

# **Seven Steps to Praying**

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**OUTLINE**

I. INTRODUCTION..... 2

II. SEVEN STEPS TO PRAYING ..... 3

    1. STEP ONE - DISCIPLINE OF THE BODY AND THE CONSCIOUSNESS ..... 3

    2. STEP TWO - DISCIPLINE OF THE WORDS ..... 4

    3. STEP THREE - DISCIPLINE OF THE MIND AND THE HEART..... 4

    4. STEP FOUR – CULTIVATE RECEPTIVITY ..... 5

    5. STEP FIVE – DISCIPLINE OF THE MIND ..... 6

    6. STEP SIX – BE BEDAZZLED ..... 7

    7. STEP SEVEN – THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE ..... 7

III. CONCLUSION ..... 8

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 10

## I. INTRODUCTION

The view of prayer as communication in the manner of conversation has occupied a predominant place in Christian tradition of prayer. From this perspective, prayer is a conversation between an individual and God.<sup>1</sup> In a broader view, prayer is a communion; as a bridge for belief and faith, prayer is the bridge into communion with God. Michael Downey would put it: "Prayer is not only to be understood as conversation and communication in dialogue, but as ongoing participation in the communion of persons open to God's "adventing" in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Our enthusiastic joy is a way in which we allow others to know that our prayer is fruitful and that our communion with God is steady. As quoted by different people, most notably Blessed Mother Teresa: "joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God."<sup>3</sup> St. Paul rejoiced even when imprisoned, and even when persecuted (Phil. 1:4, 1:18, 1:25, 2:2, 2:17, 2:28-29, 4:1, 4:10). Joy is always bound up with his work as an apostle. Joy is an experience of God's present and nothing can make it void. Joy becomes conviction for the believer, providing the basis for the absolute optimism. The enthusiastic joy of our lives is a demonstration to the world that we are not talking about a bunch of old proverbs or old rules. But we are talking about something vibrant and alive that dwells in us, and in which we inhabit the presence of God and in His presence we rejoice. Let us be enthusiastic about praying and about the good news that we are never alone even though it might seem like God is far away. And yet, we lift our gaze to see anew the God who is always present to us and who enters among us so that we can stand in joy. The problem, however, is that we become really absent; thus for 2000 years the Christian tradition has cultivated techniques of prayer of lifting the veil, of shaping the heart, of softening the imagination, of clearing our perception; so that we can see anew and raise our gaze to God. For 2000 years, holy men and women have practiced techniques of praying; so that we can then be able to appreciate and rejoice in the presence of God by shaping our hearts to receiving what comes to us ultimately as a gift.

Prayer in Christian tradition is a topic of great breadth; nevertheless, this paper shall attempt to identify seven ways to cultivate a deeper sense of prayer. These ways are techniques which have come to us from the Catholic tradition along with what Professor McNamara taught in her Contemporary Christian Spirituality class at the University

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Downey, *"In the Ache of Absence,"* The Liturgical Ministry 3, (Summer 1994):98.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John T. Catoir, *Encounters with Holiness: My Interviews with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Dorothy Day, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Fr. Walter Ciszek, SJ, Leon-Josef Cardinal Suenens, John Cardinal O'Connor, Mother Angelica and Many Others,* (New York: St. Pauls/Alba House, 2007), xxiv.

of Portland in spring 2009. These techniques help us cultivate a soft heart, an awakened mind, and a clear perception that we are not alone as in the midst of the chaos, we do not have to be afraid for Emmanuel, God is with us.

