



the empty bell

Christian Prayer, Meditation and Contemplation

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All four Gospels tell us that Jesus prayed. He prayed alone on mountains and in the wilderness. He prayed on roads, in people's homes and in temples. He prayed alone with God and he prayed with and for others. He prayed out loud and he prayed silently, in his own heart. Those prayers that we hear in the words of the Gospel often reflect or even repeat the prayers we find in Jewish scriptures. Jesus prayed as a Jew and his prayers taste like the Psalms. We can guess from his ministry that Jesus placed a higher priority on prayer than on religious duties and laws.

Unfortunately, Jesus did not provide us with a detailed developmental program of prayer. In fact, the only explicit direction he gave is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew where he emphasizes solitude and a specific focus on God as Creator and Father. The prayer that begins, "Our Father in heaven" is probably the one prayer that Christians of all denominations have in common. By tradition it is called The Lord's Prayer:

Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6: 6-13)

The various practices of Christian prayer began to be articulated more clearly in the third to the sixth centuries when desert monks and mystical theologians such as Cassian, Evagrius, Origen, St. Antony, St. Augustine and St. Benedict, and many others--such as St. Isaac of Syria, Maximus the Confessor and St. Athanasius--who are claimed as sacred teachers in the Orthodox tradition. These early Christian writers, whose writings are fortunately collected and translated anew in the Paulist Press' series, The Classics of Western Spirituality, wove many wonderful stories, practical suggestions and theological frameworks for meditation and prayer.

Most of these early Christian monk/writers were familiar with silence--their own silence, and the silence of God. Quite often, they emphasized "purity of heart" and a letting go of all thoughts that were not directed to God. They suggested that in order to enter into the light (or the darkness) of God's presence, one should first focus the mind with a simple prayer. Single lines or phrases from the Psalms were often used for this purpose: "Oh God, come to my assistance, Make Haste to help me", or "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me". Sometimes, the pray-er is counseled to recite the short prayer in a rhythm with each breath. When the mind had become still, St. Athanasius sug-

gested that one simply “breathe Christ”.

Gradually, an implicit architecture of prayer was developing among the Desert Fathers. The first stage of prayer, reading Scripture or reciting a repetitive prayer from Scripture, was called, in Latin, *Lectio* or prayerful reading. The second stage, *Meditatio*, was characterized as a kind of spiritual digestion whereby the reader or listener let go of the Scripture phrase or sacred phrase, letting the words, images and meanings sink deeply into the soul. The third stage, *Oratio*, was understood as an inward, silent or vocal response to God’s message or presence, perhaps in a heart resonating with gratitude. *Oratio* was understood to be a response, usually in the I-thou dimension, to God’s loving presence. The fourth and final stage, *Contemplatio*, was seen as a complete letting go whereby one was not doing anything any longer. One simply let oneself be in God’s presence without words, images or meanings, without wanting anything. In contemplative silence, only God was understood to be acting, upon one’s soul. Thus, contemplation was meant to honor the apophatic side of God who is beyond all words, understandings, stories and images.

Over the centuries, monasteries and convents evolved their own favorite methods of prayer and meditation, drawing from Scripture, tradition and experience. Some emphasized silent meditation or contemplation, while others emphasized sacred liturgies and the Eucharist, a prayerful reading of Scripture, repetitive prayer, or prayers of intercession, gratitude and praise. After the Reformation in the 16th century, Protestant denominations drew parishioners’ attention almost entirely to the Bible, to sermons and vocal prayer, and to the singing of hymns. If the kataphatic (Greek: with images) dimension of prayer lifts up the ways that our senses and our minds can mediate God’s presence, and if the apophatic (Greek: without images) lifts up the ways in which God real presence is beyond all concepts, meanings and sensual experiences, then we can say that the Protestant Reformation lifted up the kataphatic dimension of prayer and almost obliterated the apophatic, contemplative and mystical dimensions.

Unfortunately, the Catholic and Orthodox love for silent meditation and contemplative prayer was almost entirely rejected by Protestant churches during and after the Reformation. Perhaps there were good reasons for this spiritual re-focusing at that time in history, but the loss of the apophatic and the contemplative dimension in prayer was a major loss for Protestant Christianity. When the Protestant emphasis on the words of Scripture and on vocal prayer is not balanced with a contemplative letting go of all words and meanings for God’s sake, it is too easy to miss God’s presence between our words and theories, and to become attached to one’s own verbal propositions about God. Without the contemplative dimension, it is too easy to slide into a fanatical fundamentalism, to believe that one’s current verbal understanding of God is the best and universally true--and that those who disagree are wrong or evil.

