

In *Praying Our Way Toward Wholeness*, Tracy O'Sullivan sets out to establish that "Life is the greatest grace." He explains in easy-to-understand language how a real life of prayer comes about—through faithfulness to daily personal prayer, no matter what the odds, and surrendering to God's action of purification and transformation of the human person.

**SISTER MARY MARTIN, O CARM, RETIRED DIRECTOR OF
LAY CARMELITES, PROVINCE OF THE PURE HEART OF MAY**



Praying Our Way Toward Wholeness is the fruit of years of contemplative wisdom, much theological reflection and prayer, and fifty-five years of priestly ministry, most of which were spent working with those who have slipped through the cracks and in some cases, in the words of Pope Francis, have been "thrown away. This book should be read by all who experience discontent with both life and religion and who are willing to venture a challenging journey to the center.

**DONALD BUGGERT, O CARM, PROFESSOR EMERITUS,
WASHINGTON THEOLOGICAL UNION**



With a keen eye, Father Tracy explores the wisdom about prayer in the Scriptures and the liturgy and in the wisdom he has gained from his long experience serving those whom society has neglected. You will soon find a reason every day to turn to the wisdom of this gifted spiritual guide.

**KEITH J. EGAN, T O CARM, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
AND SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE**

In a world marked by brokenness and the loneliness of individuals by indifference to silence and contemplation, and the search for technological solutions to human problems, the pastoral witness of an authentic consecrated life is of great value to the church and the world. Intimacy is rooted in constant and profound conversation with God. *Praying Our Way Toward Wholeness* is an excellent reminder that the message from our merciful God is always “Love.”

**BERNADETTE MOORE GIBSON, DIRECTOR OF PASTORAL CARE
AT OLD ST. PATRICK’S CHURCH, CHICAGO**



Now more than ever, we need to do all that we can to help youth and young adults enter into a life of prayer and meditation. So many of them feel lost and lonely. They are many times confused and suffer from hopelessness. Father Tracy’s *Praying Our Way Toward Wholeness* will be a wonderful practical guide to this deeper encounter with Jesus, who walks with us on the journey.

**✠ DAVID O’CONNELL, AUXILIARY BISHOP OF LOS ANGELES,
SAN GABRIEL REGION**

TRACY O'SULLIVAN, O.CARM.

PRAYING
OUR WAY
TOWARD
WHOLENESS

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO

daily prayer



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Author Tracy O'Sullivan hosts a weekly blog (available in both English and Spanish) dedicated to supporting you on your spiritual journey.

Visit www.prayingalonetogether.blogspot.com as well as his pages on Facebook: www.facebook.com/Tracy.OsullivanO.Carm and www.facebook.com/tracyocarm

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INTRODUCTION

EVERYONE WANTS TO BE HAPPY. God made the heart with that most fundamental hunger. Our problem is finding what makes us happy for the long run. Our faith tells us that the simple answer is walking with Jesus. The difficulty is that life has so many deceptions and illusions that it is hard to find the true Jesus.

Jesus is the Word of God. All we want to know about God will be found in Jesus. All that God has done and is doing for the world is revealed in Jesus. The Scriptures tell us God's message and God's intentions for us. At both the deepest level and at the simplest level, they are an expression of love. Jesus pulls all the various themes and stories of the Bible together in his life, death, and resurrection. In that love story in Jesus, we are invited to find the purpose of our life. If we do find it and embrace it, we will possess the happiness that does not slip away.

One of the best ways to encounter Jesus is unswerving commitment to deep personal prayer. In this prayer, the emphasis is to change our lives—not to change God to meet our desires. I will explain this type of prayer in the context of Carmelite spirituality. The Carmelite tradition teaches us

that God loves us first and loves us as we are in all our brokenness. This is the beginning point for all prayer.

Our growth in prayer begins with the effort of our mind and imagination. They help us get in touch with God. As the growth progresses, there is a process of purification and transformation beyond our effort, leading to union with God. This special intervention by God is called contemplation.

In the experience of contemplation there is a switch of focus to God's part in prayer. The mind, the heart, and the entire being need to be prepared for this new reality. Our perception and, even more, our experience of God, as well as our understanding of self, must undergo a radical make-over. This produces a feeling of turmoil. Our sense of clarity and security in things spiritual crumbles. This is good. Surrender and acceptance are the way forward.

St. John of the Cross says, "Contemplation is none other than a secret, peaceful and loving infusion of God, which, if the soul allows it to happen, infuses a spirit of love" (*Dark Night*, I.10.6).

This book is an effort to make deep personal prayer understandable and attractive. It is a call to pray regularly. This will only happen with a personal discipline. In Section One I describe what this prayer is. I also present two practical methods of prayer. The following chapters delve into the foundations, benefits, obstacles, and difficulties in prayer.

In Section Two I talk about the call to contemplation, which is a gift from God usually related to our progress in

Introduction

prayer. I present Teresa of Ávila's teachings on seeking contemplation from her classic, *The Interior Castle*.

Prayer is a journey. Each of us has our own place on the journey. This book will help you identify where you are and encourage you to move on. It is helpful to all of us if we understand that we all share the need for a good GPS when it comes to prayer. None of us are totally secure in our directions. The Carmelite tradition is a special roadmap created by some of the great saints and doctors of the church. It is a call for beginners, a lift for those on the way, and an awesome guide for those approaching home. One thing we all share is that we need to take the next step. Hopefully, this text will help you discover what is next for you in walking with Jesus in prayer.