## II. SEVEN STEPS TO PRAYING

### 1. STEP ONE - DISCIPLINE OF THE BODY AND THE CONSCIOUSNESS

The first step is a very interesting technique but a simple one: “pay attention.” The fact is that many of us live in the future or live in the past. We are worried about tomorrow and anticipatory anxiety; or we are stuck in the past; psychologist called it “paranoia or neurosis;”<sup>4</sup> rather than paying attention to where we are in the here and the now, and rejoicing in the presence of the moment in which we live and move and have our being. This is as simple as paying attention and put ourselves in the presence of God. In the Rule of Benedict (Chapter 52), St. Benedict's instructions to his monks emphasized “a quiet attention to God's presence through attention to God's word that comes alive in lectio.”<sup>5</sup> Labyrinth walk can also be an instrument to help paying attention. It helps focus our attention on the path of prayer.<sup>6</sup>

Many spiritual directors tell us that this prayer technique is best achieved by simply paying attention to the most essential characteristic of life which is the breath. Eckhart Tolle in his book titled “the Power of Now” suggests that we discover the prayer technique of the mystics themselves, who say that the first step of praying is the humble recognition that we are earth creatures who breathe.<sup>7</sup> Paying attention to breathing is the most rudimentary and simple way of practicing this first technique of prayer, breathe in and out. The reason is that the breath is the very “spiritus dei;” it is the breath of God.<sup>8</sup> Hence, to pay attention to the breath is to pay attention to the breath of God. As in the book of Genesis, God made the clay figurine in the beginning; he took this little mud and he made nostrils and then he bent down and breathed on him (Genesis 2:7). Thus, the breath is the breath of God that inspirits us; therefore, to pay attention to the here and the now is as simple as paying attention to the breathing in and out of the presence of God in us. Because breathing is always a giving and a taking, a receiving and a letting go, paying attention is a living way of living in the moment, letting go, dying and rising at each moment.

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<sup>4</sup> Talcott Parsons & Edward Shils, *Toward a general theory of action*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), 336.

<sup>5</sup> David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), 281.

<sup>6</sup> Sr. Ray Maria McNamara, RSM, Ph D. “Contemporary Christian Spirituality” (Labyrinth walk. University of Portland, Portland, OR. March. 22, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, (Novato: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 120.

<sup>8</sup> Aloys Grillmeier and John Bowden, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 195.

## 2. STEP TWO - DISCIPLINE OF THE WORDS

The second step is to put a few words together, but do not try to make them elaborated. Prayer is not a contest, but prayer is a way with words. As part of class spiritual practice, Professor McNamara of the University of Portland invites her students to consider piecing a few words together but keep them short and sweet.<sup>9</sup> Jesus offers us plenty of advice about how to pray. He criticizes the pagans for the “muchness and manyness” of their prayers. “In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mt. 6:7-8). This is all about coming before God in a sincere manner,<sup>10</sup> establishing a method of contemplation, and praying in concert with the breath. Sometimes, the babbling with words gets in the way of paying attention, but words are important. Simple words: the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* suggests to choose one word and use it as a centering experience: “take a short word, preferably of one syllable, to do so. The shorter the better, more in accord with the Spirit. A word like God or Love. Choose which you like, or perhaps some other, just so it is short, and fix this word to your heart so that whatever happens it will not go away.”<sup>11</sup> Praying a few words in the ancient tradition keeps us in tune with the divine presence and, in fact, often times piecing a few words allows us to pay attention to the here and the now.

## 3. STEP THREE - DISCIPLINE OF THE MIND AND THE HEART

The third step is the discipline of the mind and the heart, and that is to recognize everything as a gift. The meditation and contemplation of God in *Lectio Divina* are techniques of prayer as described by Professor McNamara in her introduction to spiritual practice.<sup>12</sup> It was preserved in Western monasticism. A period of several hours set apart each day in the monastic rule for the individual reading and learning by heart of scriptural texts, which were then meditated upon both at that time and also during the manual work occupying the rest of the day.<sup>13</sup> *Lectio Divina* is one way to shape the minds to ultimately come to cultivate and to recognize that everything is a gift. We live in a world that conditions our mind differently; therefore, we do not recognize the presence of God. But everything is gift as Mary Oliver says in her poetry: “someone I loved once gave a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this,

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<sup>9</sup> Sr. McNamara, RSM, Ph D. “Contemporary Christian Spirituality” (Class lecture. Feb. 8, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Philip Sheldrake, S.J., *Image of Holiness*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1988), 63.  
See also Emilie Griffin, *Simple Ways to Pray, Spiritual Life in the Catholic Tradition*, (Maryland: Rowman Publishers, 2006), 112.

