

Chapter 5



Praying: The Practice of Companionship with God

I remember my grandmother's prayer. Every day she would go to her room and sit in her rocking chair. The door was open, so no one was closed out, but we understood she was not to be interrupted. She sat in that chair, rocking, for up to an hour. Mostly she was silent. But every so often, she would sigh, "Oh, God." That was all she ever said, but she usually said it more than once, in a different tone of voice each time. When she came back out, she was just as usual, except for a quality of radiance about her. How I longed to do whatever it was she did there!

Fellowship in Prayer, Author unknown¹

Companionship with Mystery

Prayer is the primary means of our relationship with the Holy. While prayer is about words, it is more truly about a whole way of personal and communal presence to daily life. Initially a conversation, prayer increasingly becomes a rhythm of heart and mind that finds the Beloved in all things. As Esther de Waal observes, a "life lived in God's presence is a growing, permeating consciousness of what that presence means."² I write as a person formed in the Benedictine spirit, meaning that I am learning to seek God within life experience. *Lectio divina*³ teaches me to look further than first impressions, and to attend to every aspect of creation with deepening levels of awareness for the

graces revealed within. Just as a painting embodies the "hand" of the artist, so the created world embodies the mark of the Creator. The book of Job reflects this wisdom: "ask the animals, the birds, the plants, and the fish . . . and they will teach you. . . . In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being" (Job 12:7-10). The life of prayer brings growing awareness of the pervasive presence of the Holy in every place and time.

The reality that God is eternal Mystery means that we humans will never be able to describe, contain, or master the Holy. Yet those with a spiritual longing can make a twofold affirmation: (1) the world is God's—God is somehow present within our experienced material world; and (2) I am God's—in some unimaginable way, the Mystery that is God reaches out to me and claims me. A persistent element of the Mystery is the ongoing human hunch that God is "in *personal* relationship with embodied possibilities."⁴ However we think of God, we are haunted by the sense that we are not alone. God is not confined by time and space, but the perennial human intuition is that God is *present* in time and space. Humans may speak of the "otherness" that surrounds us as the world of Ideals (Plato), the Atman (Hinduism), the inner life, Jehovah, or the Trinity. But whatever the term, the referent is Mystery. The desire is for connection, for companionship.

But how? How do humans find companionship with something always Other? The issue is compounded by the historical idea, especially associated with the scientific revolution, that the Mystery of God is merely like the "mystery" in murder mystery novels, that is, something that can and will eventually be "solved" and mastered by human ingenuity. No longer did humans need the "crutch" of belief in something beyond our knowing, because we could "know" everything! A great deal of ink has been spilled on this idea of human mastery, but it seems not to have significantly touched the inevitable human longing for the More. Religious doctrine and ritual may not have the claim on human hearts that they once had (in the United States in particular), but still a vast majority of people describe themselves as "spiritual."

Cynthia Bourgeault offers a useful way to discuss companionship with the Holy, honoring both the claims of science and those of the spirit, as she describes the intelligence of the human mind as integrated with the intelligence of the "moving center" and the intelligence of the "emotional center." We well know the gifts of the intellectual center for reasoning, discriminating, analyzing; but perhaps we don't recognize that these are primarily gifts of separating and denying. They are valuable gifts, but not well suited to spiritual work. "Trying to find faith

with the intellectual center is something like trying to play a violin from a saw: it's simply the wrong tool for the job."⁵

In contrast, the gifts of the other two centers are our strong arms in spiritual practice. The moving center includes both the instinctive center, regulating the inner operational systems of the body; and the moving center proper, operating our outward and voluntary interactions with the physical world, the five senses, movement, and rhythm. Repetition can connect us with the steady pulsations of breath, heartbeat and instinct. Certain gestures strengthen interior rhythms of balance, relaxation, making contact, and embracing. The moving center can be seen as an affirming force, connecting us with parts of ourselves unreachable solely by the mind.

