



An introduction to some contemplative prayer practices

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1. The Examen

The Examen, based on the writings of Ignatius of Loyola, is a practice of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to discern God's presence and God's direction for us.¹ The aim of Examen is not to label actions as good or bad, but to discern the impulses that underlie our actions throughout the day.

There are a number of methods for the Examen, but here is a simple one:

1. **Ask God for light**, so that I look back on the day with God's eyes, not just my own.
2. **Give thanks** for the gift of the day I have just lived.
3. **Review the day**, carefully looking back, and being guided by the Spirit.
4. **Face my shortcomings**, what is wrong in my life and in me.
5. **Look forward to the day to come**, asking where we need God tomorrow.

2. Fasting

Those who fast learn to control their hunger or desire for comfort so that they can also learn to control their other, more harmful passions—greed, lust, envy, anger and so forth. We start with the simple desires so we can learn to master the deeper, spiritual ones.²

Fasting (willing abstinence or reduction) could take a number of forms. At Hope, we have strongly suggested two forms of fasting—fasting from food, and digital fasting.

Fasting from food is, of course, the most well-known form of fasting, and seeks to bring our natural desire for food—perhaps our most basic desire—under control.

Digital fasting recognises the often-destructive force that screens and other technologies can have on our brains, lives, and relationships. We too easily become distracted, and ignore the things in our lives that are most important in order to give our attention to the fleeting and empty satisfaction of receiving a notification. Moreover, our screens prevent us from ever being bored, and in losing the blessing of boredom we may find our creativity, meditateness, and draw towards meaningful relationships slowly being sucked away.

3. Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina literally means “divine reading,” and is the practice of praying the Scriptures. It centres on listening to a small portion of text with the “ears of our heart.” It can be done individually or in a group.

There are four steps in Lectio Divina, although they are not rules so much as guidelines:

- a) **Lectio (reading)**: Read the Scripture slowly, so that it sinks into us.
- b) **Meditatio (reflecting)**: Take time to silently reflect on the text we have just read, meditating on what God might be saying through it.
- c) **Oratio (responding)**: We respond to God by allowing our hearts, inspired by the text, to pour out in prayer. This should be less a process of well-thought-out prayers, and more about allowing prayers to arise out of the depths of us.
- d) **Contemplation (resting)**: In this final stage, we let go of our plans and ideas, and simply rest in God. We listen for the still, small voice of God who speaks to us in the depths of our person.

¹ “The Daily Examen,” <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen>.

² Matt Anslow, “Fasting: Learning to Desire Differently,” <http://hopeuniting.org.au/uncategorized/fasting-learning-to-desire-differently/>



4. Praying the Psalms

Praying the Psalms is to simply read the Psalms slowly while praying through them as you read. Simple, and yet not so simple.³

5. Centring Prayer

Centring Prayer, developed in the 1970s, is based on more ancient practices, including Lectio Divina. Like Lectio Divina, the root of Centring Prayer is listening to the Word of God in Scripture. It is a way of going beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Christ. Centring Prayer should last for no less than 20 minutes.⁴ The guidelines for Centring Prayer are:⁵

1. **Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.** This word should be 1–2 syllables (for example God, Jesus, Father, Mother, love, peace). The word is not sacred because of its inherent meaning, but because of the meaning we give it as an expression of intention to commune with God. We shouldn't change the word throughout the prayer, since this would be to engage our thoughts. It is also possible to focus on one's breath rather than a sacred word.
2. **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.** We should introduce the sacred word as gently as possible.
3. **When engaged with your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.** Such thoughts, which are a normal part of centring prayer, may include any perceptions, such as body sensations, feelings, images or reflections.
4. **At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.** This helps us bring the silence into everyday life.

6. The Active Prayer Practice

The active prayer involves a phrase drawn from Scripture, comprised of five to twelve syllables. The pray-er says this phrase aloud or silently in sync with their heartbeat. Examples include "O Lord, come to my assistance," "Abide in my love," "I belong to you, O Lord," and "Jesus, my light and my love."⁶

A phrase can be repeated at any time of the day, and the advantage of repeating the same phrase frequently is that "it eventually becomes a 'tape' similar to the 'tapes' that accompany one's upsetting emotions."⁷ The new 'tape' erases the old ones so the Spirit can suggest what should be done.

7. Handwriting Scripture/Prayers

Just as we tend to absorb more from lectures or sermons when we take notes, so too do we absorb more of the Scriptures and of God's word to us in prayer when we handwrite them.

The process is simple: Either choose a portion of Scripture and write it out on a bit of paper, or write out your prayers as you say them. Both practices force the pray-er to slow down as they read or pray, reflecting more deeply on what they write.

³ A good starting point is "Five Ways to Pray the Psalms," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/35.88.html>.

⁴ More resources at <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/centering-prayer>.

⁵ Keating, "The Method of Centering Prayer," <https://cpt.org/files/WS%20-%20Centering%20Prayer.pdf>.

⁶ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 134.

⁷ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 133.