

Taking Prayer Seriously



An introduction to contemplation for lay ministers.

Alan Roberts

**And should by chance
you do not know
where to find Me,
do not go
here and there;
but if you wish to find me
in yourself
seek Me.**

Teresa of Avila

Part one

Session one

INTRODUCTION

Welcome everyone to these seminars on contemplative prayer.

Our present age is a new dawn in the Church. You will have heard I am sure many comments relating to dwindling congregations and other problems we have. However, without any doubt there are great signs of hope.

Just over 40 years ago I began my ministry in priesthood, and I have a very clear memory of preaching to a packed city church. It was like I was shoving spiritual goodies down the mouths of people Sunday after Sunday, but for what purpose? How many spiritual riches did they need before we got something back? It seemed that our sole job as priests was to evangelise the faithful! The words of Jesus to the disciples: *"give them something to eat yourselves"*(Mk6:37) hadn't come to the fore at that time, at least not to my mind.

Today however, it's a different scene. The laity conduct communion services, lead prayer groups and teach competently at high levels. They are among our spiritual directors, liturgy planners, prayer group leaders and in my own diocese they pastor parishes with all the rights of a parish priest, with the exception of administering Sacraments. It seems to me now that a parish priest's role is to pastor the pastors.

These new shepherds, and you may well be one of them, do need to be nourished themselves and if you, as a baptised catholic, take your faith seriously, then shepherd you are. You are capable of giving those who hunger something to eat, because you have had a lifetime of 'being with' the source of all our food.

Spirituality is what you do with what you believe. In other words, how you live it in your daily life. As a lay catholic you share in the ministry of the Church just as much as any priest, religious or bishop. St Paul, when he likens the body of Christ to a human body, reminds us that all the parts are important: *"nor is the body to be identified with any one of its many parts."* (1 Cor 12:1)

Paul also advises: *"clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ."* (Rom 13:14) This is not some request solely to those who are very involved in Church, for we are called equally to be involved. God is in all things, St Ignatius of Loyola reminds us. Therefore parents caring for their children, or going out to work, are sanctifying the world equally as much as the priest at the altar celebrating the Eucharist, or the lay person running a parish. Clothing yourself in Christ is necessary to become what you are created to become, which is what Jesus means when he says: *"be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."* (Mtt 5:48). Without this awareness, the Church can never evangelise.

So why the need for contemplation? Is there some hidden belief that you are not praying properly? Certainly not. It is just that we have in our Church a great treasure in contemplative prayer. It has been brought to light again in recent years as the Church has gone through her renewal. It leads to a growing friendship with the Master and when people pray, a parish takes on a new heart.

As you become familiar with the gospel stories, you will notice how often it states that Jesus would go off to a lonely place to pray. This detail is slipped in, in between the stories and can go unnoticed. It follows that if Jesus needed to do this, then how much more do we. Jesus grew weary, and he needed to be refreshed. It was in this time apart with the Father, that he

would come to understand the wisdom of God: “and (he) spent the whole night in the prayer of God.”(Lk 6:12)¹ It penetrated his heart while he was with the Father in those lonely places. It enlightened him with the wisdom he would need to lead his disciples and preach to the many. It was also in this time that He would abandon himself to the Father.

Now, no one can teach you to pray, that is God’s work. What is offered here, is nothing more than a few principles for the journey and the encouragement to begin. When one sets out on the contemplative path, it is usual to flounder somewhat in the early stages. It has been likened to learning to swim. After a while you realise that the water will hold you afloat. It is not easy to sit still for a long period of time and to learn to pray in stillness. We are so used to using words, and think this must always be the case. But there comes a time in our prayer lives when it is right to let go of words and just be there. If you practice it, starting in a small way at first, the grace of God will soon be at work within you. If you open your heart, God cannot resist the welcome and your prayer will bear its fruit.

You may or you may not be familiar with the words, meditation or contemplation. Certainly, you will have an image of a person sitting in a yoga position, looking as though they are totally at peace with the world.

In the Christian tradition these practices have always been an important part of life for those committed to religious life and priesthood. However, in more recent years, there has been a major renewal and much has been written on the subject of prayer. The renewal has attracted the interest of many laity who now put aside a lengthy period of time on a daily basis to be alone with God.

I am well aware that for our laity their homes are not monasteries. The opportunities for silence are mostly few and far between and a specific period of time has to be created. While this is difficult it can be done, even if just for a few minutes a day. Commit to this practice and you will I am sure find a *treasure hidden in a field.*(Mtt 13:44)

EXERCISE Take time now to write out your prayer history. Describe your childhood praying, your teenage years and your way of praying now. The following statements may prompt you somewhat in your writing.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS CAN YOU IDENTIFY WITH

- 1 My prayer life is fairly dry
- 2 My prayer is not much more than a few formal prayers
- 3 I feel satisfied with my prayer life at present
- 4 I have no idea how to use Scripture for prayer
- 5 I’ve never sat down to read the Gospels in a prayerful way
- 6 I’ve no idea how to begin meditating
- 7 I pray hard when I’m desperate, but when the anxiety goes I return to normal
- 8 I’m loaded with distraction when I pray
- 9 I’m a worrier. Prayer does nothing for my worry, but it is this which keeps me praying
- 10 I’m beginning to feel an attraction to seek God more deeply through prayer
- 11 I like to pray. I find peace through prayer and love to rest in God’s love
- 12 I’ve been setting aside a time for prayer for years.

My dear friend

I discern God's call to you
In the desire for him who burns in your heart.

The eternal love of God is calling you out of the mundane
To live a life close to him,
In a special friendship.

Take courage now, and frail mortal though you are,
Try to understand yourself
And what is happening within.
Your enemy will suggest
You rest on your laurels
So be on your guard.

**You can no longer be content
to live at a distance from God.**

Do not be deceived into thinking
That you are a holier or better person
Because of your great calling.

This loving desire is certainly God's gift,
It is up to you to nurture it.

(The Cloud of Unknowing)²

When?

The responsibility is yours.

The choice of the time and duration of the prayer arises from a determined will, revealing the secrets of the heart. One does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has time: one makes time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dryness one may encounter." (Catechism 2710)

Next, you must ask yourself, at what time of the day will I go off to be myself and pray? I can forecast one thing: for most of you there will be an internal struggle to make time. I have been practising this type of praying for the best part of 40 years. There has hardly been a day when I haven't had to make a firm decision to do it. I am a creature of habit, but the temptation to "let it go just for today" always remains. My observation is that most experience similar temptations. *"I have set before you life and death...choose life.."* (Dt 30:10)

Where

*His reputation continued to grow,
and large crowds would gather to hear him and have their sickness cured,
but he would always go off to some place
to be alone and pray. (Lk 5:13-16)*

It follows that if Jesus needed to go off and be alone to pray, then how much more will we have need of this practice. Clearly, Jesus had his favourite places for prayer.

You may have a perfect space for this in your home, or you may just be able to create it in your bedroom or living room. Some may prefer to spend this time in their local Church.

In Catholic tradition, praying in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament is always recommended. The Real Presence of the Blessed Sacrament is a reminder of the fullness of God's self-giving to us. However, one doesn't pray any the less because a place is chosen where the Blessed Sacrament is not reserved. First and foremost, through Baptism, Christ has made his home within us. Prayer therefore honours the invitation of Jesus: *"abide in me, as I abide in you"* (Jn 15:4)

If you are praying in a place such as your room, it is good to set a focal point on a small table or on the floor. At that spot you can lay a crucifix, bible or some icon. This will help create the atmosphere of the sacred during your time of prayer and be a visible focus should you become distracted.

Reflection:

- 1 At what time of the day will I go away by myself to pray?**
- 2 How long do I feel I can commit to prayer at this point in time?**
- 3 Where is the best place for me to pray?**

HOW TO BEGIN

In order to pray sincerely the words: "Here I am, Lord," there are some principles you need to obey: The first three are vital: Relax, Relax, Relax! It is God who finds us, not the other way round.

Conscious breathing In order to relax, your breathing will be your greatest ally. You will need to practise breathing very consciously at first. Allow the breathing to be deep and rhythmic. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Let each breath come from the pit of your stomach as you fill your chest with air, hold it for a second, then let it go. When your mind turns to God you will pray naturally in time with your breathing.

Sounds It is often difficult to find a really quiet place to pray. The secret is not to block out the sounds and wish they would go away. Instead, listen to them and accept them. Listen to the sounds within the sounds. You will not relax by blocking out, but by accepting, leaving things be to follow their natural course.

Self-discipline is required in the early stages of prayer. First of all, sitting erect in a firm supportive chair is much more helpful for relaxing internally, than is lounging on a sofa. Sometimes, you may feel you need to tie yourself to the chair because you are so restless. Don't be discouraged. It doesn't matter if your prayer is full of distraction. At times it can seem as if all your efforts are totally useless. All that is important is you are genuinely seeking God. Your efforts will soon pay off, and a prayer time like this each day will become as natural to you as eating.

EXERCISE IN RELAXATION

The following is an exercise I have taught to many over the years. You may find it helpful:

- Be firmly seated in a chair in an upright position....
- Feet together on the floor or tucked under the chair.....
- Hands on your lap.....
- Close your eyes.
- Breathe rhythmically, filling the lower stomach with air and drawing it up the chest - hold it for a second or two and gently release it.
- Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth....
- Tell yourself you will do this consciously 5 times....
- Now listen to the sounds outside the room....really hear them....focus on them....distinguish them....
- Listen to the sounds inside the room....outside the room.....
- Focus again on your breathing....then again on the sounds....outside...inside....
- Now begin to focus on the various parts of your body, observing tension that may be there:....
- forehead...eyes...facial area...
- back of neck....across the shoulders....
- let the tension run out through the right arm....left arm....
- imagine your hands...now the part where your back is touching the chair....
- the backs of your thighs against the chair....
- imagine your right leg....left leg...feet on the floor....
- (repeat the exercise if necessary)
- focus again on your breathing and begin praying in time with each breath....
 - Pray slowly in time with your breathing
The Lord...is...my shepherd...I...shall...not want....
 - Let this phrase repeat itself several times...
 - Imagine a shepherd in a desert land caring for about 20 sheep...
 - See some of them individually, representing people you know...see yourself as one of them....you are being taken to fresh green grass....
 - Let the shepherd appear in your imagination as Jesus...
 - Allow yourself to stare at this Shepherd...then speak to him....
 - Imagine the love and care from the Shepherd descending over you...
 - Continue in this prayer for 10 minutes leaving the Spirit to guide your prayer.

REFLECTION What happened within you during this time
Did the Shepherd say anything to you
What did you say to the Shepherd?

DURING THE WEEK

- Become familiar with the relaxation. It doesn't need to be exact. Explore various times of the day for your prayer
- Use Ps 23 as the Scriptural input for your prayer during the week
- Pray it slowly, breathing just a line at a time
- Stay with any line or phrase that speaks to you
- Pray this Psalm at least 4 times during the day this week.

You learn to pray by praying

Session two

GROWING INTO ADULT PRAYER

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult,
I put an end to childish ways. (1 Cor 13:11)*

Perhaps also, we can add to the above quote: “and when I was a child, I prayed like a child”. What the above quote from St Paul implies, is that our intelligence, our emotions and our physique are all expected to mature, and most of us take the appropriate steps to ensure the necessary growth. We know that if we don't, then we will appear and act in childish ways when, as adults, more is expected.

Many life-time Catholics who are quite committed to their faith, find prayer extremely difficult. Often enough they have nothing more to survive on than what they learned in childhood. There is no growth in their prayer because they have not been given the knowledge that there is a natural evolution which ought to take place with age, and if we don't pay attention to it, our prayer life can become so dry we see no point in it. This kind of dryness is not the “dark night” spiritual writers speak about. What is happening here, is that the call into the world of silence is being ignored. Our relationship with God can be compared to that of husband and wife. When they first meet, conversation comes easily, and if the relationship is cared for well, the day will come when they don't need words so much. They are simply happy to be in each other's company.

A person I knew well, namely my mother, had compiled a list of prayers that had become meaningful over the years. Each night she would disappear into her room to pray them. After Ordination, I went to study spirituality and made a 30 day retreat. A few days into the retreat I realised what an amazing thing we have here. Silence! Previously, I had felt trapped by it, but now I could handle it. I then resolved to return home and dedicate my life as much as I could to teaching it. To my amazement, my mother had made a similar retreat when I was away, albeit for six days, but she had discovered ‘the hour’, and no longer did she need someone else's prayer to fill in the time. That hour became a part of her life each day. Using a risky metaphor, one could say she took to it, like a duck to water! It was the first of many blessings this kind of praying would bring me.

Praying, whereby we use few words and are content just to be in the presence of God's love, is known as contemplative prayer, or meditation. Contemplation then is probably best described as **cultivating our friendship with Jesus**. Knowing how to do this is what these pages are about, and we can also say, we learn by doing it. Perhaps the famous words of St Augustine are very apt at this point: “You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

When I toured Israel, the guide, because of the heat, warned us to constantly sip water, a little at a time. “Don't wait until the end of the day” he said, “it will be too late. Dehydration will have set in, and all the water in the world won't suddenly relieve your suffering”.

Setting aside a period of your day just to be with Jesus is sipping living water, a little at a time. And the Master himself promises:

*The water that I will give,
will become in them a spring of water
gushing up to eternal life. (Jn 4:14)*

It was in 1977 that I first ran a seminar on contemplative prayer. It was offered to all parishioners in the parish assigned to me at that time. About sixty or so turned up, and I began by asking why they had come. One lady gave a particularly poignant answer. She said: "we say our 'Our Father's and Hail Mary's' but not much else." I was soon to discover that this reply came from a woman of deep faith, who had suffered much in her earlier life, was dedicated to her husband and family and generous in every way. What this person was saying was that she needed more. The seminar was a turning point in her spiritual life. She became committed to a daily practice of contemplative prayer and met weekly with a small group of women who together would pray in silence for one hour. The group continued meeting for many years.

At the very core of my being, I am convinced that contemplative prayer is what most Christians crave sooner or later. Contemplation gives us the opportunity of discovering God at deeper levels. It helps us recognise the value of silence and so incorporate it into our public worship and our everyday lives.

To me, it is more than co-incidence there has been a renewed interest in meditative prayer. People's lives are encompassed with so many pressures. Incomes have to be taken care of and advertising subtly gives us a message that we need this thing or that thing. Human beings must have a god to worship and when it is not the true God, we will find another, but it will be an illusion. The false god leads to self-centredness. As a result addictions of all kinds abound.

It is little wonder then, that in these days more and more people are beginning to devote daily, a specific time to withdraw from the activities of life, to be alone with God. As a result of the work done by many in encouraging ordinary people to deepen their prayer, many laity are now competent spiritual directors going into parishes conducting retreats-in-daily-life.

The great temptation relating to prayer is not to bother. Giving in to that is all the evil spirit needs in order to do his job. He knows he will not win by tempting you to do something really evil. He is more cunning than that.

PRAYER

- Relax
- Imagine yourself on a very hot day
- You are thirsty and a spring of cool, refreshing water flows from the ground
- You realise it is, in a mysterious way, the presence of Christ
- You cup your hands and begin to drink – living water
- Feel the water running through your body, taking away the thirst
- You drink a little more ... again...and again....
- You realise you are drinking the life of Christ...and you pray the name of Jesus
- Breathe in and out praying in time with your breathing...
- Each drink is refreshing you...calming you...hear the words....
“The water...I shall give...will turn into a spring...inside you....gushing up....
to eternal life....”
- Remain in the prayer for 10 minutes....asking for the gift of hunger for prayer.

DURING THE WEEK

- Read John 4: 1-15 each day.
- Repeat the above suggestion for prayer.

**The great temptation relating to prayer
is not to bother.**

Session three

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPLATION

When I was still very young, a teacher asked me

What I did on holidays when I was home.

I answered timidly, "I often hide in a corner of my room,

Where I can shut myself in with bed curtains, and then I think."

"But what do you think about?" she said laughingly.

"I think about God, about the shortness of life, about eternity

-in a word, I think."

I know now that I was even then really engaged in mental prayer

Under the guidance of a gentle Master.

I know that "the Kingdom of God is within us,"

that Our Master has no need of a book or teacher to instruct our soul.

The Teacher of teachers instructs without sound of words,

And though I have never heard him speak,

I know that he is within me,

Always guiding and inspiring me;

And just when I need them,

Lights, hitherto unseen, break in upon me.

Now it is, as a rule,

Not during prayer that this happens,

But in the midst of my daily duties.

(St Theresa of Lisieux)⁵

The important point in the above quote, is I think the last two lines. Often in our time apart, nothing happens. The fruits of our prayer are more easily observed at other times, especially during the mundane. Our real prayer is our life, which we offer to God. Our "prayer time" is to improve the quality of our offering.

Perhaps the most difficult and yet the simplest form of prayer is contemplative prayer (prayer of our hearts). While it is difficult to clear our minds of all clutter, what is easy about this form of prayer is the total and clear focus on God alone. St Theresa of Avila describes contemplative prayer as “nothing else than a close sharing between friends”.

