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*The person knows what is true, who, free from all thoughts, all discernible appearances, and inward images, perceives intuitively that which no outward seeing has revealed. I have compassion for those who not knowing this, laugh and mock at me. Such people want to behold and taste eternal things and divine activities, and stand in the light of eternity, while their hearts flit about, caught up in yesterday and tomorrow.*

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Meister Eckardt, quoting St. Augustine of Hippo, wrote in The Book of Divine Comfort in 1308

St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans admonishes us to “*be transformed by the renewing of the mind [of Christ in you], so that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect.*” We are not called by God to be defeatists. We are called to be coworkers with the Holy Spirit. St. Gregory Palamas, a 14th century Greek theologian, pointed out that all of our study, prayer, and work is a response to the promptings of the Spirit so that we may come to a point where we really understand that through Baptism our sins are forgiven, we are God’s beloved children, members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and inheritors of the Kingdom of God.

There are three aspects of spiritual life that together comprise the path to discovering that which is really true. Devotion to Jesus Christ, who is both Teacher and Truth, is the foundation, the rock, on which the Christian’s spiritual house is built. The practice of compassion, or agape love, forms its strong framework. Prayer, meditation, and contemplation complete your spiritual house as its roof and pinnacle. Every part is essential to the whole. The power of devotion is the basis of contemplative prayer. The greater your confidence in Christ, the more open you are to receiving him. In the Gospels again and again Jesus says:

*“Your faith has made you whole.”*

What you believe in your heart about Jesus is what you see in him. For those who see Jesus as a great human teacher, that is who they receive. But if you see him as not in the least different from God, that is the one whom you receive. Persistence in faith is of paramount importance in opening your heart to receive the grace God offers. Luke 9:24 says: “*Lord I believe; help my unbelief.*”

Rely on Jesus’ promises. Be steadfast in faith.

## Contemplative Prayer: How to Pray

By Christopher Seal

While the Kingdom of God is among us here and now, still the Christian walks by faith, and not by sight. When a person has even a little bit of faith in Christ, the door of the heart opens a crack, and a corresponding amount of light illuminates the soul. However, with a heart wide open through faith, the light of Christ enables the believer to live more and more fully in the Kingdom in everyday life situations.

Have confidence in what God can do. Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:7:  
*“Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.”*

That is why devotion is a key component of contemplation, as it is in every aspect of Christian life.

The Christian walk is lengthy, and your commitment to spiritual practice must be life-long. Never give up. No one starts out at the Holy Spirit’s finish line. There will be peaks and valleys on your journey. We are sustained in this through the underlying power of divine grace. Always pray for the spiritual gifts of patience and perseverance to tread the path to which you have been called. When you fall down, have the confidence get up again and again, because Christ walks with you.

As well as devotion to Christ, compassionate love, agape, is essential to making any spiritual progress. Jesus said:  
*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Agape in Greek means a compassionate love that makes no distinction. Agape is love which leaves no one out. Agape is the motivating source of every Christian’s ministry.

In Christian theology, agape is identified as an expression of the divine nature. In the First Letter of John we read that “God is love [agape].” It is, in essence, God’s love for every person, every tree, every rock, fly, and mosquito; love extending and suffusing all things to the farthest limit of the universe. Eros in the Greek language is not limited to romance or sexuality, but rather eros is also love directed toward a particular object, whether that is a person, place or thing. As human beings, we practice both forms of love, and both are utilized in spiritual practice, as devotion (eros) and

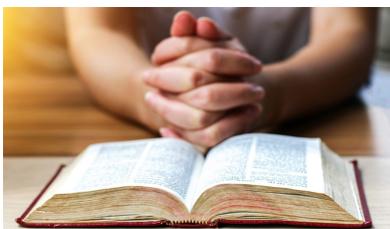
compassion (agape). All your prayer, study and work must be grounded in the eros of devotion and the agape of compassion.

