

embraced by God. Prayer is my conscious acceptance of this embrace.
Christian prayer is my conscious acceptance of relationship with God and
with Jesus - and is now to prayer as a relationship with God and with
Jesus that we turn.

In the Orthodox tradition, there is the Jesus prayer. “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner.” This prayer is repeated in a mantra like manner until it becomes as familiar to us as breathing itself. The Jesus prayer is the prayer of the pilgrim, the act of pilgrimage being itself a prayer. We pray as we journey to a sacred place, or we pray as we journey inwardly while physically walking the labyrinth, or we pray as we walk along the beach, or, in the park, or, in the peaceful garden.

(FQ) The rosary is another prayer which makes use of rhythm and repetition. In the rosary, the Hail Mary is something like an extended mantra which draws us into reflection on the major events of the life of Jesus. Our concentration is not on the words that we actually say, it is on the mysteries that we contemplate.

As we expand our ways of praying, we increase our awareness of the presence of God all around us. Our levels of consciousness expand. We become more conscious of the reality of the Divine. To quote Thomas Merton again: “Our souls rise up from our earth like Jacob waking from his dream and exclaiming: ‘Truly God is in this place and I knew it not’! God becomes the only reality, in whom all other reality takes its proper place – and falls into insignificance.”

(DG) Prayer, therefore, puts us in touch with reality because it puts us in touch with God. It puts us in touch with the creative energy of the universe. It puts us in touch with the energy that maintains the universe in existence. For Christians, this creative energy is incarnational, it finds human form in the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ all of creation is intimately embraced by God. I am embraced by God. The everyday events of my life, however insignificant they may otherwise seem, are

Down through the centuries, then, the Christian tradition has been enriched by many different forms of prayer. In these talks we will be looking closely at centering prayer. But, there are many ways to pray and the rule of thumb is to use whatever prayer form seems to be working for us at a given time in life. There is no right or wrong way to pray. We can avail of a variety of approaches, but some will be more appropriate than others at certain times. Good liturgy, for example, celebrates the liturgical seasons of the year and combines ritual, vocal prayers, music, song, dance, symbolic action and moments of silence. The characteristic of good liturgy is inclusion. All of the participants truly participate. No one is simply an observer. Everyone leaves having been enriched and nurtured by the experience. Good liturgy, therefore, involves a lot of preparation and no little creativity and imagination.

Of course, there is prayer with the sacred Scriptures, or, Lectio Divina. This prayer has its origins in the Christian monastic tradition. Men and women in the monasteries prayed the psalms and read from the Scriptures at set times during the day but they always took with them a little phrase to ponder upon as they went about their duties between one prayer hour and the next. They repeated this phrase until it became second nature to them.

(DG) Another way of praying with scripture is found in the Ignatian tradition. This makes use of the imagination. A passage from the Gospels, for instance, is read a number of times and then we meditate by imagining ourselves present when the incident actually took place, or when the words were actually spoken. This method of prayer allows us to involve ourselves emotionally with Jesus and with the apostles.

unflattering ideas about God. So, it is important that we allow God, who is Ultimate Reality, an introduction on God's own terms. We have to leave aside our assumptions, our preconceptions and, dare I say, our prejudices. We have to open ourselves to God as God is, not as we imagined God to be. The strange thing is that in doing this we will find that not only are we introduced to God as God truly is, we are also introduced to ourselves as we truly are.

St. John of the cross says that the center of the soul is God and St. Teresa writes in a poem: "Seek your self in Me, and in yourself seek Me." In other words, we are to look for ourselves in God and look for God within ourselves. The great theologian Karl Rahner puts it another way when he says that in prayer we come to understand that, "we are ourselves the utterance and address of God which listens to itself."

(FQ) But what can we learn from Jesus, the Revelation of God, about prayer? Well, we know that Jesus was a devout Jew. Both as a child and as an adult he travelled to Jerusalem for the Passover and went to the temple to pray. He observed the Sabbath in the synagogue and knew how to read from the Scriptures. At the beginning of his ministry, he went into the desert on his own to spend time praying to the Father and discerning what the Father wanted him to do. He left the disciples at times and went off by himself to spend time alone and to pray. He was familiar with the psalms. For example, his last words from the cross, in the gospel of Saint Luke, are from Psalm 22. Talking to us about prayer, he encourages us to bring everything to the Father and to persevere in our prayer. Do not use lots of words says Jesus. His advice is to pray simply and to pray in private. In teaching us the Our Father, Jesus teaches us to praise God, to pray for the kingdom which is all God wishes for us, to pray for our daily needs, to ask forgiveness and to ask to be protected from evil.

Track 1: What is Prayer?

(DG) Before we can talk about centering prayer, it may be no harm to spend a few minutes talking about prayer itself. What is prayer? What goes on when we pray? If God loves me unconditionally, why bother to pray at all? If prayer does not change God, is it true then that the real purpose of prayer is to change myself? These are worthwhile questions, so, to begin, let us go back to the first question, what actually is prayer?

For me prayer is any acknowledgment, even the most passing acknowledgment, of God's presence in life and in creation. So, as I look in wonder at a baby, a tree, a glorious sunset, or a beautiful seascape, I may just pause, for a second, to acknowledge the mystery of the divine and to ponder God's presence. This is prayer, pure and simple, and it begins in the human ability to wonder. The wonder of a child is how a child first reaches for the Divine and as that wonder becomes conscious it is transformed into prayer. It does not matter how fleeting the moment is. God is present to me and I am consciously present to God as I wonder at life and the creation which surrounds me.

In the acts of the apostles, we read that God is not far from any of us. In fact, in God, we live and move and have our being, the Acts of the Apostles tells us (Acts 17:27-28). Our very existence is dependent upon God. Thomas Merton says that the aim of prayer is to come to know God through a gradual realization that our very being itself is penetrated by God's knowledge and love for us. Prayer, therefore, it is our opportunity to come to know God upon whom our very existence rests. We introduce ourselves to God and we allow God to introduce himself, or herself, to us. This last point is very important. Many of us have very confused and