“It is a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus...It achieves real union with the prayer of Christ to the extent that it makes us share in His mystery” (Catechism 2724)

Contemplative prayer is the prayer of simple presence with one’s lover. It can be intense. It is always recollected. It is the prayer of silent listening and love. One must consciously will time with the Lord. To do so requires a determined will and being recollected under the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It is our poor and loving surrender to the Lord.” ‘I look at Him and He looks at me’: this is what a certain peasant of Ars used to say to the holy curate about his presence before the tabernacle” (Catechism 2715). There can be no better place for contemplation than in the presence of the exposed Blessed Sacrament. (Peter Vaghi)⁶

In this book the terms meditation and contemplation will be used interchangeably. There is a distinction between the two, but they blend in to one another:

Meditation: a form of prayer, distinguished from contemplation, in which the mind uses images (such as those provided by Scripture) as a means of focussing on God.

Contemplation: a form of prayer, distinguished from meditation, in which the individual avoids or minimizes the use of words or images in order to experience the presence of God directly.⁷

Personally, I prefer the word ‘contemplation’. You can see the word ‘temple’ concealed there. In the Jewish tradition the sanctuary of the temple was the dwelling place for the Holy of Holies. It was located in the inmost room of the temple. Hence, the further in you went, the closer you came to that sacred room, too sacred for the ordinary person to enter. For the Jewish people, the High Priest alone could enter the Holy of Holies and then only once a year.

Now this kind of praying is about going into that inmost room. In our age we are familiar with the journey to outer space. Contemplation has been described as the journey to inner space, and the further in we go, the more connected we come to our real selves. The words of Jesus come alive: “*Abide in me, as I abide in you.*” (Jn 15:4)

Pure contemplation is the gift of being able to sit in the presence of God, in a loving relaxed manner. It is about allowing God to break into our lives. It is about cultivating our friendship with the Risen Jesus. Why? Because of who we are:

The seed of God is in us. Given an intelligent and hard-working farmer it will thrive and grow up into God, whose seed it is, and accordingly its fruit will be God-nature. Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees, and God seed into God. (Meister Eckhart)⁸

Since we are made for God and belong to God, it makes sense that we allow God's word to penetrate our lives. This calls for a heart that knows how to listen:

Now as they went on their way he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks: so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me. But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' (Lk:38-42)

As disciples of Christ, we are called to be contemplatives-in-action. The important thing to note in the story at this point, is that Jesus is praising Mary because she had stopped to listen. Martha's work was necessary, but that could come later. If we fill our lives with activity, and never take time to be, to listen and to calm our minds, then eventually activity takes over. One of the most common excuses people offer for their lack of an extended period of prayer is "they haven't got time". Then, when the opportunity for stillness arrives they think of the many things that must be done! You may even have noticed the "excuses" surfacing within yourself.

PRAYER

- Relax...Imagine yourself as Martha in the home with Mary....
- Look around your home....suddenly Jesus is standing at the door....
- He is your friend...you greet him....Mary shows him where to sit....
- Mary also takes a seat opposite and you sit beside her for a moment....
- Jesus begins to speak about God whom he calls Father....
- Then you realise no one has offered Jesus any food or drink....
- You find yourself moving to the place where food is prepared....
- Mary stays sitting....you find yourself getting resentful....
- You speak to Jesus about Mary who should be helping you....
- You hear the words of Jesus...."she has chosen the better part...."
- Now become Mary....you are listening to Jesus....what is he saying....
- What is the subject of Jesus message? What wisdom does he have for you?....
- Be there for 10 minutes pondering: "Mary has chosen the better part".

DURING THE WEEK

- Pray with the Martha & Mary story from above
- Write out your reflections
- What is the message in the story for you.

**Contemplation calls for a heart
that knows how to listen.**

Session four

INWARD STILLNESS

Be still and know that I am God (Ps 46:10)

In the cover picture, the person appears to be in an extremely calm state. However, only he knows what is really going on within. He may in fact be calm in mind, but on the other hand he may be experiencing inner turmoil.

The importance of relaxation for good contemplative prayer cannot be overstressed. You must be prepared to spend the whole time relaxing if necessary. When we feel restless, that is not the time to get up and go, but rather to hang in there. We are like the faulty TV. The reception is there, but loose wires need adjusting – sometimes just a little, other times quite radically. Often, after a real struggle to remain, and we settle only towards the end of our time, a deep peace and calm arrive. This is always worth waiting for and then we know: *A peace the world cannot give. (Jn 14:27)*

Learning to be still both inwardly and outwardly, is much of what we must learn in these seminars. We must train ourselves to recognise the tensions of life and one by one let them go. We go on doing this until we are so still we come to that point of awareness – God and I, I and God. When we have left behind our grip on life, we become free to be loved by God, then free to love in return.

When we persevere with the help of a gentle discipline, we slowly come to hear the still, small voice and to feel the delicate breeze, and so come to know the presence of Love. (Henri Nouwen)⁹

Inward stillness is a state we arrive at, rather than make happen in an instant. You will notice that while your body may be still, the inner you is racing. Only gradually and gently can you learn to lay aside the distractions of life.

Remember, my life is my prayer. This is what I offer to God. In a real way, this time apart is only a preparation for living, and I will have achieved a great deal if I come away from my prayer feeling relaxed and calm. In this atmosphere I can be conscious of what I am doing, and why. I can then live according to what God calls me to do, and in this I give God the worship of my life. Awareness of God's presence comes not from a strained tense effort; rather, it results from gently letting go my possessive grip on people and situations. Worry and anxiety are the two great enemies. When these have gone, there remains only one thing – attention to the Lord and awareness of the one who is the author and giver of all peace and strength.

LISTENING IN PRAYER

*Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live. (Wis 8:14-15)*

Perhaps one of the greatest proofs that we need to listen in prayer, is found in the story of the Annunciation. Mary was disturbed by the angel's words to her, but she listened to what was being said: *"and now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus". (Lk 1:16)*

Mary listened, conceived and gave birth to the Word of God. In a real way it is the same for ourselves whoever we are in the Church. We endeavour through our daily living to bring God to those who hunger for Him. If we are believers then we are the yeast that causes the bread to rise. (see Mtt 13:33) It is only when we have heard the Word and been nourished by it ourselves, will we have a message for others, and those 'unawakened' sense whether or not the message has first of all been conceived in our hearts:

I once attended a week long retreat given by Br David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine hermit. His great theme and message is gratitude. During the week I took aboard many of the points he made and the following weekend I used some of them in my Sunday homily. I could feel it all falling flat. I felt flat and knew that I was not really in tune with what I was preaching. Brother's words had made their way into my mind, but not yet into my heart. I had still to let them nourish me and become mine.

Prayer therefore has little to do with words. It makes sense that we be quiet to allow God and God's wisdom be revealed to us. If the message has not been born within, our words will be empty.

Prayer is not an emotional outpouring of our troubles to God. We can acknowledge these, but then we must leave them be and trust in the God who provides 'our daily bread'.

Silence naturally must play a major part in contemplative prayer, otherwise, how can I listen? Silence is a language all its own. The strange thing about us is that we find it difficult to go into this contemplative world, yet the further in we go, the more loudly God will speak. We are attached to many things, things that cannot do anything to save us, even though we hope they will. They are the false gods we worship, and the depth of our worship can be measured by our willingness to let them go. Soon, the false gods we worship, and the lies our cunning minds feed us will surface and if we give them away to the power of Truth, we will stop hiding behind the clutter of our lives and become free to pray: "Here I am. I come to do your will".

THE SCRIPTURES

*The word of God is something alive and active:
It cuts like any double-edged sword but more finely:
It can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit,
or joints from the marrow;
It can judge the secret emotions and thoughts.
No created thing can hide from the Word;
Everything is uncovered and open to the eyes of the one
to whom we must give an account of ourselves. (Heb 4:12-13)*

God speaks to us through our emotions, insights and the scriptures especially. When God speaks it is a moment of grace. An inner conviction comes with this moment, but we must wait for it. People in contemplation have been described as “waiting for the Lord.” A person who loves surfing gave me the imagery of waiting for that special wave. When it comes you only need to go with it. Often, it is through the Scripture that this happens. Suddenly we see the selected text in a new way.

It was a special moment when a spiritual director first said to me: “tell me, what has the Lord been saying to you today?” I was on a silent retreat, so it was easy to answer, but it was the first time in my life, (and I had a long seminary career) that I was ever asked that question. It made me realise that even a short line from Scripture contains a message, and it goes to the core of our being!

The prayerful reading of sacred scripture lies at the heart of contemplative prayer. The great St Jerome said, “ignorance of Scripture, is ignorance of Christ”. It nourishes the prayer and the prolonged periods of silence will also nourish our reading of scripture. This is a wonderful gift for the person who is entrusted with communicating God’s word.

If your involvement in Church activities includes worship in some form or planning services, selecting Scripture will probably be at the core of your work. What is important is that you allow the message to nourish and inspire you and make its way into your heart first of all. This is listening to God. When we use the word ‘listen’ we naturally imply that someone must be speaking.

Tenders of the Word must sit with God’s word, savor it as a wine connoisseur savors a winery’s prize vintage. He reads it slowly and carefully, letting it filter into the corners of his unconscious where it takes root under the quiet tutoring of his imagination. Here the word begins to reveal its ever new promise to transform the lives of those who will soon hear it aloud from the preachers’ lips. A certain anxiety surfaces as the preacher remembers Karl Barth’s words, “Preaching is ‘God’s own word.’ That is to say, through the activity of preaching, God himself speaks.” (Donald Cozzens)¹⁰

While sensitivity and skill is called for when speaking about the Divine with others, your words will mean nothing to the listeners if you have not allowed the message to rise within you, allowing it be preached first of all to yourself.

Then you have something to give. If we are regular in our prayer, we are like those plants that must be watered just a little but often. Give them too much and they can’t cope. Give them none at all and they die. Give them the right amount, and they thrive.

Already in these notes, you will have noticed the constant references to Scripture. You may have had experience of a scriptural text speaking strongly to you. This is one of the key ways God will communicate with us.

In the years ahead, and for the rest of your life, you will be growing in your appreciation of the Word of God. The readings from the Eucharist will help nourish you on a daily basis. Prayer nourishes our reading of scripture, and our reading of scripture nourishes our prayer. You will also find scripture useful in preparing liturgies in your parish such as communal reconciliation, praying with the sick and group reflections.

There are many ways of praying with scripture and some are listed here to help you begin. The four gospels of course must become central, for in them we are nourished with the mind of Christ – his wisdom, his love for the Father, his compassion for humanity and his complete dedication to the Will of God.

Suggested ways of praying with Scripture

- Simply begin reading your way through the gospels, and pause when you feel taken by a particular passage. Develop a mantra from it if you so desire.
- Pray with selected passages given by your spiritual director. Record your thoughts and what has happened within you as a result. What insight have you gained?
- Take a psalm and pray it through. When a line strikes you as significant, stay with it and let it be a mantra until you feel you have exhausted it: e.g. My soul...is thirsting... for the living God...
- Pray using your imagination with the gospel stories. Ponder the story and record what you consider it means.
- Use the readings of the day. Learn to find a message in them. **Make it a rule:** never attend Mass without first giving some time to the scriptures for the day.

LECTIO DIVINA (Reading with God)

Lectio (reading): read the passage of Scripture slowly, more than once. If a particular word, phrase or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why,) you may want to write it down.

Meditatio (reflection): let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. You are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words.

Oratio (prayer): allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture or by the thoughts that have come to you while reflecting on it

Contemplatio (rest): let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God in simple and wordless contemplation. ¹¹

THE MOVEMENT INTO SILENCE

*Just as the rain falls to water the earth...
my word shall not return to me empty. (Is 55:10-11)*

It is worthwhile knowing that prayer evolves. You needn't worry what stage you are at. Setting aside time and doing one's best is sufficient. Feel free to pray in a way that is natural to you. There are no rules. It is what is in your heart that counts. Let God lead your prayer: *Teach me your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. (Ps 24:4)*

Prayer is fairly wordy. This is always our starting point. The beginner usually likes more rather than less scripture and words seem to flow freely. So use whatever words you feel drawn to, and read Scripture until you feel drawn to put it down. Sometimes, choose a line from the Psalms, repeated with your breathing until you feel you have been fully nourished by it. You may appreciate quiet music or reading the gospels for a while. Just go with whatever helps. After a while, things will simplify. Words will become fewer, or less laboured. When this happens you are moving to a deeper quiet.

Fewer words and the imagination is called upon more. Using the imagination can help immensely as the prayer of quiet develops. If for example you are meditating with the story of Jesus calming the storm, you might like to imagine yourself out on the boat with Jesus. Then you see the storm gathering and feel the boat on the rough waters. You see Jesus asleep on the boat and you know it's time to awaken him. You identify your worries and see yourself handing them over one by one, asking for the gift of trust. You use the experience to inspire your prayer.

The use of the imagination and intellect fade. Now you find that the words are fewer, honest and from the heart and very much directed to what you need: e.g: "Lord, let me know your love. To be your minister, I must know it first of all." The Spirit will pray within you, that is give you the words. God speaks to you through a line in scripture, or your insights and even emotions. You will now be able to quite easily answer the question: "what has God been saying to you?"

Finally, even the words fade. One is content to sit. There is love in this sitting and a confident expectation that God will do all that is necessary. The only words may be a simple expression: "I love you!" But in this is expressed gratitude, wonder, praise, adoration. Often, one word can express so much. If someone comes into a room and yells out "FIRE!" the intensity of the call is saying many things. As one sits in this contemplation one becomes quite confident that God is present, attending to all the needs of our life. On our part, all that is required is attention to God with nothing more than the love of our hearts.

*When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half of her swift course,
down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all powerful Word;
into the heart of a doomed land the stern warrior leapt. (Wis 18:14-15)*

After a while, we can grow tired at any of the above stages. You may feel that prayer is no longer what it once was and you are not gaining anything from it. The temptation to abandon it sets in. This is the time to hang in there. You are simply being taken deeper into quiet. The

evil spirit will never give up tempting you to abandon this kind of praying. Remember too, there is no straight line to God. Growth in prayer is cyclic.

I remember the day I climbed Mt Taranaki with some friends. We came to a steep section just to the side of Fantam's Peak. It was summer and the snow was still further on so we had to make our way on very loose gravel. At that point it seemed as though we were climbing one step forward and then a backward slide. We must have been making progress as we eventually came to more solid ground, but it certainly didn't seem like it. I think that is the way with prayer. If we go to prayer with the right attitude and keep climbing, we will arrive. How could God let us down?

PATIENT TRUST IN OURSELVES AND THE SLOW WORK OF GOD

Above all,
Trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
To reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
Unknown, something new.

And yet, it is the law of all progress
That it is made by passing through some stages of instability...
And that it may take a very long time.
And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually –
let them grow, let them shape themselves,
Without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
As though you could be today
What time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own will)
Will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually
Forming within you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit
Of believing that his hand is leading you,
And accept the anxiety
Of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

(Teilhard de Chardin)¹²

PRAYER

- Relax
- Begin by praying prayers you know well
- Pray them slowly and from your heart
- Keep praying until you feel ready to slow down even further
- Now take a phrase from the prayer
- Pray it repeatedly for a while
- Create in your mind a scene in which the words of the prayer are being prayed
- Stay with the scene for a few minutes
- Ask for whatever grace you feel you need
- Now just be...praying simple words expressing your love.

DURING THE WEEK

- Concentrate on asking God to teach you to pray
- Go up to Jesus and ask: "Lord, teach me to pray".

COLLOQUY

- This is a prayer of petition for a particular grace, such as that in the above: "teach me to pray" or, whatever the gut need is
- It is made as one friend might speak to another
- It could be made firstly to God the Father – so I can know his love
- Secondly to God the Son- so I can be with him and find the Father
- Thirdly to the Holy Spirit – to be convinced of the need for prayer
- Finally to Mary, that she might obtain this grace for me, so that I can know her Son intimately and as a friend, because He is the Way to God.

***Eyes see only light, ears only sound,
but a listening heart perceives meaning.***¹³

Session five

MANTRA STYLE PRAYER

“Thinking about Christ is an intellectual exercise, being with Christ is prayer” (K. Penry SJ)¹⁴

Mantra praying is like building the great wall of China. It took at least a 1000 years to build, is 5000 km long, and stretches out over rugged terrain and steep mountains. How was it built? Stone upon stone of course! One at a time. The infamous Chairman Mao’s saying is perhaps worth noting here and making use of: “until you reach the Great Wall you’re no hero.”

Mantra style praying, (often called centering prayer) fits in well with contemplative prayer and will help us understand the concept of ‘being with’ Christ. Each mantra prayer adds another stone to the great wall, and with perseverance we eventually get it built.

Some people panic when they hear the word ‘mantra’ as they feel it is too pagan. What they forget is that in a single word we come into contact with our Creator and much is expressed in this word. We have a personal relationship with God, and in Jesus we find a way towards God. So really, our prayer is not a mantra in the strict sense. It is simply a convenient word to use to describe part of the process of moving towards God.