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous Author, “Chapter VII,” in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 134.

<sup>12</sup> Sr. McNamara, RSM, PhD. “Contemporary Christian Spirituality” (Class lecture, March 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Belden Lane, “Prayer Without Language in the Mystical Tradition,” *The Solace of fierce landscapes*, (NY: Oxford, 1998), 66.

too, was a gift.”<sup>14</sup> We understand what gift really means when we get out of the mindset of this world because this world’s mindset is not about gift, but it is about trade; it is about presents, not gifts. Presents people give with an anticipation of having to return. That is our world; our minds are conditioned to think that somehow, we got to give something back, but a gift is something given without any expectation of return. A gift is given to be received or not to be received. A gift is given without the conditions of thanks and praise; instead it is given in the freedom of the giver whose delights in giving. If we recognize everything is a gift, even a box of darkness can be an opportunity for grace, conversion, solidarity, thanks and praise.

As disciples of Jesus we are called to cultivate a prayerful mind to recognize that every experience is a gift for it holds within it the presence of God; “God is in everything.”<sup>15</sup> Of course, prayer in itself is also a gift as David B. Perrin puts it: “Prayer is first a gift, a grace, that is received and responded to. This gift is unwrapped by expressing actively the animating presence of God in life through, for example, the recitation of psalms, quiet moments of recollection, communal worship, mindfulness about God, and good works.”<sup>16</sup> Experience holds within it the promise of love. If we can cultivate and recognize that everything is a gift, then even when they insult us and persecute us, we do not have to reciprocate. But rather, because we live in the presence of God through prayer, and because we pay attention and are piecing a few words together to focus our minds and hearts and see that everything is a gift, we do not pay back evil with evil. But rather, in the chaos of other, we can enter into their chaos with love and humor.

#### **4. STEP FOUR – CULTIVATE RECEPTIVITY**

The fourth step is to cultivate receptivity. Not only do we recognize the gift with the intellect, but there must be a cultivation of accepting it all and receiving it all. This is challenging because we do not like to be receptive. We live in a society where we have to look like we are in control even when we are not. Prayer is the recognition that it is all in God’s hands, and everything is a gift, and that we can say a few words by simply paying attention to our breath. Prayer techniques over the 2000 years shape us; so that we can live in solidarity and in wonderment and in conversion. Though the “Bible does not provide ready answers to the difficulties or complex questions we face in today's world..., bible

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See also Paul F. Bradshaw, *Two Ways Of Praying*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Heidi Fischbach, “Baba Yaga's Place where body & mind meet soul,” <http://babayagasplace.squarespace.com/poetry-for-heart-and-soul/2007/10/25/the-uses-of-sorrow-mary-oliver.html> (accessed March 4, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Sr. McNamara, RSM, Ph D. “Contemporary Christian Spirituality” (Class discussion. University of Portland, Portland, OR. March 1, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 278.

reading invites the reader into a receptive and reflective stance before the text that nourishes and transforms our life in Jesus. Ultimately, bible reading and study leads into authentic prayer.”<sup>17</sup> These prayer techniques, that make us present to the presence of God, demand a cultivation of receptivity; Thy will be done.

