

Teresian Prayer

Prayer is the essence of our vocation. We all received our vocation through prayer. In this talk we will review what our Legislative Documents tell us about mental prayer. In the second part of this presentation, we will also review the stages of meditation in the spirit of Teresian prayer.

Section I: OCDS Legislative Documents

To begin, please pull out your Legislative Documents booklet.

Our **Constitutions** emphasize the importance of silence, solitude, and prayer.

SECTION I: Our Identity, Values and Commitment (*turn to page 18 in booklet*)

Taken from the Rule of St Albert:

“6.The Rule of St Albert is the original expression of the spirituality of Carmel. It was written for the **LAYPEOPLE** who gathered on Mount Carmel to live a life dedicated to meditation on the Word of God, under the protection of Our Lady. The following principles of that Rule guide Carmelite life:”

Specifically I want to highlight the following:

- 6 b. Being diligent in meditating on the law of the Lord
- 6 c. Giving time to spiritual reading
- 6 g. Seeking interior silence and solitude in our life of prayer

Further on in our Constitutions on Number 9 (page 19) the fundamental elements of our vocation are detailed. I call your attention to 9b and 9c.

9 b. “to seek “mysterious union with God” by way of contemplation and apostolic activity, indissolubly joined together, for service to the Church.”

9 c. “to give particular importance to prayer which, nourished by listening to the Word of God and by the liturgy, is conducive to relating with God as a friend, not just in prayer but daily living.”

SECTION III: Witnesses to the Experience of God (*turn to page 25 in booklet*)

21. “Carmelite Seculars will commit themselves daily to spending time in the practice of mental prayer. This is the time to be with God and to strengthen their relationship with Him so that they can be true witnesses to His presence in the world.”

Next, turning to the **Provincial Statutes** (*turn to page 52 in the booklet*)

Sec. I Our Identity, Values and Commitment

1 d. “to spend at least one half-hour daily in the practice of mental prayer in an atmosphere of interior silence and solitude [cf Const. #21]. Mental prayer, as practiced in lectio divina, with its four aspects of spiritual reading, reflection, conversation with God, and contemplation, is the foundation of Teresian Prayer.”

Our Formation Guidelines have guides for both group and individual use for how to do Lectio Divina. By the way, Lectio Divina is a Benedictine term, with only minor differences in Teresian mental prayer. In order to persevere in prayer we need to detach from many things, one of them being media. How many of us check our email several times a day? Check Facebook? Text messages? I even get a notice on my watch/phone when someone is at my front door and I am tempted right away to pick up my phone to see who it is.

Our Legislative documents underscore the importance of personal prayer, and we will become lukewarm or fall away if we do not persevere in our mental prayer. Prayer is the source of our vocation.

I want to encourage everyone to be faithful to prayer and to learn / re-learn how to do Mental Prayer.

Section II: Mental / Meditative Prayer

What is Mental Prayer / Meditation? It is the 30 min in solitude and silence, in meditation, set aside for God, to develop and participate in that conversation “with one who we know loves us.” Nothing takes the place of our Mental prayer, our time spent alone with the Lord who loves us.

Before I talk about one specific form of mediation, I want to talk about Teresian prayer in general. Personal freedom in prayer is one of the primary tenets of Teresian prayer. Whatever form of prayer

we use, our prayer should always include “mental prayer”. What does this mean? St Teresa advises us that we should always be mindful of what we are saying and to whom we are saying it. This attentiveness is the essence of Teresian mental prayer. St. Teresa also states in her Foundations 5.2, “Prayer consists not in thinking much, but in loving much.”

Now I want to spend some time on Meditation and what it is. I have leveraged heavily from the book *Conversation with Christ* by Peter Thomas Rohrbach, OCD. This is an excellent source for detailed, yet simple instructions on Meditation and is easy to teach from.

St Teresa sums up the whole matter of mental prayer in her statement that we all have heard many times, “Mental prayer is nothing else than an intimate friendship, a frequent heart-to-heart conversation with Him by whom we know ourselves to be loved.”

St Teresa preferred to designate the process as “mental prayer” and “prayer” in place of using the term “meditation”. I will be using the term “Meditation” to provide a framework for providing this heart to heart conversation with Christ, as this is the term used in the book.

The soul has three principle faculties, the Intellect, the Memory and the Will. It is through the **Intellect** that we come to the knowledge of some object and through the **Will** that we begin to love it. St Teresa is insistent that both the Intellect and the Will be employed for meditation to be successful. The Intellect supplies the material for the conversation with Christ and the Will is brought into play by expressing sorrow, regret for sin, the promise to avoid future sin, etc. Teresa would have us fill our minds with memories of Christ so that we will more easily talk to Him.

I would like to talk to you about one method of Teresa meditation. This is something that many Carmelites can do. There are 5 simple steps that I will list and then give greater detail.

