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.

Yet eros and agape—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to "be there for" the other. The element of agape thus enters into this love, for otherwise eros is impoverished and even loses its own nature.

On the other hand, man cannot live by oblative, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. Jn 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. Jn 19:34).

In the account of Jacob's ladder, the Fathers of the Church saw this inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between eros which seeks God and agape which passes on the gift received, symbolized in various ways. In that biblical passage we read how the Patriarch Jacob saw in a dream, above the stone which was his pillow, a ladder reaching up to heaven, on which the angels of God were ascending and descending (cf. Gen 28:12; Jn 1:51).

A particularly striking interpretation of this vision is presented by Pope Gregory the Great in his Pastoral Rule. He tells us that the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation. Only in this way will he be able to take upon himself the needs of others and make them his own: "per pietatis viscera in se infirmitatem caeterorum transferat". Saint Gregory speaks in this context of Saint Paul, who was borne aloft to the most exalted mysteries of God, and hence, having descended once more, he was able to become all things to all men (cf. 2 Cor 12:2-4; 1 Cor 9:22). He also points to the example of Moses, who entered the tabernacle time and again, remaining in dialogue with God, so that when he emerged he could be at the service of his people. "Within [the tent] he is borne aloft through contemplation, while without he is completely engaged in helping those who suffer: intus in contemplationem rapitur, foris infirmantium negotiis urgetur."

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Fundamentally, "love" is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly. Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love. And we have also seen, synthetically, that biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it. This newness of biblical faith is shown chiefly in two elements which deserve to be highlighted: the image of God and the image of man.

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.

Some Points for Reflection:

- "*Yet eros and agape—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.*" — How do you see the interplay between eros (ascending love) and agape (descending love) in your marriage? Can you identify moments when both aspects were particularly evident?

- "*Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to "be there for" the other. The element of agape thus enters into this love, for otherwise eros is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblative, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.*" — In what ways has your love for your spouse shifted from being primarily self-focused to being more concerned with the happiness of the other? Share examples of how you demonstrate this selflessness. Reflect on the importance of receiving love as a gift in your relationship. How do you create an environment where both partners feel valued and loved? How do you best receive love? Do you know how your spouse receives love best? Do I seek to give my spouse the love they receive well, or the the love I think should be given?

- "*In the account of Jacob's ladder, the Fathers of the Church saw this inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between eros which seeks God and agape which passes on the gift received, symbolized in various ways. In that biblical passage we read how the Patriarch Jacob saw in a dream, above the stone which was his pillow, a ladder reaching up to heaven, on which the angels of God were ascending and descending (cf. Gen 28:12; Jn 1:51). A particularly striking interpretation of this vision is presented by Pope Gregory the Great in his Pastoral Rule. He tells us that the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation. Only in this way will he be able to take upon himself the needs of others and make them his own.*" — How can you balance contemplation (spiritual nourishment) and action (serving each other and others) in your marriage? What specific practices can you implement to achieve this balance? Which spouse tends towards contemplation more than action? Which spouse tends towards action more than contemplation? Reflect on how you have taken on each other's needs and challenges in your marriage. What steps can you take to be more attuned to each other's needs?

- "*Fundamentally, "love" is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly. Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love.*" — The excerpt discusses how cutting off the two dimensions of love can lead to impoverished love. How can you ensure that both eros and agape are present and flourishing in your relationship? What aspect of the text resonates most with you in your marriage? How can you apply these insights to foster a deeper and more authentic love between you?

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.