

Christian Meditation: A Beginner's Guide to Catholic Mental Prayer

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Christian meditation "engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire" in prayer. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2708)

It is also known as *mental prayer*.

This article is a detailed, "how to" guide to Christian meditation. You **can** develop a strong prayer life!

Christian meditation is essential

Every Christian **needs** to practice mental prayer. Every day.

Your faith cannot live without prayer, the "vital and personal relationship with the living and true God." (*Catechism*, 2744 & 2558)

Recall the basic truths about prayer from this site's [how to pray](#) article:

- Prayer is essential to the Christian life
- It is compatible with everyday life
- Prayer will nurture with even the smallest faith
- It's easy to learn the basics of prayer

Your good habits of [daily Catholic prayer](#) and the [presence of God](#) will help you make a strong start in Christian meditation.

Those habits make it easy for you to start mental prayer. In fact, they'll make it an absolute **pleasure!**

With your habit of daily Catholic prayer, you're already doing the most basic action of mental prayer: speaking with God.

Now you need to learn to **listen** to him, too. Christian meditation is the way to do that.

Not your everyday "meditation"

Don't let the word "meditation" fool you. Mental prayer is very **different** from Eastern meditation practices.

- Non-Christian meditation practices aim at *emptying* the mind.
- Christian meditation **engages** the mind in prayer.

Catholic meditation seeks use the faculties of the mind to know the Lord, understand his love for us, and to move into deep union with him. Use of the mind "is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ." (*Catechism*, 2708)

Put simply, our goal is to to answer the basic human question: "Lord, what do you want me to do?" (*Catechism*, 2706)

Christian meditation must immerse us in the Trinity: we surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit, the master of prayer, so that he can unite us to Christ and perfect our prayer to the Father.

"Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"

(*Gal 4:6*)

(If you want to know more about the differences between non-Christian and Christian meditation, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) wrote a paper on the topic. It's pretty dense reading! But it's worth a look if you're interested in the topic. See the CDF's "Some Aspects of [Christian Meditation](#)" for more (opens a new browser window).)

What you'll need

You only need a few simple things to start a lifetime of rich Christian meditation:

- A small amount of time
- A quiet place
- A Bible

Start by taking just 5 or 10 minutes, alone and in quiet. Early in the day is best, but if that's not possible for you, find another time.

Give yourself a set time, and stick to it. Consistency is very important: don't cut prayer short if you're "dry" one day, and likewise don't prolong it if you're feeling wonderful.

You also need to find some written or visual **material** to use as the basis of your Christian

meditation. The Gospels are the best choice. Pick one and read a part each day, or just use the daily Mass readings. You can read the daily Gospel passage in your Bible, subscribe to a monthly booklet like [Magnificat](#), or read them [online](#).

- The daily readings are good because they're **brief**. You're reading for *depth* here, not length.

You can use many things as the source material for Christian meditation: Scripture, especially the Gospels, spiritual writings, liturgical texts, and even the "fingerprints of God" visible in the natural world itself.

Pick your reading *beforehand*, so you don't waste your prayer time finding a suitable passage in the Bible.

Of course, the eBook [Following Christ Through The Gospels](#) is a terrific resource for learning to pray with Scripture. This classic by renowned priest Father Bernard Basset is a **step-by-step** guide to praying with the Gospels.

It was written specifically to help people develop a solid prayer life, as well as gain a deep understanding of the Gospels. This is available through the Catholic Spiritual Treasures program.

Bible passages to get you started

I know — it's a little intimidating to have to find a good place in the Bible to start.

Here's a small set of Scripture passages to get you started. I'm deliberately not including the text itself here, so you'll get comfortable working with your Bible. You'll thank me later. (You're quite welcome; don't mention it!)

These passages vary in length quite a bit. The first one, in particular, is very long. Pick just a few verses at a time from the longer readings. Remember, you'll be reading for *depth* in Christian meditation, so shorter is better.

