Catholic Prayer Traditions

“Lord, Teach us to Pray!” Luke 11:1

The prayer of the Catholic Church is far more than the memorized vocal prayers, devotional prayers (such as the Rosary) or the prayers we say together at Mass. For over a thousand years, the Church has developed rich prayer forms such as contemplative prayer (Christian meditation), Liturgy of the Hours, prayer using scripture, and prayer using nature, to name a few. For centuries, only priests, monks and cloistered nuns participated in many of these prayer forms, but today we recognize the value these spiritual practices have for lay people.

In a culture where New Age spirituality can be attractive to many people, including youth and young adults, it is important to note that the Catholic Church has its own beautiful treasury of prayer – ways to draw closer to God that are perhaps less familiar, but not difficult. Below is a brief introduction into just a few of the larger “schools of prayer” found in the Catholic tradition: Benedictine, Carmelite, Dominican, Franciscan and Ignatian. (See Quick Summaries below.)

Some General Resources on Catholic Spirituality & Prayer:

- Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part 4: “Christian Prayer”.
- Jeep, Elizabeth McMahon, Children's Daily Prayer (annual) Liturgy Training Publications
- Mathson, Patricia, Bless This Day: 150 Everyday Prayers for Grades 1-5, Ave Maria Press, 2002.

SOME GENERAL ONLINE RESOURCES

- Loyola Press: www.findinggod.org: hover over “Our Catholic Faith,” then over “Prayer” – includes online retreats, multiple links on how to pray, etc.
- Word on Fire: http://wordonfire.org/Home.aspx - Fr. Robert Barron, SJ teaches Catholicism through the use of videos, a blog, articles and more.
- Praying Each Day: http://www.prayingeachday.org/prayersites.html - Various Resources on Prayer and Catholic teachings from the De La Salle Brothers in Great Britain.
- Catholic Encyclopedia: www.newadvent.org/cathen - Articles on all types of spirituality, religious orders, and prayer.

QUICK SUMMARIES OF MAJOR PRAYER TRADITIONS

1. Benedictine Prayer & Spirituality

Benedictines are best known for communal living according to the Rule of St. Benedict, its founder, in which the two main principles are manual labor and communal prayer. Recently, there has been a movement for lay people to live elements of the Rule as well. The Rule can be simplified as: Commitment, Balance and Relationship. Lay Oblates live the Rule and receive ongoing spiritual guidance.
The communal prayer of the Benedictines is the **Liturgy of the Hours**, a structured liturgical prayer consisting of psalms, prayers, songs and readings, following the rhythm of the times of day and of the Church Year. Lay people are encouraged to use the simplified version found in *Christian Prayer*, and includes Morning and Evening Prayer.

Benedictine tradition includes a simple form of prayer using scripture – **Lectio Divina** (holy reading) – that facilitates understanding what God may be saying to a person through a reading. The four steps are:

1. *Lectio*: read or listen to the text, paying attention to any words or phrases that stand out.
2. *Meditatio*: meditate on what speaks to you, repeating it to yourself and allowing it to interact with your thoughts, hopes, memories and desires.
3. *Oratio*: pray, entering into loving conversation with God, allowing the word you have heard and meditated on to touch and change you.
4. *Contemplatio*: simply rest in the presence of God and accept His loving embrace. In silence, let go of your own words and simply enjoy being in the presence of God.

The contemplative tradition of the Benedictines is best known from the Trappist monks, who observe a strict rule of silence. Their form of contemplation was recovered from the ancient tradition of meditation based on the desert Fathers and Mothers, the fourth movement of *Lectio Divina*, and the mystical tradition of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This prayer form is called **Centering Prayer**, or *The Prayer of the Heart*. Famous 20th Century American Trappists include Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, William Meninger, and even Henri Nouwen, who spent a year as a “part-time” Trappist.

### Some Resources on Benedictine Spirituality:

- Benedictine Order international website: [www.osb.org](http://www.osb.org)
- [www.masteryfoundation.org](http://www.masteryfoundation.org), click on “Interfaith.”
- St. Procopius Abbey, Lisle, IL – website: [www.procopius.org](http://www.procopius.org) - local information and resources

### 2. Carmelite Prayer & Spirituality

The earliest Carmelites were hermits who stayed on the slopes of Mount Carmel near the end of the twelfth century. They lived in poverty and sought solitude on the mountain where Elijah the prophet had made his home, while meditating on God. Today, they look to the mountain, to Elijah, to Mary, and that tradition of solitude as their spiritual wellspring. The symbol of Carmel stands for the intimate encounter that God brings about between the person and God in the midst of all that is most ordinary in life. The expression and source of this encounter, contemplation and prayer, are the very heartbeat of the interior journey of transformation of the Carmelite today, whether vowed religious or layperson.

The symbol of Elijah is central to Carmelite spirituality. He is seen as a man on a journey who hid in the desert in a time of dryness and journeyed back to meet God in new and unexpected ways. This symbol is operative in a key concept of Carmelite spirituality from St. John of the Cross: the “dark night of the soul” – a period of spiritual dryness where God seems not to be present to the seeker. Mary is associated with the rain of God’s Grace that ends the dryness, like the little cloud Elijah sees in 1 Kings 18:44.
Key concepts in Carmelite spirituality are 1) allegiance to Christ, 2) openness to Scriptures, 3) a sense of silence and solitude, and 4) the undivided heart. The primary Carmelite prayer forms are **solitude and meditation**. The Carmelite mystics, Teresa, John of the Cross, and Therese of Lisieux expanded the original vision, writing about new ways to understand the soul’s continuous longing for union with God and the daily struggles of the journey to reach it. Their writings and poems help lead us into visionary prayer.

