



PRAYER ENRICHMENT GUIDEBOOK

*Exploring Seven
Traditional Forms
of Prayer*



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EXPLORING SEVEN
TRADITIONAL FORMS OF PRAYER



“For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”

— ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

Prayer is an essential practice of the faith. It is the core of our relationship with God for whom we thirst and who thirsts for us.

Throughout Christian history, various styles and forms of prayer have emerged and receded, ebbed and flowed. This fluid pattern of prayer often characterizes our individual lives of prayer as well. Just as there are seasons in a relationship between two people, there are seasons in our relationship with God. At certain times, one form of prayer is more fruitful and life-giving, while in another age God may invite us to encounter him in a different way.

This Prayer Enrichment Guidebook is meant to facilitate those times of exploration and transition into different forms of prayer. This short guide contains introductions to seven styles of prayer, each one distinct yet firmly rooted in the spiritual tradition of the Church.

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The entry for each prayer practice introduced in this guide contains the following:

- ◆ *A brief overview of the prayer practice*
- ◆ *Its origins*
- ◆ *Why one might practice it*
- ◆ *How one can practice it*

This guide intends neither to be exhaustive nor comprehensive. Instead, it is an aid for all Christians to deepen their relationship with the Lord through new forms of prayer and to help others do the same. It is an ideal supplement for teachers, catechists, ministers and anyone who seeks to help themselves or someone else encounter God in a new way.

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LECTIO DIVINA

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

“Above all it’s the Gospels that occupy my mind when I’m at prayer; my poor soul has so many needs, and yet this is the one thing needful. I’m always finding fresh lights there, hidden and enthralling meanings.”

—ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

The phrase lectio divina means “divine reading” in Latin and is a fitting name for this prayer practice of listening to Scripture with the ear of the heart. Lectio divina (often called “lectio” for short) is a dialogue with God through Scripture that includes the whole self: thoughts, images, memories, desires, etc. The movements within lectio divina involve reading, listening to, responding to and resting in the Word of God. It can be practiced alone or with a community.

The origins of lectio divina

With encouragement from the Church Fathers, lectio divina entered the daily prayer of the early monastic communities in the 6th century as a way of communicating with God through Scripture. It has developed over time into the practice we know today of reading God’s Word and attending to his presence therein. The four movements within lectio divina are reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.

Why you might pray with lectio divina

Lectio divina encourages us to become receptive to the divine Word in order to form us into the image of Christ. Pope Francis speaks of lectio divina in *Evangelii Gaudium* as a “way of listening to what the Lord wishes to tell us in his Word and of letting ourselves be transformed by the Spirit” (152). If you desire to incorporate more Scripture into your prayer life and pay closer attention to the movements of God, lectio divina might be a place to start.

HOW TO PRACTICE LECTIO DIVINA

◆ **Select a Scripture passage**

Before starting your prayer, select a passage from Scripture to use for your lectio divina. It can be from the Old or New Testament, but it shouldn't be too long. The length of a reading from Mass works well. Often, people choose to pray with a reading from the day's Lectionary or the Mass for the upcoming Sunday.

◆ **Preparation for the prayer**

Before entering into the prayer, prepare yourself physically and mentally. Begin by sitting comfortably, placing both feet on the ground, with posture upright and hands open on your lap as if waiting to receive a gift from God. Then, abandon any agenda, worries or thoughts you bring to this prayer and entrust these things to the providence of God. Ask for the grace to be receptive to what God will speak to you through this Scripture reading.

STEPS OF LECTIO DIVINA

1 READING (LECTIO)

Begin by slowly and meditatively reading your Scripture passage out loud. Listen for a particular word or phrase that speaks to you at this moment and sit with it for a time.

2 MEDITATION (MEDITATIO)

Read the same passage a second time. As you re-engage the text, let the word or phrase that stood out become your invitation to dialogue with God. Allow the word or phrase to wash over you and permeate your thoughts and feelings.