The Empty Bell approach to Christian prayer seeks to honor both the apophatic and the kataphatic dimensions. To borrow from the sacred language of the Great 4th century Councils, we believe that the fullest expression of Christian prayer dances (Greek: *perichoresis*, a dance-around) between that which we can know, sense and vocalize, and that which is a Mystery in God. In this dual emphasis we perceive more space for interfaith dialogue--especially with Asian spiritual paths such as Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism--than one finds in a purely kataphatic Christian spirituality. We believe that the Holy Spirit of Jesus is free of human (and Christian) understanding, that it “blows where She will” and initiates love, compassion and mercy in many cultures and religions. The Empty Bell’s contemplative style of prayer, is rooted more in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox denominations than the Protestant ones, but we see no essential contradiction with the spiritual vision of all major Christian churches and

denominations. We like to think of ourselves as part of the Body of Christ, even if our Body includes members with whom we disagree.

Christian Contemplative Prayer

Resources for Training & Education

Two internationally known Roman Catholic organizations currently sponsor retreats, organize local prayer groups and offer website education: Contemplative Outreach, led by Trappist Fr. Thomas Keating, and the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), led by Benedictine Fr. Laurence Freeman. Their websites are bountiful resources for educating oneself in the history and practice of the Roman Catholic contemplative path. Please see www.contemplativeoutreach.org and www.wccm.org

Both of these organizations are keenly aware of the importance of the apophatic tradition and both teach meditative practices that are consistent with this emphasis. Practically speaking, both Fr. Thomas Keating and Fr. Laurence Freeman emphasize silent meditation as opposed to vocal prayer. Both men draw their followers' attention to the silent presence of God, especially as discerned from the solitude of a meditation cushion.

At times, one might mistake the actual practices of contemplation in Contemplative Outreach (also called Centering Prayer) and the WCCM, for some types of Buddhist meditation: Words fall away, and one simply dwells in the Wordless Presence of God. In this emphasis both teachers are very comfortable with the Christian-Buddhist dialogue. Fr. Laurence Freeman in particular, is a close friend of the Dalai Lama, and the two have co-led many retreats. For those who are interested in these dialogues, see the WCCM website or see the articles that I have written about a few of these Buddhist-Christian encounters elsewhere on the Empty Bell website.

The Empty Bell community admires and values the work of Fr. Keating and Fr. Freeman, and their communities. They are, almost single-handedly, rescuing the contemplative Christian tradition from the juggernaut of post-modernity and the excessive media attention that is given to the more fundamentalist Christian denominations. On the other hand, we feel that our friendship with the Contemplative Outreach (CC) and WCCM communities is capable of holding nuances of distinction in theology, vision and practice.

In the Empty Bell we value the CC and WCCM emphasis on silent meditation and the use of a mantra to help the mind settle down. But once the mind and body have settled down, the Empty Bell community calls attention to the inner flow of images, memories, meanings, visions and imaginary conversations. Yes, one can become easily distracted by the flow of inner experience. With CC and WCCM we ask, "How can one dwell in God's presence if the mind is a 'tree full of monkey's!'" But memories and images, for example, are not always a distraction. Sometimes, God may speak to us or call us to a new action or identity through a memory or image. CC and WCCM tend to emphasize letting go of all conceptual thinking, inward story-telling and the flow of images, whereas the Empty Bell community advises that sometimes pay close attention to what messages these inner experiences might bring from God.

We can make ourselves available in silent meditation, but we cannot control how God will reach out to us. At the Empty Bell, we suggest that the Christian meditator stay awake on every level to the im-

minent arrival of God who may come beneath the radar of thoughts, images or memories, but who may also come expressly within and through memories, images or thoughts. We teach openness to Christ's presence in each moment, even if this means letting go of all conceptual meanings one moment, and following the path of remembered images or the flow of a remembered conversations in the next.

For those who are interested in Buddhist methods of meditation, please go a Google search for websites in various forms of Buddhism. Frequently, such websites will feature a button that is labeled "Methods" or "Meditation Instruction". To get a good sense of the variety of Buddhist meditation methods, check out varieties of Buddhism. Search phrases such as: Vipassana Buddhism, Hinayana Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Ch'an Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Soto Zen, Rinzai Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Shin Buddhism, Nichiren Buddhism or Pure Land Buddhism.

Here are three Christian ways to pray that are rooted in the contemplative or mystical traditions of Christianity--Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina and Ignatian Contemplation. This summary is compiled by Episcopal priest Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas:

Three Ways to Pray

- Go to your holy place.
 - Spend some moments settling down. Use whatever ways you have learned to center yourself. Let the spine be straight, the body relaxed and alert. Let your body be firmly planted on the earth, your hands resting easily, your heart soft, your eyes closed gently. Bring awareness to your body. Consciously soften any obvious tension. Notice your breath. Notice your feelings and thoughts. Let go of any habitual thoughts or plans.
 - Remember your desire for God in the form of a prayer or wordless feeling.
- Continue with A or B or C:

