

## Putting Ourselves in God's Presence

*Lord teach us to Pray Series*

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### I. Let's begin by putting ourselves in God's Presence

**The Place:** The first aspect to look at is the **place of prayer**. It is ideal of course if it is a calm and silent area. Can we pray in a church? Well of course, it's God's house and Christ is present in the tabernacle. But, we can also pray in our room or another quiet place in the house that Christ Himself recommended. It is also possible to pray seated before a beautiful view outside that John of the Cross spoke of to his novices. We can also pray in the metro, while walking down the street or riding a bike. We simply need to **withdraw into our inner cell**.

**The Time:** it is important to be awake, so we need to determine the most suitable time for each one of us. Then, we need to share that time with the Lord, put it on our schedule and stick to it. At times, we can feel called to pray in the middle of the night. And if so, by all means do so, it is always a grace to be called to pray in the silence of the night.

**Position:** don't forget that we pray with our whole being. So our **bodily position** translates the prayer of our heart. Some may prefer kneeling, others sitting and others laying down...but that could be risky for obvious reasons. What is certain though, is that we need to be **comfortable** to avoid

cramps. In silent prayer, it is the **entire being** that enters into the **secret of God**.

**Preparation:** First of all, let's talk about the **initial or distant preparation** leading up to the time of prayer. Is this time filled with God's presence? Our lives are so busy that we can go through a whole day and not think of God at all. So, it is advisable to have a **common denominator** throughout the day. For example, between two activities, insert a rapid time for the Lord, if nothing more than a little word for Jesus, or the blessing before meals, that way our heart has programmed little **heavenly winks** to the Lord.

There is also the **preparation** that takes place **right before** the scheduled prayer time. In other words, a **break** is necessary before beginning to pray which represents a **time of transition** between worldly activity and actually putting ourselves in God's presence. What we want to avoid doing here, is creating emptiness. Don't forget that I am allowed to go before the Lord with all my worries. The **goal of prayer** is certainly not to empty myself nor to forget my troubles. Prayer is meeting the Lord, having a dialogue with Him about my life.

The mystics are in accord with this outlook. **St. Teresa of Avila**, the Madre, tells us that **silent prayer, in her opinion, is an exchange of friendship where we speak often one on one with the God we know loves us**. There you have it, **a dialogue!** **St. Ignatius of Loyola** talks about a **friend talking to a friend** and knowing how to **be quiet to listen** to him.

Let me also mention, the **Cure d'Ars**, the patron saint of all priests, who asked one of the farmers in his church how he prayed. His

answer was simple: “**God looks at me, and I look at Him.**”

### **How Long to Pray?**

If you open the fourth book of the **Catechism**, we are given some advice concerning the **time of day** to pray, **how long to pray**. What was also pointed out was that we don't practice silent prayer when we have the time! No! In reality, we never have the time.

As far as **how long** to pray? Well, that's an arrangement between you and God, but let me suggest a **minimum of twenty minutes** for beginners; this can **increase over time**. The Catechism tells us that **silent prayer** is the poor and humble **submission to God's loving will, in an ever-deeper union with His beloved Son**. This union between the Son and each one of us is rather long simply because of the time of preparation to put ourselves in God's presence which takes more than two minutes.

In conclusion, let me come back to the **definition of mental prayer** given us by the Catechism. **It is a simple expression of the mystery of prayer: it's a look of faith turned towards Jesus, it's listening to God's Word; it's a silent love.**

### **II. Carmelite School of Prayer**

Now, I would like to **trace a path**. Let's put ourselves in the **Carmelite school of prayer** by taking a look at the teaching of St. Teresa of Avila and others. We will begin with the **prayer of recollection**, accessible to all. Teresa of Avila tells us to **gather up all our senses and enter within ourselves to be alone with our God**. This is to be found in the *Way of Perfection*.

This recollection doesn't fall from the sky, no! it requires an **effort of the will**. What's important is to **remove oneself from exterior world**, in order to bring oneself to the **soul's center**; this action is called **putting oneself in God's presence**. **Recollection** leads the soul to the most **intimate temple of the Lord** to enter into **relationship with Him**. A **real relationship** that allows us to **keep Him company**. Be careful of **lazy inactivity** that has nothing to do with anything divine!

### **Steps to Recollect Ourselves**

**1/** We **begin** with the **sign of the cross** made slowly with reverent attention. Our prayer is Christian, the sign of the cross brings us into the **mystery of the Trinity** and the gift of Christ to all men.

**2/** **Next**, we make **an act of faith**, in other words we become **aware of God's presence**. **Teresa of Avila** told her nuns the following: **If you don't consider who you are speaking to, what you are asking and of whom, well, I don't consider that mental prayer**. So you see it is not about meditating about God, but rather about a **personal relationship** with Him where there is a **direct face to face**.

**3/** A Carmelite friar related that before he enters his cell, he **knocks on the door and asks the Lord if He is there before going in**. Let me suggest that you do the same, to know if He is there in your **heart**. You will **hear the presence** of the Lord. It is simply a way of reminding ourselves that the Lord is **waiting for us**. If the Lord is truly in your room, we need to remember that we are sinners, a poor, wounded creature standing before the Almighty, but as Therese of the

Little Flower reminds us, He is also the One who comes begging our love from us.