3 PRAYER (ORATIO)

Read the text a third time. What is God saying to you in these words? What do you want to say to God? What feelings do these words raise up in you? Share your answers with God.

4 CONTEMPLATION (CONTEMPLATIO)

Read the text a final time. As you do, release the word or phrase you have been praying with. Be still and rest in God's embrace. What gift has God given you to take away from this prayer? To what action might God be inviting you? Thank God for this gift and invitation as you conclude your prayer.



THE EXAMEN

PRAYING YOUR EXPERIENCES

“All the things in this world are gifts of God, created for us, to be the means by which we can come to know him better, love him more surely and serve him more faithfully.”

—ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

The Ignatian Examen is a prayer that helps us to identify and pay closer attention to God’s activity in everyday life. When fully adopted, the Examen becomes a habit, a daily inventory of the ways God has been at work in our lives and of the ways that we either have or have not responded to this activity of God.

The origins of the Examen

The Examen was developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits and a master of discerning the movements of the Holy Spirit. He believed the Examen was so powerful and important that he required every Jesuit to practice the Examen twice daily: at midday and at night.

Why you might pray the Examen

Daily practice of the Examen improves our awareness of the slow but certain work of God in our lives. The more the Examen becomes a habit, the more aware we become of the movements of God throughout the day. If you wish to perceive the movements of the Holy Spirit with greater clarity or are in a process of discernment, the Examen would be a great practice to adopt.

HOW TO PRACTICE THE EXAMEN

◆ **Pick a time of day**

If you are going to pray the Examen once each day, the most helpful times tend to be in the morning, at midday or at night. The time before going to bed can be helpful if you already pray Night Prayer regularly. Nighttime is also a natural place to start practicing the Examen since you will be reviewing what happened over the course of the day. Midday prayer can work well for people who already have a habit of praying during their lunch hour. One distinct advantage of a midday Examen is that it gives us a chance to review the morning, see where God has already been active and still have the chance to make adjustments for the rest of the day. If you tend to be a morning person or have a habit of praying at the start of the day, you can also pray the Examen in the morning with the previous day as your focus. Whatever time of day you choose, consider making it a part of your routine so that you don't forget.

STEPS OF THE EXAMEN

As you begin, invite God into your prayer and ask for the grace to see yourself honestly as you review your day. Then, at a meditative pace, review your day using the five steps below as a guide. You can prayerfully meditate on your responses or journal as you move through the reflections.

1 EXPRESS GRATITUDE

Recall your day and name anything for which you are particularly grateful. Thank God for these gifts.

2 REVIEW THE DAY

Review the events of your day. Move from morning to night and notice where you felt God's presence. (No detail is too small or too mundane.*) Were there any invitations to grow in faith, hope or charity? How did you respond to these invitations?

3 NAME YOUR SORROWS

Name those things from the day for which you are sorry. Include both actions and regrets, things you did or did not do.

4 SEEK FORGIVENESS

Ask God to forgive you. If there is someone you may have hurt and with whom you should reconcile, resolve now to reconcile with them and ask their forgiveness.

5 ASK FOR GRACE FOR TOMORROW

Conclude by thanking God for the gift of your life and this day. Then, ask for the grace you need to see God's presence more clearly and to conform yourself to Jesus Christ more closely tomorrow.

**Early on, you may feel overwhelmed by trying to remember all the happenings in your day. Don't get discouraged! Trust that God will bring to mind those things he wishes you to see. Later, as the Examen becomes a regular practice, you will start to notice movements as they happen throughout your day, and recalling them in the evening will become easier and more natural.*



CENTERING PRAYER

PRAYING AND BEING WITH GOD

“Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”

—ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA

Centering prayer cultivates a disposition of interior silence intended to make room for God. It is a way of disposing ourselves to receive the gift of contemplation, an encounter with God's presence. As St. John Vianney said of his time in Eucharistic Adoration, "I look at him and he looks at me." This contemplative gaze or time of being with God is at the heart of centering prayer.

