Prayer Exercise

On Christian Love (Deus Caritas Est)

Habit of Prayer: Meditative

What is Meditative Prayer?

Meditative prayer is a deep, reflective form of prayer that engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. It begins with the Word of God or a spiritual writing from one of the saints and aims to integrate the subject of meditation with our personal life experiences. This exercise helps you deepen your relationship with God and align your will with His by reflecting on an excerpt from Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est (On Christian Love).*

Step 1: Read Excerpt from Benedict XVI's *On Christian Love*

Find a quiet place. Pray a prayer of invitation – "Lord, let me hear from you" – and quiet your mind so it's open to hearing from God. Slowly read the excerpt below. Let it soak in. After spending a few minutes thinking about the passage, read it through at least once more, slowly.

Two things emerge clearly from this rapid overview of the concept of eros past and present. First, there is a certain relationship between love and the Divine: love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence. Yet we have also seen that the way to attain this goal is not simply by submitting to instinct. Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or "poisoning" eros, they heal it and restore its true grandeur.

This is due first and foremost to the fact that man is a being made up of body and soul. Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united; the challenge of eros can be said to be truly overcome when this unification is achieved. Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness. The epicure Gassendi used to offer Descartes the humorous greeting: "O Soul!" And Descartes would reply: "O Flesh!". Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love —eros—able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur.

It is part of love's growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to become definitive, and it does so in a twofold sense: both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being "for ever". Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal. Love is indeed "ecstasy", not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God: "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Lk 17:33), as Jesus says throughout the Gospels (cf. Mt 10:39; 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; Jn 12:25). In these words, Jesus portrays his own path, which leads through the Cross to the Resurrection: the path of the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and in this way bears much fruit. Starting from the depths of his own sacrifice and of the love that reaches fulfillment therein, he also portrays in these words the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.

(continues on next page)

Step 2: Reflect & Meditate

After reading for a second time, consider: What sticks out to you? Perhaps it's a particular image, phrase, or a single word. Let that be your focus, meditating on what might God be trying to show you through what stands out.

Reflection Questions:

- What does the idea of purification and personal growth mean to you in the context of love?
- Can you identify areas in your own life where you might need to grow or purify your understanding of love?
- Reflect on the notion of love seeking exclusivity and permanence. How do you see these qualities manifested in your relationships?
- What challenges do you face in striving for a deeper commitment?
- How can you cultivate a sense of permanence in your relationship amidst life's changes?
- How do you view your journey of love together?
- What milestones or experiences have contributed to your growth as a couple?

Points of Reflection from the Reading:

- "*Love is indeed 'ecstasy', not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God: 'Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it' (Lk 17:33), as Jesus says throughout the Gospels (cf. Mt 10:39; 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; Jn 12:25).*"

  How do you understand the concept of self-giving in the context of love? What does authentic self-discovery look like for you, and how is it connected to your ability to love? The excerpt discusses Jesus' message of losing one's life to preserve it. How do you interpret this in the context of love? What sacrifices have you made or are you willing to make for those you love? What practices or habits do you engage in as a couple to promote personal growth and purification in your relationship? How can you support each other in this journey?

- "*Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love —eros—able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur.*"

  How do you interpret the relationship between love as (eros) and love as (agape) as described in the text? What implications does this have for your understanding of love in your own life? Reflect on the challenges you face in achieving the true grandeur of love (eros) in your relationship. What steps can you take to address these challenges together?

- "*Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united; the challenge of eros can be said to be truly overcome when this unification is achieved. Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness*."

  How do you experience the unity of body and soul in yourself? How do you experience the unity of body and soul in your marriage? In what ways can you deepen this integration to enhance your connection?

Some Guidelines for Entering into Meditation Well

Since meditation engages parts of the human being that are extremely diverse, there is no one way to engage in meditative prayer. As mentioned above, Scripture is the highest way of engaging beginning meditative prayer. However, Sacred Tradition, holy icons, liturgical texts of the day/season, writings of spiritual fathers, works of spirituality and even the "great book of creation"(CCC2705), meaning the world around us, are also great places to begin! Below are helpful pointers.

- ***Attentiveness is key*!** Do not let yourself worry about how long you meditate, but that you continue to practice it again and again.
    - As Padre Pio said, "When you do not succeed in meditating well do not, for this reason, cease to do your duty. If there are many distractions do not lose heart. Make a meditation on patience; you will profit all the same. Fix the time, the length of your meditation, and do not rise from your place until you have finished it even at the cost of being crucified."
- ***Don't compare yourself!*** Since the methods of engaging in mental prayer are vast, do not fall into the trap of comparison. Sometimes different seasons of life are fed by different methods of meditative prayer.
- ***Having something to read/ponder is key!*** Whether it is a favorite beautiful spot in your town, Scripture, writings of a Saint or Father/Doctor of the Church, contemplating the meaning in a sacred icon/image, have a resource to meditate with!
- ***Slow and steady wins the race!*** When beginning your time of meditative prayer, slowly make the sign of the cross, take time to slow down your breathing, and kneel for longer than you normally would.
    - "I strongly advise you, therefore, to pay attention to initial gestures and attitudes…Calm and slow movements are of great importance in breaking the rapid and tense rhythm of a busy and hurried life." ~ Fr. Henri Caffarel, the founder of Teams of Our Lady.