A. A Form of Centering Prayer

- Let a short word or two rise from deep in the center of your being that expresses your desire or your love for God. Don't try to force the word(s) to come. Just listen for it with a relaxed, inviting mind.
- Silently and gently repeat the word(s) in rhythm with your breathing. Enter the present moment. Stay awake. Let your intent be to fall effortlessly through that word into God's spacious, wordless presence. . . Let the word breathe through you. . . You may begin by actively repeating the word, but eventually you may find yourself simply listening to it, as you would to a bell that is ringing far away. . . As your mind becomes quiet, you may find that the word changes slightly--it may become shorter, or sound more softly--or it may simply fall silent, as you open to the presence of God. Let that happen, if it does. . . Sometimes you may need to use an act of will to repeat the word, just as a bird sometimes needs to flap its wings. Sometimes you may find yourself simply resting in the presence of God without using the word, just as a bird sometimes glides through the air. . .
- Whenever you become aware of anything else--if anything distracts you or pulls you away from



your quiet awareness of God, then very gently use the prayer-word to return to the Presence. . . Seek nothing during this time but steady, trusting, attentive rest in God.

- Conclude the time of prayer by slowly praying a verbal prayer (such as the Lord's Prayer--or "Glory to you who creates us, redeems us, and lives in our hearts, now and forever"--or a spontaneous prayer of your own).

B. Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

[Lectio] • Take up your Bible. Select a passage. Read aloud (if possible), attentively and reflectively, until a word, phrase, or scene catches your imagination or heart. At that moment, pause, put your Bible aside, and give yourself to prayer. . . (Note: Each step may last only a moment, or may extend over several minutes. Take the suggested steps as guidelines only. You may find yourself moving back and forth between steps, or praying in a different sequence. That is fine. Pray as the Spirit moves you.)

[Meditatio] • Gently repeat the word or phrase over and over. Mull on it. Reflect on its meaning. Let the words sink into your heart and mind. Chew on them, as a cow chews its cud. Savor and relish them.

[Oratio] • When you feel saturated, share your feelings with the Holy One in whose presence you are. As you take in the insights you received during the meditatio, what is your spontaneous, emotional response? Share your responses--with words, song, feelings or movements of the body--with God. Return to quiet, and listen for God's response to you.

[Contemplatio] • Quietly rest in God's presence. You are lovingly present to one another.

- When attention falters, pick up your Bible and resume reading until the next moment of insight or movement of love.
- Continue this peaceful, unhurried rhythm of reading and pausing.

C. Ignatian Contemplation

(adapted from Martin Smith, The Word is Very Near You)

- Ask God to touch you through the passage of Scripture you have chosen. Tell God that you desire to be open to the word, the healing, the probing, the consolation, whatever God knows you need at this time.
- Pick up your Bible and read the passage slowly and carefully several times. Pause between each reading for half a minute or so, to allow yourselves to notice details. Let questions and insights occur as you notice more with each reading.
- Place the Bible aside. Now give your power of imagination free rein to bring the scene to life with yourself as a participant. Don't look on it as if it were a movie projected onto a screen. It is happening all around you. Feel free to smell the scents of seashore and marketplace. Hear the noises, sense the movements. Allow yourself to become whoever you want in the scene. For example, are you one of the disciples? A bystander able to see everything happen right there on

the spot? Are you the sick person? Are you Jesus?

- Let the drama slowly unfold. Let whatever happens, happen. Don't control the story. Let yourself feel what happens. Don't step back out by trying to glean lessons from the story (or to take notes for a sermon!). Don't start thinking about applications to your life. Allow yourself to be affected by the words and actions of the story.
- As your feelings are affected by the event, let yourself respond. Often you need to respond by articulating these feelings to Jesus. Tell him how you have been touched. Ask him what the feelings mean. What kind of gift are they? What are you thankful for? What do you want to ask for? Who is God for you just now? How is God inviting you? At other times the best response is to stay with the impression the story has had on you, savoring it and soaking yourself in it, aware of the presence of Christ.
- When the awareness dies down of itself, or you feel you have replied and responded to God's way of touching you in this particular prayer, bring the meditation to a simple conclusion, perhaps by reciting a prayer such as the Lord's prayer or by singing the verse of a hymn. (It is better to round off the prayer time positively, so you can resume your activity, rather than just let the prayer peter out into distraction and restlessness.)

At the end of your prayer, after A or B or C:

- Give thanks to God.
- Shift your posture. You may wish to bow, as a gesture of gratitude and respect. Take a few minutes to get in touch with what you were feeling, sensing, or intuiting in the course of your prayer.
- Note in your journal exactly what you were feeling, sensing, or intuiting.

Two good, basic books on prayer:

Nancy Roth, The Breath of God: An Approach to Prayer, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1990.

Martin L. Smith, SSJE, The Word is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying with Scripture, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1989.

And a book on contemporary theology:

Marcus J. Borg, The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith, San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1997.