There are two popular mantras in use today for contemplation: The Jesus prayer & Maranatha, (Come, Lord Jesus) (See 1 Cor 16:22)

Advantages of this kind of praying

- I have a place to be before God as I am, not as I think I ought to be*
- I am opening myself to the Christ who heals, encourages and calls
- I am learning the language of silence and developing prayer of the heart
- I am drinking from the Source - the Spring of Living Water**
- I can centre myself immediately, once I realise I am distracted
- It develops prayer of the heart.

*In Maori tradition, the Marae is a meeting place, where you can be yourself. When issues are to be dealt with, it is there that one can lay them out openly and honestly before others, and they will be received with respect. For those who come from the area, it is their ‘turangawaewae’ (place to stand). Just as the culture has catered for a basic human need, so has God in giving us Christ.

**St Theresa of Avila uses the analogy of drinking water from two sources. One, the water comes through a series of contraptions. She likens this to listening to a good sermon or reading a stimulating article. On the other hand, we can go to the spring, the original source from which the water comes. Spring water is delicious. A mantra style prayer is like drinking from the spring.

The Jesus prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

This prayer has its origins in the Eastern Church and is possibly inspired by the following Gospel stories: the healing of the blind men who cry out: *Lord, have compassion on us, Son of David.* (See Mtt 20:29-34 & Lk 18:35-43)

: the Pharisee and the tax collector who went up to the temple to pray: ... *but the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner."* (See Lk 18:10-14)

: Peter's profession of faith, when in response to Jesus' question: *"But who do you say that I am?"* He replies: *"You are the Christ the Son of the living God."* (Mtt 16:16)

In the prayer therefore, we identify with all three – the blind men, the tax collector and Peter.

How to use the prayer

- relax
- take a few deep breaths allowing your breathing to become rhythmic
- pray the prayer fully in the beginning, each word in time with your breathing:
Lord...Jesus...Son of the living God...have mercy....on me....a sinner.

Eventually the prayer may shorten to just the Name: *Jesus*. In this one word is expressed gratitude, praise, adoration, surrender, sorrow, love. Eventually, it becomes the prayer that keeps bringing me back to the place of **being with Christ**. Each time I breathe in the Name, I strengthen my friendship with Jesus and increasingly hear the words: *"abide in my love."* This helps me understand St Paul's request to *"pray without ceasing."*

UNDERSTANDING THE PRAYER

Lord

When I call Jesus 'Lord' I am surrendering my life to the will of God. I am becoming God's servant. This is the basis of Christian spirituality. At the Annunciation Mary prays: *Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. (Lk 1:37)*

Jesus

To call on the name of the person is the equivalent of being in their presence. Jesus role is to save, and he comes in the risen state. In this time Christ will continue doing what he did while on earth, namely, saving us from ourselves – greed, unruly passion, self-centredness. As these are taken from us, our lives open to the Divine Presence, living all the time within us. Through this prayer we understand what Jesus means when he says to us: *abide in my love. (Jn 15:9)*

Son of the living God

All of us are children of God, but Jesus is one whose relationship with the Father is unique. They are one. This phrase unites us with Peter's great act of faith: *you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Mtt 16:16)*

Have mercy on me

Mercy means love and kindness. It is not a prayer for leniency. What I am asking for here is the grace to trust that Jesus really does *"welcome sinners and eats with them."* (Lk 15:2) Eventually I will so know God's love that sin loses its power. I am after all, "saved by love". *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. (Jn 3:16)*

A sinner

Admitting I am a sinner is simply acknowledging my need for Christ and that I am in the process of becoming something greater, a person fully alive in Christ. As a human being, I am, to a greater or lesser degree "cut asunder" from my true self. This part of the prayer expresses my humility and owns the truth: namely, I need Christ. Eventually, through all of this, I see into my life and let go of what is not leading me to God: *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."* (Jn 8:31)

MARANATHA – O Come Lord

This is an Aramaic word, the language of Jesus. It relates to 'Thy kingdom come'. As a mantra it is made popular again by the Order of St Benedict in their promotion of meditation. It is recommended it be prayed, once again in time with your breathing, as follows: ma...ra..na...tha. Or you may wish to use the English: come...Lord or come...Lord...Jesus. Remember though, the pray-er must always be free to use whatever words the Spirit prompts. Any such prayer is only the starting point, and while great explanations can be given to encourage their use, nothing is better than the prayer the Spirit prays in you.

OTHER MANTRAS

Jesus, I love you!

For I tell you this, one loving blind desire for God alone, is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do. (The Cloud of Unknowing)¹⁵

Ask yourself: what prayer do I pray often? It is important to respect the mantra the Spirit puts within you. These may vary and change and may come out of the Scripture that feeds you at the time. It is praying with love that is the important thing.

Accepting what is expressed above, surely it makes sense to simply pray: “Jesus, I love you” or similar words. After all, *to believe* means *to be in love* and the author of the Cloud also says:

No one can fully comprehend the uncreated God with their knowledge, but each one, in a different way, can grasp God fully through love. Truly this is the unending miracle of love: that one loving person, through their love, can embrace God, whose being fills and transcends the entire creation. And this marvellous work of love goes on forever, for God whom we love is eternal. Whoever has the grace to appreciate the truth of what I am saying, let them take these words to heart, for to experience this love is the joy of eternal life, while to lose it is eternal torment.¹⁶

A gospel reflection

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes Lord; you know I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him a third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me? And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you’. Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep’. (Jn 21:15-17)

PRAYER

- relax
- Put yourself in the scene and become Peter .
- Hear the questions from Jesus but use your own name.

DURING THE WEEK

- Pray the mantra appealing to you.
- Stay with the gospel story John: 21:15-17.

Love makes labour light.
Love gives value to all things.¹⁷



**In my prayer, I stay with the Risen Jesus.
He will lead me to the Spirit and the Spirit will lead the prayer.
I will be led to the one whom Jesus called 'Abba' (Father),
then become enveloped in this Trinity of Love
and
take my place at the Table
as a Son or Daughter of God¹⁸.**

Session six

DISTRACTION

The louder our world today is,
the deeper God seems to remain in silence.
Silence is the language of eternity; noise passes.
(Gertrud von Le Fort)¹⁹

When people set out on the path of contemplation, almost certainly they will notice how hard it is to concentrate. There is much advice given about distraction. Perhaps the simplest is don't become anxious about it. If you are genuinely seeking God, you will be brought to peace in this regard. Distraction happens because our world is so noisy and our lives are often filled with many concerns.

Some will advise do your best to ignore distraction and return immediately to your mantra; others, the best way to become free of distraction is first of all acknowledge it, then examine it to see if there is something you can learn about yourself from it. "Everything speaks of God, if we only learn to listen".²⁰

An example might be in regard to resentment. Let us say that I am carrying a resentment towards a particular person and it is occupying a lot of my thinking. This will certainly surface when I go into silence. I won't be free of it until I deal with it and can let it go. If contemplation is about God invading my being, then surely that place to which God comes must be ready, since God is Love. This kind of distraction is more serious and we will come back to it when we deal with the subject of inner healing.

Another example might be the tasks for the day presenting themselves before you. In this case, simply acknowledge them and lay them aside for later, then return to the mantra.

In the beginning though, when one takes up contemplation, it is quite likely you will be swamped with distractions concerning everyday life. Almost certainly you will be tempted to get up and go because you suddenly think you have something important to do. Recall the Martha and Mary story. Mary stops because 'now' was the time to listen.

This is what the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* advises:

Centre all your attention and desire on God and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart. Do all in your power to forget everything else, keeping your thoughts and desires free from involvement with any of God's creatures or their affairs whether in general or in particular. Perhaps this will seem like an irresponsible attitude but I tell you, let them all be; pay no attention to them.....And so diligently persevere until you feel joy in it. For in the beginning it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a cloud of unknowing.....but if you strive to fix your love on him forgetting all else, which is the work of contemplation I have urged you to begin, I am confident that God in his goodness will bring you to a deep experience of himself.²¹

The above advice can appear to contradict what others advise in regard to distraction. I think that what the author of *The Cloud* is saying is “put aside the distractions that just concern everyday life”.

With more serious distractions however, most modern writers would agree to “look at them first, see what they say to you and let them be a springboard into prayer”.

An illustration might be as follows: my distraction relates to my concern about money. I find myself desiring more, or, worried that I don’t have enough. So I pray appropriately: “Lord, help me be content with what I have”, or, “I trust you will provide”. Having done that, I then return to my mantra or centering prayer.

As if to confuse matters, our minds may go to the wonders of nature, or perhaps I just find myself reflecting on life and how fortunate I am. Obviously this is a time to express thanks and praise, once I realise what is happening. My life is in the palm of His hand. God is in all things.

Finally, we will find ourselves distracted about unimportant things – maybe a song that is popular or something we are learning at the moment – that is certainly a time to return immediately to the mantra. Refocus on your breathing and begin again.

If you have never had any distractions, you don’t know how to pray. For the secret of prayer is a hunger for God and for the vision of God, a hunger that lies far deeper than the level of language or affection. And a man whose memory and imagination are persecuting him with a crowd of useless or even evil thoughts and images may sometimes be forced to pray far better, in the depths of his murdered heart, than one whose mind is swimming with clear concepts and brilliant purposes and easy acts of love. (Thomas Merton)²²

PRAYER

- Relax
- Consciously surrender to God
- Allow the love of God envelop you
- Continue praying, conscious of Christ’s presence
- When you become distracted look at it...what is it...what should you do with it?
- Return to your prayer

DURING THE WEEK

- Relax
- Pray using your centering prayer
- Concentrate each day on observing your distractions
- What are they saying to you about you?

Practice it – something will happen!

Session seven

OTHER PRINCIPLES FOR PRAYER

Humility

Our ability to pray is a gift from God. There is so much that can trap us when we pray, but pride is perhaps the greatest trap of all. Pride exists for sure when I give in to the temptation not to bother about prayer, or when I think I am well on the way and forget that I am just at the foot of the mountain. The great paradox about prayer is, I'm always 'just beginning'. If I have progressed it is because of grace and grace alone:

- the attraction to prayer is grace
- the ability to respond is grace
- growth in prayer is grace
- consolation in prayer is grace
- perseverance in prayer is grace

Having said all of the above, does it not make sense to go before God and simply say: "Here I am! Teach me".

Dryness and Experiences

*The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness.
For when we cannot chose words in order to pray properly,
the Spirit expresses our pleas in a way that could never be put into words,
and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what the Spirit means,
and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit
are according to the mind of God. (Rom 8:28-30)*

In the years I have been encouraging others to practice contemplation in their daily life, I have noticed that many fail to persevere once the novelty wears off. "I no longer get much out of it" is the most common excuse, or, "I don't have time". And when you ask how long do they watch TV for, you'll be surprised.

This kind of dryness is par for the course. If we think there is a promise of great consolation every time we pray, we are very much mistaken! Contemplation is about going to be with Christ for no other reason than love, gratitude and the desire to let God be God in my life. In this I will be transformed into who I really am – a son or daughter of God. That is what is promised.

A person who takes up serious prayer may feel very dry at the start. Often this is because they don't know what to do. Guidance is usually necessary for the beginner. Then, as one settles in to regular prayer, times of consolation may come, then times of doubt and confusion relating to the value of all this, then times of absolute boredom, then consolation once more, until finally one becomes convinced that a time set aside for God is as natural to our condition as eating. I need to be converted to the idea that giving time is essential. If I commit to going "into the desert" all I need is trust that God will do what is appropriate. Anything less means I am dictating the terms and saying to God: "I will pray, if you make it nice!"

Secondly therefore, we must be seeking only God, not the consolations of God. Certainly people do have experiences in prayer. God sends these because God knows that we need them from time to time. They help us believe and become convinced that God really is present in our lives. The Thomas story in the gospel of John is typical of God's sensitivity to our needs:

"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." ...Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe". Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God."

(Jn 20:24-29)

The genuine seeker rarely speaks about their experiences. They may do this perhaps in a spiritual direction situation or in an appropriate sharing time. These consoling experiences might be when one feels a strong attraction to reading Scripture, an inner pull to prayer, a line from Scripture standing out, a strong sense of Presence, a sudden realisation of some aspect of faith, an overwhelming sense of being loved by God, or forgiven for one's sins.

God's self-revealing comes however in a myriad of ways. In ordinary life it happens all the time so to speak: the birth of a child; staring into the sky; in the midst of a forest or mountaintop. God is simply not confined to our terms. In the silence of the soul open to truth, God comes when unexpected and always in a manner sensitive to the person's needs, as in the incident with Thomas mentioned above. Likewise with Paul on the road to Damascus. (See Acts 9:3-9)

Finally, one needs to remember, that living without God is as crazy as pretending we don't need an education or any emotional satisfaction or physical exercise. When I understand this, I will be prepared to *cross that barren desert*.

PRAYER

- Relax
- Follow by being Thomas in the above scene.
- Hear the words of Jesus. Pray the prayer of Thomas.

DURING THE WEEK

- Pray each day with the Thomas story from above.
- Ponder also, the connection between faith and trust for Thomas.

**↙ need to be converted to the idea
that giving time is essential.**

Session eight

CHRIST

*Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness,
and all these other things will be given you as well. (Mtt 6:33)*

God is the arrival point of our spiritual journey, but Jesus is the way, and through the power of the Spirit he brings us into the truth and life of God. The ultimate reason for prayer therefore, is to come to know Christ and allow the reign of God to break into our lives. Any motive other than this will almost certainly mean we abandon commitment to prayer as soon as the novelty has worn off. More than ever today, we must focus on a gospel centred spirituality.

Keeping our eye on Christ is what will motivate and sustain us each day. This friendship with Christ needs to be a growing friendship and can only come about by 'being with' him constantly. *"And know that I am with you always, yes, till the end of time". (Mtt 28:20)*

Our vision and longing for greater things comes from this relationship. Our ability to be patient with each person, to welcome them and treat them with respect and pray sincerely with them comes from this relationship. Our insight into the Scriptures, our conviction that we believe what we teach, our ability to find meaning in our Liturgy and Sacraments will all come from this conscious friendship we have with Christ. And as the desire to 'abide in his love' grows within us, we will let go of the need to fill our lives with busy-ness, be guided into our work, then find ourselves being in the right place at the right time.

The problem for all of us is tiredness of spirit. A regular time apart with the Lord, gives us the energy to return to our lives refreshed. Hence, the words of Jesus need to be taken literally: *"come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest."* (Mtt 11:28)

When we grow tired we can easily lose our focus, and the whole purpose of contemplative prayer is to energise our spirits. If we fail to provide for this, we put ourselves in a very dangerous place and our passions take over. More will be said on this in the section on inner healing. But for now, it is enough to know that our passions are our enemies. They can weaken and defeat us if we allow ourselves to grow tired and remain in that state for long periods of time. When Jesus says *"come to me"* he invites us to face our enemy, that is, our passions. They are the weeds that can grow among the wheat. We have to live with them, but with Christ we have the wherewithal to deal with them.

Whether we are celibate or married, living up to our commitments is always a challenge, and loneliness can find its way into our lives quite easily. All of us need to learn to live alone, even though we have a spouse for our soul mate. A healthy marriage requires this, otherwise we end up being dependent on what another cannot possibly give.

Through a developing prayer life, the vacuum we experience at times can be transformed from loneliness into aloneness if we take the time to be alone with the Alone.

They who fear to be alone will never be anything but lonely,
no matter how much they may surround themselves with people.
But they who learn,
in solitude and recollection,
to be at peace
with their own loneliness,
and to prefer its reality
to the illusion of
merely natural companionship,
come to know the invisible companionship of God.

(Thomas Merton)²³

Christ the Servant

Another aspect of Christ is that of servant. And contemplation is about allowing him to be our servant. When our feet have been washed, then we become capable of washing the feet of another. The huge love of God expressed in the Incarnation can only be absorbed little by little, which is why we need to be disciplined in our practice of prayer on a daily basis. St Theresa Avila reveals in her writings that for a long time she begrudged giving the hour to God in contemplation. She would be looking at the clock, waiting for the hour to finish. Eventually though, love for God ruled her life.

I think most of us who set aside a decent period of time each day, would identify with St Theresa's struggle. St Alphonsus Ligouri, in his Visits to the Blessed Sacrament, writes that so often we find even just a quarter of an hour to be an age. It is a matter of learning to enjoy the hospitality of God and trusting that our response to God will become one of pure love.

Eventually to the faithful heart the sense of Christ's presence becomes "not so very far away", or 'near'. Merton describes it well with the phrase "the invisible companionship of God".

A gospel reflection

It was before the festival of the Passover, and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was.

They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, and he got up from the table removed his outer garment and taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then pour water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet'? Jesus answered, 'At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand'. 'Never'! said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet'. Jesus replied, 'if I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me'.

'Then Lord', said Simon Peter, 'not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well'! Jesus said, 'No one who has taken a bath needs washing, he is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are'. He knew who was going to betray him, that was why he said, 'though not all of you are'.