And the emotional, or heart center, has long been understood in spiritual practice as the human organ best suited to reach for God. While recognizing that emotions can be misdirected or out of control, the early Christian theologians saw God as loving and beautiful, desirable to the human heart, and creating within us the emotional passions. Thus, they conclude that the powerful sense of yearning for something unseen and unknowable comes from the human heart *in response* to the invitation of the infinitely good. The heart "is our antenna, so to speak, given to us to orient us toward the divine radiance and to synchronize our being with its more subtle movements."⁶ Even Augustine of Hippo, often associated with a core conviction about human sinfulness, observes, "The entire life of a good Christian is in fact an exercise of holy desire. You do not yet see what you long for, but the very act of desiring prepares you."⁷

The whole human being is involved in our relationship with God, and when we consider other human centers of wisdom alongside the rational, we see why we humans are so persistent in our desire for a "spiritual life." It seems our DNA is encoded with the awareness of both the material and spiritual worlds we inhabit. The goal of practice—especially the practice of prayer—is to integrate those worlds.

Pause to reflect:

- As you begin to ponder the practice of prayer, what is at the heart of your desire? You might consider reading Psalm 42 to reflect on this question. How have you known deep longing for the presence of God in your own life?
- Reflect on the centers described above. From which center: intellectual, moving, or emotional, do you most reach out for God?

Beginning to Pray

"Help me." This is perhaps the most common prayer, and a foundational one. Until we realize that we need help, for whatever reason, we are not ready for prayer. But once we know we need help, we need to know someone is listening. So the next prayer is "hear me." We could probably pray the whole psalter with those two words, and one other, "Thanks!"⁸

Simply put, prayer is the practice of conversation with God, some talking, some listening, some silent reflection. Sometimes people ask, "How do I pray?" There is no simple formula, and no "right" way. Begin. Start where you are. Stop and listen. Pray as you can, not as you can't. On the whole, God doesn't "answer" loudly or quickly. Settle in. Recollect the stages in beginning any relationship, a little tentative and uncertain. Consider the importance of mutual trust and regard, and the fact that even someone deeply loved can surprise us. Remember that the simple *desire* to pray is a gift from God, and God wants to help.

At various times in life, our prayer changes. Perhaps a practice of prayer we've had for a long time seems to dry up. Perhaps a crisis in our lives takes over for a time, and we don't feel we can pray at all. A type of prayer that works well for another person may not suit us. A friend of mine once complained that much of prayer practice was taught by introverts, and she was too much of an extrovert to get with it! So it is well to be acquainted with many possibilities, knowing that if one or another form of prayer doesn't touch us at the moment, there are multiple ways to deepen our communication with God.

The Rich Resources of Christian Tradition

Christianity is an historical religion, emphasizing the incarnation—Jesus born of woman, fully human. We are predisposed to look for God within time, welcoming images and actual life experiences as God-blessed ways of communication, in a form of prayer called *kataphatic* (with images). Our tradition gives important places to memory, imagination, and the body in prayer. Memory is highlighted in recollection of the saving acts of God in history at the Red Sea and in Christ's holy meal of the Eucharist. Imagination is welcomed in the scripture's constant use of metaphor and parable. The body is central as we sit and stand and kneel in worship, sing enthusiastically, and physically come forward to

receive the sacramental bread and wine. Many Christian prayer forms use images and words and life experience as ways to receive and welcome God in our lives. And, not surprisingly, our primary “measure” of good prayer is growth in compassion, evidence that our prayer actually influences and enriches the way we live each day. The classic Christian spiritual “test” of a spiritual person is: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22).

Discursive Prayer

The most frequent elements in spoken prayers are overlapping, but also somewhat discrete. These five elements are:

- **Thanksgiving:** living life in appreciation for what God is doing for us, and expressing that gratitude;
- **Intercession:** praying for others;
- **Confession:** admitting our sins and asking to be forgiven;
- **Petition:** praying for our own needs, and that our lives may be more and more in harmony with God’s will for us; and
- **Adoration:** looking at God, loving God, praising God, and abandoning ourselves to God in gladness.

All five of these elements are central to a full life of prayer.

Thanksgiving

Prayer is framed in thanksgiving, beginning and end. One might even say that the measure of a relationship with God is a life filled with thanksgiving. I recall a time when this came home to me clearly. I had worked in public service for some time, during which period I didn’t go to church and didn’t consciously think much about God. In a sense, I believe I had submerged a relationship with God into what I felt was service to God’s people. I was successful outwardly, but increasingly restless inwardly. Deciding to leave that work and attending to my restlessness, I enrolled in seminary. Later when I returned to visit some friends from the earlier period, I realized that I puzzled them—not, I think, by any overt expression of evangelism, but simply because my language was so full of gratitude! Previously I felt that I *deserved* all that I worked so hard to achieve, but now I knew that I could never accomplish for myself those things which most satisfied my deep longing for abundant life.