1. Preparation – a pause to recollect and place oneself in the presence of God
2. Selection of material – select material for the day’s meditation
3. The Consideration – begin to examine the day’s selected material
4. The Conversation – the soul begins to converse with Christ
5. The Conclusion – optional, but valuable, to tie up loose ends with Our Lord

Now I shall elaborate on each of these steps

The Preparation. Part of preparing for prayer is a life of Mortification and a dedicated time each day. The value of mortification is to establish self-mastery and detachment from self-love so as to help one persevere. It is suggested one's posture should begin kneeling if possible, but Teresa would have us be comfortable – but not TOO comfortable lest drowsiness sets in. The eyes should be closed (which will be hard to do at first) and the soul should be humble before God. The most important preparation for prayer is asking the Holy Spirit to be with us and guide us during our prayer time. If we make this request with heartfelt sincerity we may find ourselves drawn out of our favorite ways of praying into new and deeper ways of relating to the Lord.

The Selection of Material. There is great latitude in selection of material for meditation. Some excellent sources are *The New Testament*, *The Psalms*, *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas a Kempis or *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament* by St Alphonus Liguori, material that helps us get closer to the humanity of Christ. Commenting on her use of the Gospels, St Therese said in *The Story of a Soul*, "...During meditation I am sustained above all else by the Gospels. They supply my poor soul's every need, and they are always yielding up to me new lights and mysterious hidden meanings." This reading material has a distinctly different purpose from that of Spiritual Reading. Spiritual reading is something we ought to be doing approximately 15 minutes each day, and will instruct us in the spiritual life, give principles for daily living, witness to sanctity as lived out by the saints, etc. Our meditative reading before prayer is to present us material to help us draw closer to Christ and assist in conversing with Him. The amount of reading will vary depending on the person and what is going on in their lives. Some days the mind will quickly fill with material to consider, other times it may take pages. Put the book aside when no longer necessary and pick it back up when the mind begins to wander.

St Teresa wrote about her own experience in her *Life...* "During all the years, except after communicating, I never dared to begin to pray without a book; my soul was as much afraid to engage in prayer without one as if it were to go and fight against a host of enemies. With this help, which was a companionship to me and a shield with which I could parry the blows of my many thoughts, I felt comforted. For it was not usual with me to suffer aridity: this only came when I had no book, whereupon my soul would at once become disturbed and my thoughts begin to wander. As soon as I

started to read they began to collect themselves and the book acted like a bait for my soul. Often the mere fact that I had it was sufficient.”

The Consideration: During this section the memory, imagination and intellect are all used. The imagination is used only as an introduction to prayer and IS NOT prayer. To begin a consideration, we put ourselves in the Gospel setting and ask the 7 questions (who, what, where, when, how, why and with what assistance). When meditating on a particular scene from Christ’s Passion, through the imagination and resulting reflections, the soul will become aware of the love of Christ for it, the frightening tortures Christ endured to prove this love, and the horrendous nature of personal sin which has caused this suffering. This work should not be considered an intellectual drill as a student with his text book, but the same as how one reads a letter from a friend – carefully, lovingly and with attention to its meaning. It is a gently loving attempt to discover the significance of this episode of Our Lord’s life as it relates to us. Not everyone is able to imagine extensively, St Teresa admits she was one of these persons. She states in her Foundations, **“not everyone has by nature an imagination capable of meditation; whereas all souls are capable of love.”** This sentence is so good, it’s worthy of repeating, “not everyone has by nature an imagination capable of meditation; whereas all souls are capable of love.” St Teresa tells us that even if we are unable to imagine ourselves in a Gospel episode, we can keep the episode in our minds with simple loving attentiveness. This should be sufficient to move one to the next step:

The Conversation: In the previous step, the Consideration, we have looked at scenes from Christ’s life so as to have a subject for the Conversation. We now have a topic for the colloquy and a desire to engage. We should not be concerned with artful conversation, but speak frankly and with affection. Christ wants us to talk to Him in our own words with our own sentiments. We can have periods of conversation and times of simple silent attention to Christ. What shall we say? What is there to discuss? We can express our love for Him, thank Him for his constant favors, repent of our sinfulness, petition Him for our needs. If no sentiment is forthcoming on a particular day, do not give up, just admit your spiritual poverty and weakness to Him. He will speak to you with inspirations, interior lights, with graces of light and love.

If at any point in our mental prayer, we feel like simply resting in silence with the Lord, we should let go of our mental prayer and remain in silence with Him for as long as it occurs naturally. The Prayer of Silence or Simple Contemplation is the beginning of supernatural prayer, although it doesn't feel supernatural in any way. We are not actually capable of quieting our minds on our own, so if God gives us this prayer, we should honor his gift and receive it gratefully. It may only last for a few moments or a few minutes, and as soon as our minds become active again, we should simply resume our regular routine of mental prayer or meditation.

The Conclusion. This is an optional step, however we would never just walk away in the middle of a conversation with a friend. The same is true with Christ. We can conclude with gratitude for graces received or a resolution of something we will change.

