

Prayer: Listening In The Great Silence

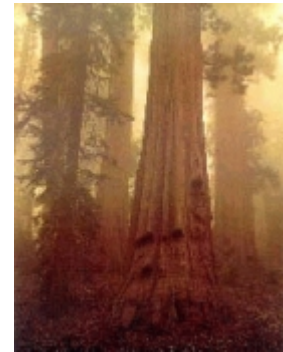
Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

Many evangelicals think of prayer as one-way communication, the believer addressing his God. But that misunderstanding impoverishes prayer and blocks the motions of the Holy Spirit in the believer's soul. Meditative prayer offers us insight into both great and ordinary matters, giving us simple, practical wisdom for the living of our days.

THE purpose of meditative prayer is to create the emotional and spiritual space that allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart. He knocks at the door and desires a perpetual Eucharistic feast with us. Meditative prayer opens that door to Christ.

Although we engage in specific meditation exercises at specific times, the ultimate purpose of meditative prayer is to send us into our ordinary world with greater perspective and balance. As we learn to listen to the Lord, we gain new, practical handles on life's ordinary problems by distinguishing between the significant and the trivial.

How do we go about meditative prayer? In biblical times, people were well versed in how to meditate. Today, however, there is an abysmal ignorance of even the most basic elements of this spiritual art. A simple description of the three basic steps into meditative prayer may therefore be helpful.



CENTERING DOWN

The first step is sometimes called "centering down." Others have used the term "re-collection"; that is, a re-collecting of yourself until you are unified or whole. The idea is to let go of all competing distractions until you are truly centered, until you are truly present where you are.

Begin by seating yourself comfortably, and then slowly and deliberately let all tension and anxiety drop away. Become aware of God's presence in the room. Perhaps in your imagination you will want to visualize Christ seated in the chair across from you, for He is truly present. If frustrations or distractions arise you will want to lift them up into the arms of the Father and let Him care for them. This is not the suppression of our inner turmoil, but the letting go of it. Suppression implies a pressing down, a keeping in check; in centering down we are giving away, releasing. It is even more than a neutral psychological relaxing. It is an active surrendering, a **"self abandonment to divine**

providence," to use the title of a book by the Jesuit spiritualist **Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675–1751)**.

Precisely because the Lord is present with us, we can relax and let go of everything, for in His presence nothing really matters, nothing is of importance except attending to him. We allow inner distractions and frustrations to melt away before Him as snow before the sun. We allow Him to calm the storms that rage within. We allow His great silence to still our noisy heart.

Let me warn you at the outset: this centeredness does not come easily or quickly in the beginning. Most of us live such fractured and fragmented lives that collectedness is a foreign world to us. The moment we genuinely try to be centered, we become painfully aware of how distracted we are. **Romana Guardini** notes, "When we try to compose ourselves, unrest redoubles in intensity, not unlike the manner in which at night, when we try to sleep, cares or desires assail us with a force that they do not possess during the day."

But we must not be discouraged at this. We must be prepared to devote all our meditation time to this centeredness *without any thought for result or reward*. We willingly "waste our time" in this manner as a lavish love offering to the Lord. For God takes what looks like a foolish waste and uses it to nudge us closer to the Holy of Holiest **Guardini** perceptively comments, "If at first we achieve no more than the understanding of how much we lack in inner unity, something will have been gained, for in some way we will have made contact with that center which knows no distraction."

Several things occur in the process of centering down. First, there is a glad surrender to the Lord, "**who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty**" (**Rev. 1:8**). We surrender control over our lives and destinies. In an act of deliberate intention, we decide to do it not our way but God's way. We might even want to visualize our bodies being lifted into the intense light of God's presence that he may do with us as he pleases.

We surrender our possessiveness and invite Him to possess us in such a way that we are truly crucified with Christ and yet truly live through His life (**Galatians 2:20**). We relinquish into His hands our imperialist ambitions to be greater and more admired, to be richer and more powerful, and even to be saintlier and more influential.

We surrender our cares and worries. "**Cast all your anxieties on Him because He cares about you,**" said Peter (**1 Peter 5:7**). And so we can, precisely because we sense His care. We can give up the need to watch out for "number one" because we have One who is watching out for us. I sometimes like to picture a box in which I place every worry and every care. When it is full, I gift wrap it, place a lovely big bow on top, and give it as a present to the Father. He receives it, and once He does, I know I must not take it back, for to take back a gift once given is most discourteous.

We surrender our good intentions and high resolves, for even those can harbor the seeds of pride and arrogance. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, "Pray for me that I not

loosen my grip on the hands of Jesus even under the guise of ministering to the poor." You see, if we loosen our grip on the hands of Jesus, we have lost everything. And so we are to surrender all distractions—even good distractions—until we are driven into the Core.