The origins of centering prayer

With roots in the contemplative prayer of the Desert Fathers, centering prayer enacts the Lord's instruction to “go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret” (Matthew 6:6). It emerges from the natural desire to be with God and set our attention on him. Centering prayer as a form of contemplation has grown in popularity in recent decades thanks to the ministry of Fr. Thomas Keating, a member of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance.

Why you might pray with centering prayer

All contemplative prayer is a way of being with God more intimately and seeking union with God. Centering prayer in particular is an aid to cultivating the interior disposition requisite for such a relationship. In centering prayer, we make space for God and invite God into it. Since interior silence is not a strength of our age, centering prayer will take time and patience to learn. Still, if you desire more opportunities simply *to be* with God or to focus your attention on God, then centering prayer will likely be worth the effort.

HOW TO PRACTICE CENTERING PRAYER

◆ **Time**

Set aside at least 20 minutes to practice centering prayer. Later on, you will be able to extend this time, but 20 minutes is enough to begin. Since watching a clock would make centering prayer impossible, look for a timer that can alert you *gently* when 20 minutes has elapsed. A gentle reminder is best because the end of 20 minutes is a sign to conclude your prayer (not a sign that your prayer has ended), and you don't want to be startled in this moment.

◆ **Space**

Look for a space where you can focus on prayer and be undistracted. Environments that we associate with other activities (like our living room or office) can be difficult places to practice centering prayer. Familiar sensory inputs will lead our minds to wander towards the activities we usually associate with those spaces.

It is best to find a place where you will be undisturbed. Small interruptions (like traffic outside or the movement of people) tend to be more distracting for centering prayer than other forms of prayer. With practice, however, you will become more resilient and better able to overcome distraction.

◆ **Objectives**

The fruits of centering prayer do not come during the prayer itself but in our daily life and relationship with God. Thus, one does not enter centering prayer with an objective in mind like attaining a state of thoughtlessness or achieving some spiritual experience. Nor should one seek to analyze or unpack the thoughts that inevitably arise during centering prayer. Instead, the only goal of centering prayer is to be with God. Like an infant gazing into the eyes of its mother, you have nothing to do during centering prayer except to be present to the Other who is God.

◆ **Thoughts**

Thoughts will come and go during centering prayer; this is totally natural. As thoughts arise and fade, do not attempt to “deal” with them in any direct way by fighting them, clinging to them, analyzing them, etc. Instead, gently return to your prayer and continue being present to God.

◆ **Sleep**

Many people actually fall asleep while practicing centering prayer. This is true of novices and experts alike. If you are going to attempt centering prayer, try to do it at a time of day when you are fully awake and not prone to sleep. If you do happen to fall asleep while praying, just continue praying when you wake up. If you sleep for the whole session, do not count it as a failure! Instead, count it as a gift from God. Thanks to your gentle timer, your accidental nap shouldn't last longer than 20 minutes anyway.

STEPS OF CENTERING PRAYER

1 CHOOSE A SACRED WORD

Choose a word that can draw you into prayer. This word will be like a compass in your hand that helps call you back to interior silence. Because you will return to it often, the shorter and simpler the word, the better. A word like *consecration* might be meaningful to you, but it might also be more likely to distract you. Consider words like *Abba*, *Jesus* or *mercy*.

2 SIT COMFORTABLY WITH EYES CLOSED

To get in a posture of prayer, find a comfortable place where you can sit with a straight back and your hands open on your lap. You should be poised to receive but not rigid, relaxed but not slouching. Close your eyes as a sign of letting go of the world around you and making yourself available to God.

3 INTRODUCE YOUR WORD

Very gently introduce your word in your mind and let yourself simply be. As thoughts or other distractions arise, call to mind your word (always gently) and let it return you to interior silence. Persist in this state of openness to God until your alarm draws you from prayer.

4 WITHDRAW FROM PRAYER

When your alarm alerts you, begin to withdraw from prayer. Thank God for the time spent in prayer and let your mind, spirit and body reacclimate to your surroundings.