When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes again he went back to the table. 'Do you understand', he said, 'what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you'. (Jn 13:1-15)

NOTE

The gospel illustrates two things:

- as disciples, we are called to imitate Christ as servant – called to serve not to be served. A little later in John's gospel, Jesus says: *"I shall not call you servants any more...I call you friends."* (Jn 15:15) This concept of service, while it seems to be a command for the Apostles, it does apply equally as much to all of us in our communities. Mutual service is of course a brilliant concept for marriage and the only way a marriage could be truly happy.

But also,

- we are reminded because of Peter, that we must allow Christ to wash our feet first of all. In other words, let Christ be our servant. And that is what happens in contemplative prayer. When Christ has made us ready, we can go out to serve.

PRAYER

- Enter a meditation, and imagine yourself as Peter.
- Stay with the scene of having your feet washed, asking for the grace of understanding.
- What do you pray?
- Also allow yourself to become Christ.
- Become conscious that this is the night before he goes to his suffering.
- What feelings surface?
- Can you identify with them in your commitment?

DURING THE WEEK

- Repeat the above meditation each day.
- Be sure to record your insights and reactions.

***Eyes see only light, ears only sound,
but a listening heart perceives meaning.***²⁴

Session nine

THE INVITATION AND OUR RESPONSE

Chapter 55:1-11 in the book of Isaiah is an excellent place to begin. The first three verses particularly say it all. After the initial relaxation in prayer, hear the words being spoken to you, listen to each line in time with your breathing. When a line speaks to you, stop and let it repeat itself until you feel you have really heard.

*Come to the water all you who are thirsty
Though you have no money, come.
Buy corn without money and eat
And, at no cost wine and milk.
Why spend your money on what is not bread
Your wages on what fails to satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and you will have good things to eat
And rich food to enjoy.
Pay attention, come to me;
Listen and your soul will live. (Is 55:1-3)*

Faith is a free response to God. It is made in love in response to love. Can you imagine the difficulty in a marriage if just one partner entered the marriage covenant against their will? It is the same with God. We are invited but free to walk alone in life if we choose. This Lover simply says: “come and see” and is patiently awaiting my response. Then, through the Risen Christ, God will gently transform every fibre of my being, and bring me to my true self, one made in the image and likeness of God.

What is important to understand is that God will not love us any the less if there is no response, and, the invitation will always remain, but, we cannot expect to appreciate the riches of God if we do not make the effort to respond. Quite simply: we are what we love and treading the path of prayer is a life-giving thing to do.

Nothing is more practical than finding God.
That is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way.

What you are in love with,
What seizes your imagination,
Will affect everything.

It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning.
What you will do with your evening,
How you will spend your week-ends,
What you read,
And what amazes you with joy and gratitude.

Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.

(Pedro Arrupe S.J.)²⁵

THE SEARCH

*If you seek me with all your heart,
I will let you find me. (Jer 20:13)*

There is something important we really need to know. You do not find God. Rather, God finds you. The most important thing you can do is to cease hiding. In order to do this stillness is needed, i.e. physical and inward stillness. That is why relaxing at the beginning of your prayer is called for. Then, all you need to do is say: "Here I am". God will do the rest.

It is said that once you start seeking God, you have already found God, and the paradox is that on the one hand we can say we have found God, but on the other we are only at the foot of the mountain.

The great temptation in all of this is not to bother. Giving in to that is all the evil spirit needs in order to do his job. He knows he will not win by tempting you to do something really evil. The evil spirit is more cunning than that.

If you give yourself generously to this task, God cannot resist such a one, but remember:

Brother, sister, you want to seek God with all your life,
And love God with all your heart.
But you would be wrong
If you thought you could reach God.
Your arms are too short, your eyes are too dim,
Your heart and understanding too small.

To seek God
Means first of all
To let yourself be found by God.
God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
God is the God of Jesus Christ.
God is your God,
Not because God is yours
But because you are God's.
To choose God
Is to realise that you are known and loved
In a way surpassing anything humans can imagine,
Loved before anyone had thought of you
Or spoken your name.²⁶

This attitude of letting yourself be found by God, and simply praying: "Here I am, Lord", destroys the notion that we can find God through our intellect or long and verbose praying. Above all it operates out of the belief that whatever we come to know or realise is the work of God alone. All is gift, and the discovery of God is certainly that. Therefore:

*Ask and you shall receive
Seek and you will find
Knock and the door will be opened (Lk 11:9)*

PRAYER

- Relax
- Focus on how you feel about your closeness to God
- Here the words: *'Come to the water'*
- Notice what do you need to pray for...
- What prayer is spontaneously arising in you...
- As you pray your mantra imagine yourself drinking living water...
- Imagine Christ coming out of the water and you are found by Him.

DURING THE WEEK

- Pray with Isaiah 55. Take a small section each day.

***You do not find God,
God finds you.***

Session ten

GRATITUDE - ALL IS GIFT!

If the only prayer I ever said was thanks, that would be enough.
(Meister Eckhart)²⁷

If prayer does not help us see the hand of God in our lives and fill us with gratitude, then it isn't serving us as it ought. Most of us would have no difficulty in accepting the importance of giving thanks when we receive a gift. It is an ordinary part of human courtesy, and while we don't give in order to receive thanks, it is certainly noticeable when our giving is not acknowledged.

Now on the way to Jerusalem he travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered one of the villages, ten lepers came to meet him. They stood some way off and called to him. 'Jesus! Master! Take pity on us'. When he saw them he said, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' Now as they were going away they were cleansed. Finding himself cured, one of them turned back praising God at the top of his voice and threw himself at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. The man was a Samaritan. This made Jesus say, 'Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they? It seems that no one has come back to give praise to God, except this foreigner. And he said to the man, 'Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.' (Lk 47:11-19)

So overwhelming are God's gifts in ordinary life, we have become content to give thanks at specific times, such as meals, or before retiring at night. However, the more we pray the prayer of thanks, the more conscious we become of God's giving, and the more courageous we will be in trusting God. Gratitude makes sense of our past and helps us see that even in difficult times, even those sinful times, we were being blessed. These gifts are our daily bread. We live on them, and when we wonder about prayer, surely 'thanks' is enough. But because we are strangers to such goodness, we are just like 'the other nine'.

For the Buddhist, consciousness is emphasised as a means to fulfilment. Another word for it is 'awareness'. The Christian equivalent is 'living in the presence of God'. This enables me to receive the gifts, rather than take them, and it enables me to *give in life* rather than *take*.

How often we use expressions like "take a bite to eat", "take a shower", "take Communion". Look what happens when we replace the word "take" with the word "receive". We can enjoy our food, experience the joy of the water on our tense shoulders, rest in awe with Christ.

The word "take" implies a grabbing and ownership, whereas the word "receive" shows a respect for the gift, simply because it is a gift. Our language gives us away: "I'll just grab one of those". The rush implicated in that word shows a lack of awareness and eventually this affects the way we worship. And these are the gifts that are easy to receive!

I can also improve my awareness by examining my attitudes in the ordinariness of everyday life – washing dishes, serving others. Is a duty a chore done grudgingly or with love? ²⁸

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 tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament. ²⁹ (Br Lawrence)

In order to have the attitude of Br Lawrence as described in the above quote, a sense of seeing God in all things and finding God in all things is obviously basic. But in pondering gratitude there are two sides to the coin. When we are receiving gifts, such as the gift of health, it is easy to say thanks. But what if I am blessed with bad health?

I am reminded of the time in 1995 when South Africa won the Rugby World Cup. When the final whistle blew the captain immediately gathered the team, then, in the middle of the field, they all knelt and prayed. That is admirable, but would they have done the same if they had lost?

In the book 'The Road Less Travelled', the author begins:

Life is difficult.

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult – once we understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy....I know about this moaning because I have done my share. (M. Scott Peck)³⁰

'All is gift,' – even what is difficult. That is why Jesus says:

*We do not live on bread alone
but on every word
that comes from the mouth of God. (Mtt 4:4)*

Yet, so often we act as though happiness depends on our surroundings and not something we take responsibility for. The eyes of faith help us see these times as gifts, and that we need them to become a person who can contribute to the vision: *Your kingdom come.*(Mtt 6:10)

Now prior to uttering those words: "*we do not live on bread alone,*" Jesus was tempted by the devil to "*turn these stones into bread.*" (see Mtt 4:1-4) Stones are what lay the foundation for a solid base. For Jesus, the cross (which symbolises all his dying) was his gift, or the base for a solid foundation so that we could be led to the Resurrection.

I think you will well realise that there are many things about our lives that are hard to accept, as was the Cross for Jesus. From the Passion of Christ we learn that an essential element of our spirituality is to live according to the Will of God. This calls us to love God first of all, and then have the faith to know God has us in the palm of his hand. This kind of faith comes from practising gratitude because gratitude helps us trust the Source of all gifts.

In order to grow in appreciation of the wisdom concealed in the saying: *all is gift*, there are three aspects of the spiritual life we need to bear in mind: *the Cross; the present moment; surrender.*

THE CROSS

The pity of life today,
is that most of us die before we are fully born.

(Eric Fromm)³¹

The Cross is not something so much to be carried, as to be embraced. The crucifixion scene is a stark reminder that the way to life is not through power but through humility. Jesus had died many times to his own ego before Calvary. When he was born into our world as one like us, he showed he was not even clinging to his divinity: *"His state was divine, but he did not consider his divinity a thing to be clung to"*. (See Phil 2:5-11) When he washed the feet of his disciples, he effectively renounces his status as Lord and Master. (See Jn 13:1-15) And when he was about to die, because he had given until he could no longer take, he said: "take and eat it, this is my body". He had given everything. God raised him up as the Lord of all creation and now, even in his risen state, he still gives himself!

The Cross therefore stands for all those difficult issues in life that need to be dealt with in order to imitate Christ. The Gospels remind us that this is a daily thing and there can be no growth within us without embracing the Cross.

A person who is not 'fully born' is one who never recognises that the gifts come in the form of bread and stones. It is as though happiness is theirs by right. They insist the stones become bread and never lay the foundation for a solid base. The frightening aspect is that we are all, to a greater or lesser degree, rejecting or being tempted to reject the path which leads us to be "fully born".

And that is the real reason for silence in our lives, and what we mean when we pray: *lead us not into temptation*. In other words, "don't deprive us of the wisdom to know that we do not live on bread alone."

The death implied in taking up the Cross is death to our ego, and gratitude shifts the ego.

Prayers of thanksgiving are deeply transformative. When we practice this kind of prayer daily, for some time and inclusive of others, it changes our attitude to life. It makes us more appreciative of life, of people, and of God. In some cases this can show itself as a change of personality.

When we learn to see everything in life as a free gift, we no longer move around with the long face of those who experience life as drudgery, a boring struggle with one problem after another. Instead of being full of complaints, pessimistic, and impossible to please, we become happy, contented, and grateful for what we have. Instead of being cynical and seeing only the negative in people and events, we learn to appreciate the goodness in other people.

A deeply grateful heart can change one's attitude to God too. I no longer just think that God is good and believe it because I have been told so. I begin to feel that God is good and that God loves me – and everyone else. (Albert Nolan)³²

Accepting the Cross as a gift, calls first of all for us to recognise the opportunity provided for growth in selflessness. There is no need to wait for the moment when we will be called to prove our love by heroic deeds, because:

In the midst of our everyday lives,
we are provided
with countless opportunities
to prove our love,
often through painful dying
first of all.
These are the gifts
which bring about our growth as human beings
enabling us become emptied of self
and therefore
fully alive -
like Christ
whose state was divine
but who did not cling to his equality with God.

THE PRESENT MOMENT

The past is no more
The future not yet
The gift is now!

(Br David Steindl-Rast)³³

St Therese of Lisieux is a great example of living in the present moment. She understood that in worldly terms she could never achieve anything great for God, especially living in the seclusion of a Carmelite Monastery. Instead then of letting her mind persuade her she should be elsewhere, she concluded she would have to find her meaning there. So even picking up a pin from the floor was significant – if it were done out of love. Likewise, when putting up with the annoying habits of another! Her constant praying for the salvation of souls revealed her love for the kingdom and earned her the title of “Patroness of the Missions.”

Then there is the story of Archbishop Thuan imprisoned by the communists in 1975. In the isolation of a prison cell for 13 years, his first resolve was “I will not wait. I will live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love”³⁴. He was soon to find ways to do this – secretly writing letters to his people but especially in loving his prison guards.

There’s always a gift in the now! In order to find it we need to live consciously, or, in the presence of God who is always to be found there, in the present moment.

Surrender: And while I am looking ‘over there’,
I miss the gift that’s here.

Much of our lives can be spent wishing things were different, even when the situation we find ourselves in has been planned by us. For Archbishop Thuan, he could have spent his time waiting for freedom. St Therese could have used her time plotting a more meaningful life. Instead, they accepted and found a way by surrendering to what is “now!”

Priests, surrender their autonomy to live according to their call, and the married must surrender their lives to the person they have chosen to love. Happiness comes when we accept the gift, bread and stones.

Surrender comes when we cannot or ought not change, or ought to change what now exists. As an example, a person might be tempted to think that if they didn’t have responsibilities to their family, they could be doing much more important things. Or, they just decide the responsibilities they have are too much and so walk away. Then, when their wishes are fulfilled, they find they are no happier, and the process of wishing for something else begins again. When I move to a new situation, the first thing I unpack is myself!

Faith means trust, and our faith is based on the belief that we are part of God’s plan. It means having a light grasp on our own plans for we never know what God has in store for us. The temptation is to believe the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. This temptation arises when we have not yet accepted our present situation and dealt with what is difficult.

My writing of these notes is at a time of wondering what I am doing in this seminary. At times I feel irrelevant and wasted, and in the scriptures this morning I was awakened when reading about Abraham’s trust in sacrificing his son (see Rom 4:20-25). Then in the gospel Jesus was saying: *‘there is no need to be afraid: you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows’.* (Lk 12:7) Why do I think God would desert me now? Life is difficult!

In order to find happiness therefore, first of all identify what is difficult, give thanks for it and the gift will be found. Surrender will come more easily.

Now, some gifts come in the form of bread - easy to embrace.
Some come in the form of stones - more difficult to accept,
but
they are gifts none the less and should be received
in the same way as bread.
The temptation is: *turn the stones into bread*
but
Wisdom (Jesus) says:
you do not live on bread alone,
but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.
Now,
anyone can eat bread, stones are more difficult to swallow:
in fact you will die if you eat them.
Trust, my friend,
and don’t skip the agony,
dying is not a dead end,
it leads to the Resurrection.
All is gift! ³⁵

PRAYER

Daily Examen. A very good thing to do at any time of day, is take time for 'the examen'. In this you are asked to review the past 24 hours, conscious that 'all is gift'. How have we received each of God's gifts – the people, the situations, that which has been difficult, that which has brought joy. Have we received all with gratitude? Specify the shortcomings, ask for help where needed. This way of looking at our lives means we just don't concentrate on the wrong we have done, but helps us look at our efforts to be conscious of God's infinite goodness in our lives.

- Give thanks for the day
- Pray for light to realise the gifts
- Review the day – what has been my attitude?
- Ask for the help I need where perhaps I lost opportunities to be Christ
- Give thanks for all the gifts of the day.

DURING THE WEEK

- Ensure you take some time each day, to examine your life according to the method described above.

**To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant,
To enact gratitude is generous and noble,
But to live gratitude is to touch heaven.³⁶**

ADDITIONAL

A METHOD OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

This method of prayer is suggestion only. It can be very helpful for getting underway. One suggestion is that you take it phase by phase each day.

Beginning

- Very simply invoke the Spirit of God to guide your prayer
- Focus on a particular grace you feel you need and ask for that grace
- Read a selected scripture
- Begin the relaxation
- Surrender to God's presence. Consciously make a prayer of love. Use the imagination to sink into this love, which, like the sun envelops you.
- Recall the Scripture – has something struck you? Does it lead you in some way to pray for something specific.
- Focus on your life? Allow people, events, situations to come to mind. Is there something significant there you need to accept, or give thanks for, or repent of?
- Hand over – if you find yourself struggling in some way, see yourself handing this over to Christ. Ask for the grace you need to let go.
- Return to the prayer of love, which may come in the form of gratitude, praise, adoration.
- Remain in the stillness, praying as you can for the allotted time
- Before concluding, read the selected Scripture once again

Part two

Inner Healing

Session one

THE TRUTH WILL MAKE YOU FREE

*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples,
And you will know the truth
and the truth will make you free. (Jn 8:32)*

After a time of endeavouring to respond to God's invitation "come and see" a person is taken into a period of seeing the reality of their lives more clearly. This time can be quite painful. Silence inevitably helps the open person to see themselves as they are. It is necessary to look at the past, not to hang on to it, but to let it go.

If we liken the soul to a beautiful garden in God's sight, it is as if Christ decides to walk us through the garden. He points out to us the plants that will destroy the beauty of the garden if allowed to remain.

