

In *Never Stop Praying*, Leo Gafney has achieved a remarkable work: a versatile, spiritual, and practical guide that will inspire a broad readership, including seminarians in training, priests preparing homilies, theology professors, and particularly mature men and women, married or unmarried who want to find God everywhere—from their daily work to the last years of their lives. In 26 chapters, each providing a topic for a week, he takes a single experience—peace, work, sickness, love, forgiveness, the poor, the Holy Spirit—and analyzes it with a passage of Scripture, mental image, and weekly practice that will turn an idea into a character-forming experience and the reader into a more sensitive and living human being.

✦ **RAYMOND A. SCHROTH, SJ**, *editor emeritus of America magazine, author of The American Jesuits: A History and The American Journey of Eric Sevareid*

This book gives many practical ways to integrate faith in our lives on a weekly basis. Overall it reminds me of a favorite verse, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2). This book will help ordinary people begin to change their thinking and become transformed on the journey to become more like Jesus.

✦ **DICK KIERNAN**, *Director of Come Follow Me, a ministry dedicated to “form leaders to make missionary disciples”*

In the midst of our busy, fragmented lives, it is a challenge for Christians to give the necessary attention to their spiritual growth. In *Never Stop Praying*, Leo Gafney skillfully uses meditations on a single word or phrase as a way to focus our attention on our spiritual and moral lives and to allow the Spirit to transform us. This compendium of meditations was, for me, a useful tool in my ongoing search for relationship with God.

✦ **KERRY MCKEON**, *Former Youth Director, Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, Washington, CT*

Leo Gafney invites you to take him at his word; and that word is “accept.” Accept not just the thoughts he shares with you in this book, but accept as well his invitation to pray your way—randomly perhaps—toward a deeper acceptance of God’s love for you. This is a prayer manual that lifts the soul.

✿ **WILLIAM J. BYRON, SJ**, *author of A Book of Quiet Prayer*

With his new book, *Never Stop Praying*, Leo Gafney has offered another fine addition to the growing Catholic library of resources on prayer and spiritual meditation. A genuine pilgrimage with Christ awaits those so inclined.

✿ **DEACON RICHARD MAGENIS**, *St. Martin of Tours Parish, Canaan, CT*

The commentaries, interspersed with humor and personal reflection, encouraged me to revisit them midweek for further inspiration and to maintain my focus on the specified word. Having a full week allows time for follow-up on Bible passages or other concepts that were mentioned.

✿ **DIANA DRAPER**, *St. George Catholic Church, Guilford, CT*

For busy people and pastors looking for a user-friendly book about prayer that they can recommend to their parishioners who want to grow closer to God, Leo Gafney has written a first-rate work. Set in the context of twenty-six weeks, he lays out a prayerful week-by-week journey about communicating with God in a very personal way. With a rich commentary on twenty-six themes he provides Scripture readings and weekly practices about how to live more intimately in God’s presence on a daily basis. This book is a treasure.

✿ **FR. WILLIAM WATTERS**, *pastor emeritus, St. Ignatius Church, Baltimore, MD*

NEVER STOP
praying

WEEKLY MINI-RETREATS
TO GROW YOUR FAITH
EACH DAY

LEO GAFNEY



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CONTENTS

	<i>Introduction</i>	1
WEEK 1	<i>Accept</i>	5
WEEK 2	<i>Peace</i>	10
WEEK 3	<i>Sickness</i>	14
WEEK 4	<i>Faith</i>	19
WEEK 5	<i>Prayer</i>	24
WEEK 6	<i>Words</i>	29
WEEK 7	<i>Patience</i>	32
WEEK 8	<i>Symbols and Rituals</i>	37
WEEK 9	<i>Born Again</i>	43
WEEK 10	<i>Fully Human, Fully Divine</i>	47
WEEK 11	<i>Water</i>	52
WEEK 12	<i>Love</i>	56
WEEK 13	<i>Temptation: Greed</i>	60
WEEK 14	<i>Redemption</i>	64
WEEK 15	<i>Death</i>	68
WEEK 16	<i>The Stranger</i>	72
WEEK 17	<i>The Triune God</i>	76
WEEK 18	<i>The Poor</i>	81
WEEK 19	<i>Do Not Worry</i>	86
WEEK 20	<i>Forgiveness</i>	90
WEEK 21	<i>Sharing Meals</i>	94
WEEK 22	<i>The Eucharist and Community</i>	98
WEEK 23	<i>Dimensions of the Church</i>	103
WEEK 24	<i>Original Sin</i>	107
WEEK 25	<i>Work</i>	111
WEEK 26	<i>The Holy Spirit</i>	115
	<i>Continuing</i>	119