5 TRUST IN GOD AND IN YOUR PRAYER

It's easy to worry that your centering prayer was a waste of time. *Did I do it correctly? Should I have done something else? Why did I get so distracted?* These are all temptations. When looking back at your centering prayer, keep two things in mind. First, the fruits of centering prayer rarely come in the moment of prayer itself but instead manifest in other areas of life. Second, a session of centering prayer is time set aside to be with God and make ourselves available to him. A child who climbs into a grandparent's lap will delight the grandparent whether the child is perfectly still or constantly squirming. We can have similar confidence that our time in centering prayer delights God whether we have been perfectly still or constantly squirming. To believe otherwise is a temptation and not from God.



WALKING MEDITATION

PRAYING WITH A LABYRINTH

“Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to hear and respond to what the Lord is asking.”

—CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2705

Praying with a labyrinth is a form of walking meditation, a physical expression of the interior journey towards Christ that characterizes all Christian meditation. Like a pilgrimage, forms of walking meditation evoke our earthly journey towards heaven while simultaneously giving us time and space to listen and respond to the Lord.

The origins of the prayer labyrinth

The earliest examples of labyrinths go back nearly 5,000 years, but the use of labyrinths in Christian prayer emerged during the Middle Ages. The most famous example of a Christian labyrinth intended for prayer is the stone labyrinth inlaid on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral in France. However, you can find prayer labyrinths in most areas of the country, from abbeys and monasteries to the campuses of Catholic parishes and colleges.

Why you might pray with a labyrinth

Where we pray affects how we pray. Most of the time, we seek to pray in places of quiet and stillness. At other times, taking a walk or simply being outside helps us pray. Although we can embark on a walking meditation nearly anywhere, the predictable and concentrated route of a labyrinth frees us from the inevitable distractions that come with being out for a walk (like recalling directions or wondering when to turn back). If being outdoors makes you feel closer to God or if pilgrimage has been influential in your spiritual life, then praying with a labyrinth might be a helpful practice.

HOW TO PRAY WITH A LABYRINTH

Since a prayer labyrinth is an external aid to prayer, we can use it to help with forms of prayer that are already familiar to us like the Rosary or the Examen. Of course, we can also use the labyrinth as a walking meditation as described below.

◆ **Find a labyrinth**

Look for a prayer labyrinth in your area. If you can't find one nearby, you still have options. You can make a basic one in your backyard (some paving stones will do the trick) or you can use the perimeter of your backyard to similar effect. If you live near a park, you can walk along a predetermined path or trace some other feature of the landscape. The key is finding a place where you will be relatively undisturbed either by other people or the need to make decisions about the direction you are heading.

◆ **Scriptural preparation**

Consider reading a passage from Scripture to set your mind on God's accompaniment with you during this short pilgrimage of prayer. There are many possibilities, but here are a few to get you started: Deuteronomy 1:31, Exodus 13:21-22, Isaiah 42:1-9, Luke 24:13-35.

STEPS OF PRAYING WITH A LABYRINTH

1 NAME YOUR INTENTION

Since we embark on a walking meditation in order to hear and respond to the Lord, invite God to walk with you during this prayer period. Ask for the grace to hear and respond to him. If you have any particular intentions on your heart, name them to God at this time and tell him that you will carry these intentions with you during the walk.

2 WALK THE PATH

Enter and follow the path of the labyrinth, knowing that God is with you. Go at a pace that feels natural. As you move along the path, notice what is happening in your mind and heart. There is no agenda to this prayer. Rather, let your prayer unfold as you go and trust in God's guidance. If your mind wanders to thoughts that seem like distractions, name the distraction, lift it up to God and ask God to guide your mind and heart back to him. If the distraction returns, explore it with God.

3 GIVE THANKS

When you reach the center of the labyrinth, thank God for having walked with you along the way.

4 REFLECT

Afterwards, take time to reflect on your walking meditation. Write down your thoughts, feelings or anything else that you experienced. If something from these recollections stands out to you, consider exploring it at another time in prayer or in spiritual direction.



