

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES PRIMER

Rather than bring us answers to our problems, spiritual practices enable us to experience God anew in fresh and dynamic ways.

Spiritual practices are:

- **A means to engage with God's presence.** Spiritual practices are merely tools that place us in the space where God resides so we can listen to, learn from, and love our Creator.
- **Part of healthy spiritual growth.** Just like any human relationship, our connection with God needs tending, too. Spiritual practices help us to better understand ourselves and God, leading to spiritual maturity.
- **Choices we make for developing our relationship with God.** Not every practice will work for every person, and that's okay. Part of the journey is determining how God speaks most clearly to us and discovering which practices help us get closer to God. The book ***Soul Types: Matching Your Personality and Spiritual Path*** by Sandra Krebs Hirsh and Jane A.G. Kise is a good resource for determining the spiritual practices that may work best for you.

Spiritual practices are not:

- **Ways to earn favor with God.** God's love for us is based on grace, not works. We cannot earn righteousness through spiritual practices. The practices place us before God, and it is God who does the transforming work in us.
- **Commanded nor required.** Spiritual practices are God's gift to us. We partake out of a joyful desire to experience God more deeply. Our motivation to engage in the practices flows from the freedom we enjoy in Christ.
- **Exhaustively defined.** There is no single comprehensive list of spiritual practices. This means we are afforded abundant creativity in how we practice. The door is open for all kinds of possibilities, from art and music to social justice and service. God delights in helping us uncover new ways to experience the divine.

WEB-BASED RESOURCES

Before beginning, you may find it helpful to review a few helpful Internet resources related to Spiritual Practices.

- [ELCA Recommended Practices for Lifelong Faith Formation](#) — For people of all ages
- [Faith+Lead \(Luther Seminary\)](#)
- [Spiritual Practices Index – Vanderbilt University](#)
- [Spiritual Practices and Resources \(includes video clips\)](#)

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

This practice involves praying on behalf of others. Both Jesus and the Holy Spirit model intercession: Jesus prayed on our behalf (Hebrews 7:25, Romans 8:34) and the Spirit intercedes when words fail us (Romans 8:26-27). God works through intercessory prayer to enact change in us and in the world.

Making the practice doable

When you receive a prayer request, ask God to clarify exactly how you might pray for the person. There may be a deeper need that is only known to God.

Questions to ask yourself

- For whom do you feel compassion and concern as you think about the needs of others?
- Which situations or requests regularly come to your mind?
- How might you ask God to reveal those for whom you should pray?

SERVICE

This practice fosters humility as we put others' needs before our own. We can extend acts of service to friends, family, and even strangers. Jesus demonstrated servanthood in his own life and insisted that those who desire greatness must first become servants themselves (Matthew 20:26-28).

Making the practice doable

- Ask God to reveal areas in your neighborhood or community that might be good places for acts of service.
- As you prepare, approach the people you wish to serve with humility and listen to their ideas about what is needed.
- Avoid the temptation to be praised for your work. Let God's pleasure be your greatest reward.

Questions to ask yourself

- Where do you see God already at work in your neighborhood or community?
- How might you join God in the works of service that are already happening?
- Who is your neighbor? How might God expand your ideas about who you are willing to serve?

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

This practice involves temporary separation from the distractions of everyday life so we can more easily hear God's voice. Jesus regularly practiced solitude when he withdrew from his disciples and the crowds (Matthew 14:13, Mark 6:31, Luke 6:12, plus many others).

Making the practice doable

- It is possible to find solitude without physical separation. Solitude can happen during a busy day as you draw on the inner peace God grants to you through the Holy Spirit.
- Silence and solitude can be as simple as noticing the fullness of the details around you. In this way, you are practicing being fully present with God, yourself, and others.

Questions to ask yourself

- How might you incorporate elements of noticing and being present as you go about your day?
- What might you discover about God through the things you observe?
- As you consider silence and solitude, which parts of the practice would be easiest for you? Which might be more difficult? How might God help you overcome any difficulties?

