

What is the difference between saying prayers, meditation and contemplation?

What are we doing when we pray? It is an opening of the “whole self” to God; that is, our physical, intellectual and emotional dimensions, not merely the expression of wishes or the rote repetition of words. It is talking to God either privately or in a group/congregation or as in a worship. In Matthew 18:20; Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered, Jesus promises to be there, to be present for them..." in the community, the gathering that is called Church. This is the reason Jesus taught his disciples to pray (Matthew 6:9-13).

Many of us grew up thinking that prayer was all about words—lots of words offered to God on a daily basis—pious words, begging words, prayer-list words. Certainly prayer is not word alone, it involves a waiting or a silence wherein we listen attentively for God's voice. This form of praying is called meditation. Meditation is a reflective focusing on the spiritual content in a Devotional prayer. For instance, meditating on the mysteries of the Holy Rosary. During meditation, in place of words we focus on images, imagination, and interior prayerful feelings.

Contemplation is silence in the presence of God with the intention of being present before God. Meditative contemplation is sitting in the loving presence of God in silence. St. Teresa says, “the wild beasts of our wild thoughts make the soul close her eyes to everything but them.” Thus what we need to do is to tame our wild thoughts so that we can become ever more conformed to the mind of Christ (Galatians 4:19). Often this requires very technical skill and discipline of concentration. Thomas Keating provides four guidelines to help us consent to God's presence and remain with this engagement:

1. The first is "choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence
2. The second guideline is "sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence
3. "When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."
4. Conclude the prayer by remaining "in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes."

Contemplation is praying without words like Mary did by her Sacred Gaze at Jesus from under the cross. Gazing at the face of Christ is perhaps the most direct and intensive form of praying. It also opens the way to contemplation. How could one spend time gazing on the beloved face of Christ without realizing how greatly loved we are, and how powerful God's mercy is? This was what Mary did at the foot of the cross. We too can develop this practice by gazing at the crucifix, at Jesus during adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and gazing on sacred icons in silence. This is what we are called to do as we kneel at every Mass during the prayer of consecration.

Gazing includes far more than simply looking at something, even with love and attention. Our gazing has to lead us below the surface, so that we are able “to penetrate with the heart what is ordinarily missed by the eye.” There is power in prayer and God can and does answer prayers to help accomplish goals and bring about a variety of desired outcomes.

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.