A second thing that occurs within us as we are learning to center down is the rise of a spirit of repentance and confession. Suddenly we become aware—keenly aware—of our shortcomings and many sins. All excuses are stripped away, all self-justifications are silenced. A deep, godly sorrow wells up within for the sins of commission and the sins of omission. Any deed or thought that cannot stand in the searching light of Christ becomes repulsive not only to God but to us as well. Thus humbled under the cross, we confess our need and receive His gracious word of forgiveness.

We may want to picture a path littered with many rocks. Some are small pebbles, others are quite large, and still others are almost completely buried, so we have no idea how big they are. With compunction of heart we invite the Lord to remove each stone; they represent the many sins littering our lives. One by one He picks them up, revealing to us their true character and offensiveness. To our eyes some look big and others small, but the Lord helps us to understand that, when lifted, the smallest pebble has the same weight as the largest boulder. Some rocks need to be dug out of the ground, and while this is painful it also brings healing. When we see the path completely clear, we rejoice in this gracious work of the Lord.

Or the Father may open to us an image of our sin in its totality as a great lump inside—a spiritual cancer consuming and destroying all life. Ceaselessly in our spirit we cry out, "Sin! Sin! Sin! Help! Help! Help!" Then we watch as God's healing light penetrates our innermost being, dissolving all sin and utterly destroying it. Again we thank Him for this gracious salvation, given to us through the work of Christ on the cross.

A third reality that works its way into our hearts as we are becoming more and more centered is an acceptance of the ways of God with human beings. We are acutely aware that God's ways are not our ways, that His thoughts are not our thoughts (**Isaiah 55:8**). And with an inner knowing born out of fellowship, we see that His ways are altogether good. Our impatience, our rebellion, our nonacceptance give way to a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings. This is not a stoic resignation to "the will of God." It is an entering into the rhythm of the Spirit. It is a recognition that His commandments are **"for our good always"** (**Deut. 6:24**). It is a letting go of our way and a saying yes to God's way, not grudgingly but because we know it is the better way.

We might want to visualize ourselves on a lovely beach somewhere observing the footprints of God in the sand. Slowly we begin to place our feet into the prints in the sand. At some places the stride looks far too long for our small frame, at other places it looks so short that it appears childlike. In His infinite wisdom, God is stretching us where we need to be on the edge of adventure, restraining us where we need greater attentiveness to Him. As we follow His lead, we enter more and more into His stride, turning where He turns, accepting His ways and finding them good.

BEHOLDING THE LORD

As we learn to center down, we begin to move into the second step in meditative prayer, which is "**beholding the Lord.**" What do I mean? I mean the inward steady gaze of the heart upon the divine Center. We bask in the warmth of his presence. Worship and adoration, praise and thanksgiving well up from the inner sanctuary of the soul. The fourteenth-century mystic **Richard Rolle** observed that as he learned the gaze of the heart, he experienced real warmth around his heart as if it were actually on fire. He was so surprised at this phenomenon that he kept feeling his chest to be sure there was no physical reason for it. Instead of fear, as we might expect, this sensation brought him "great and unexpected comfort." Fortunately for all of us, he has recorded the insights of those experiences in *The Fire of Love*.

Few, if any of us, will have the physical sensations **Rolle** experienced, but we all can learn the gaze of the heart. There is a lovely little chorus that is popular these days, the first line of which says, "Set my spirit free that I may worship thee." And that is the yearning of our hearts as we behold the Lord. We love Him, we worship Him, and we adore Him. There are inward whisperings of devotion and homage, and perhaps outward shouts of praise and thanksgiving.

Often it seems that music is the language of beholding. "**Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making music to the Lord with all your heart**" is how the apostle Paul described it (**Ephes. 5:19**). And who can hinder the spontaneous outbreak of adoration and praise? The great hymns of the church aid us in our beholding, for in an important sense they encapsulate for us the beholding of faithful Christians throughout the centuries. As we sing the great hymns, we enter the communion of saints.

Many times we enter experiences of beholding that go deeper than human words can express. Saint Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with "**sighs too deep for words**" (**Romans 8:26**). And often there are inward yearnings and aspirations that cannot quite be caught in human language. At times the gift of tongues, or glossolalia, becomes a channel through which the spirit may behold the Holy One of Israel. At other times there are experiences of what Saint Teresa of Avila called "**the prayer of quiet,**" where all words become superfluous. In silence we behold the Lord, for words are not needed for communion.

Often a brief passage of Scripture will aid us in our beholding. We may be drawn to the great vision of the Lord high and lifted up, recorded in **Isaiah 6:1–8**. Or perhaps we will go to meditate on John's vision of the reigning Christ in **Rev. 1:12–18**, or even in **Rev. 19:11–16**. We may be directed to behold the Savior cradled in the manger or dying on the cross.

Most of all, we sense His nearness and His love. **Father James Borst** said, "He is closer to my true self than I am myself. He knows me better than I know myself. He loves me better than I love myself. He is 'Abba', Father to me. I am because He is."