TAIZÉ

PRAYING WITH MUSIC

“Look, you tell me, I am singing. Yes indeed, you are singing; you are singing clearly, I can hear you. But make sure that your life does not contradict your words. Sing with your voices, your hearts, your lips and your lives.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE

Taizé (pronounced: tay-zay) is a prayerful form of music known for its simple, yet rich and meditative character. Taizé music often takes the structure of an ostinato (a simple melody that repeats over and over) and is meant to serve as a kind of musical centering prayer. Because Taizé music itself is intentionally simple, it provides a great way to move our prayer from the head to the heart.

It's worth noting that much of what follows is applicable to other forms of prayerful music like chant or worship music. However, Taizé is a great starter example because it is easy to learn and designed especially for active prayer.

The origins of Taizé

Taizé music comes from the Taizé Community, a French ecumenical religious community founded in 1940. The hallmark ministries of this community are ecumenical prayer and hospitality, and music plays a significant role in both.

Why you might pray with Taizé music

There are many benefits to praying with Taizé music. First, in the same way that a sport moves an athlete to focus on the game and not the outside world, the meditative music of Taizé can help us to leave behind our many distractions and concentrate on the Lord. If you are particularly prone to intellectualize prayer, or if you desire to pray more intentionally from the heart, the music of Taizé could be of great help.

Second, the music of Taizé is catchy—in a good way! Like any good song, you may find yourself humming a refrain after praying with this music. Unlike secular music, the songs of Taizé are aimed at praising God and drawing us deeper into relationship with God. If you want your prayer to echo throughout your day, consider praying with Taizé music.

Finally, Taizé music can help us establish a rhythm of prayer. The music itself structures time for us while the lyrics give us the words to use. If making time for prayer or finding words to speak from the heart has been a struggle, the music of Taizé might be a helpful aid.

HOW TO PRAY WITH TAIZÉ MUSIC

◆ **Finding the music**

Having Taizé music is essential for this prayer practice. Taizé albums are available on streaming services like YouTube and Spotify, or you can buy CDs of the music on the Taizé website. If you have musicians in your community, the songs are simple enough that musicians can often learn them by ear, or the Taizé website also has songbooks available.

◆ **Personal prayer**

Praying with Taizé as an individual can take whatever form you wish. The music can either function as an aid to your prayer or the lyrics themselves can become your prayer. If you are a musician, you can also pray the music by playing it. However you choose to

pray with this music, make your song selections ahead of time (like in a playlist or well-organized songbook) so that your prayer is not disrupted by constantly having to search for and queue up the next piece.

◆ **Communal prayer**

Praying with Taizé music in community is also a simple and fruitful practice, but it takes a little more effort to prepare and organize.

Some things to keep in mind as you set up Taizé prayer in common:

- ***The space***

The prayer space is important for any form of communal prayer. If you have access to a church or chapel, consider praying at night, by candlelight or as part of Eucharistic Adoration. If you do not have a dedicated prayer space, consider creating one with a crucifix, an open Bible, some candles, icons, flowers or other objects that will help to set the place apart from its normal use.

- ***The music***

Taizé music is best prayed live. If you have musicians in your community willing to learn the music, invite them to lead your prayer. Having music leaders will allow the rest of the community to join the prayer effortlessly and without hesitation. If live music is not an option, do your best to ensure the sound quality of the music. Set up good speakers and test them beforehand. You want the sound to fill the space without overwhelming it. Create a playlist ahead of time and practice shifting between songs. Fumbling with technology will quickly break the contemplative spirit of the group.

- ***Silence***

Whether you have live or recorded music, make sure to leave space for silence. Silence is essential to all prayer forms, but it is especially important when praying with music. People will need silence to speak their own words to God and to listen for God in return.