Prayer very much relates to life and what is going on in our lives. The risen Christ whom I encounter in my prayer wants to transform every fibre of my being.

It is true
that we are called to create a better world.
But we are first of all called to a more immediate task:
that of creating our own lives.

(Thomas Merton)³⁷

Feelings³⁸

Before we can go deeper into this subject of inner healing through prayer, it is important to understand that for prayer to have a transforming effect on our lives we must be content to be before God as we are, not as we think we ought to be.

It is necessary therefore to be in touch accurately with what I am experiencing. There is little use in praying "please God make me good, make me loving" when I am not identifying the seething resentment I am carrying. In order to get in touch, one important question is : How do I feel?

When asked this question, many reply by dodging the question and in the end tell you nothing about their feelings: e.g. "How do you feel about having nuclear weapons in this country?"

An evasive reply would be: "I feel that we need to protect ourselves as we have many enemies in this world".

The above answer is a judgment and a statement about the world and tells me nothing about feelings. It is totally different from the answer of another who says: "I feel afraid...insecure." If I follow the words: 'I feel' with the word 'that', then I can be sure I have not answered the question accurately.

Accepting feelings

A common response from people is to say: "I shouldn't feel like this", especially if the feelings are intense. As an example, someone may secretly feel hatred. Being uncomfortable with this they bury the feeling and pretend it isn't there. It's a matter of realising that feelings are spontaneous, but once recognised we can choose to acknowledge them and act appropriately.

Always trust your feelings, but examine what you are doing with them.

Note:

- feelings are a spontaneous, inner reaction to a person, place or situation
- feelings happen and are not planned. Therefore they have no morality
- feelings are an important part of making me who I am.

Hence:

<i>I feel</i>	<i>I feel</i>
Peaceful	angry
Content	ashamed
Loving	guilty
Compassionate	powerless
Free	afraid
Confident	trapped
Loved	resentful

The above lists of feelings are not meant to be segregated as positive and negative. Both columns are equally good and useful. **Feelings can be a signal – God's built in way of warning us that something is wrong...or right.**

Remember: Feelings are neither good nor bad. It's what you do with them that counts. I have a right to be angry and I am free to express my anger, just not anywhere or anyhow.

Tuning in to feelings – how to do this

- 1 **Use imagery** - I feel like a roaring lion
- 2 **Use a feeling word** – I feel afraid...scared....terrified...peace...in love
- 3 **Become aware of body feelings*** – sick to my stomach. Also note: clenched fists, raised forehead, facial tension, folded arms, neck pains. All of these and many others are signs of some form of tension.

* When I sit down to pray, it is then I may well observe inner tension and my body will give me the clues as to where it comes from. By identifying it, I can relax more easily. We use many phrases in everyday speech which tell us much: e.g. a pain in the neck, I could thump him, stand on your own two feet, stabbed in the back, the weight of the world on my shoulders, kicked in the guts.

Example: How do you feel when God is the subject of conversation among your non-Catholic friends?

Answer: I feel tense and afraid because they will mock my beliefs if I reveal them. I find such conversations a pain in the neck.

Emotions

An emotion denied will appear at another time and in another place,
but this time loaded with resentment. (C G Jung).

Closely connected with the subject of feelings is our emotions. A feeling is closer to the surface, it is what is here right now. An emotion is a deep seated energy within. We speak of people being 'very emotional' or 'quite cold'. Naturally, people vary in the way they express their emotions. The first, it would seem, expresses them, the second suppresses them. What is important is that emotions are allowed to flow within us. They are like the waters of a river - they only need to be allowed to flow. If you block them they burst out to where they shouldn't go.

An example of a person out of touch with their feelings and the need for inner healing is in the story of a priest expressing to a visitor a hostile anger about his bishop. The visitor was so concerned she went to see another priest about him, only to be told: "that man is angry about every bishop. In fact, he's angry about everything!"

The reason people express emotions inappropriately, is because they are not owned at the primary level. They are out of touch with them and suppressing whatever is going on within. In order for prayer to be effective, we must ensure that we are not using prayer to cover up our real feelings and emotions. When a person has difficulty accessing their emotions, clearly professional help should be sought. We should not be afraid to make use of this service.

It has been a frequent observation of mine that people struggling with alcoholism will easily turn to religion or prayer, but refuse to attend AA or seek counselling for the issue. Sooner or later, the addiction overpowers them once more.

I have also noticed, often enough to be concerned, that some married couples have separated shortly after one or both have been received into the Church. Obviously a problem existed in the relationship, and while prayer or faith could have helped, it was being used to avoid facing the issues that needed to be resolved first of all.

It is likewise for a person desiring to live a chaste sexual life, whether they be married or single. Christ comes into the picture, because he is the reason for us embracing this state. He promises a 'yoke that is easy, but a burden that is light'. However, prayer alone will not help if you are not dealing with the underlying issues connected with your sexuality. The sexual energy is very strong and it too must be allowed to flow. No one is free to express their sexuality in any way they wish, but if we suppress this energy by wishing it would disappear, or consider it as slightly evil, rather than seeing it as good and a sacred part of being human, we will eventually become resentful of our situation and compromise. Celibacy is a huge challenge for any individual and many need help at some point.

If we are to grow as human beings, to know oneself is a principle that has to be observed. Faith gives us the courage to look at ourselves honestly, and we must use whatever means we have at our disposal in order to facilitate the process.

PRAYER

- Relax
- Observe your feelings right now
- Notice particularly any bodily tension
- Specify the particular feeling
- Say to yourself "I feel...."
- What does it relate to?
- Breathe into the feeling
- Begin to pray and return to the issue and feelings if they have relevance to prayer
- After praying, write up the experience.

DURING THE WEEK

- When you pray, ensure you focus on your feelings before beginning your prayer as well as at the end.
- Ask yourself if you have found consolation from the prayer.
- Reflect on any negative feelings you may have had, such as impatience, boredom, anger. Address these in your writing. If you feel unresolved, ask God to show you the reason.

Session two

IMAGES OF GOD

God is watching me,
but only because God loves me so much,
God can't take his eyes off me!

(Br David Steindl-Rast) ³⁹

Popular portrayal of the phrase 'God is watching you' creates an image of an old man with a beard, noting down our wrong doing. As a result, many who deny the existence of God, deny a god who never existed anyway. The great challenge for all of us is to know in our hearts the wonder of God's love for the whole of creation.

For many, the first thing that needs attention is their image of God. A healthy understanding is basic to sound spiritual growth. To go deeper without this is to put ourselves in danger, and we are likely to develop a form of religious neurosis. An overly strict God will demand standards of us that are impossible and instead of Christ setting us free we will find ourselves enslaved, probably in a way similar to the Pharisees in the gospels.

We use many images for God, but strictly speaking it is impossible to find a word which describes God accurately. Jesus is the ultimate image of God, because he is God Incarnate. Therefore, what he does is what God would do. What he says is what God would say. Jesus referred to God as 'Abba' and in this he expresses the intimacy of God's relationship with us. The word is commonly used for one's human father, and can be likened to such words as Dad or Daddy. That we can be intimate with God is beyond question, and in the end all we can say is 'GOD IS LOVE'. Properly understood, the word 'love' is a perfectly acceptable mantra for prayer.

True love, loves unconditionally. When we sin or refuse to seek God, God's love remains and the invitation as well: *come, listen, live*. God does not condemn because we sin, we condemn ourselves and create our own hell. All God does when we sin is wait for our free response no matter how desperate that response may be:

*And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity.
He ran to him, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. (Lk 15:20)*

All of us can learn to free ourselves from false images of God, by identifying the kind of God that dominated our childhood. Who were the influences then, and what kind of God do we have now? Can I detect elements of a god who is a:

- Policeman – catch you breaking the rules
- Santa Claus – won't come if you don't behave
- Judge - issues the punishment
- Stage director – puts on the play, but once begun is not involved
- Stern parent – always correcting, always watching
- Demanding God – the loving aspect of God is excluded. The relationship consists of meeting the demands God is continually making.

The above images fail to speak of the unconditional lover who is the God revealed in the Gospels and to a large degree in the First Testament. Compare the above false images with the following scriptures and spend the week praying with the ones you are drawn to:

- *Come now, let us talk this over, though your sins like scarlet they shall be white as snow. (Is 1:18)*
- *Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more (Jn 8:11)*
- *Humans look at the sinner but God looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7)*
- *Zacchaeus come down, I must stay at your house today (Lk 10:9)*
- *Behold, I am with you always, yes, to the end of time. (Mtt:28:20)*
- *Your heavenly Father knows what you need, even before you ask. (Mtt 6:8)*
- *I will never forget you, my people,
I have carved you on the palm of my hand. (Is 49:15)*
- *Come to me.....and I will give you rest. (Mtt 11:28)*
- *You are precious in my sight. You are honoured and I love you. (Is 43:4)*

GOD IS LOVE

In the English language the word love is used somewhat lightly.
We say, I love food, I loved the movie.

In addition, we have separate words that are expressions of love -
compassion, empathy, sympathy,
adoration, affection, yearning, approval.

Then we speak about 'falling in love'.

When this happens we see only the persons virtues,
and it takes time for our real love to be proved –
when we can accept the other, warts and all.

In the Maori language,
love and these implications of love
are embodied in one word – *aroha*.

Now, in our faith journey
we grow to understand
that God is in love with us – the kind of love that is *aroha*,
the kind of love that embraces us as we are,
is there with us.

The contemplative is called to surrender to this Lover
who graces us to fall in love in return.

When we have grasped something of this invisible companionship
we will never be able to let go
and will want to return constantly
that we might become who we are meant to be
in the gift of this world.

AS A PERSON MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD, I AM

Blessed God, who is constantly creating, is constantly blessing. His creation was not just a single act, but a process that is always taking place. The gift is NOW!

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence. (Eph 1:3-5)

Precious A popular book several years ago tells the story of an old man waiting for a bus. While doing so he reads his prayers, and a priest standing beside him says: “you must be very close to God” to which he replies: “yes, the Father is very fond of me”.

This is a concept we find difficult to grasp. We so often think of our relationship with God as a one-way process: God is precious to us, but we don't always see the reverse. If our response is to be realistic we must come to know that God is in-love with us. Why would we bother going to anything less – a god made in our image! Humanity's difficulty in believing in God stems mostly from the fact that it is difficult to believe that we might be precious to the creator of the universe. So try praying with the following scriptures:

“Do not be afraid. For I have redeemed you; I have called you by name you are mine...you are precious in my eyes...you are honoured and I love you...do not be afraid, for I am with you. (Is 43:1,4,5)
Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the child of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you. See, I have branded you on the palms of my hands.” (Is 49:15-17)

Enjoyed *I am God's work of art!*

A grace to pray for is that I will grow to understand just who I am, as is portrayed in: *We are God's work of art. (Eph 2:10)*

When artists display their work it is because they believe they have produced something worth looking at. There would be something wrong if the artist could not gracefully receive the compliments offered by those who came to view their work.

The Lord created me when his purpose first unfolded, before the oldest of his works.... From everlasting I was firmly set, from the beginning, before earth came into being.....I was by his side, a master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere in his world, delighting to be with the children of the earth. (Prov 8:20.23.30-31)

So often when we reflect on God and love, we rush to say: “but I am a sinner”. Yes, that is very true and it is vital we acknowledge that, but I am not permitted to nurse guilt. Of equal importance is the realisation that with God I am:

Understood

The word was addressed to Jeremiah by God, 'Get up and make your way down to the potter's house; there I shall let you hear what I have to say'. So I went down to the potter's house; and there he was, working at the wheel. And whenever the vessel he was making came out wrong, as happens with the clay handled by potters, he would start afresh and work it into another vessel, as potters do. Then this word of God was addressed to me, 'House of Israel, can I not do to you what this potter does?...Yes, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in mine. (Jer 18:1-7)

God says: "Be perfect," the devil says: "Now!" Potters don't mind if it takes a while to perfect their work. They expect that. It is likewise with God.

Be perfect means "become fully grown" or become all that God intends you to be. This calls for a calm acceptance of myself as imperfect, which does not mean I rest content in my sins, but, if I weren't imperfect, I would have no claim on Redemption.

It is a fact that the nearer we move to God, the more acutely we see our own frailty. My growth in Christ is a cyclic process and sometimes it feels like I am making no progress at all. Christ however knows our struggles. He knows what it means to be tempted: *turn these stones into bread. (Mtt 4:3)*

Exercise At this point it is suggested you write out your story "how my image of God was formed." Trace your story from your earliest memories in blocks of about five years, up until the present day.

- Who are the significant people involved?
- Was their contribution helpful or unhelpful. All in all, do you have a healthy image of God?

PRAYER

- Relax
- Select a Scripture from this section on Images of God that has spoken to you. Pray with it in the coming week. Stay on this theme until you feel you have a new appreciation.
- As your mind turns to Christ, imagine the love of God enveloping you.
- Hear God call your name...how does it sound?
- Hear the words in time with your breathing "do not...be...afraid...you...are precious...in my sight.
- Continue in this this love, praying as you are led.

DURING THE WEEK

- Pray with the scriptures quoted in this section.

God says 'be perfect', the devil says: 'now'

Session three

THE PROCESS OF INNER HEALING

The most beautiful people are those who have known defeat,
known suffering,
known struggle,
known loss,
and have found their way out of the depths.
These persons have an appreciation,
a sensitivity,
and an understanding of life that fills them with
compassion,
gentleness,
and deep loving concern.

(Elizabeth Kubler-Ross)⁴⁰

Entering our inner world can be a very painful process. It is not easy coming to terms with the broken part of our lives. However, we have to let all this go if we desire growth as a person and growth into Christ. Another term for 'letting go' is 'dying' to it, but we have to visit it first of all.

When the time is right, the process of inner healing will often begin by a feeling of confusion or inner turmoil. It is as if a tug of war is going on within – Jesus is attracting us to freedom but we want to stay where we are. In a strange kind of way we are secure in darkness. One part of us longs for freedom and the other part hesitates about paying the price. At this point, the temptation is to get up and go. However, **the way out of our turmoil is through**. By this we mean that we stay with the anguish, allowing the pain and feelings to surface. Be relaxed about releasing tears, anger or whatever emotions come forth from within. Visualise yourself handing the issue over to Christ or putting it at his feet. See it melt away.

All of this is part of being before God as we are. We have a God who is Love at the foundation of our faith, a God who accepts and understands. It is now time to trust in the loving kindness (mercy) of our Creator. We are in this state because prayer takes us into a period of purification so that we can be transformed. The pain will soon pass and peace will result. In the course of the healing process we will discover the gentle God. People often carry the burden of painful memories and it affects the way they live. Allowing these to surface and letting them go is what brings freedom from our inner hurt and guilt. Because of the gentleness of God, people usually don't walk away from their agony. They seem prepared to step out into the deep. If we pray like this, nothing will happen without God preparing us beforehand. Healing is the ministry of Jesus. His loving presence strengthens us to face our truth honestly.

A Gospel reflection

He entered Jericho and was going through the town when a man whose name was Zacchaeus made his appearance; he was one of the senior tax-collectors and wealthy man. He was anxious to see what kind of man Jesus was, but he was too short and could not see him for the crowd; so he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was to pass that way. When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him: 'Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today'. And he hurried down and welcomed him joyfully. They all complained when they saw what was happening. 'He has gone to stay at a sinner's house' they said. But Zacchaeus stood his ground and said to the Lord, 'Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount'. And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham, for the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost. (Lk:19:1-10)

Resentment

*Resentment and anger,
these are foul things and both are found with the sinner. (Eccl 27:30)*

The story is told of a young monk who went to an elderly and wise old confrere for advice. The young monk said: "I want to attain the highest possible state of holiness. That is why I have come here. I want you to help me". The old monk replied: "Go and rid yourself of all your anger and bitterness first, and then I will show you."

Resentment is the greatest killer of effective prayer and effective living. If harboured, it grows into unadulterated hate. It has the power to control our lives, twist and distort our thinking and paralyse us in such a way that love becomes impossible.

Resentment can get buried deep within ourselves very easily. It is not uncommon for good people to believe they shouldn't feel this way, and so they bury their feelings of anger. If someone hurts me, either in reality or in my perception, I will feel resentful. This is normal, but once I become aware of the resentment, I must then deal with it. I am not free to hang on to it but am called to forgive "*from my heart*". (Mtt 18:35)

Part of the reason for receiving spiritual direction is to seek guidance when dealing with the hurts of life. Sometimes resentment has been carried for many years. A person may not even be aware of its existence, or how deeply affected they have been by a particular incident.

At other times people, who may or may not know they have a lot to face, are afraid of doing so. That is why it is so important to be firmly grounded in the knowledge of a loving God, and that we are reassured with the consoling scriptural texts such as "*do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you.*" (Is 43:1)

Unacknowledged resentment will result in anger, and often this anger will be expressed inappropriately. As an example:

A person once verbally attacked me outside Mass because the Presider had given the blessing in Maori. I was told by a near frantic individual: 'I want a blessing in a language I can understand'. Not long later, I discovered that the person had recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. She lived alone, but had revealed nothing of this to her family.

