

UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

A spiritual practice is an intentional, regular practice which helps focus and shape our attention toward loving relationships with God and others, thereby serving as a means of God's grace for the sanctification of our souls and the blessing of the world. (Susan Phillips)

Spiritual practices may be formal (e.g. worship), informal (e.g. praying with a friend), communal (e.g. going to a church retreat), personal (e.g. journaling), traditional (e.g. confessing to God), and idiosyncratic (e.g. praying a prayer of intercession every time one hears an emergency vehicle's siren).

ENGAGING SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

While spiritual practices can take on many forms, a number of spiritual practices have been handed down over the years within the Christian tradition. As with the many disciples who have gone before us, these practices invite our intention and direct our attention to the movements of the Spirit in our inner and outer lives together.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster identifies a number of different classical spiritual practices:

The Inward Disciplines: Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, Study
The Outward Disciplines: Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, Service
The Corporate Disciplines: Confession, Worship, Guidance, Celebration

For many of us, following the movements of established spiritual practices can help support our intention and direct our attention. Like rehearsing the steps of a dance, these practices can guide our fumbling feet into a dance with the Divine. The following spiritual practice guidelines provide basic choreography to get us on the dance floor, where we can be swept up by the leading of the Spirit.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION:

BOOKS

An Altar in the World by Barbara Brown Taylor
Celebration of Discipline by Richard J. Foster
Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals
by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove,
and Enuma Okoro
The Cultivated Life by Susan Phillips
Daily Office by Peter Scazzero
The Divine Hours by Phyllis Tickle
The Ignatian Adventure by Kevin O'Brien, SJ
Liturgy of the Ordinary by Tish Harrison Warren

The Ministry of Ordinary Places by Shannan Martin
The Practice of the Presence of God
by Brother Lawrence
*The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st
Century* by Joan Chittister
Sacred Rhythms by Ruth Haley Barton
Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard

APPS

Pray as You Go
Book of Common Prayer

Spiritual Practice of Prayer of Examen

“Prayer is the inner bath of love into which the soul plunges itself.”
—St. John Vianney

Examen comes from the Latin referring to the tongue or weight indicator on a balance of scale, hence conveying the idea of an accurate assessment of the true situation.

1. Prepare Yourself

- Find a quiet spot, void of distractions.
- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Begin your prayer by acknowledging God’s presence within you. Offer yourself and this time to God.
- Bid the Holy Spirit to enliven this discipline.

2. Review an Event or Period of Time

- Choose an event or period of time for examination. Reviewing the past 24 hours is a great place to begin.
- Whatever your time period, let each hour of the past day gently pass through you memory. Linger as you remember the experiences.
- With generous pauses between questions, notice:
 - ✓ What have you taken for granted during this experience?
 - ✓ What feeling and thoughts are emerging as you look back over the past 24 hours?
- Look back again over this period of time and reflect on the ways in which God was present to you.
 - ✓ Where do you see God at work? In joy, fears, suffering, work, play? In acts of service, study? In an event, person, sound, nature, music, action?
 - ✓ When or where in the past 24 hours did you feel you were cooperating most fully with God’s action in your life?
 - ✓ When or where in the past 24 hours did you feel you were resisting God’s presence and action? Are there actions or thoughts that require God’s pardon? The pardon of others?
 - ✓ In what ways do you believe God may be calling you to a new awareness, a change of heart, a different action?
- Notice a sense of gratitude for one or two particular ways the God was present to you during this period. Express these feelings through journaling, moving, words, creating in some artist medium, singing, etc.

3. Rest and Offer Thanks

- Take a moment to rest in the embrace of the Spirit.
- Thank God for whatever you have received.

Spiritual Practice of Centering Prayer - Silent Meditation

Centering Prayer is simply the prayer practice of "centering" one's whole self on the person of God.

It is a discipline of silent prayer - a quieting of thoughts, words, and physical movement. The idea is to let go of all competing distractions and focus all of who we are within the presence of God. It is fundamentally a prayer of active surrender and letting go.