**4/ Next** we make a rapid **examination of conscience** or at least **ask forgiveness** for all the times we didn't show love. How? Well, by saying the **Confiteor**, or, if you have the time, by reading **Psalm 50** or by making **an act of contrition** inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Catechism says that asking for forgiveness.... demonstrating this trusting confidence puts us in the light of the communion between the Father and the Son and with each other.... It is not about admitting that we are sinners for fun, no, and it's not about false humility, but about a recognition of **what we truly are, a creature who is loved and who depends entirely on God.**

**5/** If you have reconciled with God, you are invited now to **call on the Holy Spirit** because He comes to the aid of your weakness and prays within you.

To call on the Holy Spirit, the most well-known prayer is Come Holy Spirit but there are others.

**6/** After having called upon the Holy Spirit, we **pray offering ourselves totally to God.** It is about being grateful not efficient. In chapter 12 of Romans, St. Paul encourages us to offer ourselves as holy living hosts pleasing to God. By offering ourselves to God at the beginning of our time of prayer, we tell God that we are seeking His will and not our own. We are **offering God our free will.** Without giving our Lord our free will, God will not act within us. By offering our free will, we open our hearts to allow Him to act.

**7/ After these steps,** normally the soul **recollects itself and enters within** itself

with its God. This is the **most difficult part.** We enter into the **silence of God.**

In order to do this, we must turn from any **exterior activity of the senses**, and either close our eyes or fix our eyes on something. But let's say you are at home and you notice the dust, well, it's finished. You will surely get up and go get a dust cloth to take care of the problem.

Teresa advises that our senses be removed from exterior things and then the eyes just naturally close so as not to see what's around us.

**8/** Seek to create favorable conditions allowing both **silence** and **solitude** to enter into God's presence. We seek to be alone with God, face to face with Him. It is this that allows the eyes of the soul to see better.

**9/ Descend into our Hearts**

So then, how do we descend deep down into our hearts? You can use a **book**, the Gospels for example to help you to recollect yourself. Or perhaps look at and/or speak to a **picture** of our Lord or place yourself before an **icon.** Teresa suggests also that we pray the **Our Father** very slowly contemplating each word.

**10/ Remaining in our Hearts**

Now, once in our hearts, we need to be able to **remain** there! The **secret** is to **descend** and **stay** there since our Lord lives in our hearts. To maintain the contact with our Lord, we rely on our **faculties** (Will, Intellect, Memory) but also using our **imagination** to relive a Biblical scene and focusing on Christ's attitude. We remind ourselves that the **Christ is present.**

Teresa encourages us to imagine ourselves **blind** or in a **dark room**, repeating to ourselves that He is there, even touching

Him. We don't need to raise our voices because she tells us He is there, He hears us and wants to hear us. This idea can, through experience, be transformed into a kind of intuition. Teresa also suggests the idea of withdrawing with God into our **interior paradise**.

### **11/ The Mutual Look**

When instructing her nuns, Teresa simply instructed them to **look at Him**. The **look of soul on the Christ; the look of the Christ on the soul**. This **mutual look** expresses a **personal relationship, an immediate living relationship; a reciprocal presence**. It is a very simple, intuitive activity **animated by our faith**.

For this to happen we need a **desire**, the desire to experience **union with God**, a desire for His glory. Simply put, a desire for God. This desire concerns not only the individual soul, but the salvation of all souls. It's about the realization of the **loving plan** of the Father. A **look filled with love**, just like two people who love and understand one other without a word. This is called a **loving attention** and as St. Augustine said: **"Come back to your heart, enter your heart."**

### **III. Distractions**

Of course, we tend to dwell on the **difficulty of the descent into one's heart** and the **distractions**. It is not a separation from exterior things but rather a **solitude** of the mind, a **detachment** from all that isn't God. So, it's about descending from the **head to the heart**.

We have spoken of the importance of not trying to manage our **distractions** as that would tend to worsen them. On the other hand, we can wonder where they come from as distractions are the exact **opposite of recollection**, a concentration of the activity of our faculties on a supernatural reality, in other words we are looking at the Christ present within.

**Distractions** represent an **evasion of our faculties** towards another project, thus eliminating our recollection. Another way of saying this, is that I **leave my heart and return to my head**. It can end up being a cause of **suffering**.

It is important to simply disregard them. Teresa herself would often say: **"For several years I waited for the bell to ring signaling the end of the time of prayer."** This should be very encouraging for each one of us. We have all had that experience while in prayer to sneak a peak at our watches to see the time that seems to drag on.

So, what **causes** these distractions? Well, some are voluntary and we know the remedy. If, however, it is not voluntary we can **either** change our place **or** our time of prayer. It is important too though, not to get caught up in fight with ourselves to make it happen.

Yes, it isn't easy. There is a need for discipline in recollecting oneself; being **aware of our senses** all throughout the day, striving to grow in humility and placing ourselves under our Lord's direction.

Once descended into your heart, seek to remain there with the Christ. If, however, you find yourself, **'up in your head,'** no worries, simply return to your heart. This

exercise could happen **50 times** during your time of prayer! It can be discouraging! Know though that as long as you are not firmly in your heart, you are not completely in God's presence. The goal is to be in the **heaven of my soul.**

### **Conclusion**

This **challenge** of putting ourselves in God's presence doesn't happen in a day. No, we need to **practice** it. Sometimes your prayer time will be simply about you putting yourself in God's presence. That's fine. "**Remain in me**" not for a few minutes or hours but **always**. Yes, to live always in the **heaven of our souls.** Amen.