1. Matthew chapters 5-7 (*The Sermon on the Mount* — this is one of the most essential parts of the Gospels to get to know.)
2. Matthew 13:1-24 (*The parable of the sower*)

3. Matthew 13:44-50 (Parables: *hidden treasure, pearl of great price*)
4. Matthew 18:1-6 (*Becoming like children*)
5. Matthew 18:21-35 (*The unforgiving servant*)
6. Matthew 19:16-30 (*The rich young man*)
7. Mark 1:14-15 (*The proclamation of the Kingdom*)
8. Mark 1:40-45 (*The healing of the leper*)
9. Mark 5:24-34 (*The healing of the woman with the hemorrhage*)
10. Luke 1:46-55 (*The Magnificat*)
11. Luke 15:1-10 (Parables: *the lost sheep, the lost coin*)
12. Luke 15:11-32 (*The prodigal son*)
13. Luke 17:5-10 (Faith; attitude of service)
14. John 1:1-18
15. John 2:1-11 (*Wedding at Cana*)
16. John 3:14-21
17. John 8:23-32 (*"The truth will make you free"*)
18. John 15:1-11 (*The vine & branches*)
19. John 15:12-17 (*"Love one another"*)

Naturally, the Bible is full of outstanding material for Christian meditation! These suggestions are just some good places to start.

Prayer time: preparation

Again, two things are very important in Christian meditation:

- Consistency in *time* of prayer
- Consistency in *duration*

This consistency is so **critical** because of what's called the "battle of prayer". As you grow in prayer, you'll overcome many things: tiredness, distractions, boredom, the feeling that you're not getting anything out of Christian meditation, etc. All of these things conspire to tempt you into **stopping** your prayer life.

The stakes here are very high indeed. Your spiritual life **depends** upon persisting in prayer! That's why it's called a *battle*.

Realize that this battle starts **before** you even sit down to pray — it starts with simply making and keeping the appointed time for Christian meditation. Choose to fight this first battle the strongest. Keep to your chosen time! It's easy to do, and you'll find it makes it easier to fight the *other* battles, also.

Once you're ready to start, sit down and quiet your mind.

Place yourself in the presence of God and ask for his help with a quick prayer. You can use your own words, or a written prayer. I use this one:

Preparatory Prayer

My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence, I ask your pardon for my sins, and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

(From *Handbook of Prayers*, James Socias, ed.)

The basic structure of prayer time

Your Christian meditation session should generally follow this basic outline:

1. Read your source material for the day (the Gospel passage, or whatever you're using). Read it two or three times, slowly, and let it sink in.
2. If a part of the reading grabs your attention, stay with it.
3. *Meditate* on the reading, or on the part that catches your attention. **The next sections are a detailed guide to doing this!**
 - o This is the heart of your prayer time. You'll spend most of the time on this point.
4. If your thoughts drift, regain focus with the words of the passage.
5. Form some **specific** resolutions based on your meditation. Know how you are going to apply these thoughts to *your* life, *today*.
6. End with a quick prayer of thanks.

Christian meditation itself

The *meditation* itself is the heart of your prayer time.

Let the passage provide material for a *conversation* with God: ask him questions, tell him things. Above all, **listen** to him, both in the words of Scripture and in how those words guide your thoughts.

If you need help with this part of Christian meditation, try something like:

- Pretend that God wrote these words just to you, right now, to tell you something important. What is it? How will it affect your life?
- Imagine the scene in the reading. Picture yourself there, hearing the words, seeing the action. Follow the Lord, watch him, listen. What is he teaching you?
- What does the passage tell you about God? What is he like? What does he value? What does the passage say about *you*?
- Does the reading's message, or a part of it, describe *you*, for good or bad? What specific things should you change in your life to be closer to the Gospel message you're reading?

The goal of Christian meditation is closer **union** with Christ.