FASTING

PRAYING THROUGH SELF-DENIAL

“Fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind, subjects one’s flesh to the spirit, makes the heart contrite and humble, scatters the clouds of concupiscence, quenches the fire of lust and kindles the true light of chastity.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE

Fasting is a voluntary abstinence from something good, usually food. It’s a familiar spiritual practice for most of us, but it’s also a practice we tend to take up only during Lent or only when the Church tells us we have to. That’s unfortunate because fasting is, in the words of St. Basil the Great, a powerful “weapon of protection against demons.” Similarly, Christ tells his disciples that certain kinds of demons can only be cast out by prayer and fasting (Mark 9:29). With this in mind, we should want to be well-practiced at fasting and have this form of prayer in our spiritual arsenal at all times.

The origins of fasting

Fasting is a tradition with ancient roots. Think of Israel’s Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), David’s fast after the death of his child or Nineveh’s fast of repentance (see Leviticus 23; 2 Samuel 12; and Jonah 3).

Prayer and fasting is fairly common in the New Testament as well. The prophetess Anna and John the Baptist both fasted in preparation for the coming of Christ (see Luke 2; Mark 2). Jesus himself also fasted. Recall

his forty days of fasting in the desert at the start of his public ministry and his instruction to his disciples to pray, fast and give alms (Matthew 4, 6). We also know fasting was a practice of the early Church (Acts 13 and 14).

Why you might pray through fasting

There are many reasons to fast; some are good and some are bad. Some bad reasons to fast would be to lose weight, to feel more worthy of God's love or to compare yourself to another person. We must keep in mind that fasting should always be done out of love. (Really, the same can be said of every action in the Christian life. Our motivation should always be love of God and love of neighbor.)

It's also worth noting that fasting from sin doesn't really count as fasting. Yes, we should eliminate sinful habits and whatever else keeps us from God, but just because we're giving something up (in this case, sin), it doesn't mean we're actually fasting. We're just doing what we're supposed to be doing!

What are some good reasons to fast? Fasting helps us to prepare for liturgical feasts like Easter, to master our instincts, to develop good spiritual habits, to grow in humility and dependence on God, to offer a sacrifice on behalf of an intention and to be more united with Christ. If any of these good reasons resonate with you, consider taking up a fast.

HOW TO PICK YOUR FAST

◆ **Start small**

If it's been a while since you fasted from anything regularly, start small like skipping snacks between meals on Fridays or not having your afternoon coffee once a week. Starting small is smart because it helps limit pride about our "great feats" of fasting and it helps build habit and momentum.

You can think of fasting like running. If you suddenly decided to start running a long distance each day, you might be able to keep it up for a time, but you would quickly burn out without a foundation of running previously. Similarly, when we elect a significant and sudden fast, we can probably do it for a few days, but our resolve quickly fades. It's better to take up a small fast that we will actually complete than to pick an impressive one that we will quickly abandon.

◆ **Keep it simple**

Fasting doesn't need to be elaborate. That's what makes food such an obvious choice for many people. With food, we can be certain that we will desire it at certain times of the day, that giving it up will be a sacrifice and that (for most people in good physical health) skipping an occasional meal should not have any real negative effects. Still, we can legitimately fast from lots of other things too: drink, conveniences, media, hobbies, pastimes, the Internet, etc.

◆ **Make sure your decision is good for you and your relationships**

Use good judgment. Your fast should be a legitimate sacrifice, but it also should not become a punishment for you or a burden for your family. Fasting from using your car to get to work would probably be a true sacrifice, but if it makes your kids late for school and makes you angry when you get home for work, it's probably not a good idea. Remember: you're voluntarily choosing to fast out of love.

◆ **Watch out for rationalization**

If you get an idea for a fast and find yourself immediately rationalizing why not to do it, that might actually be a good sign to consider fasting from it. Rationalizations tend to be surface-level reasons that conceal a deeper, truer motivation. In the case of fasting, rationalizing sounds like, "Yes. That would be a good fast, but that's how *I* relax each day." Or, "Yes. I could do that, but that's the one thing I get to have for *me*." Rationalizations are different than justifications, which are reasons founded in truth that correspond to

true motivations. They sound more like, “Yes. But my doctor says I need to make sure I eat three full meals a day.” Or, “Yes. But giving that up always makes me irritable and unable to sleep.”