INTRODUCTION

W e Christians have been blessed in recent years with new books suggesting topics and methods for meditation. These works generally propose settings from the life of Christ and texts from Scripture with explorations to deepen our engagement with God and strengthen our daily living in Christ. Christians have also adapted practices from the Buddhist tradition emphasizing a quieter, less verbal approach as we encounter the spiritual dimensions of our lives. Many Christians start each day with a reading and reflection. Some meditations are based on a single word or phrase.

This book is consistent with current practices on prayer, but instead of emphasizing fifteen- or thirty-minute readings and meditation, I propose a method for cultivating our spiritual lives throughout the day, particularly in the odd moments between our responsibilities and tasks—perhaps while walking or doing other things that leave the mind and heart somewhat free.

This is not to say that the practice of our faith should be squeezed in between the more pressing duties of life, such as

work and care for family. Rather, I offer these reflections and exercises with the thought that our faith and understanding of God's work should permeate every aspect of life. It should be like the air we breathe—always there, giving strength to everything we do or encounter—or like the mortar holding together the bricks of a building.

We can quietly control our stray thoughts and feelings, organize them, and use them to grow spiritually. This practice holds an additional advantage in helping us avoid the alternatives—simply letting our minds and hearts wander or, what is worse, drifting into negative thoughts that may promote greed, selfishness, anger, and the many distractions that inhibit spiritual growth. In our wandering minds we are often led to think about things we want or injuries we imagine or ways in which we might get even. And so, controlling and directing our thoughts and images and emotions, we can both avoid evil and seek what is good.

A week seems more suitable to this practice than a day, for several reasons. Days occur naturally with the rising and setting of the sun, while a week is a human invention; still, weeks have a more predictable rhythm. For most of us, weekends are days of relaxation. Sunday for many is still a day for church. Monday to Friday have certain characteristics related to family, work, school, and perhaps volunteer activities. So a week marks out a well-defined unit of time. In addition, a week gives us more time to reflect on the meaning and impact of a word or theme; a day is too short. Finally, some very conscientious Christians who practice daily meditation and frequent prayer have told me that they become anxious and feel guilty if they do not take time for prayer and reflection as often as they believe they should. But living the Christian life should be a source of joy, not guilt. The week may provide a somewhat more leisurely pace to your prayer and reflections, while still maintaining a sense of order.

I will suggest a word or short phrase with ideas about how you might cultivate this for the period of a week. Each meditation concludes with a mental image to which you can quietly return during the day, and also a verse from Scripture to anchor the theme. You might wish to reread the section every morning or several times during the week, thinking about what aspect of it appeals to you or how the word or phrase responds to your needs for the day.

Many people have become serious about their personal development—with exercise, diet, meditation, yoga, and other practices. Again, what is presented here—although we do not prescribe definite times or places—is meant to be taken seriously, and you may want to set aside times and places that are suitable to make your reflections more systematic. But in the spirit of the gospels we leave the practice of faith to the Spirit working within each person.

Each reading also contains a passage from Scripture. There is a depth and warmth in Scripture that reaches the minds and touches the hearts of believers. We are nourished and strengthened in ways that we cannot measure. Just as food and exercise provide the body with strength that will be needed later, so our spiritual strengthening will be needed. In the readings themselves, it might be helpful to proceed slowly, stopping at a word, phrase, or image that seems particularly important to your life and thinking. Allow the love of God to grow quietly in your mind and heart. Some of the Scripture readings are short; I encourage you to go to the chapters listed and read more.

The reflections contained here are only a starting point and will probably be read in the morning or evening. The reading is meant to be a springboard for further thinking and, more importantly, resting your mind, heart, and spirit in God, as guided by the Holy Spirit.

You might of course ask who I am to offer suggestions about spiritual growth. I am a sinner like you, struggling to let God in Christ enter more fully into my life. I have taken only a few steps in this direction; and yet my imperfections, though many, should not prevent me from offering a few insights that may be helpful to others.