Even if in this case the woman had a just reason to be angry, the anger expressed would have been far more intense than the cause deserved.

We need to know just what we are angry about. A simple process to go through when resentments surface is to specify the feelings and emotions – anger, sadness, rage. In a safe environment it is good to let these feelings out. It is certainly useful to talk about them to another, so you can explore the issue in depth. But, at the very least own the feelings and don't be afraid of them. Then, imagine yourself passing the issue over into the hands of Christ, while you ask for the grace of letting go. The key to understanding that there is a letting go or healing, is when the person, after speaking about the issue and dealing with it, senses a new freedom and the anger has melted away.

Note, you do not discover these necessarily by doing a quiet self-analysis. They will naturally surface in your prayer when the time is right.

PRAYER

- Enter the meditation and allow yourself to be Zacchaeus.
- Climb the tree and see Jesus approaching
- See him looking up to you
- Hear him calling your name and saying 'I must stay at your house today'.
- Note your feelings
- Walk him back through your life
- What sins do you wish to repent of
- How should you make reparation?

DURING THE WEEK

- Write your story of any relationships that you have found difficult
- Take them to prayer, consciously handing over to Christ any ill feelings you may have
- Observe your feelings after the prayer.

The way out of our turmoil is through.

Session four

HEALING OF MEMORIES

Memories which need healing are those that cause us pain, resulting from the unpleasant experiences of our earlier lives. A range of emotions would normally be associated with these. Frequently, these kind of memories are buried deep within our psyche, although at the same time, they could be very much on the surface.

That prayer can assist with the healing of memories is certainly true, and when one commits to this kind of praying, sooner or later the scarred memories will start to surface when the time is right. Christ will take you to them. All of this has to happen so that the Risen Christ can transform the old person into the new.

As with the facing of sin, we must allow the Lord to take us to the precise area in need of healing. When the painful memories are relived in his presence and given to him, inner peace results. It is the peace the world cannot give.

Sometimes people have difficulty facing past hurt. They say "it's no use living in the past, or holding grudges." While there is some wisdom in this attitude, what is happening here is a truthful acknowledgement of what has happened. It may be necessary to express the emotions, such as rage or anger in a safe place. Letting all this out ensures we genuinely forgive and give away the entire event.

A testimony

I am an alcoholic and dry for a number of years. For a long time after seeking help for my alcoholism I would occasionally go and have a drink. When this happened, immense guilt would overwhelm me. So much so, that I was unable to drink much at all. The guilt was not so much from the fact that I was drinking, but from some other source.

I had been practising contemplation for some time, and once, after this outbreak of guilt, I was advised to ask Christ to show me what was wrong. Then one day, after I had given up trying to work it all out, my mind went back to my childhood.

I recalled an event in which I was given what I considered to be a large sum of money. I could see my mother taking it from me, and I could see myself screaming in anger.

Somehow I began to carry with me a fantasy that would later lead to my alcoholism and gambling. At birth I was a twin, and the weaker of the two. But my older, stronger brother died. Later, when I was naughty as a child, someone would say that it was me who should have been taken.

I grew up feeling as though I had to apologise for existing. In some way my fantasy was that one day I would make a lot of money and therefore have lots of friends surrounding me. The money that I was to make would come from betting on horses! Invariably I would lose and so turn to drink.

I think the fantasy stemmed from that rejection I experienced as a child, when told that I should have died and not my twin, and from my mother taking that money from me. The two seemed to combine somehow.

When the healing took place, "the boy in me came up and left me".

Note This man lived in sobriety for the remainder of his life as a regular member of AA. He died about ten years after submitting this story.

Co-operating with professional help

In regard to the testimony below, I can only say that this person's background was one of the saddest I know. I agreed to work with her on condition that she devoted at least 15 minutes to prayer each day. I should add that she had been receiving professional help, and by adding prayer to her daily routine, she found another dimension. It was not a matter of cancelling out the one in favour of the other, but of working hand in hand.

For the first twenty years of my life, I knew little happiness. Mine was a home of violence and crime. So bad was the damage that I had my first breakdown at the age of 12. I attempted to take my life at 23. I just couldn't cope at all and I was hurting all the time. Through my background, I had developed very serious personality problems.

It had created in me a terrible identity crisis. I knew what I was but I had no idea who I was. I had years of counselling and psychiatric care, trying to find the answer so I could begin to live with myself and others. There just seemed no permanent way to handle all the agony inside. I had by now developed a terrible self-image. I had become a complete mental cripple and totally immature.

The counselling and psychiatric care I had received was able to explain and help, but nothing, no amount of help from them could take it away. It was always with me. There seemed to be no permanent way to handle all the agony and hurt inside. But I knew, through it all, that I wanted to be well.

Slowly but surely, I am being healed through prayer. I know it's working because I am coping and staying on top of things for much longer periods now.

At first, I didn't even recognise the change. But others noticed that I didn't fly into a rage over little things quite so often. Little by little, as different areas of my life come to the surface, I am able to see myself as I really am. The Lord is gentle, but consistent.

It is going to be a long process, but I am sure that if I can keep focussing on the Lord in times of trouble and anger, I can find a way out.

Note This person returned to seek professional help a few years later. It seems that prayer strengthens a person to face their issues and bring our darkness into the light. This enables us accept the realities of what has happened, effecting the letting go. This example also illustrates that sometimes it is better for prayer and therapy to work together.

Healing from fear

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth za tha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me. ‘ Jesus said to him, ‘stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath. (Jn 5:1-9)

It is important to note the last sentence in the above story. Jews were free to walk on the Sabbath but not free to carry a mat. But with Jesus, it is a new day, a new way of approaching God. Faith is about believing in the power of God. Believing sets us free.

Fear is why so many today are afraid of commitment. Metaphorically speaking they are unable to walk. What faith does is free us from fear and one will often notice a new confidence in people. Christ releases them and the following testimony speaks of a young man afraid of marriage because of what he experienced in his earlier home life.

When I would walk alone, I would think about life with another. I dreamt of happiness with someone, but to me, when I dwelt on it, I would think “it’s only a dream, an unreality.”

My home life had not been happy. For my parents a week wouldn’t go by without bitter conflict. At 15 I left home and went my own way. In this time I grew close to some of the girls I was going with and thought often of marriage. But I had no faith in keeping it together. When I thought seriously about the commitment, it terrified me. Somehow, I knew in my heart that I could never be one hundred per cent sure. If my parents couldn’t hold their marriage together, what chance did I have? Why follow in their footsteps?

A lot of water passed under the bridge from the time I first left home. After about eight years I found myself in a relationship that was going nowhere. I was confused and getting totally fed up. Everything revolved around pubs and parties. It must have been a year or more later that I decided to turn to the Church.

I went on a weekend retreat where I was introduced to contemplative prayer, and it was here that everything clicked – PEACE! This was the missing link: “Be still and know that I am God.” Dear sweet Jesus, that taste of reality I shall always remember.

Our Lord took me from there and gave me the courage to begin to die to myself, so that he could live in me. He taught me to love and gave me hope. I had a love affair with the Father and in return he gave me my wife. After making the decision to love God and give him everything, he returned it a thousand fold.

A little over a year after becoming firmly committed to a time of prayer each day, I married. It just seemed the most natural thing in the world – no fears. I was absolutely sure this was right. It was made in heaven.

Note: The above story was written some 30 years ago. The author has lived happily in his marriage all that time.

Bad self-image

Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? He said to him, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Mtt 22:36-40)

If loving one another is a commandment to obey, then it follows that we need to love ourselves, otherwise, how can we love our neighbour?

We tend to judge others by the way they perform in our sight.
God loves us as we are.⁴¹

Love of self means a person can accept both their gifts and their limitations. They don't wallow in guilt, but hold to the hope that Christ will make all things new.

Bad self-image will exist when the scarred memories are not dealt with. In these memories the person learns to take on board negative messages that destroy their image of self, messages that leave them feeling they have to prove their worthiness, both to God and people: You couldn't do that; If you do it, it's bound to be a disaster; You wouldn't have the brains for that; You're not like your brother; And many others, sometimes much more disastrous.

It is always very noticeable in those who begin to deepen their love for silence, that their self-confidence grows rapidly. Probably this is because they learn to trust. Trust is the essence of faith, and when Jesus healed he did not say: "*I have healed you*" but "*your faith has healed you.*" (Mk 10:52)

Facing the "put down" messages within ourselves, helps us realise the paralysing effect they have on our living. Exposing all the hurts of the past to the Risen Jesus and reinforcing the message that we are created in the image of God, soon brings healing and a new confidence.

Dealing with bad self-image is possibly an area where the help of a trained counsellor should be sought as well. As the insights are discovered, bringing them to prayer will help one see more clearly not to be governed by the messages learned much earlier in life. Scriptures such as 'you are precious in my sight' and sayings such as 'the Father is very fond of me' are worth taking on board at these times. As disciples of Christ, we need to remember that Jesus had great confidence in them. He entrusted the mission to them, even though from a human level he had every reason not to. But he affirmed them by calling them '*the salt of the earth*', '*the light of the world*'. (Mtt 5:13-14)

Testimony

The following testimony, could come under any category. I put it here because of the way this person's self-image and personal confidence grew rapidly, once she had known God's forgiveness and had exposed her hurts to Christ.

I have been asked to try to put into words the way my life has changed since beginning a regular life of contemplative prayer.

I began my inward journey in my late 20's. I grew up feeling very insecure. I was an average student at primary school but fell way behind at College. I felt alone and frightened on the inside. Nothing was talked about at home. We certainly didn't talk about feelings or anything that was going wrong. I learned later in life my mother was sexually abused as a young girl.

I went to work and tried to get on with life. I was soon promoted at my place of work and got on well with co-workers, but my personal life was another story. After a few stormy years I met and married my husband. I was 19, he just 20. By this time, I myself was totally insecure, my fears had paralysed me. I was functioning on the outside; showing myself to be fairly confident and competent, while hiding my insecurity within my family. I was always fearful someone would 'find me out'. I now see that is what my mother did too.

My father died in my early 20's and as I wanted to receive communion at his funeral mass, I knocked on the door of the local presbytery, and then began my return to the Church. Things moved slowly at first, but my confidence began to grow. I would sit with this priest and 'unburden' myself. He introduced me to contemplative prayer and six day retreats. Life began to have meaning. It seemed that everything I had 'hidden', came to the surface especially during my retreats, but also by maintaining a time for prayer each day and those 'chats' with Father, which I now understand to be Spiritual Direction.

Father began talking to me about going to teachers college because my children had entered their teenage years and no longer needed so much attention. I remember the thought "if he really knew how dumb I was, he wouldn't be encouraging me." I still had a way to go before I could enjoy the peace and freedom I feel today. As it turned out I did eventually go to university and get a degree.

The twists and turns in my life since I began that incredible journey over 30 years ago are too numerous to mention, but I will tell you of one incident. My mother died when I was in my early 40's. She was in a mental institution at the time. Sadly the experiences of her life had caught up with her and without her knowledge of a loving God, she succumbed to the dark thoughts and memories she kept tightly inside.

Shortly after my mother's death, the nurses at the institution where she had lived went on strike. The local radio station were calling for volunteers. I listened and thought of the confusion my mother would have felt with strangers coming to look after her. I decided to volunteer. My whole being was telling me 'NO', it was too soon after my mother died, my emotions were too raw, I didn't think I could cope. I had 4 children and a husband to look after, I didn't have the time. Still, against the odds, I made the call and arranged to go and help. The 40 minute drive to the hospital was excruciatingly painful. I wanted to turn back at every corner, every red light, but 'something' was drawing me on, gently reassuring me, letting me know it would be ok, despite the tears that flowed.

At the hospital, I tried to keep myself under control but my distress was evident to the regular volunteer I was paired with. She enquired why I volunteered. I spoke of my mother and my concerns at her confusion, had she still been alive. She asked my mother's name and when I told her she gasped. She went on to tell

me she had been with my mother the afternoon she died, that she had read a piece of scripture and recited a decade of the rosary with her. I found this incredible as the rosary is such a Catholic prayer and my mother had avoided becoming Catholic during her lifetime for a variety of reasons.

For me, I was ecstatic. I had had visions of my mother dying in a mental institution, alone and frightened. The words of scripture "I will not leave you orphaned" always come back to me when I recall this incident. God showed me that He wanted to reveal His faithfulness to my mother. I could very easily have missed all this by allowing my fears to overwhelm me and not setting out on that drive. That incident was over 20 years ago, but it still brings tears of joy and thankfulness when I recall God's personal love and grace.

Another surprising twist came 12 years ago. I was finding myself working as chaplain in a women's prison. This was not something I aspired to or even wanted, and it took a little while and much discernment to recognise that that was where God wanted me. Again, I would have run if I could but God was drawing me, encouraging me. I began to relax and enjoy my work, recognising I had something to offer having known the forgiveness of a loving God. Some of the women were amazing in their openness and insights. I became comfortable leading meditations and offering the idea of contemplative prayer but felt a hesitation in taking them deeper into their awareness of a loving God so I trained as a Spiritual Director. This gave me the confidence to listen compassionately and non-judgementally. Beautiful things began to happen with some of the women. To see their joy when they finally accepted God had forgiven them was incredibly humbling. I shall always be grateful for my 10 years as a prison chaplain. The women, labelled 'criminals' by society, taught me so much.

Through my regular time of prayer, I have come to recognise the Voice more easily - God gently drawing me, encouraging, supporting and loving me. Jesus came that we could have life and live it to the full. My life continues to be enriched as I become freer to receive all God desires to give.

PRAYER

- Relax
- Enter the presence of the Risen Jesus
- Let your mind go to any troubled area of your life...just one for now
- Identify it clearly...note your feelings..
- Allow Jesus to walk with you through it....
- What grace do you need to ask for, so that you can be free...?
- Let yourself pray for this...honestly expressing your feelings to God...
- When ready, see yourself putting the issue in the hands of Jesus...
- See it melt away...
- Remain in prayer until you feel at peace...

DURING THE WEEK

- Write the story of your life and record any difficult times
- Consciously imagine yourself in Christ's presence handing your story to Him.
- See it disappearing as the power of grace comes from His hands.

***We tend to judge others
by the way they perform in our sight.
God loves us as we are.***

Session five

FORGIVENESS

*Father, forgive them,
for they do not know what they are doing. (Lk 23:34)*

Closely interwoven with much of our inner healing is the subject of forgiveness. Our model for this is Jesus. In addition to this, there are several occasions in the gospels when Jesus refers to the importance of forgiveness from the heart. It is an absolute for growth in the spiritual life because resentment is the most powerful force of blocking the flow of love within ourselves.

Forgiveness literally is a 'giving away.' It is well established now that hanging on to resentment will eat us like a cancer. It destroys our humanity and eventually creates chaos in a community. Followers of Christ in particular cannot afford to live like this. It is contrary to all we are called to be.

Frequently, there are those who will be trying to come to terms with the hurt that results from such things as bodily injury, sexual abuse, alcoholism or from living with a dysfunctional person. In such cases a person is called to forgiveness but we have to remember that this process will most likely be a very painful one for the person concerned. Many emotions such as guilt and shame tend to cloud the issue. Therefore, being gentle with self is the first rule.

Secondly, a person may need the help of another or groups such as Al Anon⁴² to assist them in owning their true feelings and releasing them. It should be remembered too, that being able to forgive is a grace from God. **Often all we can do is recognise our powerlessness and pray from that point.** It is in our weakness that Christ can work most powerfully. Hence, the decision to forgive is a grace in itself.

We sometimes use the phrase 'forgive and forget' and we will often hear "I can forgive, but I can't forget". What this usually means is "I haven't any intention of forgiving at all".

Certainly the healing of memories does not mean that a person won't remember the incident, but it will mean they won't be consumed any longer by anger or resentment. As the healing progresses, they will even find the strength to pray for the person who has inflicted the hurt. What we need to bear in mind is that nothing can happen but for the grace of God.

Forgiveness calls for a decision from the one who must forgive, but surrendering our grievance may take time and involve a struggle with our feelings, but these are not as important as the decision we make to forgive. Forgiveness is the key to unlocking the door to real freedom. It also frees the offender to accept responsibility. Forgiveness is "giving away for"... the sake of harmony and order in our lives and harmony in the life of society.

Because forgiveness is such a life-giving quality it costs. Those who are prepared to let their grievances go are unlocking the secret of happiness.

As well, forgiveness is, in many cases a miracle of grace, as in the case of the famous Corrie ten Boom story, the woman who protected Jews during the Holocaust. She was eventually incarcerated but survived. When she was later to meet one of the most cruel of guards, she wrote she was reluctant to forgive him, but then: *"for a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intently as I did then."*⁴³

Forgiveness of self

*"Come now, let us talk this over, says the Lord.
Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall be like wool." (Is 1:18)*

It is very easy to speak about the forgiveness of God. In the priesthood we do this all the time. Furthermore, we often have to explain to people that God's forgiveness does not remember the sin. It is no more. Belief in the forgiveness of God is the essence of faith and anything less makes a mockery of Christ's sacrifice: *"this is my blood, poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sin."* (Mtt 26:26)

A woman once said to me, "if God were to condemn just one person in the whole of creation, it would be me." She knew the theology of God's forgiveness, but in reality could not accept it. In life we make mistakes because we are all only in a process of 'becoming' the person we have been created to be.