## 5. STEP FIVE – DISCIPLINE OF THE MIND

The fifth one is another discipline of the mind from the ancient tradition of prayer. That is to accept being accepted. There is a lot of self-hatred that comes when we do not live up to expectations, like expectations of some parents where they are expecting their children to live up to the expectations that they may never fulfilled. There is a lot of self-hate and self-doubt that comes out in addiction where people self-medicate the self-hate through addiction: alcohol, sex, drugs, etc. The self-hate and the self-loathing can become deeply ingrained. We forget that Christianity is a religion meant for sinners not just for saints: "for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt. 9:13); we forget that we have been accepted by the one who accepts us just as we are, and yet calls us to be all we can be. Not only do we have to be cultivating receptivity to the gift, but there is an acceptance of being loved with all our wounds and our brokenness which links to this receptivity of being accepted. This is what we believe in the sacrament of reconciliation: Look at my wounds, God. Look at my sin. We do get our soul stained, but guilt, shame and self-hatred must fly because we have been accepted by the one who has washed us clean. Being accepted allows us to celebrate the sacrament of penance. To confess our sins does not have to be a neurotic act as guilt-ridden Catholics who hate themselves, but a celebration of the good news that we have been accepted by the one who accepts us even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-11) and demonstrated an immensity of love for sinners like us. We are called into a conversion to be the image and likeness of divinity which is, ultimately, our destiny to accept. To accept who we are is to accept not only the faults, the failing and the wounds, but to accept the destiny of what we are to be the image and likeness of Christ in the world. The pivotal point of step five is to accept that we are accepted beyond self needs. We are called to be more than simply followers of Jesus Christ; he calls us to be his presence not to simply follow him, but to be another Christ as St. Paul called us "the body of Christ" (Romans 12:5).

Aren't we the baptized called to be more than just followers, but to be leaders in the world because we bear within us the very presence of Christ? To accept our destiny takes a lot of recognition of gift, a lot of receptivity, a lot of staying present, a tremendous amount of accepting that who we are is nothing less than the very place where God becomes present again in human history. That is what mystics, like St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and Julian of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 281.

Norwich called a union with God,<sup>18</sup> so profound that St. Paul described it in these words: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

## 6. STEP SIX – BE BEDAZZLED

The sixth step is to let ourselves be bedazzled every once in a while, which can also be a prayer. To be bedazzled is to let ourselves in the righteous awe of people, of life, or of experiences: like a child in front of the Christmas tree relish, like a desert monk/nun in front of splendid nature, like Sister McNamara in her story of the magnificent water fall,<sup>19</sup> like "Moses meeting with God on Sinai."<sup>20</sup> I find this to be extremely important in contemplative prayer, to let ourselves have wonderment. Father David Power in his book, "Loved beyond calculation," he says that without wonderment or bedazzlement, we aren't really Christians at all." (I heard this quote from a Catholic broadcasting program). It's our call to be filled with wonderment and bedazzlement and say Oh! And that too is a prayer.

## 7. STEP SEVEN – THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE

All of praying steps discussed above manifest themselves in the demonstration of the ultimate act of thanks and praise. It demonstrates itself the presence of God that we pay attention to, the presence of God that we recognize as a gift, and piecing a few words together, the presence of God that is received as we cultivate receptivity and being accepted that we are accepted, and the cultivation of a bedazzlement and a wonderment of creation. All of these steps are summed up in step seven, where we put our praise and thanksgiving in acts of service, justice and love. David Perrin would put it: "Prayer is not the opposite of action: service and presence to others are key aspects of Christian prayer. God does not live "up there" somewhere. Prayer ought to seek God in this world, where God and humanity live together, not outside of the world. In this world God lives and in this world relationship with God is nurtured - which is Christian prayer."<sup>21</sup> Prayer finds "its fullest expression in interpersonal communion in and through communication with others and with God. Action and contemplation do not pertain to separate spheres: the sacred and the secular, church and world, spiritual life and the domain of the mundane and profane. The one God who is constantly "adventing" is not only for us but for the whole world. Prayer is well thought of as awakening to the divine presence in every dimension of