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

1. Preparation

- Set aside 20 minutes for this prayer practice. It is recommended to practice this prayer daily and best if practiced twice a day, once in the morning and then in the evening.
- Find a quiet spot, void of distractions. Close your eyes.
- Let yourself settle down. Let go of any and all the thoughts, tensions, and sensations you are feeling and begin to rest in love and presence of God
- Acknowledge God's presence with you. Offer yourself and this time to God. Bid the Holy Spirit to enliven this discipline.

2. Select a word or image

- This kind of prayer is often difficult because the minute we are quiet, our minds are flooded with images and thoughts. To quiet such thoughts and images and to help return the focus back to being fully present to the presence of God, the prayerful selection of a word or image is recommended to gently "brush" the distractions away and refocus concentration back on God.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to give you a word or image that will serve as the concrete expression of your intention to surrender all of your concerns as you focus on entering God's presence.

3. Be in the Presence of God

- When you become aware of thoughts, or as internal sensations arise, just take this as your signal to gently return to the word or image.
- If thoughts subside and you find yourself restfully aware of God's love and presence, simply let go of the word. Just be in that still presence of God. When thoughts or images begin to stir again, gently return to the Spirit-led image or word.

4. Close with Contemplative Resting and Thankfulness.

- At the end of your prayer, you might want to recite the Lord's Prayer.
- Take a couple of minutes to come out of the silence -- even if you don't feel you need it.
- Express to God your thankfulness and pray for others in need of God's grace.

Spiritual Practice of Lectio Divina

An Ancient Way of Praying the Scriptures

“Seek in reading, and you will find in meditation,
knock in prayer, and it will be opened to you in contemplation.”
—St. John of the Cross

1. Prepare Yourself

- Find a quiet spot, void of distractions.
- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Begin your prayer by acknowledging God’s presence within you. Offer yourself and this time to God.
- Bid the Holy Spirit to enliven your understanding of God’s Word.

2. Read the passage

- Read the passage slowly twice. The second time, become aware of a particular word or phrase that catches your attention, stirs, beckons, or addresses you.
- For about two minutes just sit with the word or phrase. Let it echo through your mind, your inner self. If you are comfortable, speak that word aloud several times, with generous moments of silence in between.
- Record in your journal the word or phrase that caught your attention.

3. Read the passage again, slowly

- Notice the selected word or phrase.
- Again, sit silently for about two minutes. Pay attention to any thoughts, feelings, or associations connected to the word or phrase.
- Jot these down in your journal.

4. Read the passage a final time

- Return to your word or phrase, revisit your experience.
- Let this quiet time be longer, perhaps 5-10 minutes. Notice the way this word or phrase, feeling or image connects with the context and circumstances of your life right now. Explore what God might be saying to you through these words, feelings, or experience. Notice how God is present to you in this word or phrase. How is God nudging you to respond? Stay with your explorations until you feel ready to move on.
- At the end of the time, record in your journal your experience and insights.

5. Rest and Offer Thanks

- Take a moment to contemplatively rest in the embrace of the Spirit.
- Thank God for whatever you have received.

Spiritual Practice of Spiritual Reading

“We should read the words not in agitation, but in calm;
not hurriedly, but slowly, a few at a time, pausing in attentive reflection . . .
Then the reader will experience their ability to enkindle the ardor of prayer.”

—Jerome

1. Prepare Yourself

- Choose a place you associate with prayer rather than study or work
- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Begin your prayer by acknowledging God's presence within you. Offer yourself and this time to God.
- Bid the Holy Spirit to enliven the reading.

2. Read Slowly

- Read slowly, ruminating as you read.
- Notice any words, phrases, or images that catch your attention; stirs or beckons you; shimmers or bubbles up. Be attentive to what you find both positive and negative.