You **don't** want to reduce mental prayer to a simple reflection on the passage you're reading. You should get to know Christ better, *and love him more*. You should learn of his boundless love for you, *so you can grow closer to him*. You should see how he acts and loves and gives his very life for you, *so you can become more like him*. You should see how he seeks and does the will of the Father, *so you can, too*.

Get it?

The goal of Christian meditation is **not** just to think good thoughts about the passage. What counts is how we **apply** those thoughts to our lives.

God communicates with us through our thoughts. We must take those thoughts, form resolutions, and act on them.

"What? God talks to us through our thoughts?"

Yes, indeed!

In prayer, God most often affects our **thoughts** to communicate with us. Often it's a gentle, normal movement of thought. Occasionally it may be a sudden and strong realization.

You also sense God's voice through your conscience, imagination, and even your heart and feelings. Christian meditation can use all of these.

Of course, other things besides God affect your thoughts & emotions! Not all of them are good. Make sure that the message you're hearing in Christian meditation is consistent with the truths found in Scripture, the teachings of the Church, and general "good living."

- Don't be afraid to put the ball back in God's court if you're not sure: "Lord, I'm not sure if this is from you or not. If it is, please tell me more clearly at some other time. Until then, I won't act on it."
- Check out any relevant Church teachings. The Holy Spirit guides and forms the Church — he **never** asks us to act contrary to its genuine teachings! (*Catechism* 1783-5, 2039)
- Ask a priest for help if you're still doubtful about something, or if you think God is asking you to make unusual changes in your life. Most priests will be delighted to help you advance in prayer.

When your thoughts drift during prayer, regain focus with the words of the passage.

And don't forget: Form some **specific** resolutions based on your Christian meditation. Know how you are going to apply these thoughts to *your* life, *today*.

"What should I think about?"

Your thoughts during prayer will be as unique as you are.

Still, most people find that their thoughts in Christian meditation centers on some of the big themes found in Scripture:

- Love God more
- Seek to do the Father's will, not your own
- Increase your faith
- Follow Christ more closely
- Turn from sin
- Rely on God's mercy and love

It's not surprising that these are such common themes in prayer: God has repeated them over & over in his Revelation to us for thousands of years! (Why haven't we gotten the message yet?)

The **key** to prayer in Christian meditation is to move beyond seeing only the general themes, and to see how they affect **you** and call you to change your life.

In other words...

...form specific resolutions!

I'll tell you plainly: forming and keeping specific resolutions is one of the more challenging parts of Christian meditation, and prayer in general. It's a challenge because it calls us to **change** our lives. And most of us resist doing that.

I've found that using a **prayer book** can be a tremendous help in this area.

I use a series of prayer books called *In Conversation with God* by Francis Fernandez. I use it every day, and it's outstanding. There are three reflections for each day (which is why they need several volumes for a whole year). Each reflection help me focus on a main theme in the daily Scripture readings. (My mind tends to wander off easily otherwise during Christian meditation.)

But beyond that, I think the **most** valuable thing about this series of books is that they deliberately guide you in making those resolutions, and in understanding the specifics of how to grow in faith and virtue.

Each reflection also contains a little lesson on how to *live* something taken from the Scripture reading. Something like:

- What humility is and how to grow in it
- How to get to know the Holy Spirit in your daily life
- What specific good disposition is shown by a Scripture reading, and how to apply it to your life today

When I first started using the *In Conversation with God* books a few years ago, I was surprised at how much I had been **missing** in my daily prayer — I was badly lacking in specific resolutions. Those books have been an outstanding fuel for growth in my prayer life, and in my faith in general.

Highly recommended! I've found it to be **essential** in learning how to pray.

Ending your time of prayer

When it's time to end your Christian meditation, recall your specific resolutions. (You didn't forget to make them, did you?)

Then end with a quick prayer of thanks. Something like:

Closing prayer

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

(From *Handbook of Prayers*, James Socias, ed.)