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

This practice has many names, including *Lectio Divina* (Latin for “divine reading”) and *Dwelling in the Word*. It is a reflective reading of scripture, a method of prayer that leads us into the deeper meaning of scripture and the transformation of our lives. It is a way of deepening a relationship with Christ, a way of listening to the texts of Scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and he was suggesting the topics of conversation. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on his word leads beyond mere acquaintance to an attitude of friendship, trust, and love. Gregory the Great (6th century), in summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition, expressed it as “resting in God.”

Making the practice doable

- This practice can be done on your own or in a group setting (the Dwelling in the Word invitation in the next section is one possible way to try this online).
- The goal for the reading is depth rather than volume. It can be beneficial to stay in a single text over an extended period to see how God brings new meaning to a familiar passage.

Questions to ask yourself

- Which spaces in your personal or professional life might benefit from this practice? Would it make sense, for example, to add this practice at the beginning of a meeting?
- Are there certain scriptural themes (such as comfort, trust, or hope, for instance) that interest you in this season? Which verses might you choose that reflect these themes?

Step One: Read passage and encourage everyone to listen with the “ear of their heart.”

What phrase, sentence, or even one word stands out to you?

Step Two: Read the passage again and reflect on the word of God.

Encourage everyone to be aware of what touches them, a thought or reflection that is meaningful.

Allow a minute or two minutes of silence.

Step Three: Read the passage again and respond spontaneously to the word of God. Be aware of any prayer that rises up within that expresses the experience. Allow a minute or two minutes of silence.

Step Four: Read the passage a final time and rest in the word, reflect or pray and allow God to speak in the silence. Allow three or four minutes of silence.

To extend the practice, take the phrase, sentence, or word into your daily activity and listen to it, reflect on it, and pray over it. Allow it to become part of you. There are no “should, oughts, or musts.” Listen with the ear of your heart and let the dialog with God unfold in its own time, and let the Holy Spirit take the lead. We need to trust that God is eager to be with us and to share with us the inner peace and freedom we desire.

HOLY IMAGINING by Michael Jordan Laskey

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius Loyola instructs us to use our imagination to picture various Gospel scenes. You take it all in through your senses and then put yourself in the story at some point. Make yourself useful, Ignatius encourages. So, while praying one afternoon, I put myself at the Nativity scene in Bethlehem, and I sat on a hay bale holding the baby Jesus while Mary slept. Joseph sat next to me.

He was beaming, shaking his head in disbelief with a goofy grin spread across his face. As a father of three young kids myself, I may have been projecting my own birthing room post-delivery joyous stupor onto Joseph. But there we were, two dads, marveling at the wondrous work of our wives and the unfathomable smallness of this child who happened also to be God.

"I have no idea what I'm doing," I said to Joseph in my prayer. "Me neither," he said, still grinning. I met a new friend in that moment. The Biblical directive "Go to Joseph" is said of the Old Testament Joseph (Genesis 41:55). But in my prayer that day, the directive took on new meaning. Here was someone else tasked with a complicated, urgent job without any sort of formal training. Joseph was offering solidarity to me and any other parent who has ever been intimidated or lost.

This prayer from Pope Francis comes at the end of his apostolic letter announcing the Year of St. Joseph, which ended in December. In the letter, the Holy Father speaks of Joseph's "creative courage," revealed in things such as the way Joseph turned the manger into a welcoming home for the Son of God and in his faithful response to the angel's disturbing call to flee from King Herod and journey to Egypt as refugees. "In the face of difficulty, we can either give up and walk away, or somehow engage with it," Pope Francis writes. Joseph engages, time after time, even when his plans get flipped on their head and he doesn't know how things are going to turn out.

I think it was Joseph's creative courage I saw in his grin during that afternoon of prayer. "It's OK," I hear him say to me now, almost playfully, as we faced the unknown together. "Just show up. Dive in. Love your family. Trust the Lord."