◆ **Keep it between you and God and your spiritual director**

We have good scriptural grounds for fasting in secret (see Matthew 6). At the same time, if someone notices our fast and asks about it, there’s nothing wrong with explaining it. Similarly, including our spouse, close friends or spiritual director in our decisions about fasting can also be a great idea. They can help us keep our head straight and our plan on track. Remember, fasting is a powerful tool against evil, and we can be certain the devil will try to confuse and discourage us during a fast. Good friends are important and helpful, and their assistance or guidance does not diminish our sacrifice.

◆ **Come up with a plan for your fast**

Having a start date, end date and general plan for a fast will take the decision out of the moment and also increase your likelihood of follow-through. For example, setting two alarms for the morning inevitably means snoozing the first and falling back on the second. Similarly, if you plan to decide your fast in the moment, then you’re more likely to slide in your commitment. Pick a specific moment and duration for your fast, and you’ll be more likely to complete it. Example: “I will fast from television Monday through Thursday for the next three weeks.”

PRAYING YOUR FAST

◆ **Pick an intention**

Fasting is a great opportunity to offer a sacrifice on behalf of an intention. Consider offering your fast for something very particular. This will give you particular motivation and strengthen your resolve.

◆ **Start!**

There's no magic formula for a date on which to start your fast. Certainly, there are days and seasons during which Christians traditionally fast (namely, Fridays and Lent), but we can start a fast at anytime. Unless there is a really good reason, delaying a fast is usually just another rationalization to avoid fasting altogether.

When you begin your fast, invite God to be with you. Then, offer your fast for your chosen intention, ask for the grace to complete it and tell God that you accept as a gift whatever he chooses to bring out of it. If your fast happens at a specific time during the day, you can repeat a prayer like this each time the moment of your fast arises. If not, you can repeat it each day of the fast during your normal time of prayer.

◆ **Don't quit if you break the fast**

Fasting is not a test, and it certainly does not require a perfect score. This is prayer, and God calls us to faithfulness in prayer, not perfection. If you happen to break a fast or forget to do it, please don't get discouraged or beat yourself up. Simply recommit to your fast, invite God into the fast as above and continue as best as you can.



WORKS OF MERCY

INTEGRATING PRAYER AND ACTION

“He ‘prays without ceasing’ who unites prayer
to works and good works to prayer.”

—ORIGEN

The works of mercy are loving acts of service and compassion directed towards the spiritual and material needs of our neighbors. At first glance, it may seem odd to include them alongside other forms of prayer, but we must remember that prayer and the Christian life are inseparable. The love of God that leads us into prayer is the same love that leads us to serve our neighbor. Consider the words of Jesus: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

The origins of the works of mercy

Most of the corporal works of mercy come to us from Matthew 25, where Jesus describes the separation of the sheep and the goats at the final judgment. The origins of the spiritual works of mercy as a complete list are harder to trace. However, both the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are practices well-supported by Scripture, tradition and the lives and writings of the saints.

Works of Mercy: Integrating Prayer and Action

CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

Feed the hungry
Give drink to the thirsty
Clothe the naked
Visit the imprisoned
Shelter the homeless
Visit the sick
Bury the dead

SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY

Admonish the sinner
Instruct the ignorant
Counsel the doubtful
Comfort the sorrowful
Bear wrongs patiently
Forgive all injuries
Pray for the living and the dead

How the works of mercy relate to our prayer

This guidebook culminates with the works of mercy because they are both the fruit and nourishment of the life of prayer (see 1 John 4:7-21). Far from being a to-do list of the Christian life, the works of mercy are the fruit that naturally stems from a loving relationship with God. Prayer fuels the works of mercy; love of God gives life to love of neighbor. As the first letter of St. John says, “We love because God first loved us,” and “Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister” (1 John 4:19-21).

With this in mind, the works of mercy lead us to further union with God just as much as other forms of prayer,* and they are thus a practice for everyone to adopt.