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WEEK

1

Accept

The saints and mystics who have invested years in nourishing their spiritual lives and strengthening their union with God seem always to end by saying that acceptance and surrender are at the core of their being. We can try to do the same.

But it may not be easy. We live in a culture in which “acceptance” is not always welcomed or viewed positively. We are urged to see ourselves in competition with others—in what we do, in how much we earn, in the clothes we wear, even in the accomplishments of our children. Progress and personal growth have become the maxims of our time. Acceptance can be seen as a sign of weakness, dependence, and submission. We may not want to accept compromise, failure, weakness, or even our position in life. We are told we should become something more.

When contemplating the word “accept” as followers of Christ, we find a world very different from the one that surrounds us.

We must begin by accepting ourselves. Christ Our Lord told his followers, and us, to behold the lilies of the field. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but they are beautiful. God cares for them. Jesus tells us to be like them, to accept God into our lives, and to accept ourselves. You will see flowers, trees,

or other growing things many times today. Think of how God cares for them—and how God cares for you.

We are weak; we sin; we are mean to those we love; we fail often; we do not measure up to our own hopes and expectations. Yes, that is who I am and who you are. But God loves us as we are—not as we will be when we have more money, or when our bodies are more attractive, or when we accomplish something wonderful, or even when we are less sinful. When Jesus became human, he took on the weaknesses and limitations of our nature and our world. He accepted who he was with all the disappointments that came with it. In his own town he could not heal because of the people's lack of faith. His closest followers continually misunderstood his message—hoping for an earthly kingdom with worldly power. Christ accepted himself and his world.

In odd moments today and during this week, consider yourself—your body, your mind, your abilities, and your faults—all of you. Accept yourself; God accepts you.

And then as you think of the word “accept,” consider those in your life and accept them. Your parents are not perfect; your children are not perfect. Don't worry about changing them. Relax and accept them. They live under the same challenging circumstances and the same kinds of cultural pressures and confusion that you do. Accept them and the others in your life, as they are. They love you and care for you, even more than you know.

There are certainly things that are difficult to accept—losing a job, serious illness, the death of one we love. And yet many of us have experienced God's love and come to a deeper understanding of who we are in these most difficult moments. It is not easy to accept cancer or other life-threatening illnesses. But in dark moments we can come closest to what is at the core of our being, closest to Jesus Christ, who after praying that he might not be asked to face terrible suffering and death, repeated three times to God, “Not my will but yours be done.”

We are promised that the Christian life ends in resurrection, in unity with God. And union with God is the reason for all prayer. So we should accept the wonder of God in our lives, and the wonder of our world, and the goodness of those around us. We are never, even for a day, beyond the help that others can bring. We should not be too proud to accept their help. If young, we should accept the guidance and wisdom of those with greater experience; if in the middle of life, we should accept the sharing, companionship, and good fortune of others; if older we should accept our declining strength and the help we need.

Accepting is not always easy, but with practice it can be rewarding. We do not have to strain so hard to see ourselves making progress or to be seen as rich and accomplished in so many ways. Best of all, accepting who we are, accepting God into our lives, and accepting others with all their goodness and all their faults gives us a new freedom.

Strangely, it is perhaps God's love and acceptance that is most difficult for us to accept. We want to judge ourselves harshly. But that is not God's way.

MENTAL IMAGE

Picture Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. They are shocked. Peter resists. Jesus proceeds quietly, telling them that they will understand.

SCRIPTURE READING

This week's reading is from the Gospel of John, chapter 13. In this chapter, we read what should be the ultimate source of acceptance. Jesus is the way to the Father, and we are connected to Jesus. In many ways, our faith will surprise us, as Jesus surprised his disciples.

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean." **JOHN 13:5-10**

SCRIPTURE VERSE

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” JOHN 13:14

At the end of these meditations we will offer one or more suggestions to further focus the mind and heart and move to a deeper commitment. If you are so inclined, writing your reflections, commitments, and concerns might be helpful.

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Write down or fix in your mind one thing that you find particularly difficult to accept about yourself. It may be a quick temper, or a lack of sympathy for others, or a bit of stinginess. We are not talking about serious sins but areas of life that we are not quite satisfied with. Don’t make any great resolutions to change. Accept yourself. But know yourself.