Now, move on to the rest of your day!

Act on your resolutions as soon as possible. Recall them throughout the day. Keep asking God to help you remember them and put them into practice.

Repeat the next day!

Christian meditation is **not** hard. You can do this!

People can get intimidated by thinking they have to have profound, deep thoughts about the passages they're meditating on.

You don't have to.

God wants you to become a great saint for him — in your **ordinary** life! So it's natural that many of your thoughts and resolutions in Christian meditation will also be...

...about your ordinary life.

Of course, it helps to have more than this brief description of Christian meditation when you're learning how to pray. Besides the *In Conversation with God* series (above), there are two excellent books on this subject.

One is Amy Welborn's *Prove It! Prayer*, which I mention in some other articles here, too. If you're coming to mental prayer for the first time, start with Welborn's book. Again, don't be put off by the fact that its marketing spin says the book

is aimed at teens: this book will give you a strong start in prayer.

Thomas Green's *Opening to God* is also terrific. It's an adult-oriented book, and goes a little deeper than Welborn's book. Green's also has some good examples in the latter chapter. Personally, I found those examples to be invaluable: they're a great model for learning about the common subject matter of prayer.

Those two books will give you a stronger background in prayer, and will help you to answer a lot of questions you probably have about Christian meditation. The *In Conversation with God* series goes one step better, with **specific guidance** for each day!

Just start!

Start **now**.

Begin that prayer life you've always wished for. It **can** be yours. It begins with the simple habits and steps for Christian meditation that you've just read in this article.

Don't put it off until tomorrow. Commit to doing what's needed for your faith. (Which reminds me of another great Gospel passage for prayer: Luke 12:16-21.)

At the end of the day, it is our union with Christ that saves us. Our work is just to respond to his invitation to union.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.

(1 John 3:1)

Amen!

How to Pray: A Catholic Guide to the Interior Life

It's no secret: you **can** learn how to pray!

Yes, **you!**

Even if you've got a houseful of screaming kids, or too much schoolwork, or a job that consumes way too much of your time.

In fact, that just means that you need prayer more! Because prayer gives true **freedom**, "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). And that's exactly what you need right about now, isn't it? Yeah, I know...

...it's what we all need!

This brief guide to Catholic prayer is the fruit of my own struggle to develop a good prayer life.

I found it difficult to just **find** solid guidance in learning how to pray. But good information helped immensely, in developing both an interior life and my faith as a whole. This article covers the best things I've learned from true experts, the keys that unlocked the riches of prayer.

So let's get started, shall we?

Overcoming common myths

Too many people **think** they have good reasons why they cannot have a better prayer life.

Don't believe them!

I've used these excuses myself too many times in my life. And they still creep back in when I'm not looking! Some common **myths** are:

- "I don't need to pray in any 'formal' sense. God knows I love him."
- "I just can't find the time to pray."
- "My faith isn't deep enough to get anything out of prayer."

- "I've tried learning how to pray, but I just don't 'get it'. It's too hard."

Please know that **the truth** about prayer is Good News!

Truth: A prayer life is **essential** to the Christian life.

Prayer is "a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God." (*Catechism*, 2558)

Prayer the lifeblood of your faith. Without prayer, your faith will die. (*Catechism*, 2744)

Truth: Prayer is **compatible** with everyday life.

You do need a **small** amount of quiet time each day to learn how to pray. But it's not difficult — just 5 or 10 minutes to start is fine.

And you'll also make prayer a **part** of the fabric of everyday life. You can find God in all the normal tasks of daily life. Seek him there!

"It is possible to offer fervent prayer even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop, . . . while buying or selling, . . . or even while cooking."

— St. John Chrysostom

Truth: Even the smallest faith **will** blossom through prayer.

Here's a secret: as with faith itself, **God** does all of prayer's hard work! We get the easy part. And our part is learning how to pray, and then praying every day.