Thanksgiving is a way of opening ourselves to God. If there is no thanksgiving in me, it is impossible to know myself as gifted. But as I begin to express thanksgiving, more and more room opens in me for God’s joyful gifts.

Pause to reflect: A good way to work with the prayer of thanksgiving is to settle into a quiet time and place, and take a few minutes to write down things for which you are thankful. Start with something, anything. Keep adding. Keep writing. Keep reflecting. After a while, stop and look over your list, and select the five most important items for which you are thankful right now. If you are working with a partner, share those five items each with the other. Finally, take one of the five items to keep as your “mantra” for the next week, something to hold in your heart or under your nose like a flower to which you periodically return. Deepen your gratitude for that particular thing. Notice what effect, if any, this prayer has in you.⁹

Intercession

Intercession is prayer for others, and it probably forms the bulk of our prayer. Certainly it is the easiest prayer to do “in public,” and possibly the one that makes us feel best about ourselves for carrying concern in our hearts for others in need. [But beware of pride: I’ve often prayed over a meal for the needs of others, but I was caught up short once when someone prayed for the needs *and the gifts* of others.] Even so, there are many questions about intercessory prayer: exactly what to pray for, how it really “works,” how to decide what to pray for in a world of so much hurt, and so forth. I recommend C. S. Lewis’s *Letters to Malcolm* as a thoughtful and straightforward discussion of some of these questions.¹⁰

One insight I cherish about praying for others comes from the Peace Pilgrim:

If a person returns to my mind for prayer. . . I reach out—my divine nature reaches out—to contact their divine nature. Then I have the feeling of lifting them, lifting them, lifting them, and I have the feeling of bringing God’s light to them. I try to envision them bathed in God’s light, and finally I do see them standing and reaching out their arms bathed in golden light. At that point I leave them in God’s hands.¹¹

Not everyone can visualize in this way, but even without being able to “see” an image, it seems wise to mentally bring someone to God and leave them in God’s hands (in addition to any practical help we can offer).

The prayer of intercession is, of course, not just relevant for private prayer, but also for public common prayer. Every Sunday in my church we offer one of six forms of "Prayers of the People" from the Book of Common Prayer.¹² Yet even those of us familiar with the BCP may not notice that all six forms follow a common format of elements important for us to consider as a community of faith. This format considers in turn:

- The universal church (and I add: and all people of faith)
- The nation and those in authority
- The welfare of the world
- Concerns of the local community
- Those who suffer or are in trouble, and those who care for them
- Those who are departed (and I add: and those newly born)

I like to "festoon" this outline, supplementing each broad category with the present concerns that are uppermost in my mind, and I often do this with a group as well. This format above is not necessarily comprehensive but is rather a solid foundation from which to build personal and communal intercessions, beyond those nearest and dearest expanding to others in our communities and across the earth.

The world today offers a bewildering array of potential concerns for which to pray, and the daily dose of news can numb us to give up even trying to offer prayers for others. The way I try to think about my intercessory ministry is to consider this question: "What brokenness in the world breaks my heart?" And although many issues cry out to me, I find that a few regularly enter my heart and mind for intercessory prayer. Although some of these change over time, this question does help me focus my call to intercessory ministry.

Confession

To consider confession, we must begin with reflection on how our life is falling short of what we hope for it, and how we are responsible for—or contribute to—that falling short. Private confession is generally no longer required for Christians, but there may be times—when we feel especially burdened, during the period of Lent, annually as a "clearinghouse"—one may profitably choose to do so. It is well to prepare in a "soul-searching" time, referred to by twelve-step organizations as "a fearless moral inventory."