The 12th century master Peter Lombard clarified the distinction between what is called unformed faith, which is mere assent to intellectual propositions like the Creeds, and developed faith which arises out of experiential wisdom informed by erudition. It is not enough for a person to “know about” God. The Pharisees were famous for their intellectual learning. Christianity is not a religion of just thinking about God or doing the right thing; it is union with Christ, the very definition of the word “Communion.” You are already in him, and he is in you. Contemplation is coming to know that truth from personal experience.

The main thrust of contemplative prayer is, as a first step, to pacify the mind’s turbulence, which can be as wild as a runaway horse and as nimble and unpredictable as a monkey. When you come to see and understand how your mind operates, and then by God’s grace gain some mastery over your thought processes, you will also be able to begin to assert authority over your outward speech and actions and become a greater channel of God’s blessings to others. On the other hand, by giving up and abandoning your mind to negative thoughts and emotions, no matter how outwardly polite and kind you might seem, the world will not become a better place, despite your good intentions. St. Francis of Assisi, said:

*“Your actions may be the only sermon some people will ever hear.”*

Much of our spiritual life is simply bringing aspiration and action into accord with one another, by God’s grace.



## How to Pray

The practice of prayer and contemplation is intended, among other purposes, to help you see more and more clearly into your inner life. With persistence, and the grace of the Holy Spirit, you will be better able to maintain a state of inner freedom in Christ whether in or out of formal prayer. Ordinary life experiences might no longer completely distract you from the God “in which we live and move and have our being.” Then you will be able to better show forth God’s wisdom and love to the world.

## A Way to Start

Find a quiet place. Decide on an object on which to concentrate your attention; an icon, or other sacred image, or you can use the breath or a special word or phrase to help calm your mind like “Jesus,” or “My Lord and my God.” If you are going to use an object, put the object about 3 to 4 feet in front of you. Then:

- Sit down in a comfortable position, your body erect, facing the sacred object.
- Pray quietly to God, putting your confidence in Jesus Christ. Let your breathing become soft, deep, and regular.
- If using an object, look at it not like an art critic, but as a general whole.
- Concentrate your awareness on the object, breath, or repeating the word or phrase in a gentle voice, try to not let your mind wander. At the start, do this for a period of ten minutes at a time.

You will notice that what seems to be a continuous stream of thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations will rise up in your mind, one thought following after another in a seeming uninterrupted manner. This is a very good sign, because you are becoming aware of the normal way your mind works after a lifetime of habituation. After a while a brief gap will occur between the thoughts, and then the flow of thoughts will start again. When your concentration becomes distracted by a thought, emotion, or sensation, be aware of this and deal with it using one of the methods outlined later in this paper under “Dealing with Distraction.”

- After ten minutes, take a short break of a couple of minutes, maybe have a glass of water, then go back to your practice. At first, sit in silent concentration for two ten-minute sessions, then quietly say the Lord’s Prayer quietly and very slowly, and go your way.

If you keep on with this simple practice, you will notice your powers of concentration in day to day situations will increase. More particularly in prayer sessions, by dint of experience and retraining your mind, the flow of distracting thoughts, emotions, and sensations will quiet down, and a sense

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of limitless openness and peace will become progressively more apparent. When this experience becomes apparent, expand your meditation time from two ten-minute sessions to three sessions of ten minutes, with short breaks in between, as before.

This experience of limitless openness and peace will be interrupted from time to time by a flow of thoughts. Simply “see” through these mental phenomena and remain vividly aware of the underlying openness and peace of the depth of the soul which God has given you, on which the surface phenomena of thoughts, emotions, and physical feelings “float.” Be aware of them and let the thoughts and emotions pass by, so to speak, without paying attention to them, and they will dissolve and disappear for a while. When you feel comfortable with this:

- Expand each of your three sessions to fifteen minutes. Try not concentrating on an object of meditation, but leave your mind in an alert, open, and relaxed state, neither accepting nor rejecting whatever comes to mind or doesn't.
- Do not be distracted from the real presence of God in the here and now. There is nothing for you to do but bask in the light of Christ.
- Pay attention to God's presence, nothing more.