St. Paul tells us, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with sighs too deep for words." (Rom 8:26)

And the *Catechism* says: "The Holy Spirit, the artisan of God's works, is the master of prayer." (#741)

With a Master like that, how can you go wrong?

Truth: Learning how to pray is **simple**.

The basics of prayer are simple.

Throughout the ages, **all** kinds of people have learned how to pray.

Why not you, too?

For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.

— St. Therese of Lisieux

If you recognize your own thinking in any of those myths about prayer, **examine** the problem directly. You owe it to yourself to come to terms with it!

I've found Amy Welborn's book *Prove It! Prayer* to be a great help in addressing these questions. It's a great help for learning how to pray and developing a solid, mature prayer life. Don't be put off by the fact that the book is marketed for teens & young adults: the writing is breezy and casual, but the material is outstanding. It's very approachable. Easily one of the best guides to beginning a prayer life that I've seen.

The foundation: conversion

If you're serious about developing a prayer life, you have to make a fundamental commitment to **convert** to Christ.

That means you have:

- Love for God
- Desire to do his will
- Openness to change in your life

Prayer relies on this foundation. So what if you're **not** quite there yet?

Welcome to the club!

None of us is fully "there yet." Conversion is an **ongoing** challenge. It doesn't end when you're baptized or confirmed. You'll have to return to it frequently & renew your commitment.

But you do need a basic **commitment** to love & follow the Lord. Faith comes from God, not from our own work. But we have to consciously receive and nurture his gift of faith. A good step is learning how to pray.

It's always good to return to the basics of conversion. Review them, make sure that you understand them. I find it's helpful to pretend I'm just starting out again, and take it step by step. The article about the [RCIA inquiry stage](#) talks a lot about building a strong foundation of love for Christ.

Everything in the spiritual life rests on this foundation.

First step: pray for help

Turn to God as you learn how to pray.

With even the smallest initial faith, you'll find it easy to turn to God and ask him for **help**. A wonderful prayer here is to use the words of the sick child's father in the Gospel of Mark:

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

(Mk 9:24)

Now **you** say it! Go ahead; I'll wait. And really mean it — let it come from your **heart**.

Wasn't that easy?

Hey! You're praying!

- You're aware of a desire for God.
- You wanted what he wants for you.
- You reached out to ask him to help you get there.

Those are basically the three points we listed in the previous section!

In fact, this short prayer is an **outstanding model** of some basic *attitudes* we need for effective prayer.

Which leads us to...

Basic attitudes

This is **important**: *Prayer depends on this attitude of neediness before God, expressed beautifully in the prayer from Scripture, above.*

This attitude is one of *humility* and basic *faith*. It looks with confidence to God as the only source that can fulfill our needs and desires.

We call this having **good dispositions**.

The keys to learning how to pray:

- Good dispositions, especially humility and faith
- Perseverance

Without good dispositions, we won't really **be** praying.

Without perseverance, we won't **keep** praying.

Compare the attitudes of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Jesus's parable from Luke's Gospel (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee is one of those who "trusted in themselves... and despised others." He lacks good dispositions; you could even say he lacks basic **conversion**.

The Pharisee really talks to himself rather than God. He loves himself, but not God or neighbor. His prayer is not true prayer — hence, Jesus says he is not "justified."

The Pharisee's prayer is the opposite of a prayer of humility and faith.

In contrast, the tax collector's prayer is rooted in the humility of knowing he's done wrong, and in faith he looks to God's mercy: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Our **dispositions** in prayer are what will make us grow or stagnate in the interior life.

In addition, **perseverance** is necessary for learning how to pray. It shows our commitment to loving God even if we don't feel any particular benefit.

Especially when learning how to pray, most people face "temptations which cast doubt on the usefulness or even the possibility of prayer" (*Catechism*, 2753). The remedy is perseverance and trust in God.

Develop these two basic attitudes. Make them your own. Keep them before you constantly as you begin to pray.