It is possible to be absolutely certain about the moral command to love my enemies, the despised and the least of the lowly - even to know that to fail in this is to fail to love Christ. Yet, when Christ appears in me, in such despicable form, I am inclined to deny him a thousand times before the cock crows once. ⁴⁴

Once again, praying with the gospel stories in which Jesus encounters sinners is an effective way of learning to forgive self. Becoming that person, imagining the hands of Christ touch us, putting what disturbs us before him, and letting it melt away is a valuable prayer. The proof that the prayer is bearing fruit is in the inner peace the person experiences and in the freedom to let go of the past.

The story of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) is the masterpiece that shows the nature of God's forgiveness. Jesus simply says: *"Zacchaeus come down. I must stay at your house today."* This same story also shows a sinner forgiving himself. He owned his behaviour but still regarded himself as fit to dine with Jesus. There is nothing in the story about him pretending to be unworthy. Clearly, he accepted Jesus as one of his friends.

Healing from grief

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,
Lord, hear my voice. (Ps 130:1)*

Grief is the emotion experienced when we have suffered a loss, but usually the most severe form relates to the death of a loved one. Sometimes the circumstances may be extremely sad and even tragic. The reactions ranging from depression to sadness or anger are normal and it may take two to three years, or even longer before one feels “normal” after the experience.

At such a time, prayer may be a great help, but only if we are in touch with what we truly experience. A counsellor may be needed at this time because it is possible to get stuck in grief and this is likely to happen if we do not identify correctly the feelings and emotions that are within.

On a lighter side of this issue, a person may well experience grief when moving house or from their home town. After several years in a particular place, we come to know many people and feel very settled. Then all of sudden, just when we feel at home, we are asked to move on. A part of us may be ready to go, but another part wants to stay. Such a time calls for surrender and a close watch on our feelings.

Then there maybe the grief which comes from separation in a marriage and feelings of loneliness can be unbearable.

The stages of grief as outlined by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross are well known – denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance and peace. Here is not the place for an extended study but the reason why I have brought grief into the subject of inner healing, is to emphasise that surrender and acceptance of what has happened in our lives doesn't always come easily. Prayer does not take away the normal pain a human being experiences at such times, but it does help us work it through. Masking the pain and pretending it is not there, means it remains within us until we deal with it. Phrases like ‘it's God's Will’ can easily be misused and this is not good. A person may in fact be quite angry with God. If so, they should express that in prayer. Then, once this anger is released, things can be seen differently.

In prayer, we are to invite the Risen Christ into our pain, for God's love is compassionate love, which means ‘suffering with.’ We find an analogy with human support. We help our friends in times of grief, not by taking away their pain, but by being with them, listening and doing in simple ways whatever we can. Our presence to them is enough. This kind of support is the rock we stand on when it seems the raging waters will engulf us completely.

***In times of grief, prayer may be a great help,
but only if we are in touch
with what we truly experience.***

PRAYER

- Relax
- When you have moved into the presence of Jesus focus on a part of your life calling forgiveness...of whom...others...self
- Or
- An area of grief...allow the pain to surface....what is the emotion...
- Walk Christ through it honestly....hand over...ask for peace.

DURING THE WEEK

There are guidelines for inner healing. Reflect on them this week and in your prayer open yourself and invite Christ into your life totally, as if you have never done it before.

When inner healing is about to happen, the person usually feels somewhat disturbed. The natural tendency is to get up and go, but it is at that time one stays there, or returns to it later. Pray for the light to see the cause of this disturbance. Observe the following:

- **Don't analyse.** This is not some kind of psychoanalytic process. Jesus will take you to the area of healing, when the time is right.
- **Be specific,** that is, identify what is happening.
- **Allow yourself to feel and relive the events that cause pain.** Bring them to the forefront of your mind. Be honest and do not hide. Expose them to the Risen Christ. God loves you as you are. Always stay with the confusion until things become clear. If you need to, find a spot where you can release feelings of sadness or anger appropriately. Seek out a spiritual director or confessor at this time.
- **Hand the whole issue over to the Lord.** See yourself putting it in to the hands of Christ. Wait until the peace arrives. Use imagery such as ice melting under boiling water, or the issue put in a box and floating out to sea with tide.

If the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed. (Jn 8:36)

Session six

THE DARK SIDE

*You must give up your old way;
you must put aside your old self,
which gets corrupted by following illusory desires.
Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution
so that you can put on the new self
that has been created in God's way,
in the goodness and holiness of the truth. (Eph 4:24)*

Everyone has a dark side. It is sometimes described as the shadow side of our lives.

The shadow is like a foreign personality – a primitive, instinctive, animalistic kind of being. It is the collection of uncivilised desires and feelings that simply have no place in cultured society. The shadow is everything we don't want to be. Or rather it is perhaps everything we would like to be but don't dare. The shadow is everything we don't want others to know about us. It is everything we don't even want to know about ourselves and have thus conveniently "forgotten" through denial and repression. (William A. Miller.)⁴⁵

Where I live in the light I have the potential to live in the dark, and the stronger my light, the more powerful the temptation to the opposite. So if I am generous, I can also be mean; if I am kind, I can also be cruel; if I am faithful and strongly committed, I will have a tendency to be unfaithful.

In the Martha and Mary story there is a busy person and a relaxed person. Martha is unable to welcome the moment, she turns into a moaner. Mary *can* welcome the moment and she, according to Jesus, chooses the better part. Both characters to a greater or lesser degree respectively are a part of most human beings.

This shadow side of our lives is also reflected in the constant wavering of the Israelite people who viewed themselves as being in a covenant relationship with God. If we substitute our own names for Ephraim and Judah in the following scripture quote, we may be awakened to this reality:

*What am I to do with you Ephraim, what do I make of you Judah?
Your declarations of love last no longer than the morning mist,
or the pre-dawn dew. (Hos 6:6)*

If we all acted on the shadow side of who we are, the world would be in a shocking state. The dark side of humanity was seen during the Holocaust and the great majority of the brutal crimes were committed by people who were baptised. And that is a stark reminder of the power of the shadow.

However, just as we can go before God confessing our sins without fear of condemnation, nor need we fear God when we are looking honestly at the shadow within ourselves. Being before God *as we are* is a powerful way to pray. When I look at my darkness and own its reality, I can say to God: "without you I am nothing." I then invite Christ into this darkness and walk him through it.

In Christ's presence I can make friends with my shadow, shake hands with it and if necessary talk to a confessor or spiritual director about it. St Ignatius in his spiritual exercises recommends this, particularly when a temptation to sin is powerful and recurring.⁴⁶ In doing this I expose my darkness to the light and it ceases to have power over me. Failing to do so brings the very real risk of the darkness becoming reality.

It is said that we are only as sick as our secrets. Hence, the real wisdom here is face your truth, for it sets you free. Look it squarely in the face and don't be afraid, God is with you. You as much as anyone need the grace of God and you have a side that can sell out faster than lightning. There but for the grace of God go I.

The prodigal son story illustrates this perfectly in the elder brother who remains at home. On the surface of things he is a 'good son'. But he says to his father: "*Look, all these years I have **slaved** for you and never once disobeyed your orders.*" (Lk 15:29) He reveals his true self with these words as well as his bitterness towards the father who shows huge compassion. There is no love in him and deep down he would like to do exactly what the younger brother did.

We are called to integrate our faith with our lives. In the silence of prayer I allow Christ to show me my truth, then lead him into this darkness within me. The temptations, the inclinations that are not wholesome, the 'sell out' I may even want to be – all of this is relevant to my prayer. The gospel story of the demons being cast into the herd of swine who then dive into the sea is particularly powerful here. The swine are drowned in the lake, giving us a brilliant understanding of what the Risen Christ can do with our messed-up-ness. (see Mk 5:1-13)

In praying with the dark side of your nature, recognise your powerlessness and with love you breathe in the name of Jesus, then, as ice will melt under boiling water, so too will the darkness disappear before God.

When I am with Christ recognising that I am powerless over temptation, I am praying in a way that expects a miracle – the intercession of God.

Then, as I grow stronger in my love for the One who is the source of life, the power of my darkness loses its' hold on me. My love for God and for the gift of life become much stronger than the attraction to what is an illusion and destructive. My mind becomes renewed by this spiritual revolution.

*What a wretched man I am.
Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?
Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ. (Rom 7:24)*

TRUST

You learn to trust by trusting

Some years ago, I offered a day's retreat on contemplation for parishioners. Someone organised a beautiful old home for this – plenty of ground, and a light, spacious room for prayer. It would be perfect. The night before the retreat, the organiser rang me to say there would be tradesmen present for some of the time and they would be hammering! I couldn't believe it, and my blood pressure rose just a fraction! As I lay in bed wondering what to do, it occurred to me: trust. So I did. I prayed: "Lord if you want this, you solve it" and went to sleep. The retreat happened. All was fine. The workers didn't show!

One might well ask, what trust has to do with the dark side of our make-up. To that I would say, everything! If prayer is about a relationship with God and forming a friendship with Jesus whose disciples we are, then trust has to be a part of this relationship, as it is for a marriage relationship to work. But total trust is difficult, and the truth is we only grow towards total abandonment.

If faith does not relate to our life, and we find ourselves growing in anxiety, trying to open locked doors, what would be the use of prayer? If God has us in the palm of his hand, and Jesus tells us that our heavenly Father knows our needs even before we ask, why is it we insist on remaining "in control?" Just as there is salt and pepper, so too there is trust and faith. It's that simple. The above example may seem insignificant, but it was a big learning experience for me. If we are to take prayer seriously, trust must be at the foundation, because when we surrender to God we will need the Lord's words to Peter:

*I tell you most solemnly, when you were young,
You put on your own belt and walked where you liked;
But when you grow old you will stretch out your hands,
And somebody else will put a belt round you
And take you where you would rather not go. (Jn 21:18)*

PRAYER OF SURRENDER

The spiritual life is ultimately all about surrendering to God. Total abandonment is our arrival point. Most of us probably spend a lot of energy on bargaining with God, wanting to take back what we have offered. We set limits on our offering, refusing to hear those words: “do not be afraid”. Nevertheless, the place to start is to make the prayer and pray for the gift of trust.

I surrender myself to you, my God, and ask you:
“Put an end to my restlessness.”
I give you my will.
I do not believe any longer that I can answer myself, “what am I doing,
and what is happening through me?”
Lead me and show me your will.

I give you my thoughts.
I do not believe any longer that I am so intelligent
that I can understand myself, my whole life, or other people.
Teach me to think your thoughts.
I give you my plans.
I entrust myself to your plan, for you know me.

My anxiety about other people I give to you.
I do not believe any longer that with my anxiety I can improve anything.
That remains with you. Why should I be anxious?
My anxiety about the power of others I give to you.
You were powerless before the mighty.
The mighty have fallen.
You live.

My fear of my own failures I give to you.
I do not have to be successful if I wish to be one blessed according to your will.
All insoluble questions,
all discontent with myself,
all my cramped hopes, I give to you.
I give up running into locked doors and wait for you.
You will open them.

I give you myself.
I belong to you God.
You have me in your hand.
I thank you.

A SUMMARY

The following story will, I hope, illustrate how faith has a practical application and words like trust, the cross, abandonment are not just pious concepts reserved mainly for the great mystics of our world.

Some time ago, I worked in a large parish with many young families. One slightly older couple in particular caught my attention, and it has taken me many years to fully appreciate the brilliance of their spirituality.

They had a large family and their youngest, Cathy, was born with spina bifida. Although unable to utter more than a few sounds, Cathy's intelligence and comprehension were normal, but her bodily functions almost zero, thus requiring around the clock care. Clearly she was loved deeply and well cared for by her parents. Cathy was in fact like an angel in that community. At Sunday Mass her presence attracted people like a magnet. I enjoyed five wonderful years knowing her, and appreciating her sense of humour as she did mine.

But these days my thoughts go to her parents. They were left with the burden (if I may dare use that word) of caring for her in their modest home. It must have been a time of shock when they learned of her condition and a time of wondering how they would cope, but, if there was, it never showed. They were two people who constantly radiated humour and love.

When Cathy grew into her adult life, and her parents increasing in age, she made the decision herself to *enter* permanently a home for people with special needs. It was her decision alone and a few months after entering this home, her father, who was still relatively young, died suddenly. It was almost as if Cathy knew. Her father had been the one who lifted her in and out of vehicles, or wherever she needed to go.

In relating this story recently, a person said to me: "and the mother had only recently lost her companion, Cathy, and now she was without her husband." I replied: "that's true, but it didn't affect her personality and smile. She carried on with the same acceptance as always".

The irony of it. The truly happy people, the ones we prefer to be around, who leave us with something intangible, but wonderful, who are they? The ones who give their all, I think, the ones who let go of self and accept.

Would Eileen and Jack have regarded Cathy as less a gift than their other children? I'd find that impossible to believe. All that we need is there: embrace the cross, the present moment, surrender to what is, find the gift. In their case, and because of their approach to life, a gift came in poor physical condition, but through love became not only their treasure, but the community's as well.

For me, who said angels don't exist? I have proof they do.

PRAYER

- Relax
- Pray the prayer of surrender on previous page
- Record you reactions

Part three

For the Future

WHERE PRAYER LEADS

Love for the mission
A passion for Justice
A reverence for all creation

As a result of prayer, we are, as we saw in the part two, taken into a time of purification which leads to our inner healing. All of this is so that we will have the clarity to eventually see in greater depth, the mysteries of our faith, especially that of Christ among us and what this means for our lives. We can never cease to grow in appreciation of what God is doing for us and marvel at the wonder of God's involvement in our world through Jesus Christ and his Church. In the end, love is the all important thing, and authentic prayer empowers us to love.

Coupled with this is the realisation that we are called to partner the Risen Christ in his dream for the world "*Father, your will be done on earth, as in heaven.*"(Mtt 6:10) Therefore, the grace we need pray for is, that there exists within us, a burning love for the **mission of Jesus**.

This mission is fulfilled by our sharing with others the good news experienced in our lives. The words Jesus spoke to the disciples: "*give them something to eat yourselves*" (Lk 9:13) are also spoken to us. Such is the trust Jesus has in his followers that we, clergy and laity alike, are called to be contemplatives-in-action. God will make effective the simple offering of our efforts, just as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish offered by the small boy. (see Jn 6:5-15)

The mission is also fulfilled when we find ourselves developing a growing love for the poor and a burning desire to bring **justice** to the world:

*You have already been told what is right
and what God wants of you.
Only this,
to live justly,
to love faithfully
and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)*

Greed and power are in some form or other at the root of most injustice in our world. As an example, we spend billions of dollars on weapons of war, when a fraction of the money spent would enable poverty to be eradicated within ten years.

In the Christian scriptures, one out of every ten lines deals directly with the physically poor and the call from God for us to respond to them. In the gospel of Luke, that becomes every sixth line, and in the epistle of James, that commission is there, in one form or another, every fifth line.⁴⁷

That is why it is so important to nourish our prayer with the gospels, and when it comes to justice the story of Dives and Lazarus stands out. The rich man was condemned, not because he was rich, but because he ignored the poor man. (see Lk 16:19-31)

Sadly, even within Christianity, there is frequently a settlement for compromise when determining standards. As a result, our message loses its power and so it is little wonder many ask the relevance of this kind of spirituality. We can be sure that if prayer does not affect our lives and effect compassion within us for those who suffer from hunger and the basic necessities of life, then prayer is simply fantasy land.

Finally, there ought come from within us, **a growing love and reverence for all of creation.** For St Francis of Assisi it was only in the latter part of his life, a year before died, that he composed his famous “Canticle of the Creatures”. Creation did not play a major part in his spirituality in the earlier stages. His was, as it is for all of us, an evolving spirituality.

The indigenous peoples of New Zealand, namely Maori, have much to teach us about how we can encounter God through creation, even as we go about our daily chores. An example, well known to many, is when out fishing the first catch is put back into the sea – a reminder that this is a sacred task and a gift from the Divine, not to be owned but to be received, therefore take only what is needed for now.

All of us must have at some time or other gazed into the night sky or watched a sunrise or sunset. This ordinary experience contains the potential to direct our minds into the world of wonder, so much so that in the end we cry out: *Ah, what are humans that you should spare a thought for them, children of the earth that you care for them! (Ps 8:4)*

It is all from God. It comes as gift, not to be hoarded but to be shared. Without this, my praise for God counts as nothing. Bearing this in mind, I pray with St Francis of Assisi:

Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,
Especially Sir Brother Sun
Who is the day, and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;
And bears a likeness of You, Most High One.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
And through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
Through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
Who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom You lift the night,
And he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth,
Who sustains and governs us,
And who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.

