

# Practical Supports for Meditative Prayer

## A Mandala or other Focus for the Senses

A mandala is a circular form with geometric patterns that build off a central point, most often used to connect with a spiritual power through meditation and contemplation. Typical mandala designs and circular symbols in Christianity include:

- Crowns of thorns
- Halos or aureoles
- Celtic crosses and Celtic Knot designs
- The apse part of a church, particularly during Gothic periods
- Circular or 'Rose' windows.
- Communion wafers

Their purpose is to provide a focus for the senses, but other objects such as: pictures, candles or crucifixes are often used. Their purpose is to keep the attention steady and reduce the risk of distraction. Such objects allow a very slow start to prayer and leave room for the sense of the presence of God to take one over (or at least to allow one the space to desire that acute awareness of God). The object doesn't have to be 'Holy', it just needs to be something that can focus attention, hence the use of intricate designs in many Mandalas.

## Posture

In a form of prayer in which words and 'good thoughts' no longer feature, there is little left with which to communicate, except posture. Meditation is also a great deal easier if one is comfortable. My posture can signify my desire to communicate and enter into my relationship with God, to receive, to adore and to accept.

## A Mantra

A word or short phrase repeated can focus the mind on God and raise attention to a new level of awareness which is beyond conscious thought. It may be a phrase from scripture, it may be a short prayer such as the Jesus Prayer - "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*" like "Jesus" or "Abba" repeated quietly and rhythmically. Some people like to use a Rosary as an object to organise repeated short phrases and prayers.

## Lectio Divina

The origins of *Lectio Divina* are to be found in the beginnings of monasticism. It has a long history reaching back to before the 6th century, as attested to in the Rule of St Benedict. The monasteries were centres of learning and spirituality, and lay people as well as monastics were presented with this way of prayer.

There are 4 levels or stages to the prayer

**Reading (*lectio*)** Select a passage to listen to the words (a passage of Scripture or a poem), prayerfully and reflectively. Listen for a word or a phrase that touches you in some way.

**Meditation (*meditatio*)** Repeat that word or phrase over and over to yourself, allow it sink in, hear the words and savour them. Give time in the silence for the prayer to deepen within you

**Prayer (*oratio*)** Pray to God with the desires and feelings of your heart and soul, open yourself to God's will. Allow God's light to shine from within.

**Contemplation (*contemplatio*)** Stay in the silence, resting with God's presence and love.

The word meditation refers to a reasoning process, whereas the word contemplation is more of a '*resting With God*', transcending thinking and reasoning, and more of an experience of emotions and feelings.

This way of praying is often used with an Old Testament text such as a psalm, but it can also be used with poetry and even pictures.

# Imaginative Contemplation

## Preparation

1. Choose a suitable passage upon which to contemplate - narrative Gospel passages with lots going on are usually the simplest.
2. Read the passage a couple of times to familiarise yourself with the story.
3. Adopt a comfortable yet attentive posture in your place of prayer.
4. Still yourself, perhaps using a quietening / awareness exercise.
5. Become aware you are in the presence of God. Offer your time and your imagination to God.
6. Ask God for what you desire, what grace / gift do you want?

## Move Into the Contemplation

Set the scene from the Gospel passage. Take your time.

See all that is around hear feel taste and smell.

- Who are you? Which character in the story (named or unnamed)?
- Take up your role in the scene and take your part in the events as you let the scene unfold.
- Notice the people and their reactions.
- Be in touch with your own feelings and reactions to what you see, hear and do.
- Talk naturally to Jesus about what has happened in the scene or what this has brought up for you.

Finish with a formal prayer such as The Lord's Prayer / Our Father

NB Don't worry if things don't happen the way they are recounted in the Bible let the scene develop as it appears natural to you. After prayer, as you review it, consider what struck you. How did you react and feel about the events imagined and about the prayer itself?

## On Prayer by Robert Llwyn

I have been to Taize only once and that was about 25 years ago. Pere Schultz spoke to us on several occasions. I can remember just five words of what he said, and they have come back to me again and again, “*For me,*” said Fr Schuhz “*prayer is waiting*”. There is much in Scripture to support those words. “*The Lord is good to those who wait for him*”, says Jeremiah. “*They that wait for the Lord shall renew their strength*”, writes Isaiah. “*I waited patiently for the Lord, and he hears my cry*”, from the psalms. And more than 2,000 years later, and moving beyond the Bible to St John of the Cross we read that in prayer we are to learn to rest in loving waiting upon God. And so, when the time for silence comes, I ask you to take up your position for prayer (sitting is often best for most of us) and then, having asked the help of the Holy Spirit, to be content to wait, patiently, expectantly, lovingly, longingly. Try to realise this is all that you can do for yourself. God must do the rest. See yourself as the parched earth, looking upwards, waiting patiently for the rain to fall. You can only wait...

This period of waiting is sure to be demanding. And you will find yourself asking “*Is it any use? Am I really praying?*” And here are words of comfort. And they come from St Augustine, “*Your very desire is itself your prayer: if your desire is continued, so is your prayer also. Whatever you are doing, if you are desiring to pray, you are praying. If you do not wish to cease from prayer, do not cease from desire*”. And these words are true: the intention of the desire is prayer whether we are speaking of vocal prayer, Eucharistic prayer, office prayer, Jesus prayer, rosary prayer or, as now, the prayer of the silence of the heart before God.

Undoubtedly in this period of waiting, waiting, we are sometimes taken hold of. The parched earth is rewarded with a shower of rain. St Antony the Great says that he prays best who does not know he is praying. Watch a group of children at play. They are so engrossed in their game that they do not know they are playing.

Prayer is waiting, intending, and desiring God. Prayer, we might say, is a holding on to God, until waiting, waiting, waiting, we move into the knowledge that we are being held.