- Using a **prayer book** as a guide will give you great benefit here. The best ones will help you develop good dispositions while guiding your prayer. The *In Conversation With God* series are outstanding in this respect. It often focuses on our basic attitudes and virtues, as this is the source of many difficulties in prayer and in faith.

Return to these basic attitudes frequently as you learn how to pray. Work to strengthen them.

Build a strong foundation and prayer will become much easier.

Two simple habits

The **next** step in learning how to pray is to develop two simple habits of prayer.

1. Sprinkle a few quick prayers into key parts of your day
2. Develop your awareness of the presence of God

This will work some **quick** prayers into the fabric of your normal day. You'll also have a basic **structure** of prayer to build on.

Most of all, it makes prayer a **natural** part of daily life. That's very important as you learn how to pray: if it's something *foreign* to your normal day, you'll be tempted to drop it as soon as you're pressed for time.

This is very easy.

The article [daily Catholic prayer](#) gives you a lot of suggestions for how to add a few quick prayers into your day. It only takes a few seconds here or a minute there, and suddenly your whole day is framed by prayer.

Another article helps make living in the [presence of God](#) a habit. This is also an **essential** part of the spiritual life.

The need to start simply

You may be tempted to skip those habits mentioned above.

Do not skip them!

A very common mistake in learning how to pray is to take on **too much** and then grow discouraged. I've seen people try to start with hour-long prayer sessions, prayer journals, and long prayer workshops — only to give up in frustration.

The best approach is to do the **opposite**: Start very simply. Only take on a little. Build slowly.

In fact, these habit gets you started so easily that you'll only notice the **joy** of suddenly having prayer in your day! And you won't have to struggle to find the time.

So read those two articles now about [daily Catholic prayer](#) and the [presence of God](#). Pick just a few things to start with, and **do them**. They're the first steps as you learn how to pray.

You'll form a wonderful habit of prayer that runs throughout your day. Everything else will be framed by your deep love for God, and your desire for union with him.

Now you'll find it easy to spend a few minutes in silence with the Lord...

Talking with God: mental prayer

Daily mental prayer is **necessary** for the Christian.

Your good habits of brief prayer throughout the day will make this not only easy, but an absolute **pleasure!**

Mental prayer, or Christian meditation, will be the focus of your growth in how to pray.

Note

This detailed "how to" section on **mental prayer** grew so large that I had to make it into a separate article!

Read it to learn about how to **start** praying in the rich Catholic tradition of [Christian meditation](#) — and how to **keep going**.

Another excellent resource is the [Following Christ Through The Gospels eBook](#). This classic is a step-by-step **guide** to prayer using the Gospels as source material. Written by acclaimed priest Father Bernard Basset, it's available through the Catholic Spiritual Treasures program.

A school of prayer: the Rosary

There's actually an easy way to learn how to pray: the Rosary!

Non-Catholics often just do **not** understand the Rosary. (Believe me, I've been there myself!)

Yes, the Holy Rosary is indeed a loving devotion to Mary. But it's really much more than that: the Rosary is a beautiful **school** of prayer. It's a great way to learn how to pray.

The whole point of the Rosary is to lead you through some of the central Mysteries of Christ's life. As you go through each Mystery, you spend some time meditating on it.

See the article about [how to pray the Rosary](#) for all the details!

New life awaits you!

Prayer is your lifeline to a new life in Christ.

Use it!

Learn how to pray. Give yourself the gift of knowing how to talk with God.

Prayer "is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man." (*Catechism*, 2564)

Did you catch that?

You and God both act **together** in prayer!

The Lord awaits. "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20)

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let him who hears say, "Come." And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price.

(Rev 22:17)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* contains a beautiful set of reflections on the Our Father. They are another good guide for [how to pray](#) (opens a new browser window). (Be sure to follow the "next" buttons in that window to read through all of the pages!)

See our [home page](#) for more articles for the *beginning Catholic*.