The first stage of

prayer, he suggests, is the courtship—getting to know God. Since we cannot really love what we do not know, a love relationship must start with knowing the beloved. In the case of knowing God, this might begin with prayerful meditation on Scriptures. It might also involve using our imagination to meet Jesus in the events of his life on earth and seeing ourselves, with our own concrete personal history, connected to those events. At this stage, the goal of prayer is getting to know the God who is courting us.

The second stage of prayer is the honeymoon. Here we experience a transition from knowledge to experience, from head knowing to heart knowing. Meditation now slowly begins to require less effort. Our hope begins to be realized and the experience of God begins to flow freely with less meditative labor. We experience joy in just being with the Lord—just as good friends find joy simply in being together. They don't plan their conversation or analyze their relationship. They don't really even think about each other much when they are together. They are just happy to be together, whatever may be happening. This is Juan and his Lord.

Following the honeymoon, the third stage is what Father Green calls the movement from apparent love to true love. This corresponds to the long years of daily married life. And just as mature marriage relationships involve both a growing friendship as well as periods of deadening routine and at least occasional conflict, so too the prayer journey will inevitably include both consolation and desolation. If you don't know about desolation in prayer, you haven't been praying for very long. I have certainly known long periods when it felt like my prayers were simply echoing in my head but not reaching God. But, as we shall see, even desolation has its divine purpose. For here, in

these periods of dryness in prayer, we can learn to drink deeply from the living water in ways that are not dependent on our senses. It is in these dark nights that our soul can learn to see by faith, not by sight.

MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE

Prayer is more than you could ever imagine, because God is so much beyond what you can conceive. We are surrounded with gods that are too small to be up to the task of holding our deepest personal longings, never mind the world's most urgent problems. Our childhood God will never be adequate for those tasks. The ways of understanding and relating to God that we acquired in home, church and community are often seriously limited, sometimes dangerously wrong. This is why it is so important that we allow our views of God to grow and develop.

The view of God that counts in this regard is not the official one you might profess if you are trying to be safely within the lines of orthodox dogma. It is the one that is actually at the core of your experience of God, the one that underlies your experience of life. This will usually be the God of your childhood. For good or bad, this God is usually astoundingly robust—even in the face of later adult teaching that may demonstrate how incompatible this God is with the one you meet in Jesus. I think, for example, of the many people I know who live under an enormous burden of guilt that is associated with a harsh, punitive deity encountered in their childhood. Nowhere feels safe from the lurking presence of this God made in the image of parents or religious authority figures. Perhaps even more common are the large numbers of people—men and women—who have difficulty relating to a God that seems so inescapably masculine. In both situations prayer will be powerfully shaped by

these views of God that are the residue of childhood teaching and experience—not shaped by the reality of the God who actually invites loving communion.

I have been speaking about the love of God and so have already drawn some attention to the implications of grounding our view of God in grace. I will have more to say about this as we proceed, but let me offer a brief comment on one dimension of our view of God that has great potential to limit our experience of God—namely, the gender of God. I comment on this matter not to argue a theological point but, in keeping with the thrust of this book, to draw attention to implications for prayer that flow from how we view God.

I have long been sensitive to the apparently exclusive masculinity of God, not because I had a bad relationship with my father but probably because I had a good relationship with both my father and my mother. My childhood oriented me to a God who was the source of both males and females and who was imaged by both. However, I related to God as male because the Father, by title, made it hard to think of anything else, and Jesus seemed inescapably male—even if far from stereotypically so by either first- or twenty-first-century cultural standards. This resulted in some intellectual puzzlement about how a gendered God could be the source of both males and females, but much more importantly, it left the parts of me that related best and most fully to women out of my prayer dialogue and divine encounter. How excited I was when I discovered the ancient Christian tradition of recognizing in the Spirit the feminine elements of the Godhead. This was far from a mere theological novelty for me. Immediately it began to influence my prayer experience. In the decades since this I have learned to bring more of myself to the God who is much more than either male or female, but who contains

both. Sometimes I pray to the Spirit of God, who I view and relate to as female. But at least as often I pray to the Father or to Jesus, both of whom remain, in my mind, as male.

I do not think that the Holy Spirit is female, nor do I think that God the Father is male. God is beyond gender and at the same time the source of our gendered being. But, as I have allowed my ways of relating to and thinking about God to broaden, my prayer experience has correspondingly become much more than I could ever have imagined. I do not believe that my ideas of God, or any ideas of God, completely capture or adequately represent ultimate mystery. That is why I say I am making a spiritual point more than a theological one. And that point is that God is more than we can conceive, so we need to be careful to hold our conceptions with humility and gentleness so as to allow our prayer experience to not be limited by them.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

But enough of my prayer experience. Let's turn to yours. Perhaps your prayer remains more duty than devotion, more a matter of the head than the heart. Perhaps you know little or nothing of the sacred romance I have discussed. Don't be discouraged by this, but just as important, be careful to not allow yourself to become content with it. Remember that prayer is more a matter of consent than initiative. Trust that your prayer relationship with God has been established by God's initiative, not yours. Your part is simply making space for God, turning to God with attentiveness and openness. Don't think of this as an obligation. Hear it as an invitation to

abundant and true life. Hear it as an invitation to the encounter in love that is prayer.

Settle for nothing less than knowing God in love. This begins by knowing the depths of God's love for you. All of us need to regularly return to this knowing. In fact, you can never get enough of it. Everything else that is required of you in life—your love of God, yourself and others—all flows out of your personal knowing of God's extravagant love for you.

Take a few moments, now or sometime soon, for prayerful reflection on the things presented in this chapter.

1. How would you describe your communication with God? Does conversational prayer—brief bullet prayers throughout the day—form a part of it? If not, consider if there may be a possibility here for deepening your relationship with God. How does God's communication to you form part of your dialogue? How might your prayer experience change if your times of formal prayer included more space for listening? What makes it hard for you to offer this stillness and silence?

2. To what extent is your experience of prayer an experience of loving communion with God? What things get in the road of this intimate knowing of God's love? What could you do to get yourself out of the way of what God desires to do in your depths to make prayer as loving encounter more of an experienced reality?

3. As you read the broad range of things that I suggested are part of Christian prayer, which of them seemed like they might be helpful for you? Perhaps it is something you already do and simply never thought of as prayer. What would change if you understood these moments as prayer? And what could you do to make space for more of these moments in your life?

4. Take some time to write out your own definition of prayer. Notice if your understanding of prayer has changed over the years and how that understanding has related to your practice of prayer. How did your childhood picture of God shape your practice of prayer? And how have any changes in how you understand God since then affected your prayer life?

5. Finally, if you haven't done so already, make a particular point of noticing anything in this chapter that seems to correspond to what the Spirit of God has already been teaching you or where the Spirit has been leading you. If you do nothing else, pay careful attention to this and respond to any invitations that you sense are coming to you from God. This too is prayer and is a particularly appropriate prayer posture as you continue to work through the following chapters.

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