Some "sins" involve our active or passive participation in problems embodied in the existing social structure. The Ash Wednesday Litany in the BCP reviews some of these: our blindness to human need and suffering, our indifference to injustice and cruelty, the waste and pollution of God's creation.¹³ A "four-fold blessing" I recently received struck my heart as a useful set of questions to help me see and confess my participation in structural sins of our society:

- *God give me a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships;*
- *God grant me holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people;*
- *God give me the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish; and*
- *God grant me enough foolishness to believe that I really CAN make a difference in this world.¹⁴*

Turning to personal sins, we may wish to prepare for confession by reviewing standard lists of "sins," such as the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, or the Baptismal Covenant, but for the most part, if we are already trying to live a spiritual life, those lists may not be of much value. I recommend turning to our own experience, and asking ourselves "What questions is my life raising?" There may be an obvious and present issue, causing us to feel a special current burden that is leading us into this preparation for confession. In all, ask the Holy Spirit to show you the root difficulty, enabling you to see beyond sin to the cause of it in habits of mind or action; and to see beyond your sin to its cure, the abundant grace of God in Christ.

Having prepared, it is wise to share your inventory with someone you trust to receive it respectfully, though it need not be an ordained person. However, one of the central aspects of confession is the receiving of absolution and restoration to full communion with God and the community. So, after you have confessed, ask the other to say some words to you that will assist you to receive the awareness of reconciliation that is a deep source of joy.

Petition

Inevitably confession leads us to awareness of our fundamental limitations. We may say with Paul, "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). A

seminary professor once revealed that he did not expect confession to be a matter of (Baskin-Robbins) 31 flavors of ice cream! He encouraged us not to work to come up with something new to confess each time, but simply and honestly to bring ourselves, as we are, as God knows us to be, with our inherent limitations. We do repent, but above all, we realize we must rely on God's help.

The point of petition is to know we need help, and to ask God for what we need. A deep longing of our heart is for union with God, yet we cannot quite "do it" ourselves. Petition offers a wonderful opportunity to ask God's help in moving toward deeper, truer levels of ourselves in relation to God. Recall the words mentioned in chapter 1 of the twelfth century monk who assures us that "God does not wait until the longing soul has said all its say, but breaks in upon the middle of its prayer, running to meet it in all haste."¹⁵

The first question Jesus asks in John's Gospel is one we are invited to reflect upon more and more deeply throughout our lives: "What do you want?" (John 1:39). Why should Jesus (God) ask what we want? Unless and until we know what we need and can ask for it, God respectfully restrains response. When I was first married, I used to get upset with my husband for not *knowing* what I wanted. It's not quite the same situation with God, I realize, but I did learn in my marriage that it was unfair of me *not to ask* for what I desired. And then I realized that one of the main reasons I didn't ask was because I didn't want to be refused. Genuinely to offer myself in vulnerability to another with a real request (rather than a demand) puts me at that other's mercy. What if he said no? And yet how dishonest of me to wait unspoken in hope, or worse yet, to try to gain my objective by manipulation.

Perhaps we have been told that it is selfish to ask for ourselves, but I think it is essential. Genuine vulnerability to another is necessary for authentic relationship. Most of the time, as persons and communities, we surround ourselves with defensive walls to make sure that others do not know nor take advantage of our fears or weaknesses. Of course it makes sense to be cautious and discerning, but consider how much we lose by not allowing ourselves to be genuinely engaged with another, mutually reinforcing and maturing. It is a commonplace that the risk of deeply loving necessarily includes the pain of losing another to death. Shall we for that reason resist love? Loving takes courage, and loving God no less courage. The practice of companionship with God will take all we can give—and return it manifold, but the risk must come first.

The Psalms reassure us that any way we ask or pray to God is okay. The range of emotions offered in the Psalms is almost shocking to modern ears—anger, bitterness, self-justification, as well as love and longing, delight and praise. When we pray, we may have no sense of answering response for a time, or we may sense a negative response. What we can count on is continued companionship, continuing love.

Adoration

Is adoration different from thanksgiving? Yes, although in practice we do not often make the distinction. Thanksgiving is appreciation for God's gifts, whereas adoration is loving God for God's sake, rather than for anything God has done or is doing for us. Bernard of Clairvaux observes that in prayer, we tend to progress from (1) loving ourselves for our own sake, (2) to loving God for our own sake, (3) to loving God for God's sake, (4) to loving ourselves for God's sake, being entirely transfused into the will of God.¹⁶ *Adoration is being wholly centered in the divine glory and majesty, not giving thanks for gifts to ourselves or others, but simply rejoicing in the Giver.* I imagine how God might respond first to the prayer, "O Lord, I am a worm!" and second to the prayer, "O God, how wonderful you are!" Of course, over time we may pray both, and in God's kindness, God receives in love whatever prayer we offer, but I long to be a person who can wholeheartedly pray "O God, how wonderful you are!"