Toward midweek: Write down several ways in which you feel more free and happy because you have accepted yourself with your faults, as God accepts you.

At the end of the week: Write a very brief prayer asking God to help you accept the work of the Spirit in your life.



WEEK

2

Peace

The refrain for a hymn we sing in church proclaims, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” For some reason—perhaps the words, perhaps the melody—the refrain sounds a bit too precious when sung. But as a basis for reflection from time to time during the week, it can work very well. I am not the center of the universe, and I am very unlikely to achieve something really big. But in small ways you and I can initiate moments of peace—for ourselves and for others—throughout the day. This week, let peace begin with you.

Peace is, in the first instance, a lack or cessation of conflict. Many of the petty arguments that punctuate our days are about something other than what the words are saying. A discussion about politics may start with differences about the role of public agencies and private enterprise, for example, but quickly deteriorate into sarcasm and comments that are made more to dominate and win a point, or even to embarrass, rather than to honestly look for the truth or the best course of action. In the same way, a discussion about which restaurant to visit or which movie to watch can quickly have a subtext about who is in charge, who is making the decisions. But: “Let peace begin with me.”

A few days ago, as I drove past a landmark inn in our town, eight or ten people with signs for peace waved to the cars going past. These and others in the towns near us can be seen on weekends in quiet vigil. They remind us of the larger world where weapons are multiplying and killing is the solution to many problems. We live in a democracy, and in some small way each of us can play a role promoting peace beyond ourselves.

After several of his healings, Jesus said, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (see, for example, Mark 5:34). It seems not only that the healing ended the person's troubles, but engagement with Jesus brought these people to a new level of rest and quietness of spirit. That engagement is still available. The Spirit of God dwells within us, ready to bring a deeper sense of peace. It doesn't take a great deal of effort. During this week, accept the peace that God brings.

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus, after his resurrection, first appeared to the disciples assembled and confused, he said, "Peace be with you" (Luke 24:36), and then he asked why they were startled and terrified. They were terrified in part because they thought they were in the presence of a ghost. But even for us, contact with God in Christ can be frightening. "Do I really believe? Am I able or willing to commit to the challenges that God asks of me? Do I want to be taken beyond what I can see and hear?" The answer of course is that the peace of Christ and our faith do enable us to live our lives in God.

In his last discourse in John's gospel Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27). In thinking about this promise, we come to understand that the peace given by Jesus is much more than the lack of conflict. The world might give that sort of peace, only to take it away again. The peace of Christ is quietness of soul. We rest in God's love and in the assurance that nothing can separate us from that love.

And so we can paradoxically retain peace in the midst of unavoidable conflict. Problems with money, sickness, and personal relationships can be troubling, but they should not take away the peace that is in our hearts. Divers report that even when there are tumultuous storms at sea, deep down there remains a calm untroubled world. So it should be in our hearts.

Sometimes peace overtakes us unexpectedly. It may begin with a wonderful view of mountains or the sea; it may seem to be the result of a warm and reassuring conversation. But we should rest in that peace. God works through natural things to touch our hearts. And if we return to that peace, asking God's help to retain that view, and in times of disturbance to guide us as we make that dive below the surface, we will be refreshed. We will also be able to help others to find peace. For peace to live in our hearts, it must be shared. Like love, the more we give away, the more we have—so it is with peace.

MENTAL IMAGE

Jesus talks with his disciples at the Last Supper. He expresses great love for them and promises peace.

SCRIPTURE READING

In this reading, Jesus tells his followers that he is leaving, but the Spirit, the Advocate, will be with them, bringing peace. This peace is not the peace that the world gives. In other words, it is not the peace that might come from financial security, good health, or successful children. The peace of Christ goes deeper into our souls, and cannot be taken away.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you every-

thing, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe." JOHN 14:25-29

SCRIPTURE VERSE

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." JOHN 14:27

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Think of those things that tend to disturb your peace; think then about how insignificant they are compared with the peace of Christ that has been granted to you. Write down one or two of the things that worry you, taking away your peace. Just seeing them in writing will help you see how small they are compared with the peace in your soul.

During the week: Look for opportunities to bring a moment of peace to someone you know or even someone you meet casually. Pray that God's peace may become more active in your life and that peace might begin with you.