As you become more and more used to the gap between the arising of thoughts, investigate it. Not only is there an experience of spaciousness and peace, but something else is evident. You will eventually recognize, with some surprise, perhaps, that this utterly peaceful yet vivid sheer lucidity has always been the foundation of your experience of thoughts, emotions, and physical perceptions. It has a quality of timeless sacred presence which you may have glimpsed from time to time out of the corner of your awareness. Resting in this fundamentally effortless, alert, and serene state is what Christian monks and nuns call contemplation.



## Old Testament and New Testament

The Old Testament points out and the New Testament affirms that all human effort, skill, and understanding ultimately derives from a single source, the Holy Spirit of God. Consciousness itself, and the visible

structures which mediate it, like the body, for example, have no origin apart from the reality and loving kindness of God, to which the rational mind can only point, but never fully comprehend. Contemplation is both recognizing and resting in God, the absolute source of everything that exists. St. Veronica Giuliani (1660-1727), concisely summarizing a universally received Christian doctrine, wrote, "Apart from God nothing has any existence at all."

As contemplation becomes deeper, the sense of sacred presence subtly becomes more distinct. The Psalmist sang:  
*"Taste and see that the Lord is good."*

God's presence must be experienced. This can never be adequately described, only encountered for yourself. This is the timeless "Seventh Day of Rest" in which everything is complete. God is the true reality, the unshakable uncaused cause, the clear unfettered sky in which the soul can soar. Underpinning all your life's encounters, God is the unfailing, unobstructed sun which fills all creation with boundless light. Jesus succinctly says in Luke 17:20:  
*"The Kingdom of God is within you."*

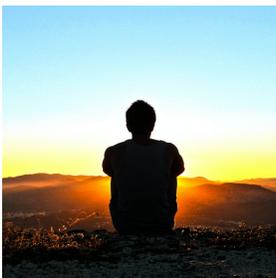
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*To understand this union, one should first know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists.*

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St. John of The Cross

Over time, by dint of practice, contemplation becomes something with which you are intuitively and intimately comfortable, and the gaps between the flow of thoughts become longer and longer. Formerly, distracting mental phenomena can be ignored, like wispy clouds passing through a bright summer sky.



## Spiritual Training

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In doing this profound spiritual training, it is important that you do not fall into a condition of merely passive mental inertia. First of all, learn to distinguish between contemplation and interior blankness by examining the qualities of each. Contemplation is lively, alert, and clear as well as serene. An inert mind is dull, sluggish, and vacant. From time to time in each session, concentrate your attention for about thirty seconds, and then relax the mind into an open and vivid condition. This simple exercise has much the same effect on the mind as tensing and relaxing muscles in the body.

As you progressively mature in contemplation you will be able to observe thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations as they arise in everyday situations. You will clearly see you that have a choice whether or not to act on them, and mental phenomena will no longer be as able to push you around as they had before. God will then be better able to act through you, and you will less and less act out through lack of awareness of your inner processes. Through Christ, peace and compassion will manifest and expand in your relationships with other people, and in your relationship with yourself. This does not imply, of course, that life will always be effortless and wonderful, but rather it will be suffused with meaning.

In classical terms, mediation is something one does, such as reading sacred texts, discursive prayer, visualization, or bodily movement such as genuflection or prostration with a sense of being separate or different from the object or objective of the practice. Contemplation is something you are, resting in God, the source of all you are, only by God's grace and mercy through Jesus Christ.

Carrying contemplative practice over into everyday life means remaining aware of Christ's living presence, the vibrant, intangible nature of things while eating, sleeping, washing the dishes, going to the store, or talking on the telephone. Through this perspective a person encounters transformative grace in the midst of the joys and sorrows of life. Remember this: some days your prayer life will seem good, some days not so good. You are not in charge, God is. What seems like a bad prayer session may really be very good and instructive. You are dealing with years and years of mental habits which are not easily turned upside-down. The fact that you are doing something is the point of the exercise. The path of contemplation is not a contest. It is not about winning or losing. To paraphrase St. Paul, there is nothing to be acquired that you do not already possess. You are in

Christ, and Christ is in you. Whatever you do, do it with the confidence of an athlete who has already finished the race.