3. Explore

- When you touch on a word, phrase or image that captures your attention, stop and explore it.
- Approach the reading with humility. Don't demand that the text meet your expectations for what an "enlightened" author should write. Accept the author as another imperfect human, a product of his or her own time and situation. Allow the text to be a gift from both God and the author.
- As you read the passage, you might keep ask yourself some of these questions:
 - ✓ How is what I'm reading true of my own life? Where does it reflect my own *experience*?
 - ✓ How does this text challenge me? What new *direction* does it offer me?
 - ✓ What must I change to put what I am reading into practice?
- You might also devote special attention to sections that upset you.
 - ✓ What is the source of the disturbance? Do you want to argue theology? Are you turned off by cultural differences?
 - ✓ How might this insight turn your life upside down if you took it seriously?

4. Journal

- Write down significant movements, insights, struggles. Note lingering questions.
- Ask for God's help in living out any new insights or direction you have perceived.

5. Rest and Offer Thanks

- Take a moment to contemplatively rest in the embrace of the Spirit.
- Thank God for whatever you have received.

Spiritual Practice of Spiritual Journaling

“Even though I might know everything about God,
God is not a person for me until I speak to God and God speaks to me.
At that precise moment authentic personal relationship begins. “

—Mariano Magrassi

1. Preparation

- You might want to focus on a Psalm, passage of Scripture, hymn, or a sacred symbol.
- Find a quiet spot, void of distractions.
- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Begin your prayer by acknowledging God’s presence within you. Offer yourself and this time to God.
- Bid the Holy Spirit to be present during your journaling.

2. Journal

- Using pen, pencil, crayons, charcoals, etc., write, sketch, paint, or draw your thoughts. Allow God to speak through this creative process.
- Speak directly to God in light of the fruit of this process.
- You may want use the dialog formula to capture your conversation with God. Write your name and proceed to write out your feelings and thoughts to God. Then write God’s name down, wait for a response and then write it down.

3. Intentional Attentiveness

- After this creative process, take a moment to re-center.
- You may want to ponder:
 - ✓ What feelings were experienced, both feelings that invite and feelings that shut down? What were the points of resistance, points of opening?
 - ✓ Explore what God might be saying to you through these words, drawings, feelings or experience.
 - ✓ How is God calling me? What response did I make to God during this time?
 - ✓ Notice anything that captures your attention; stirs, beckons or addresses you, shimmers or bubbles up, or invites further reflection.
- Stay with your explorations until you feel ready to move on.
- Record in your journal your experience and insights.

4. Rest and Offer Thanks

- Take a moment to contemplatively rest in the embrace of the Spirit.
- Thank God for whatever you have received.

Spiritual Practice of Personal Bible Study

“ . . . any attempt on our part to hear God’s voice concerns the relationship of our personal experience to the contents of the Bible. . . if we are ready to understand the biblical record, we must enter into our study of it on the assumption that the experiences recorded there are basically of the same type as ours would have been if we had been there.”

–Dallas Willard

1. Prepare Yourself

- Find a quiet spot, void of distractions.
- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Begin your prayer by acknowledging God’s presence within you. Offer yourself and this time to God.
- Bid the Holy Spirit to enliven your understanding of God’s Word.

2. Preview

- Read through the text without stopping.
- What verse or verses catch your attention most? Make note of them.
- Some people find it helpful to copy the text into their study journal.

3. Read

- Go back through the text. List any questions the text raises for you. What additional information would be helpful for you to have?
- Make sure you understand the text before interpreting it.

4. Observe and Interpret the Text

- What do you think the text is saying? What does it mean?
- Consult with biblical resource tools like a Bible dictionary or atlas.
- Consult and compare what others have observed using a variety of commentaries.

5. Apply

- Based on what the passage says, what changes is the Holy Spirit prompting you to make?
- Spend time sitting quietly listening to what God is saying to you.
- How do you intend to respond to what God is teaching you through the text?

6. Pray

- Pray about other issues and concerns, family and friends, in light of this passage.
- Thank God for what you have received.