SPEAKING TO GOD: PRAYER AS CONVERSATION by James Martin, S.J.

In one section of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius of Loyola's classic manual on prayer, we are encouraged to speak to God "as one friend speaks to another." Such advice isn't new. In fact, it's Biblical. The Book of Exodus declares that "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11).

Ignatius refers to this way of praying as "colloquy," or put another way, a conversation. Many people find this way of praying to be very natural. In their experience, Jesus is a close friend who accompanies them on this crazy and often unpredictable journey we call life. Others, however, are challenged by this form of prayer. Who in their right mind could imagine speaking to the Creator of the universe as a friend?

One way to begin this form of prayer is simply to imagine God as a wise ad elderly mentor that you have known and trusted your entire life. A colloquy doesn't have to be complicated.

Simply imagine yourself in God's presence in some way (for example, sitting in a chair next to you). And then, begin by opening yourself up to God. If you able, imagine what God might have to say to you.

Why bother? Scripture teaches us that God desires to be in relationship with us. Colloquy is a spiritual practice that holds the potential to deepen our relationship/friendship with God. Take the experience of Jane Frances de Chantal. A 28-year-old mother of four young children when her husband was killed by another man in a hunting accident. Jane struggled from being pulled under by the riptide of grief and anger that she felt. It took time for her heart to soften, many long hours of not ignoring her grief but sharing it with her family, with God, with her pastor. Perhaps it was this experience of not ignoring but confronting her grief that allowed Jane, years later, to advise, "Put yourself very simply before God ... and without any effort, whisper very softly to His sacred heart whatever your own heart prompts you to say." Grief or joy, loneliness or love, all can be whispered to God.

CENTERING PRAYER

Centering Prayer is a receptive method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.

Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer. Rather, it adds depth of meaning to all prayer and facilitates the movement from more active modes of prayer — verbal, mental, or affective prayer — into a receptive prayer of resting in God. Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Christ.

Centering Prayer Guidelines

Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. Use a word of one or two syllables such as God, Jesus, Love, Peace, Let Go, Faith, Stillness.

Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.

Imagine laying your sacred word as gently as you would a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton. When different thoughts come to your mind, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. *At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.* Centering Prayer is based on the wisdom of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: When you pray, go to your inner room and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:6). It familiarizes us with God's first language, which is SILENCE.

BREATH PRAYER

Breath prayer is an ancient Christian prayer practice dating back to at least the 6th century. Known as the "Jesus Prayer" or "Prayer of the Heart," early practitioners would repeat to the rhythm of their breath the phrase, "**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.**" In time, the prayer was shortened to, "**Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy**" or simply, "**Jesus, mercy.**"

The prayer can be used in at least two ways. First, as a quieting backdrop for prayer. You can repeat the words and let yourself enter into the presence of God, noticing what arises or simply being in God's presence. For many people, the practice of using comforting words to quiet themselves can be a highly effective way to pray.

The second way to use the Jesus prayer is to focus on the meaning of each word and let it penetrate your soul. What does it mean to call Jesus Lord? What does it mean for Jesus to have mercy on you? And how does the awareness of your sins influence your relationship with Jesus?

Breath prayer is a good example of "praying without ceasing" and has the potential to become as natural as breathing. It is intended to be a very short prayer of praise or petition, just six to eight syllables. The words of the prayer can be easily adjusted to your heart's desire. Praise is expressed by calling on one of the Divine names such as God, Jesus, Lord, Father/Mother, Christ, or Spirit.

You may also use the breath prayer for a focused time during a daily spiritual practice. Simply repeat the prayer over and over, keeping your attention on the prayer. If your attention wanders, gently return to the prayer. "However you pray it," writes the Reverend James Martin, "let this simple and ancient prayer carry you closer to Jesus' mercy."