Keep in mind that spiritual practice is only a way of helping a Christian to see what really happened at his or her Baptism. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews:

**“You have already taken your seat in the heavenly places.”**

Like going to the gym, muscles that are used will get stronger. Muscles that are not used will weaken. The most essential key point is, quoting the Nike shoe advertisement, Just do it!

## Dealing with Distraction

It is said that concentration is the king which rules the kingdom of the mind. If the king is weak, the kingdom is chaotic and disordered, and so it is with the kingdom of the mind. Because of a lifetime of habituation, we have been under the sway of thoughts, emotions, and sensations of the body as they arise on the movie screen of the mind. We give them power over us when in fact they are fleeting phenomena which appear and disappear, elusive as clouds. What goes on in the mind can be very distracting. In dealing with distraction in prayer, a variety of methods may be employed:

- First of all, pray that all obstacles to sincere prayer may be cleared away. Always remember that you are walking in Christ’s light.
- The best way to approach the flow of thoughts in a session or out is to merely remain alert yet relaxed, and “see through them,” remaining imperturbable while your attention remains fixed on God.
- Note the arising of the flow of thought, return to the meditation, and relax again.
- If that doesn’t work, visualize Jesus in the sky in front and above you, confident of his actual presence. Visualize that Christ smiles lovingly upon you, transforms into light and melts into your heart. Concentrate on the fact the Jesus Christ does live in your life. Then gently resume contemplative prayer.
- Finally, if that doesn’t work, just sit with the cascade of mental phenomena, observing it in a cool and detached frame of mind until your normal meditation time is over. Then, take a break.

## Spiritual Direction

Engaging in regular spiritual direction is an essential part of the Christian contemplative path and has been so throughout Christian history.

Optimally, find a spiritual director right away. This can be done by asking your pastor to provide you with information and/or guidance. Interview any potential spiritual director carefully to see if there is mutual compatibility and trust. It is most important that you meet with a reliable person who is experienced in prayer and mature in his or her Christian faith to talk on a regular basis. Every person's experience in contemplation is in its details uniquely individual. Always check your experience with a reliable person who can give you feedback and guidance.



## St. Romuald's Advice to Contemplatives

Saint Romuald was the founder of the Benedictine Camaldolese Order, which has flourished since the 11th century, and is renowned for the high degree of spiritual understanding demonstrated by its members. Indeed, St. Francis of Assisi came to the Camaldolese to make his own personal retreats. St. Romuald gave seven interlinked points of advice to his monks, and by extension, those engaging in contemplative prayer. His counsel to contemplatives is contained in what is called "the brief rule of St. Romuald" and is part of the vows of every Camaldolese monk and nun.

St. Romuald's first admonition is, "*Sit in your cell as in Paradise.*"

Second, "*Put the whole world behind you and forget it.*"

Third, "*Like a skilled angler on the lookout for a catch, keep a careful eye on your thoughts.*"

Fourth, "*The path you must follow is in the Psalms-do not leave it. If you've come with a novice's enthusiasm and cannot accomplish everything you want, take every chance you can to sing the psalms in your heart and to understand them with your head. If your mind wanders as you read, do not give up, but hurry back and try again.*" (This is *Lectio Divina*, by which prayerful Scripture reading helps one to enter into the rest of contemplation.)

Fifth, "*Above all, realize that you are in God's presence; hold your heart there in wonder as if before your sovereign.*"

Sixth, "*Empty yourself completely.*"

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Seventh, *“Sit waiting, content with God’s gift, like a little chick tasting and eating nothing but what its mother brings.”*

Some helpful quotes from Scripture:

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*“Whenever anyone turns to God the veil is taken away.”*

*2 Corinthians 3:16*

*“The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.”*

*1 John 2:17*

*“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promises is faithful.”*

*Hebrews 10:23*

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*by Christopher Seal*

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