

MENTAL PRAYER

Some tips for building the habit of daily meditation

The following points are for you to share with someone who comes to you looking for help in growing closer to Jesus, but who expresses difficulties in getting into a habit of daily meditation. The following are your possible responses.

When should I pray?

- Encourage your listener to pray early in the morning or later afternoon. Pick a specific time. Generalities are useless.
- Tell him that waiting until the end of the day creates further problems. If he leaves it to the end the devil will set traps.
- Fatigue and business can wreak havoc on a good time of prayer.

Where should I pray?

- Reflect on this scripture passage in order to share it. In Matthew 6, Jesus directs us to go into our room, shut the door, and speak to our Father in secret.
- Your place of prayer should incorporate solitude and silence.
- You may suggest to your listener the possibility of creating a special place at home.
- The best place is in the presence of the Eucharist.

How long should I pray?

- St. Francis DeSales, St. Theresa of Avila, and Venerable Fulton Sheen all recommended that laity should meditate for 30 minutes a day.
- If this is too intimidating, tell your listener to start at 15 minutes a day. I have found that it is easier to expand your time once the habit is formed than it is to form a habit if the initial goal is too high.
- Conversely, don't sell him short, either. Try the 30 minute goal first before deciding that this time allotment is too much.
- The over-riding question is how much time is necessary for an intimate, loving conversation?
- Don't leave off too soon.

Reviewing the 4 R's of Meditation

St. Theresa of Avila mentioned that without a book written for spiritual reading on her lap, she found meditation almost impossible. The following is based on and inspired by her instruction to her nuns on how to practice meditation:

Read. What to read? Read a book written for spiritual meditation. Obvious examples are the Gospels and the Psalms. Spiritual meditation material is any book written for the purpose of bringing the soul into communion with God, to sit still with our being enjoying His Being. "My being with His Being sitting and being together." Examples: Fr. Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God*; Fr. Jacques Philippe, *Searching for and Maintaining Peace* (actually, all of his books are excellent!); Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, *Divine Intimacy*; St. Joes Maria Escriva, *The Way*; St. Francis DeSales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*; St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*.

Reflect. Read until something strikes you. Then, stop, and put the book down and reflect on what you just read. Why did this passage or word strike you? What is the Holy Spirit saying to you? Cease being in a hurry. Let yourself be still and peaceful, soaking in this point for as long as possible.

Relate. Relate this passage or point to Jesus. Allow any internal and spontaneous conversation from the depths of your soul to bubble up.

Resolution. Resolve to apply the grace from this meditation to change you. This means to put into practice something concrete revealed to you by the Holy Spirit that He wants you to change. Another method is to take something from your prayer, i.e. a phrase or word that struck you, and repeat it throughout the day. This will focus your mind on prayer, which will focus your thoughts and heart on God-like actions.

Problems. What happens if I find nothing that strikes me? Then read just a paragraph, stop, then re-read the paragraph slowly. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you receive His insights. It may be helpful to have a pencil near you to circle any word or phrase that offers your any divine information or insight. After circling a point or two, now you have something on which to reflect.

Tip. Meditation is often called mental prayer because it involved our imagination. Traditional devotions like the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross are meditation because they engage our imagination, which places our mind with the Lord, which opens the faculties of the soul to be with Him in spirit.

Use technology to help you set time aside to pray and to remember your resolution. Use timers, notes, reminders, etc. on phone or electronic calendars to sound, thus giving you helpful reminders.

The Rosary is most helpful in establishing the habit. It is vocal prayer and meditation, with the help of Mary, at the school of Mary.

John Paul II Rosarium 15

The Rosary mystically transports us to Mary's side as she is busy watching over the human growth of Christ in the home of Nazareth. This enables her to train us and to mold us with the same care, until Christ is "fully formed" in us. cf. Gal 4:19.

Why should I pray/meditate?

First, it is an expectation of discipleship offered by the Lord Himself.

Second, this is how we change the fallen desires of the heart. We sin because we desire actions that are actually harmful to us. Meditation is how our desires are purified. Once purified, Satan's power over us through temptation is weakened, and we begin to choose that which is good more easily, promptly, and joyfully.

Third, we are made for union with God. Hence, we are made for prayer. The fact that prayer is difficult is a result of the fall. Like anything else, however, practice makes perfect. This is how we show our love of God, are transformed in love by God, how we create the desire and receive the power to grow in virtue, and thus attain infinite happiness.

How to deal with distractions

A most common difficulty in prayer is distractions. It is normal to be distracted. We should not be surprised or discouraged over this. When your mind wanders off, simply, peacefully and gently bring your attention back to God.

- Go back to the point that struck you.
- Or, move on and read to another point that strikes you.

Even if we were to spend an entire prayer period bringing our distracted attention constantly back to God it would not matter. That prayer is undoubtedly very pleasing to God.

It is wrong to think we can achieve absolute concentration for the entire duration of prayer. Distractions do not prevent God from doing His work in your soul.

- Keep a notepad with you.
- The distraction may be God's way of asking you to attend to or pray for something or someone in prayer.

- Distractions are weaknesses and only become sinful when we choose it. Nevertheless, confessing this in the sacrament of Reconciliation may be a helpful way to overcome them due to God's grace.
- Practice abandonment and trust.
 - 1 Peter 5:7, "God will manage these things for you."
 - Jesus to Catherine of Sienna: "You think about me; I will think about you."