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<sup>18</sup> Sr. McNamara, RSM, PhD. "Contemporary Christian Spirituality" (Class lecture, January 18, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Belden Lane, "Connecting Spiritual and the Environment," *The Solace of fierce landscapes*, (New York: Oxford, 1998), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 279.

everyday living.”<sup>22</sup> The acts of service, justice and love are the proof of our prayers. Unless our prayers bear fruit, our praying is just another form of self soothing; conversely, good works without prayer are works of the ego; unless the God who enters our chaos is embraced and we are set free from fear; unless we who are knowing we are not alone; unless we enter into the chaos of others and proclaim to them the presence of God, then all our praying is just words. The ultimate act of praise and thanksgiving is service. God does not want our “hooting” and “hollering” in our prayers. Our praise and thanksgiving is a new worship of God. We cultivate our openness and receptivity; we are bedazzled; our great act of praise and thanksgiving is when we wash each other’s feet. It is the prayer of our life; it is the new worship Christ calls us to and without it we are not Christians. Because we say in the preface at mass: “Father all powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere, it is our duty and our salvation to give you thanks and praise.” The question is, what does thanks and praise mean? Except they are the overflowing of what we have received in prayer, and we give as a gift in thanksgiving; they are the flow of the gift and the acts of service, love and justice. When we serve, when we pray in service for others, what happens is we will recognize in ourselves a great need for conversion because in serving others we have to die to ourselves. In serving others, there is intrinsically an offering of oneself as a gift of thanks and praise to others, as a way of thanking and praising God. In surrendering, in dying and serving, there is great joy that our lives are changed, and when we are filled with joy, we attract more people to serve. Then the cycle of praying continues: 1) Pay attention, 2) Piece a few words together, 3) Recognize the gift, 4) Cultivate receptivity, 5) Accept being accepted, 6) Be bedazzled and 7) Give thanks, praise and service. Our hearts then will be filled; we will never be alone and never afraid again for on that day when the whole world will be entrapped by the love of God. God will become all in awe. We will join the choirs of angels in heaven forever praising the one who has called us to this world, rejoicing together in Christ who is our Lord and savior, forever and ever. Amen.

### III. CONCLUSION

These seven prayer techniques are a school. Pope John Paul II uses that metaphor and says that “we are called to prayer so that we can enter a school to be trained in seeing and perceiving and receiving God’s grace.”<sup>23</sup> Prayer then, is a school of conversion, because when we pray, we pray to be changed; we pray in repentance; so that we may repent our blindness, repent of our thirsts for false idols, repent for the stench of our own lives that are locked in fear and self-absorption. We pray to be converted. We pray, also, in solidarity. Thus, each celebration of the mass we have

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<sup>22</sup> Downey, “*In the Ache of Absence*,” *The Liturgical Ministry* 3, 98.

<sup>23</sup> Donald B. Cozzens, *The Spirituality of the Diocesan Priest*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 147.

intercessory prayer because the intercessory prayer is the solidarity prayer. We pray with those who suffer from disease and for those who are victims of violence, rape and murder of domestic violence in the homes. In solidarity, we stand in prayer with those who are victims of war; we stand in solidarity with the earth which is being exploited by pollution and the waste of natural resources. We stand in solidarity when we make intercession. For when we make intercession, it is a way of standing together. And finally, we pray in wonderment, wonderment that ultimately is the wondrous bedazzlement of knowing that God is God, and we are not. The wonderful presence of God can be known in the myriad of ways in which we pray. Unfortunately, sometimes we think that we pray to change God. We pray, not for conversion, not in solidarity, and not in wonderment, but we pray, thinking we can manipulate God. True prayer is recognizing that whatever techniques of prayer we use, they are a way of letting God take over; so that our hearts and vision can be cleansed; so that we will know that we are not alone. Ultimately, prayer, whether it is toward conversion or solidarity or wonderment, whether it is for repentance or intercession or thanksgiving and praise, is meant to change us, not God.

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