**This is not to say that the works of mercy can replace prayer. Prayer and the Christian life are indeed inseparable, but they are not interchangeable; one cannot stand in for the other. Think of prayer as the root and stem of Christian life and the works of mercy as its fruit and branches.*

How to live out our prayer through the works of mercy

Unlike the other forms of prayer outlined in this guidebook, there is no step-by-step process for performing the works of mercy. Instead, they should be as much a part of daily life as eating, sleeping or praying.

Unfortunately, we often treat the works of mercy as to-do lists. “Here are some things that I set aside a certain amount of time each week to accomplish. I’ll go to the soup kitchen one week. The hospital the next week.” And so on. It is indeed good to do these things (if you already do them, keep it up!), but approaching the works of mercy as a to-do list is a bit like claiming to be an artist because you paint for four hours a month. It’s compartmentalized and lacks integration.

Pope Francis has reminded us that the works of mercy are more comprehensive than that. Broadly conceived, they are not so much a particular rubric of actions as they are a way of life that cares for and shows mercy towards our brothers and sisters in all aspects of their existence and their need.

“The Christian life involves the practice of the traditional seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy. We usually think of the works of mercy individually and in relation to a specific initiative: hospitals for the sick, soup kitchens for the hungry, shelters for the homeless, schools for those to be educated, the confessional and spiritual direction for those needing counsel and forgiveness... But if we look at the works of mercy as a whole, we see that the object of mercy is human life itself and everything it embraces.”

—POPE FRANCIS

*Message for the celebration of the
World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, 1 September 2016*

Works of Mercy: Integrating Prayer and Action

Taking this to heart, the first place to practice the works of mercy is in “human life itself and everything it embraces.” For most people most of the time, this happens in the simple and hidden ways most appropriate to one's current particular vocation. The real and concrete (not the hypothetical and ideal) is where the works of mercy will most naturally flow from and nourish our prayer. Do parents clothe the naked and feed the hungry? Do priests admonish sinners and comfort the sorrowful? Do colleagues bear wrongs patiently and forgive all injuries? Hopefully, the answer to each of these questions is a resounding yes!

Once we learn to enact the works of mercy in our daily activities (and also come to understand how we too are the recipients of daily works of mercy), our service in the more public or oft-considered works of mercy will become a deeper unfolding of an already merciful existence, rather than sporadic exercises in philanthropy. Caring for a sick stranger will be an extension of caring for an aging parent. Feeding hungry mouths at a soup kitchen will be an outgrowth of feeding hungry mouths at home. If we can integrate the works of mercy (both large and small) into the seamless garment of our life in Christ, we will be like real artists who draw and paint daily and then allow that daily creativity to spill out in more public and far-reaching works.

This integrated approach comes with a caveat: we cannot use it to excuse ourselves from serving the poor or seeking out those on the margins who do need our help. Treating our daily interactions as opportunities to show and receive mercy is a foundation for the more traditional acts of mercy, not a dispensation from them. An integrated life of prayer and mercy should propel us into the world and inflame our desire to enact God's mercy. Fueled by prayer and a genuine love of God and neighbor, we will grow in our capacity to see the needs of the poor and marginalized and find the courage to act on their behalf.



OTHER RESOURCES

Catechism of the Catholic Church

For a deeper exploration of prayer in general, see part four of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which covers Christian prayer with both breadth and precision.

Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life (Bloomsbury, 2011)

For a more in-depth exploration of centering prayer, this volume is a compilation of Fr. Thomas Keating's three most popular books.

The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today (Crossroad, 2006)

For those interested in learning more about the process of the daily Ignatian Examen, Fr. Timothy Gallagher offers insights drawn from his experiences of teaching this form of prayer to others in his work as a spiritual director.

Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence

For more information on fasting, consider reading the [*Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence*](#) (1966) located on the USCCB website. The document gives a good overview of fasting in general and recommended times for doing it. It is also helpful for understanding the recommendations of the U.S. Bishops on the Catholic tradition of abstaining from meat on Fridays.

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