Prayer Practices

The explanation of the following prayer practices is meant to be a guide, not a rulebook. The best way to understand prayer is to pray. The best way to know God is to spend time with God. There are many ways to pray. Here are some ways to pray that have been around for a long time. Try them out, experiment, explore. There’s no wrong way to pray. God loves you and wants to be in relationship with you. Here are some ways to deepen your relationship with God.

Centering Prayer – This prayer practice was founded by a Cistercian monk in the 1960's named Father Thomas Keating, even though the seeds of this form of contemplation were sown early in the Christian era. This is a way to quiet your mind and center your spirit on a “sacred phrase” that has meaning for you. Feel free to choose one from the list below or choose your own.

Let go and let God
Forgive me, O God
Give me peace
Thy will be done
Help me, O Lord
Heal me, God

Say half of the words of your phrase as you breathe in and half of the words as you breathe out. Keep repeating the words over and over again with your breath. When your mind wanders to other thoughts or you are distracted by noises in the room, simply acknowledge them by saying to yourself “thinking” or “hearing”. Then gently return to your breath and your sacred phrase.

Centering prayer can quiet your “monkey mind” (mind that swings from thought to thought creating a constant chatter in your head) so that you will eventually be able to listen more intently to what God has to say to you.

The Examen – St Ignatius’s prayer of examination (or the Examen, as it has come to be called) is a prayer practice that seeks God in day-to-day life. Even though we may know intellectually that God is always with us, we are often unaware of His presence in our daily lives. This prayer practice helps us to become more aware of God’s ongoing presence in our lives.

Choose a period of time to examine in prayer. This can be a day, a week, or a specific event. Allow your mind to wander through that period of time. Ask yourself one or more of these questions:

- When did I notice God during this time? What felt like a time of God’s absence?
- What am I most/least grateful for during that time?
- When did I feel exhausted, drained or angry?
- When did I feel a sense of love, peace, joy (the gifts of the Spirit)?
It is helpful to write down what comes to you. As some answers to these questions surface, notice what this tells you about the future. How is God calling you into being or into action?
Write down your reflections if you wish. Repeat this prayer at regular intervals in order to see how God is working in your life.

**Lectio Divina** - Fifteen hundred years ago, a man we now know as Saint Benedict created this form of prayer called Lectio Divina which is Latin for “sacred reading” This process takes seriously the idea that the Bible is the living Word of God which still speaks to us today.

Have you ever read a passage of scripture and then forgotten it 15 minutes later? Lectio Divina helps us to deepen our relationship with God through reading a passage 3 times and letting the Word sink into our heart and soul. It allows us to savor the Word and digest it slowly. Here is the process: Select a short scripture passage.
1. Read the scripture passage out loud slowly and listen closely to what you are reading.
2. Allow for some silence to let the scripture sink into your heart and soul.
3. Read the scripture a second time to yourself.
4. Allow some silence and notice the words or phrases that stand out for you in the reading.
5. Read the scripture a third time to yourself.
6. Allow some silence to ponder how this passage relates to your life today. What is it saying to you? What actions is it calling you to take?
7. You may choose to write down the words and phrases and the way in which this passage speaks to you.

**Jesus Prayer** – In the book, “The Way of the Pilgrim” it tells of a Russian peasant who attended church one day and heard the words from I Thess. 5:17 to “pray without ceasing”. These words stayed with him and he wondered how someone could pray without stopping when they have other things to do to make a living. He went from church to church listening to sermons to find the answer to his question. Finally he met a holy man who said to him, “Ceaseless interior prayer is a continual yearning of the human spirit towards God.”

Then the holy man told the peasant to repeat the name of Jesus over and over again without stopping. The words of the prayer were taken from two passages of scripture: Jesus’ encounter with the blind man, Bartimeus who cried out to him as he passed by the city of Jericho, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.”(Luke 18:38) and that of the publican, “O God be merciful to me a sinner.” The Jesus prayer combines elements from both in its longer form, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” The Jesus prayer has been used in the Christian east since the earliest days of the desert monastic communities.

You can use this prayer today in either its long form or its short form which is, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” With either form, simply pray half of the words on the in breath and half of the words on the out breath. Say the prayer over and over again in rhythm with your breath to quiet your mind and open your heart.

**Walking Meditation** – Find a peaceful place to walk. Outside works best, but you can also do walking meditation indoors. Walk slowly bringing your attention to your breath and your senses. Begin by focusing on one sense at a time (for instance, begin with sight and notice everything you can see all around you, then move to hearing, etc.)
Also, become aware of your breath as you are walking. This grounds you in your body. After you’ve focused on each of the senses, allow yourself to become aware of them altogether. Whenever your focus shifts to thoughts or your “to do” list while you are walking, gently bring your attention back to your breath and to the sense you are focusing on. If you begin to walk fast, remind yourself to slow down and be in the present moment with yourself and with God.

**Gratitude Journaling** – Write down all the things and the people in your life that you are grateful for. This can be a daily or a weekly practice. It is also very helpful to do at times when you are feeling discouraged or frustrated. You can also do this in the form of a letter to God or a dialogue with.

**Writing a Letter to God** – Find a time that you can be quiet and free from interruption for at least a half hour. Take a piece of paper or a notebook and write a letter to God. Start the letter with “Dear God” or “Dear Jesus” and then write whatever is on your heart and mind; your feeling, your hurts, your struggles, your questions. After you have finished writing everything that’s on your heart, close your eyes and ask God to answer your letter. And then, listen. Listen for the words that come into your mind and write them down. If no words come to you the first time, try again at a later time. Be patient with this process and trust that God will respond in His own timing.

**Having a Dialogue with God** – This exercise is like writing a play script. Write your name or initial on the left side of the page and then write what you want to say to God. Close your eyes and wait for God’s answer. Then record what you hear. Don’t try and guess what God would say, just let the words come to you. Go back and forth between writing what you want to say to God and recording what you hear God saying to you. Try to get your head out of the way and let your heart take over.

**Reference** – The book Creating a Life with God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices, by Daniel Wolpert is highly recommended reading to explore these prayer practices more deeply.