ON GOING DEVELOPMENT

To Keep On Believing

How can it be
That 'when I come down the mountain'
and in spite of the glorious vision I still retain,
I find that I am so little better a person,
So little at peace,
So incapable of expressing in my actions,
And thus adequately communicating to others,
The wonderful unity that I feel encompassing me?

I began to think that most of our weaknesses
Are due to the fact that our 'belief' is too narrow,
And that we don't believe through to the end.
To stop believing a second too soon,
Or not to believe enough,
Is sufficient to ruin the whole structure
Of what we are building.

(Teilhard de Chardin)⁴⁸

The readings of the day

Unless one is following a specific pattern of prayer, such as Retreat in Daily Life, (see next page) in an ordinary prayer time, the scriptures chosen for the daily Mass are perhaps the best means we have in order to nourish our prayer. These will challenge me and bring me to an awareness of anything I am doing that may be destroying life within me. They will also help me see how little things can grow within me: greed, wanting more, dissatisfaction with what is, materialism, impurity and self-centredness. There is no place discipleship for the mentality of 'what I can get out of it'. The only way to fulfilment in this vocation is as servant and total commitment. The great danger is that our spirits may fall into indifference and we forget that conversion is an on-going process. The daily readings help keep our initial conversion moving.

*Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus,
who though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of humans.*

*And being found in human form he humbled himself
and became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name
which is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5-11)*

Conversion is an on-going process

RETREAT IN DAILY LIFE

The following 'retreat in daily life' follows the pattern of a directed retreat, except, what you cover in a day on a retreat, is covered over the period of a week. It is just a matter of taking one scripture for your prayer each day, make a weekly appointment with your spiritual director, make a few notes after your prayer about anything that seems significant – a scripture that stands out; a sense of God's presence; a realisation or perhaps some understanding about events in ordinary life.

A commitment to at least a half hour prayer each day is essential. The following scripture passages are there to help you, but you needn't feel you have to get through them all each week. If one is particularly strong, stay with it until you sense it is time to move on.

One final word: you may be tempted to think you know all this. You've already experienced God. This is a trap. Be humble in your prayer – God is infinite. Always approach God with the mind of one who has never known God.

Loyalty to a period of prayer each day, will bring its reward. It will lead to love, for God is love, and in the end that is all there is. May the God you meet, richly enlighten your mind and let you be an instrument of true peace.

PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION

Human beings are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created.

From this it follows that we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it.

To attain this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden. Consequently, on our own part we ought not to seek health, rather than sickness, wealth, rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, a long life rather than a short one, and so on in all other matters.

Rather, we ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created.

(St Ignatius of Loyola)

WEEK ONE God's Invitation to me

Ask for the grace of hearing this call.

Is 55:1-3 Rev 3:20-22 Matt 11:28-30 Eph 3:14-21
Jn 1:35-41 Jn 4:1-4 Revision

WEEK TWO God's personal love for me

Ask for the grace to experience this love. Be careful about presuming you know it.

Is 43:1-4 Is 41:8-16 Ps 139 Ps 23
Ps 90 Ps 91 Revision

WEEK THREE God's love revealed in Jesus

Ask for the grace of knowing Jesus, for to know him is to know the Father.

Jn 5:1-13 1 Jn 3:1-2 Eph 2:1-10 Rom 8:28-39
Jn 10:14 Jn 10:10 Revision

WEEK FOUR I am loved by a forgiving God

There is nothing I can do to make up for my sins. Ask for the grace of sorrow. That is enough.

Is 44:21-22 Lk 15:11-22 Ez 36:26-29 Is 1:18
Ps 51 Jn 8:3-11 Lk 7:36-50

WEEK FIVE Facing my sinfulness

Ask for the grace of knowing where my sinfulness lies. Seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation when ready.

Rom 7:13-25 Gal 5:13-26 Ps 51 Lk 6:27-35
Lk 5:29-32 Jn 14:27 Revision

WEEK SIX Jesus the healer

Be open this week to memories, fears, doubts etc coming to the surface. Ask for the grace of seeing my need for healing.

Mk 1:40-45 Mk 2:1-12 Mk 10:46-52 Jn 5:1-9
Lk 13:10-13 Jn 14:27 Revision

WEEK SEVEN To know only God

This calls for self-emptying. Jesus did not cling to his equality with God. He gave until he could no longer take, and so was born into eternal life. Ask for the grace of a generous response.

Phil 2:5-11 Lk 2:51-52 Mtt 4:1-17 Jn 21:18
Lk 6:36-38 Lk 9:46-48 Mtt 16:24-26

WEEK EIGHT The Passion of Jesus

Pray for the grace of appreciating the love Jesus has for the world, and that I might have the grace of accepting my own cross.

Jn 13:1-15 Mtt 26:26-29 Mtt 26:36-46 Mk 15:1-22
Jn 19:17-24 Jn 19:25-42 Lk 22:39-46

WEEK NINE The Resurrection

Christ has returned to us as the Risen Lord. He continues his ministry of building the Church and calls us to co-operate in this Mission. Pray for the grace to lose all fear.

Jn 20:1-18 Jn 20:19-29 Lk 24:1-35 Lk 24:36-49
Acts 2:14-36 Acts 3:1-10 Col 2:6-7

WEEK TEN Surrender to this loving God

Pray the surrender prayer each day this week.

Mtt 13:44-46 Mtt 14:22-33 Lk 12:13-21 Lk 12:33-34
Eph 1:3-15 Eph 3:14-21 Eph 4:17-24

Note: A similar type retreat can be made on a smaller scale in the course of one week or extended over 30 weeks of the year, working one's way through the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.

PRAYER IN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Many years ago, I attended a Marriage Encounter course. It was an excellent experience and I am sure beneficial to many couples. The advice given was that couples find 20 minutes to communicate with each other every day. They were asked to sit and one would speak for 10 minutes while the other listened.

In the follow up meetings it seems that no one was doing this and I suspect because communicating on command is a little artificial! Since that time however, I have wondered if it would not be more beneficial to ask a couple to light a candle to symbolise Christ's presence in their bond, then sit in silent prayer for 20 minutes. One thing is for sure: an enormous bond grows when people pray together in this fashion.

Children

There is a movement afoot to encourage children to meditate for 1 minute according to each year of their lives. Hence, a 5 year old will learn to meditate for 5 minutes, and a ten year old for 10 minutes.

I have personally experienced this in a classroom. The teacher enthusiastically supported it. The class consisted of 7 – 8 year olds who sat in a real prayerful silence for 8 minutes. They had built up to that time during the year. It was amazing.

THE ROLE OF A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

A spiritual director is one best described as a prayer companion. He or she ought be one who has trodden the path before you, and everything revealed to him or her is treated with the same confidentiality as in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The role should not be seen as one that is there only for when you are in crisis or facing difficulties. It is primarily a role designed to encourage and affirm what is happening within you. The Spiritual Director, if he is a priest, may also be used as a Confessor for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In order to give direction there are three things required from you:

- 1 **You are praying.** By this I mean giving time to quiet prayer each day. Without this you cannot really listen and there won't be any material to work with.
- 2 **You are open.** If not, you will probably end up directing the director!
- 3 **You are as honest as you can be.** A good director will not pry and go where they are not invited. It is up to you to divulge your inner self when you are ready. Prayer assists this process.
- 4 **What a director is not.** A director is not a psychologist or psychiatrist. When such matters arise, he or she may encourage you to see an appropriate person.

Journaling: Keeping a prayer journal or diary is a helpful especially in the early stages of developing your prayer. These recordings could be any of the following:

- The way you've been feeling lately – would you call it consolation or desolation?
- Insights you've had from the Scriptures
- Insights from the Scriptures that help you understand prayer
- Realisations or deeper appreciations of the truths of our Faith.
- Insights into your own self
- Insights from your spiritual reading
- Insights into your own sinfulness and needs
- Signs that you are growing in prayer.

Please note: In addition to journaling, writing poetry, painting or drawing, composing songs, recording dreams and working with them are all useful tools in helping you get in touch with your inner self. Sometimes, just sitting down and deciding to write for 30 minutes, even though you don't know where to start, will be beneficial. Don't forget, the positive as well as the more difficult side of life needs to be focussed on.

DISCERNING YOUR CALL

Discernment is about discovering where God is in whatever is going on within, as well as learning to find God in all things. When one reports on one's prayer, the director's role is to help clarify where the Spirit is at work. Decision making can be a time for discernment, and for many of you it will be important to discern whether or not God is really calling you to a particular state of life. When an important decision is to be made an honest and open approach is needed.

Summary of rules for discernment

- Trust the common place, the ordinary, the everyday.
- Live in the here and now: "one day at a time".
- Don't make a decision when we are down: be careful of emotional haste.
- Take wise advice wisely, from those we love, from the Church, from professionals.
- Learn the patterns – to and away from God, light and love: the examen; a journal?
- The bad spirit divides, isolates, locks you in your fears. The Holy Spirit draws us out into the open, to be transparent.
- Feelings AND thoughts are good.
- What is the most loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful and self-controlled thing to do here?
- The world does not revolve around me: no work for the coming of the Kingdom is too small, irrelevant or inconsequential.

(Richard Leonard SJ)

Should you come to a point whereby you feel doubtful about a decision and you wish to discern it through prayer here are some guidelines to go by:

- Ask God for the grace of guidance. What you want to know is, *what is God asking of you?*
- Be honest with your director.
- If over a long period of time you continually feel a lack of energy for your decision it probably means you need do nothing in the meantime.
- If after prayer, on a repeated basis, there is a clear message that this is not for you, then that is most probably the right thing.
- Don't make a rushed decision.
- Don't make a decision when you are having a bad day.
- Check to ensure you are truly open either way.

Kia ora katoa,

Among the Maori of Aotearoa, New Zealand, the language, the customs the whakapapa and the many treasures of their culture are passed on from one generation to the next. Older people will take aside the younger ones and teach them. Maori have an instinctive pride in their culture because they know that wisdom is concealed there. It is this pride that has in recent years brought about a renaissance in Tikanga Maori.

As well, older Maori know that a responsibility falls on them, because just as their ancestors have handed on the customary treasures that enriched their lives, so too must they, the present generation do the same.

In the Christian tradition we have a fine treasure in contemplative prayer, something which has been handed down through the centuries.

As co-workers with Christ, one of the most rewarding things we can do is to encourage and teach people to pray and treasure the Word . This you could well do provided you are committed yourself and genuinely believe in what you teach.

Some years ago I stayed with a class mate, a priest and missionary working in the Solomon Islands. He had only just opened a new Church at the time of my arrival and the locals were still completing the finishing touches. At about 4 in the afternoon I would go down to that church for my hour of prayer. At that time, I was much thinner than I am now, and I could easily sit on the floor, legs crossed in a semi-lotus position. There were no pews in the Church, only the equivalent of kneelers. I took up my position on the floor behind the pulpit. On the first day, a worker was hammering, and he kept it up during my prayer. On the second day, he was still at it, but ceased when I went in. I also noticed that children had gathered at the back of the church while I was at prayer. A few days later, when I stood up to go, there they were, sitting silently at the back of the Church, in the same posture as myself.

When I related this story to a friend back home, he said: "quite simple, people will do what you do. They learn from you!"

Our people have a right to these treasures, and if you can hand on what you come to know, this work will have been well worthwhile. Because I have seen so many wonderful laity doing this in the Church of New Zealand, I am compelled to encourage you to take up the practice of contemplative prayer now and so lay the foundation for a solid spiritual life and take responsibility for handing on this *"treasure hidden in a field"*.

Ma te Atua koe e manaaki, e tiaki hoki. May God bless and look after you.

Alan Roberts.

END NOTES

Stories or quotes given in indentation and not identified belong to the author, except where testimonies are given but clearly belong to someone else. Scripture quotes are mostly from the Jerusalem bible but also from a variety of translations.

- ¹ Douay-Rheims bible. Traditional translations say: "he spent the whole night in prayer to God".
- ² *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Taken from Ch 1-2. Image Books edition published 1973
- ³ Publication details unknown
- ⁴ *In Search of the Beyond*. Carlo Caretto p 96 par4-6. Darton, Longman & Todd. 1975
- ⁵ *Simply Surrender*. Therese of Lisieux. 30 Days with a great spiritual teacher. Series editor John Kirvan. Ave Maria Press. Notre Dame Indiana. pp 32-33.
- ⁶ *The Prayer We Offer*. Mgr Peter Vaghi. Ave Maria Press. 2012
- ⁷ *Christian Spirituality*. Alistair E McGrath Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp 182, 186
- ⁸ *God is a Sea*. David Walker St Paul's Publication. 31.12.77
- ⁹ Henri Nouwen. Accessed from www.gratefulness.org WORD FOR THE DAY, May 4, 2012.
- ¹⁰ *The Changing Face of Priesthood*. Donald B. Cozzens. Liturgical Press. P91 par 2.
- ¹¹ Issued by N.Z Catholic Bishops Conference, 2011.
- ¹² Publication details unknown.
- ¹³ *A Listening Heart The art of contemplation*. David Steindl-Rast.. Crossroads Youth Network.
- ¹⁴ Kevin Penry, S.J. Ignatian Centre of Spirituality, 1976
- ¹⁵ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Ch 9.par 1 op. cite
- ¹⁶ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Ch 4, par 4 op. cite
- ¹⁷ Theresa of Avila. Accessed from www.gratefulness.org WORD FOR THE DAY. March 22, 2012.
- ¹⁸ The icon is a masterpiece of the Russian Orthodox iconographer, Andrei Rublev. All three angels are blessing the chalice, in which lies a sacrificed calf, prepared for eating. The sacrifice of the calf signifies the Saviour's death on the cross, while its preparation as food symbolizes the sacrament of the Eucharist. All three angels have staffs in their hand as a symbol of their divine power. The first angel on the left represents the Father. The second angel in the middle represents the second person of the Trinity and is inclined towards the Father as if in deep conversation. The angel on the right represents the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit. It is the Spirit that animates everything that exists and this is represented by a mountain about the head. (Adapted from "Thoughts on Iconography" by monk Gregory King. Taken from: Andrei Rublev's Icon of the Holy Trinity www.holy-transfiguration.org/library/en/lord_trinity_rublev.html)
- ¹⁹ Gertrud von Le Fort. Accessed from www.gratefulness.org WORD FOR THE DAY. 9 May, 2012
- ²⁰ *Called by Name*. Peter van Breman, 58-72 Denville New Jersey: Dimension Books
- ²¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing* Ch 3 Par 1 & 4. op.cite
- ²² *The pocket Thomas Merton*. P87 New Seeds, Boston & London, 2005
- ²³ Publication details unknown
- ²⁴ A Listening Heart The art of contemplation. David Steindl-Rast. Crossroads Youth Network.
- ²⁵ Publication details unknown
- ²⁶ *Rule for a new brother*. Darton, Longman & Todd. P1-2.
- ²⁷ Publication details unknown
- ²⁸ In this I am writing from memory, ideas first implanted in me by Br David Steindl-Rast, Palmerston North retreat, 1983.
- ²⁹ Accessed from www.gratefulness.org WORD FOR THE DAY, Oct 31, 2011
- ³⁰ *The Road Less Travelled*. M.Scott Peck. Arrow Books. Problems and Pain. P13
- ³¹ Source details unknown
- ³² Jesus Today. Albert Nolan. Orbis Books. Personal Transformation Today.
- ³³ Palmerston North Retreat, 1983 Br David Steindl-Rast.
- ³⁴ *Five Loaves and Two Fish*. F.X Nguyen Van Truan. Printed in Palmerston North with author's permission. PO Box 2847 Garden Grove, CA92842714-530-63011
- ³⁵ Inspired by Br David Steindl-Rast & Fr Kevin Penry SJ.
- ³⁶ Johannes A. Gaertner. Accessed from www.gratefulness.org WORD FOR THE DAY, Sat Oct 13. 2012.
- ³⁷ *The Pocket Thomas Merton*. New Seeds. Boston & London. 2005
- ³⁸ These notes are my recordings taken from Marriage Encounter, Tahuna Beach, Nelson 1977.
- ³⁹ *Love and Living* P159. Thomas Merton. Mariner Books, 2002.

⁴⁰ From 'Word for the day' May 2, 2012 www.gratefulness.org

⁴¹ Kevin Penry, SJ. Pymble, 1976

⁴² Al Anon is for partners of Alcoholics. Many similar groups for victims of dysfunctional behaviour exist and are well worth investigating.

⁴³ *Tramp for the Lord*. Corrie Ten Boom. Ch 7 Love Your Enemy.

⁴⁴ This is a quote from memory, but inspired by Conrad W. Baars, *Born Only Once*. I am unable to track the original source.

⁴⁵ *Make Friends With Your Shadow*. William A Miller. P23 par 2. Publishing House, Minneapolis.

⁴⁶ See Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, 326.

⁴⁷ *The Holy Longing*. Ronald Rolheiser, *The Non-Negotiable Essentials*. P64.

⁴⁸ Publication details unknown.