Section III: Variations in Method

For those who just cannot meditate, St Teresa offers variations on this method. They are a meditative recitation of vocal prayers, meditative reading, or gazing on a beautiful image of Our Lord. Vocal prayers are recited meditatively when they are said slowly and with frequent pauses and with close attention to the meaning of the prayer and to whom it is directed. As an alternative, we can simply gaze at a beautiful image of Our Lord or at His mysterious presence in the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. St Teresa herself experienced her great conversion while she was praying in front of an image of Christ at the pillar.

A note of caution on using the Rosary, favorite devotions, or chaplets during our required 30 minutes of mental prayer. While these forms of prayer can be used meditatively as mental prayer, we often have associations with them that limit our freedom in prayer. If we desire to pray these prayers because of the promises associated with them or because of the apostolic graces associated with them for the conversion of sinners and salvation of souls, we should not use them to occupy our 30 minutes of "quality time" with the Lord. The purpose of our 30 minutes of mental prayer is to build and maintain a personal relationship with the Lord. This is done especially by meditating on Scripture (where He is always present in the Word) and by simple, heartfelt conversations with God. There may

be times when the only prayer we can muster (because of ill health, fatigue, or debilitating distractions) is a decade of the Rosary or a favorite chaplet. However, these prayers should only be used as temporary measures. We should always retain our Teresian freedom in prayer. In other words, we must be free to let go of our favorite prayers when God wants to lead us into a closer relationship with Him through other forms of mental prayer or contemplation.

Section IV: Aridities and Distractions

Now with respect to distractions and aridities, these are problems encountered by all who seriously undertake mental prayer and should be expected. **Aridity** happens when one is distracted and his mind wanders from the subject of meditation and the will receives no consolation in conversing with Christ.

Distractions can come from a variety of sources, exterior sensations, visual images, lack of preparation, failure in recollection, a vivid imagination, etc. The distractions that arise from external sources can be fought with careful custody of the senses. For example, there is a beautiful family with 9 children at our 7:30 am Sunday Mass, the kids are perfectly behaved, hair fixed and dressed in their Sunday best. I have a hard time not watching and marveling at them and force myself to not gaze their way. The distractions that arise from internal sources are more difficult to combat, for example, “Did I lock the front door when I left?” We need to persevere at bringing our attention back to the meditation. St Alphonsus Liguori states “the devil labors hard to disturb us at the time of meditation in order to make us abandon it.” In *Conversation with Christ*, Rohrbach summarizes these principal facts about distractions as follows:

1. Distractions are the common experience of all who practice mental prayer.
2. Distractions can – and must – be lessened and reduced.
3. Distractions, however, cannot be entirely eradicated.
4. Distractions must not discourage the soul from perseverance at meditation.

As soon as we notice that we have wandered into a distraction, we should simply return our attention to God and resume our regular practice of prayer without wasting any time on feelings of self-recrimination or guilt.

Lastly, to deal with aridity. We all should expect times of aridity throughout our life. There are several sources of aridity: a lack of full development in the spiritual life, which means if we are still involved with venial sin or mediocrity we will suffer aridity. Another source of aridity can come from involuntary circumstances such as illness, fatigue, etc. Also, sometimes God purifies the soul by allowing a period void of sense. This may last a very long time and is a good thing. We are to follow Christ without seeking consolations. We are to be willing to embrace the cross of aridity for His sake. For a good book on dryness and aridity I have found *Secrets of the Interior Life* by Archbishop Luis Martinez an excellent resource.

Finally, we may experience aridity when God wishes to lead us into contemplative prayer. St. John of the Cross gives us three signs of the beginnings of contemplation:

1. We can no longer meditate or reason with our imagination as we were able to do before, and we take no pleasure in meditation.
2. We have no desire to fix our attention on a particular object, interior or exterior. (However, the imagination may still wander while the soul is recollected.)
3. We take pleasure in being alone, waiting upon God in inner peace, quietness, and rest; and we have a general loving knowledge of God without any particular understanding. (This, of course, assumes that sin and sloth are not the causes of the aridity.)

Section V: Closing

This Mental Prayer is the great gift of Carmel to the Church. It is the responsibility of our formation to teach mental prayer well so that each of us can practice it well and take it out to the Church. We each already have our own way of praying, but Saint Teresa's method of mental prayer can greatly enhance the way in which each of us prays.

Our mental prayer is to encourage us to deepen our friendship with God and to come closer to Him. I believe many problems could be minimized or eliminated if we ALL were striving to develop our spiritual lives. Developing this presentation has helped me see where I can tidy up my own mental prayer. Again, I would highly encourage the reading of *Conversation with Christ* by Peter Thomas

Rohrbach, OCD. This book is referenced in our Formation Guidelines in Formation 1, Year 1. If interested, copies are available in the gift shop for purchase.

I will close with this quote from Archbishop Fulton Sheen: "Prayer begins by talking to God, but ends by listening to Him. In the face of Absolute Truth, silence is the soul's language."

PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE:

At 3:30 we will gather to take 30 minutes (or longer if you like) to practice mental prayer. I will be handing out a sheet of selected Scripture verses. If you have a favorite psalm or have a Bible, feel free to select something for your meditation.