Many of the Christian canticles are songs of adoration, for example the beginning of Mary of Nazareth's song of praise, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" or the *Te Deum*, "You are God: we praise you." Psalms 104 and 145 are wonderful to pray with in adoration: "Bless the Lord, O my soul; O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness!" and "I will exalt you, O God and bless your Name forever." What a mystery it is that we are invited to bless God! Yet how else can we understand early morning birdsong or twilight sunset at the ocean, except as adoration of God?!

Other Traditional Christian Prayer Practices

Other important prayer practices of the Christian tradition include (1) prayer without ceasing, (2) walking meditation (3) praying the hours of the day, (4) praying with nature, and (5) meditation/contemplation.

Prayer without Ceasing

Prayer need not be complicated. Given that the goal is to become increasingly alive to the holy presence among us, a simple formula, repeated continuously, can be a helpful way to move our awareness of God from a mental thing to something that joins the rhythm of our heart and lungs to become a subtle but constant presence within us. Two “formula prayers” have been used for centuries to this purpose.

- One of them is rooted in Psalm 70, verse 2: “O God, come to my assistance; O Lord make haste to help me.”
- The other is taken from the plea of blind Bartimaeus to Jesus in Mark’s gospel (10:46-52): “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.”

The latter phrase has been developed into an expansive form of prayer, initially presented as a story in *The Way of the Pilgrim*, and later taught in detail in the *Philokalia*.¹⁷ It is considered an extraordinarily useful way to “pray without ceasing.”¹⁸ I find one or other of these forms especially helpful in times when I am fearful or anxious, as the prayer reminds me of God’s presence and grounds me.

Walking Meditation

I often practice formula prayer while walking, first attending to the rhythm of my pace, then to the rhythm of breath and heartbeat, and gradually adding the prayer rhythm until I can sense the prayer moving down into my heart. The old monastic cloisters were built between the church and the residential areas, and the monastics would walk around the cloister praying one of these prayers or a prayer antiphon which stayed in their mind and soul.

Another ancient, and now well known walking prayer, is walking the labyrinth. A labyrinth is not a maze (one cannot get lost in it, for it is a singular route in and out), but it does wind around and around from “outside” to an inner center, where one may sit for a time, and then walk back to the beginning. The most famous Christian labyrinth is on the floor of Chartres Cathedral, and today many canvas labyrinths are available for use in local communities. Walking the labyrinth, one pays attention to the thoughts that arise, exploring the many dimensions of their life experience at present in relationship to images the labyrinth brings to mind, and especially in the center space, bringing everything to be offered to God. Books and pilgrimages by and with Episcopal priest, Lauren Artress, are excellent guides.¹⁹

Praying the Hours of the Day

The world is God’s and I am God’s. This fundamental Christian affirmation rescues us from thinking all is lost and/or that everything depends upon our being where we are and doing what we do. We are not alone, not abandoned to our own (limited) resources. But we forget. For most of us, it requires only a few hours (or minutes) to take everything back into our own hands. The prayer of the hours of the day is intended to remedy or at least limit our forgetfulness.

One of the Hebrew psalms calls to God, “Seven times a day do I praise you!” (Psalm 119:164), and Benedict’s sixth century guidance for prayer in his *Rule* picks up this phrase in specifying that the monastic day should be punctuated with Lauds (daybreak), Prime (immediately following, at the “first hour” of the Roman day), Terce (9 am), Sext (noon), None (3pm), Vespers (dusk), and Compline (bedtime). Benedict also added an early morning Vigils office (watching for the dawn, approximately 2 am) which is an office of readings.²⁰ The prayer of these hours (called the *Opus Dei*, or the Work of God) gradually spread through most of the Christian monastic communities in the West and later in the world, as well as many of the cathedral communities. It is intended to be a prayer of the community, and is fundamentally a prayer of remembering that this is God’s world.