SECTION ONE

Prayer

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One

REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER

WHEN TALKING ABOUT DEEP PERSONAL PRAYER I AM USING THOMAS MERTON'S DEFINITION and the added insights of Teresa of Ávila. Merton says:

Prayer then means yearning for the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of God's word, for knowledge of God's will, and for the capacity to hear and obey God.

Teresa says prayer "is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone

with Him who we know loves us.” All prayer must raise our awareness of God’s loving presence. Humility is the foundation of prayer. It moves us to realize our total dependence on God.

We need to engage God’s word. The most privileged way of this encounter is in the Bible but also in the experiences of our life. This interaction of life and prayer will be a theme throughout this text. The encounter with God’s word leads us to what God wants, a call out of our selfishness to generosity toward God and others. In this prayer, listening is the key. New insights into the reality of how God guides our way of living open new horizons for humility, service, and love. This dialogue is rooted in God’s love for us.

Committed personal prayer comes in many different forms: vocal, mental, meditation, *lectio divina*, and contemplative prayer. This dedication to prayer requires a discipline to pray on a regular basis. Committed personal prayer is an effort to bring prayer into life habitually, no matter how we feel. It might start out as only several minutes a day, but with faithfulness, discipline, and generosity it will grow. It will gradually transform our lives. It leads us in a journey to be totally in love with God.

FIVE POINTS OF PRAYER

There are five important points in Merton’s definition of prayer:

- The first is that we focus on the presence of God. This demands a conscious effort to direct our attention to an experience of the sacred.
- Second, we bring God's word into our mind, seeking understanding.
- Third, this reflection should lead us to a sense of what God wants of us.
- Fourth, we bring this insight to our life so the word speaks to us and leads us forward.
- In the fifth step, we live in obedience to God's call. Prayer is all about life and the way we live.

Later, I will explain two prominent forms of prayer: *lectio divina* and Christian Meditation. Here, I will briefly use *lectio divina* to further explain prayer in a more general way. *Lectio divina* is a prayerful reading of the Bible or, at times, reflection on a profound personal experience.

As we begin committed personal prayer, the first item is to gather ourselves so that we can pay attention to the fact that we are in the loving presence of God.

The heart is the deepest truth about us. The Bible speaks of the heart almost a thousand times. It is the heart that is the source of prayer. The heart is where we encounter our most real self.

The four steps of *lectio divina* are reading, reflecting, responding, and resting. The first steps, reading and reflection, may take the majority of the time in the first stages of this new personal prayer. However, the job of reading and reflection is to bring us to a deeper sense of God's presence. The last two steps are praying with an open heart and resting in silence in the loving presence of the one we know loves us.

In sum, prayer is gathering all our faculties to pay attention to the intimate presence of God, to seek a loving and life-giving encounter with God. We have a sense of a sacred presence calling us to life in love. This experience of committed personal prayer seeks to clarify the will of God in the concrete reality of our daily experience. True prayer empowers us to bring God's love to our life in service of the kingdom.

"Listen, I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

* REVELATION 3:20

The single greatest obstacle to prayer is to not begin. The second is the relentless attack of distractions. The resolution of distractions is an ongoing problem that needs much attention, but ultimately, it is a return to our focal point.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE

Scripture helps us delve more deeply into the gift of prayer. The parable of the lost treasure (Matthew 13:44–46) is a fruitful example. There are three steps in this parable: finding the treasure, selling all we have, and buying the field.

The “finding” comes from a sense of hunger in the depths of the heart, a feeling of incompleteness. There is a recognition that life holds more than what we have. In the “finding” we often experience God’s love for us in our brokenness.

The “selling” involves making a commitment to pray. This costs us our time and comfort. Creating a schedule, building an atmosphere, and discovering and practicing a method of prayer all come at a cost: self-sacrifice. What we are doing is making space for God by letting go on God’s terms.

The “buying” brings us to the practice of prayer as a regular and disciplined part of our lifestyle. We address the issues that are hindering our pursuit of God.

The initial atmosphere for prayer is important. We need to minimize distractions by seeking the most silence and solitude that is a practical reality for us. For some, a candle or incense or religious art is helpful. We need to be aware of who it is we are encountering. Second, prayer always has to be rooted in love responding to love. Third, prayer needs to come from a heart yearning for faithfulness to love.

All prayer must begin with a sense of the loving presence of God. The material we read and the thoughts that lead to reflection almost always have a spark of light, some-

times quite intense. This touches our spirit and calls us to change. This is our own metro center that carries us from the mind to the heart and into life.

Prayer is about how we live, not how we feel. Most often, God gives beginners at prayer a sense of peace and progress. Gradually, God weans us from the beautiful feelings to sharpen our focus away from ourselves and toward God.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Genuine self-knowledge, which opens us up to our true self, always helps our prayer. It invites us to get real. In turn, when our prayer is authentic, we get to know ourselves more truthfully. A major purpose of prayer is to draw us out of a world of self-deception, illusions, and a sense of self-importance that places us at the center of our world. The slow process of growing in self-knowledge leads to that gradual development of personal transformation called conversion, which is repeated at several levels. The journey to refocus and recognize God at the center is only possible when we acknowledge our sinfulness and selfishness.

With faithfulness to prayer there are changes. We slowly grow in patience. The possibilities of reconciliation come out of nowhere. Situations where it was difficult to see the other side of a story now often open up to four or five different valid points of view. The prejudices of a lifetime get exposed for exactly what they are—a lie. We become more sensitive to the needs of the poor and issues of justice. We see the conflict between our lifestyle and a responsible care

for the environment, such as recycling and the appropriate use of water and energy. This is the dynamic beginning of our pilgrimage to God with Jesus leading the way.

Having considered the overall message of prayer, we will now address two practical methods of prayer.

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