### Some Resources on Carmelite Spirituality:

- Discalced Carmelites – [www.ourgardenofcarmel.org](http://www.ourgardenofcarmel.org)
- St. John of the Cross, writings, especially *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, The Dark Night* or *Spiritual Canticle*
- St. Teresa of Avila, writings- especially *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*
- St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*

### 3. Dominican Prayer & Spirituality

**St. Dominic was a spirit-filled man raised up by God to answer the pressing need of the Church for a continuous body of trained preachers.** (Father William A. Hinnebusch, O.P.) He founded the first apostolic Order (Order of Preachers) in 1216.

Nearly eight hundred years after the foundation of the Order, the Dominican way of life still offers the individual, and the world, a unique path to holiness. The Order can be characterized as **contemplative**, rooted in a strong prayer life; **apostolic**, determined in its work for the salvation of souls; **liturgical** in its life centered in the celebration of the Eucharist and choral recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours; **sacrificial**, consecrated to God through the vows and always mindful of the life of penance; **doctrinal**, dedicated to study, teaching, and the defense the Faith; and **fraternal**, lived in community and bound together with one heart and one soul in God. St. Dominic's genius was a way of life that blended the contemplative and active, a life that remained faithful to the monastic practices of contemplative orders, but not limited by them.

*What the Dominican Order has given to the Church in past centuries, and what it can offer her in the future is vital and necessary, because its mission—the mission to proclaim the Gospel—touchest her own origins and inner being. Preaching the Word of God and proclaiming the name of the Lord Jesus throughout the world will always be needed by the people of God. (Father William A. Hinnebusch, O.P.)*

### Some Resources on Dominican Spirituality

- Order of Dominicans international website: [www.op.org](http://www.op.org)
- OP Sources: Resources for promoting the Dominican Charism – [http://opsources.edgewood.edu](http://opsources.edgewood.edu)
4. Franciscan Prayer & Spirituality

Franciscan prayer is definitely in and of the world, at the same time it is an experience of God. Francis did not speak about spirituality so much as he lived his prayer - as Celano (an early biographer of Francis) said "He became prayer" and in the intimacy of his relationship with God he would have his followers join him. "Hold back nothing of yourself for yourself, so that he who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally," Francis said. Franciscans seek God through an incarnational approach – God is our loving Father and all we have is gift; Christ is our Brother and the Spirit of that love lives in us. The Franciscan approach is Trinitarian, not static. Again Francis was practical - the Crib, the Cross, the Eucharist were his way to God, and finally his relationship to the Triune God led to an intimacy and familiarity with all wonders of creation so that he could address them as Brother/Sister - all are members of the one family.

Features of Franciscan spirituality are community and solitude, prayer and penance, humility and poverty. Prayer can be vocal prayer, prayer using nature as its source and inspiration (see Francis’ Canticle as an example – text is in popular hymn “Canticle of the Sun”), contemplation, or Lectio Divina. The contemplative dimension often focuses on union with God, and experiences of divine love. Yet, Franciscans are active contemplatives who find their mission in social justice ministry, and they are often found helping the poor, the elderly and the sick in homeless shelters, nursing homes and hospitals.

Some Resources on Franciscan Spirituality
- Franciscan Order (worldwide) www.ofm.org - click on “Franciscans” for English
- Franciscan Web Page – a directory of links, including saints, etc. www.wtu.edu/franciscan
- “Franciscan Spirituality” by Valentin Breton, OFM: http://www.ewtn.com/library/SPirit/FRAN spir.txt
- Providence of St. John the Baptist in Cincinnati, OH: http://www.franciscan.org/default.aspx

5. Ignatian Prayer and Spirituality

Ignatian spirituality is intellectual, visual and eminently practical. It aims to assist people to know God, understand their interior struggles, and discern what God is asking. St. Ignatius Loyola developed the *Spiritual Exercises* and founded the Jesuit Order as a way to teach others to do all of this. The role of a spiritual director as a compassionate listener/advisor is key to Ignatian spirituality. Ignatian prayer forms include visual meditation, examination of conscience, prayer of discernment, journaling and more.

The steps of Ignatian prayer in the *Spiritual Exercises* are
- 1.) Quieting oneself
- 2.) Naming a desire one has – the reason for the prayer
- 3.) Exercising the imagination through a visual meditation on a Scripture story
- 4.) Applying the senses – savoring the parts of the experience that provoked the strongest reactions
Afterwards, there should be a *colloquy* – a prayer conversation with a member of the Trinity or with Mary, relating the experience back to the desire. This step may continue later with a spiritual director. Ignatian visual meditation begins with Composition of Place – placing oneself in the scripture story, by imagining how it looks, feels, smells and sounds. This can be done by oneself after reading a Scripture, by viewing a painting of a Scripture story subject, or can be guided by a leader and conducted in groups.

The Ignatian *Examen, or examination of conscience*, has five steps:

1. Quiet oneself.
2. Pray for the grace to see clearly, understand accurately and respond generously.
3. Review in memory the history of the day (week, month) looking for concrete instances of the presence and guidance of God, and the activity and influence of evil. (Pay attention to strong feelings associated with experiences and encounters).
4. Evaluate those instances in which we have either cooperated with God or yielded to the influence of evil. Express gratitude and regret.
5. Plan and decide how to collaborate more effectively with God, and how, with God’s help, to avoid or overcome the influence of evil in the future.

**Some Resources on Ignatian Spirituality**

- Society of Jesus, USA [www.jesuit.org](http://www.jesuit.org)
- Sacred Space: [www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie) - a daily online interactive Ignatian prayer, posted by the Irish Jesuits, also includes links to Sacred Heart Novena, commentary on the daily Mass readings, and more.