Most of the prayer times are brief, containing the chanting of several psalms, brief readings from scripture, and the Lord’s Prayer, although it is possible today to get books of elaborate prayer “offices,” each of which can take some time. When Thomas Cranmer in sixteenth century England wrote the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, he condensed the eight hours of prayer into two major ones, morning prayer and evening prayer, and included a brief office of compline that follows Benedict’s outline closely. The point is simply that since the early Hebrew period, not only monks and nuns, but people of Jewish and Christian faiths have had some sort of practice of praying regularly throughout the day.

As I have studied these times of the prayer hours, I realized that although they are spaced about evenly throughout the hours of the day, they are also carefully linked in history to significant events of faith, corresponding to what might be natural human emotions during a normal day.²¹

Praying with Nature

In some periods of Christianity, nature was considered to be “suspect,” a source of potential delights and temptations that might draw

the mind away from God. Thankfully, that attitude has mostly disappeared, for how could it be consistent with Jesus's ever-present awareness of the marvelous beauty of bird feathers, the astonishing growth of tiny seeds, the marvelous gift of water for thirst? God is not confined in nature (a view called pantheism) but is revealed in nature (called panentheism). As I trust will be obvious from this chapter, creation is marked by the wondrous creative hand of the One who created all, and thus can be a powerful sign of the Mystery's presence among us. It is not really necessary to offer any special techniques for praying with nature, if one appreciates Abraham Heschel's definition of Sabbath as ceasing the work of creating (things) to marvel at the gift of creation.²² Helpful specifics are offered in the previous chapter (4).

Meditation/Contemplation

Both Western and Eastern spiritual traditions include meditation and contemplation. It is somewhat confusing that the terms are used one way in the East, and the opposite way in the West. In the West, meditation tends to mean discursive thought, while contemplation refers to an imageless, wordless resting in God (called *apophatic* prayer). In the East, contemplation means discursive thought and meditation means a self-emptying presence to the Holy. In the following paragraphs, we'll use the typical Western definitions.

Both traditions honor both meditative and contemplative modes of prayer, and consider them to be linked. When people are invited into a time of imageless, wordless prayer, generally speaking they are offered "tokens" enabling the mind to remain steady. An Eastern metaphor describes riding an elephant through a village; if the elephant has nothing in his trunk as he goes past various stalls of foods, he will be likely to pluck up a banana here, a melon there. Needless to say, the stall owners are not happy about it, so the mahouts have learned the importance of giving the elephant a stick to hold in his trunk before they enter a village. With the trunk absorbed in the job of holding the stick, mischief is much less likely.

In Western tradition, Teresa of Avila uses a different metaphor of a monkey in the attic. Both images are meant to suggest the tendency of the mind to wander into all sorts of irrelevant things if it is "empty-handed," so to speak. Thus, a number of tools have been used over time to help the mind settle, while the heart focuses on God below conscious awareness. Fortunately, these tools are readily available and can serve a variety of preferences. One of the most common is to begin a

time of contemplation with a focus on the breath, allowing oneself to slow down with each breath, moving deeper and deeper into quiet, and allowing a slow, steady breath to hold the mind quiet for a time. Another common tool is a mantra or a special prayer word(s), such as "Jesus, mercy," "Love," or "Hear my prayer." Repetition of the mantra is used in the beginning until inner quiet comes upon us, then released until inner noise comes back, then gently repeated again, and so forth throughout the prayer time. A candle may be used, or an icon, quiet music in the background, the soft chanting of an antiphon. Each of these tools allows a focus on something sensory which gradually leads the mind into quiet, and which can readily move the mind back into silence as needed.

Contemplative prayer practice is widely in use today, and there are many excellent sources of information on this practice. Abbot Thomas Keating is one of the originating contemporary teachers of this method and the chapter on Gratitude includes more about this practice.²³

The Gift of Hope

Why do we pray? As one of the primary means of our companionship with God, prayer helps us learn to hear and recognize God's communication with us. Moving deeper into this companionship, and noticing more frequently God's presence to and with us, we learn to trust the Mysterious Presence with our lives. We have less need to control and manage everything around us, as it becomes clearer to us that in fact, we are not in control anyway. Even when we think we are brilliantly capable, things often go awry. Consider the unintended and often harmful consequences of technological advances, or the troubles faced by our loved ones, no matter how carefully we try to protect them.