Begin with 5 minutes and gradually increase the time to 15 or 20 minutes as you become disciplined with the prayer. You may want to use a timer to free yourself from watching the clock. Some find it useful to write in a journal of their experience with the prayer.

BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD.

Close your eyes and recall the line *“Be still and know that I am God”* (Psalm 46:10). Be still, calm, peaceful, open to the presence of God.

With your eyes closed, imagine that God is calling you by name. ***Imagine that God is asking, “(Your name) what do you want?”*** Give God a simple and direct answer that comes honestly from your heart. *Write down the answer. If you have more than one answer, write them down.*

Your answer may be one word, such as peace or love or help. It may be several words or a phrase, such as “feel your presence” or “lead me into life.” Whatever your answers, they are the foundation of your breath prayer.

Select the name that you are most comfortable using to speak with God. Combine it with your written answer to the question God asked you. This is your prayer.

Breathe in the first phrase/word (generally your invocation of God’s name) and breathe out the second phrase/word (request or need).

Sometimes you may want to reverse the practice a bit by sitting in silence and letting the Spirit pray through you. *Ask for God to reveal your name, and God’s desire for you.* This can be a profound experience. You may wind up hearing something like, “Beloved, you are enough,” or “Mighty One, rest.” Wait on God and see how you may be renewed.

JOURNALING

Keeping a Spiritual Journal is a wonderful way to reflect upon your faith and be in conversation with God. The journal can take many forms, and there are a variety of resources available to help one begin.

A Few Considerations:

The style of journal will depend on what sorts of entries you propose to make. Blank pages or a grid pattern will work better for those who will include drawings and sketches in their journals. For those whose entries will be prose, lined pages make more sense. Try some experiments.

For example:

Vary the frequency at first to see what feels most comfortable. Will you write daily entries? A more in-depth weekly reflection? Make different kinds of entries. Try drawing, poetry, lists, reflections on Bible passages, writing out prayers. *See what feels meditative and useful to you.*

Vary your forms of address. Write a letter to God. Imagine that you are a character in the Bible and speak as that person would speak. Write to someone in your life who needs to forgive you or be forgiven by you. Write as if God were speaking directly to you.

Don’t give up if you miss a session or two. Just pick it up again. Choose a form that works for you. There is no “right way” to keep a faith journal.

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

St. Ignatius of Loyola is the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) and the creator of a set of spiritual exercises that have brought peace and deepened spiritual meaning to many generations of Christian practitioners. Ignatian spirituality refers to several types of formation that Ignatius perfected as the Father General of the Jesuits. The practices most practiced to this day are the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, a set of prayer practices, devotions, and meditations that can be done regularly. Perhaps the best known of the Spiritual Exercises is the Daily Examen, a daily devotion with readings and exercises around a theme like gratitude or mercy.

Here is a form of the Ignatian Daily Examen from ignatianspirituality.com:

1. Become aware of God's presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
5. Look toward tomorrow.

GOD MOMENTS: UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS IN THE ORDINARY

Where do you seek God? Are you waiting for God to appear in a monumental, life-altering event? In *God Moments: Unexpected Encounters in the Ordinary*, Andy Otto shows you how to discover the unexpected beauty of God's presence in the story of ordinary things and in everyday routines, like preparing breakfast or walking in the woods. Drawing on the Ignatian principles of awareness, prayer, and discernment, Otto identifies three practices that help find God in all things:

- **Awareness** — Gain an understanding that God is present in the ordinary messiness of our lives, such as a battle with depression or sharing in the struggle of a friend.
- **Prayer** — Develop a prayer life using Ignatian practices, such as asking for a morning grace and examining how your prayer was answered at the end of the day. That way you can focus on a personal relationship with God that finds everyday physical activities such as making a meal as an opportunity to talk to God.
- **Discernment** — The more you are aware of God's presence and draw closer to God in prayer, the better you can learn how to plug into God's narrative of the world in a way that enables you to participate in the divine story using your gifts and talents.

FOR FURTHER READING

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun