

Mental prayer. How to do it?

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A Christian is someone who has a good relationship with Christ, and Mental Prayer is a good way to develop such a relationship. In this article, we will discuss what Mental Prayer is and how to do it.

Mental Prayer is a quest to find out what God wants us to do

It is important to understand that God is the initiator of prayer. He invites us and we respond even if we are asking something from him. If he is inviting us into prayer, then it would necessarily mean he has something to tell us. We use our efforts in Mental Prayer to find out what that is. Mental Prayer, therefore, is a quest. (CCC §2705) The mission of this quest is to find out what God wants us to do. (CCC §2706) We seek God's instruction, and we follow.

Another term for Mental Prayer is *meditation*. It is not Eastern meditation whose goal is to seek peace and tranquility. Instead, Christian meditation focuses on Christ and what he wants for us.

Mental Prayer is not Spiritual Reading. In Spiritual reading, we read articles and books that teach about spiritual life. This article, for example, is Spiritual Reading. It helps us see the world in a Christian perspective. Mental Prayer does achieve what spiritual reading does too, however, Mental Prayer is meant to feed the heart and will; while spiritual reading, the mind.

The Four C's of Mental Prayer

Father John Bartunek beautifully outlines the Four-C's of Mental Prayer in his book *A Guide to Christian Meditation*: concentrate, consider, converse, commit. I will summarize them here in my own words.

Concentrate

We focus our heart and minds to God – which is the definition of prayer (CCC §2559). We empty ourselves of what is going on around us and place God in our presence. We can do this by saying a short prayer. A good prayer is: *My Lord and my God, I know that you are here with me, that you see me, and that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence and beg forgiveness for my sins and the grace to spend this time of prayer fruitfully. My Immaculate mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my holy guardian angel intercede for me.*

Another one is : *Oh Holy Spirit, I am your humble servant in need of your help. Grant me the graces I need: the wisdom and knowledge I require to understand what you want to tell me today; and grant me the fortitude and virtues I need to do what you want me to do..*

It is easier to concentrate in a quiet place, which is why Christ often went to a mountaintop or “lonely place” to pray alone. Timing is also important. We want to choose a time when we are less bothered by phone calls, noise, and things we have to do.

If there is one vital thing to remember is that God has something to tell us, so we must put ourselves in the disposition to listen.

Consider

Another term we use for Sacred Scripture is “the word of God.” If it is indeed God’s word, then we seek its meaning. Sometimes we gloss over the words and don’t get the meaning behind them. Sometimes we read or hear certain scriptures so often that they may seem ordinary and fail to discern the extraordinary message sandwiched within. Mental Prayer is intended to unpack this meaning.

We start by reading a scripture passage. It is suggested we go about it in an orderly manner. Maybe we can read the Gospels a few verses at a time, and in the next day continue where we left off. This first way is good when you want to follow the flow of a particular evangelist’s writing. Another way is to follow the lectionary that has laid out the mass readings using a three-year cycle. This second way is good when you want to read the appropriate scripture for the liturgical seasons. If you do this for three years you would have read most of the Bible.

Read the passages prayerfully – that is, in a way that you are trying to suck the juice out of a fruit. The best way to do this is by entering into the scene itself. Place yourself into the scene and start considering things: what is the social atmosphere like? How are people saying what they are saying? Why would someone say what he or she said? Is there any cultural reason why someone does or says something? What are the people feeling?

Always remember though that in the end, you are trying to find out what God’s message is in what you are reading – and how it applies to you! This is the core of Mental Prayer.

Converse

As you read, something might strike you as odd, or funny, or interesting. Stop reading and stick with it for a few moments. Ask yourself why it is odd, funny, or interesting. If it fills you with awe, then give praise to God. Of course, you may use words, but you may just focus on his grandeur and know that God knows what’s in your mind. Sometimes words cannot express what you need to say, and that is okay. Let the Holy Spirit reach out through your wordless groans. (Romans 8:26). If the passage fills you with contrition for the things you’ve done, then stop reading and ask pardon. You may use words, but sometimes tears are all that is needed and Christ knows what they are for. If the passage makes you chuckle or break out in laughter (oh some verses are hilarious; for example the entire book of Jonah was meant to be funny – just imagine a reluctant prophet who runs away, gets swallowed by a fish, and then gets regurgitated in the same place he started) enjoy it and thank God for having a sense of humor. If the passage fills you with gratitude, then give thanks to God for his generosity and unconditional love.

These are not the only reactions that are possible. A particular passage might strike different people differently; it might even strike us in a different way at a different time. The point is to keep considering what God's message is to you personally in your situation now. We are not prevented from speaking with Mary, the saints, and the angels who are eager to help us, so feel free to include them too.

Commit

You may keep going back and forth between Considering and Conversing and that is the way it is supposed to go. However, at one point, it will be time to end. Some people like to set a time. Maybe a beginner ends in ten minutes, and that can be expanded to twenty or thirty minutes as you become more comfortable with Mental Prayer. Some can spend an entire hour in mental prayer – but that doesn't come without building up to it. Maybe you can do it in two 30-minute tranches.

At this end point, it would be good to zero-in on one thing that touched you the most. It could be an inspiration to do something you've been procrastinating, or a resolution to stop doing a bad habit, or simply having more affection for God. Focus on this and commit on whatever it is touched you in this meditation. Resolve to do it if it is something you need to do. Ask for God's grace if you need to. A good way to make this practical is to infuse this resolution into your work and social activities for the day, (or the next day if you pray at night.)

It would be nice to end with a prayer. A good one is: *Oh my God I thank you for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you have communicated to me in this meditation. I beg your help in performing them. My Immaculate mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my holy guardian angel intercede for me.*

Practice Mental Prayer

We know we can't be good at something if we don't practice it. Weight-lifters can't lift very heavy weights right away. Instead, they start small and work their way up. Our prayer life is the same way too. We need to pray better each time – our prayer life can't be the same now as it was when we were a child. Our prayer life has to be better today than it was a year ago. We can only do that if we pray often. The best thing to do is to set a time of prayer everyday as if it were an appointment with Our Lord.

Materials on Mental Prayer

There are some books that have commentaries on the Gospels that help our mind in Mental Prayer. A good one is *The Better Part* by Fr. John Bartunek (Published by Ministry 23, Amazon). It groups Gospel passage in chunks and explains it in four ways: Christ the Lord, Christ the teacher, Christ the friend, and Christ in my life. Each chunk also has guide questions for group discussions, but it can also be used privately in prayer. The back of the book has a guide to readings of the liturgical calendar.

Another book is *To Know Christ Jesus* by Frank J. Sheed (Published by Angelico Press, 2013)

Of course, this is not the only way to do Mental Prayer. But you can start with this and it can evolve as you grow in prayer. Sometimes a song or a religious painting might evoke Mental Prayer, and that is perfectly alright too. The thing is we must not stop praying. It reminds us we are children who are dependent on a Father.