Today's world is full of problems, many of which fill our souls with grief. Some of those problems we bring on ourselves, some come upon us willy-nilly. How are we to face these situations? We can try to deny their seriousness. We can let ourselves sink into discouragement and despair. But real prayer gives us a more positive option. We recall ourselves to the basic fact that the world is God's and we are God's—not just those of us who are Christians or avowed persons of faith or intentionally spiritual—we all are God's and living in God's world.

What can that mean, if God doesn't definitively intervene to stop all this trouble? What does trust in God mean, if bad things happen to good people? No sacred text of which I am aware promises that we

will never have trouble. The Mystery that we call God is truly beyond our knowing, and ultimately we cannot wrap our small minds around God's purposes, but what the faithful practice of prayer can teach us is that we are companioned, we are befriended, we will never be alone. We can look back on the stories of our faith traditions, and on our personal stories, and see the times when things looked very bad, yet God found a way to bring goodness out of our very worst moments. Oh yes, there exist violence, loss, misunderstanding, and frightful strangers in our world, but prayer can bring us hope: hope for things unseen and unimagined, yet hope nonetheless even and especially in times like these.

SAMPLE EXERCISES

Praying with Words

Look back to the five elements of discursive prayer: Thanksgiving, Intercession, Confession, Petition, and Adoration. Choose one on which to focus and begin your practice of prayer. You may use the sections above to direct your prayer, or follow a pattern of your own choosing.

Self-Awareness

In a quiet and relaxed time, let your breathing settle you. Give yourself time to enter deeply into your most authentic self-awareness and ask yourself three questions (below). When you have adequate answers for today, put your knowledge in the form of one or more petitions to God. Sit in silence and listen. Observe what, if anything, happens today or within the next week or two.

- What are my hopes and dreams, my deep longings?
- What do I lack, where do I hurt, what seems consistently to block my hopes?
- What am I willing to give up or let go, in order to receive what I desire?

Body Prayer

Sometimes it is helpful to express adoration and praise of God through the body. One may practice prayer with upraised arms and dancing, or through the voice upraised in song. One might try "interpreting" one of the psalms of praise in body language, or paraphrasing it in one's own words, to deepen one's expression of joyful adoration.

Praying the Hours

If it is desirable to try praying these hours for a time, consider taking only five to ten minutes per period, focusing on one attitude and reminding oneself of God's continuing care in each period.

- Before fully waking: Take a moment to be radically expectant for God in today's activities;
- At or after breakfast: Praise God and rejoice in the wonder of God's being;
- As you begin the workday: Dedicate yourself to be God's co-worker in all the day brings;
- Mid-morning: Seek God's strength to act as you would throughout the day;
- Noontime: (traditionally noon and midnight are considered to be the moments when we are furthest from God, most at risk in spiritual conflict, whereas the "hinges" of 6am and 6pm are believed to be the times most likely to sense oneself close to God's presence, hence:) Acknowledge that life is difficult, with many pulls and pushes in all directions, and simply be where you are at this moment;
- Mid-afternoon: Persevere in faith;
- At (before/after) dinner-time: Give thanks for the day and its fullness; and
- Bedtime: Acknowledge your need for God's care and rest.

As you pray on these occasions, be aware that you are joining a large group of people, scattered over all the earth, in all times zones, who are joining you in lifting their thoughts to God in this way.

Praying with Nature

First, let yourself be drawn to an object in nature, and if it is convenient, settle yourself comfortably with the thing in hand (a leaf, a pebble, a nut, a feather, whatever). Get acquainted with your natural object with all your senses: how does it smell and feel, what is its weight, texture and temperature, and so forth. What is it like? What does it do? Discover all you can, being very gentle and reverent in your attention.

Then identify imaginatively with the natural object and "become" it. If you were this object, what would your history be? What would your chief gifts and limitations be? Where did you come from, and where are you going? As a little part of nature, what is important to

you? What is your existence like? Describe yourself as this creation. Say to yourself silently, "I am. . . ." Finally your object may have some wisdom specifically for you. Ask for this, and then listen quietly to whatever comes to mind. Don't hurry and be respectful. If a prayer forms in you, express it in whatever way seems right.

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