

The Path of Contemplative Prayer and the Labyrinth

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines prayer as the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God (CCC 2559). Prayer is a way of placing ourselves in God's Sacred Presence to give Him praise and honor. Through prayer we open our entire being to His divine will. As Christians we are called to be prayerful for it is the pathway that leads us to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Our Lord taught us the importance of prayer throughout the Gospels. It is through the faithfulness of our prayer life that we will journey closer to God and grow in holiness.

The Church provides us with many valid and effective forms of prayer. We pray in different ways and at different times depending on our needs. There is no right or wrong way to pray. St. Paul exhorts us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes. 5:17). By putting God first, our life becomes a prayer. Fr. Laurence Freeman, OSB compares prayer to a great wheel with the spokes representing the different types of prayer, such as the Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, the Rosary, Bible Studies, and personal devotions. Prayer is the wheel that turns our whole life towards God through Christ who is at the stillness of the hub. It is here, at the center, that we find the serenity of contemplation.

Contemplative Prayer is another method of prayer sanctioned by the Church. It dates back to at least the 4th century with the early Desert Fathers and Mothers. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that contemplative prayer is simply gazing upon God in silence and love (CCC 2715). Entering into contemplative prayer is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we 'gather up' the heart, recollect our whole being under the promptings of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us (CCC 2711). The Catechism also states that contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gift, an intimate sharing of friendship with our God. It is the prayer of the heart rather than of the mind. (CCC 2713) Contemplative prayer is like regular prayer, except that one is quiet in order to listen to God and give Him a chance to speak.

Each week, when our Contemplative Prayer group meets, we begin with intercessory prayer for all our needs and those of our loved ones. We then spend time prayerfully reading and personally responding to the Sunday scriptures (Lectio Divina), thereby seeking what the Holy Spirit is telling us. Surrounded by God's love and mercy, we then hear some words of encouragement followed by the peacefulness of resting silently in the presence of God and listening to his voice. When we relax and are still, God speaks to us. "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10).

A serious life of contemplation is essential, especially for the times in which we live. We need some peaceful, quiet time. In spending this time with God without distractions, we invite Jesus to come into our lives and calm the storms that confront us daily. We begin to feel the inner tranquility that enriches our spiritual growth and leads us to a closer union with God.

As a spiritual tool, a prayer labyrinth can also be a source of comfort and oneness with God. A labyrinth is a walking meditation with a defined path that winds to the center and back out again. Used to facilitate prayer and reflection, a labyrinth will generally help a person emerge inspired and encouraged. The experience of walking the labyrinth and time spent in the center represent life's journey and a sacred space for the Spirit to work on our inner being.

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