As we behold the Lord, we soon learn that we are not only acting but being acted upon. God, the great Initiator, who first drew us into His love and gave us the ability to

love Him, responds. He who seeks us before we ever seek Him responds to our seeking. He is anxious to invade our spirit and to give us all good things. We feel His gaze upon us. He fills us with His "Sabbath rest." Peace, serenity, joy unspeakable and full of glory—all of this and much more overwhelms us. It feels as if we, by our beholding, have opened the small spillway door of a great reservoir of divine love; then to our great surprise all heaven breaks loose, and we are flooded by divine graces.

Does all this lofty talk of union with God discourage you? Do you feel miles away from such experience? Rather than attempting to scale the heights of spiritual ecstasy, are you just hoping to make it through the week? If so, don't be disheartened. Many times we all fall miserably short of the goal. Often our meditations never seem to get past our frustration over the unwashed dishes in the sink or the chemistry exam next week. But the little we have experienced reminds us that at the heart of God are the desire to give and to forgive, and we are encouraged to go deeper in and higher up.

THE PRAYER OF LISTENING

As we experience the unifying grace of centering down and the liberating grace of beholding the Lord, we are ushered into a third step in meditative prayer, the prayer of listening. We have put away all obstacles of the heart, all scheming of the mind, all vacillations of the will.

Divine graces of love and adoration wash over us like ocean waves. And as this is happening we experience an inward attentiveness to divine motions. At the center of our being we are hushed. The experience is more profound than mere silence or lack of words. There is stillness, to be sure, but it is a listening stillness. We feel more alive, more active, than we ever do when our minds are askew with muchness and manyness. Something deep inside has been awakened and brought to attention. Our spirit is on tiptoe, alert and listening.

On the Mount of Transfiguration the word of the Lord came out of the overshadowing cloud saying, "**This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him**" (**Matthew 17:5**).

And so we listen, really listen. We do not do violence to our rational faculties, but we listen with more than the mind. We bring the mind into the heart so that we can listen with the whole being.

Francois Fenelon said, "Be silent, and listen to God. Let your heart be in such a state of preparation that His spirit may impress upon you such virtues as will please him. Let all within you listen to Him. This silence of all outward and earthly affection and of human thoughts within us is essential if we are to hear this voice." As I have noted before, this listening does indeed involve a hushing of all "outward and earthly affection." **Saint John** of the Cross used the graphic phrase, "my house being now all

stilled." In that single line he helps us see the importance of quieting all physical, emotional, and psychological senses.

As we wait before the Lord, graciously we are given a teachable spirit. I say "graciously" because without a teachable spirit, any word of the Lord that may come to guide us into truth will only serve to harden our hearts. We will resist any and all instruction unless we are docile. But if we are truly "willing and obedient," the teaching of the Lord is life and light.

And teach us He will, if we can but quiet ourselves to listen. Christ *is* the "**prophet like unto Moses**" who is to teach us inwardly (**Deut. 18:15**). In His broken body and spilled blood He *did* establish the new covenant through which His law is written on our hearts, and we know the Lord because we have heard His voice (**Jeremiah 31:31–34**). And He longs to speak with us and teach us. He seeks us that we may have living communion with Him. He seeks to instruct us not just in matters of great and eternal significance, but in simple, practical matters that are in reality *the* matters of eternal significance. He wants to walk with us through our days and give us insight and wisdom to make life's ordinary decisions: a little insight here on how to be a better parent or spouse; a little perception there on how to respond to a professor or overbearing boss. If we will listen, He will also teach us about what we like to call the big issues: war and peace, sexism and racism, the knotty problems swirling around biomedical ethics, and ever so much more.

There is a danger here, isn't there? We can get the teaching wrong—history is replete with those who have arrogantly assumed they knew the mind of God on every issue under the sun. There are checks—God's revelations given to us in Scripture, the discernment of the Christian fellowship—but even these are not completely foolproof. Many have twisted Scripture into a thing of their own, and often the church has failed to listen to the Lord. In spite of the danger, however, we must proceed, for it is the way of life. And I have found that if we undertake our task with humbleness of heart, we can trust Christ to lead us into His way. If we begin to wander off toward some wrong idea or unprofitable practice He will guide us back. If we are willing to listen to the heavenly Monitor, we will receive the instruction we need. And so we listen quietly, patiently, until clearness comes.

The goal, of course, is to bring this stance of listening prayer into the course of daily experience. Throughout all of life's motions—balancing the checkbook, vacuuming the floor, visiting with neighbors or business associates—there is an inward attentiveness to the divine Whisper. The witness to this reality is overwhelmingly uniform in all the great masters of the interior life and is represented so well in the famous words of **Brother Lawrence**: "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament." We bring the portable sanctuary into daily life.

To describe our movement into meditative prayer as "steps" may be misleading. The word may imply something a little too clear-cut, as if each "step" could be sharply distinguished from the others. All these movements interrelate and often splash over into each other. It is a living experience we are describing and, like all living experiences, cannot be defined too rigidly. The Lord is the creator of infinite variety, and at times He may turn our little steps into one giant leap, or teach us to skip or hop or run or even stand still. In all things and at all times we are to obey Christ.