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Prayer as Friendship with God

by Kathleen Hope Brown, D.Min.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks to his disciples about prayer: “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will repay you.” (Matthew 6:6)

Opening the Heart

We know from the Gospels that Jesus took time to pray even when he was busy, even when the crowds were pressing in on him. His Jewish upbringing gave him a profound respect for formal prayer, such as the Psalms, as well as the communal prayer of the people gathered in the Temple. However, in this passage, Jesus is calling his disciples’ attention to something different—a quiet, contemplative prayer, an opening of the heart in stillness and silence to the presence of God. This kind of prayer nurtures an intimate relationship with God. This kind of prayer is resting one’s head against God’s heart and listening for the pulse of life.

The world we live in is busy and noisy; stillness and silence are difficult to find. Quietness is rare, and inner tranquility even more elusive. Clergy and religious can be particularly

challenged in making time for private, contemplative prayer because of the demands of their work, along with the temptation to consider their work—leading other people in prayer, preparing to preach, leading others to that “inner room”—to be sufficiently prayerful for their own needs. They might maintain a disciplined rhythm of formal prayer, filled with many words, but neglect their personal relationship with God.

Deepening Intimacy

Certainly, words are one way to communicate with God, but only one. In fact, prayer is not primarily about words but a disposition of the heart, an inner movement of lifting the soul to God. Some clergy and religious, whose prayer life does not reflect a dynamic, intimate relationship with God, avoid any reference to feelings when they talk about their prayer; they can articulate what they know about God, while not being in touch with their experience of God.

Spiritual direction sessions can become theological discussions, as the intellectual approach may feel more comfortable and less threatening.

Jesus calls his disciples to friendship, however: “I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.” (John 15:15)

Like any friendship or any relationship of love, an intimate relationship with God requires time, attention, stillness, and attentive listening to the small, subtle movements of the heart that are part of God’s “language.”

*In prayer . . . so many different interior movements take place that to express them all is impossible, not only because of their quantity but also because of their nature and quality. Since this is spiritual, they are necessarily extremely subtle.*¹

—St. Francis De Sales,
Treatise on the Love of God

Prayer is both God’s work and our work, God’s invitation and our response. At Saint Luke Institute, our clients have the opportunity to nurture their personal, intimate relationship with God, to respond to God’s invitation with mindfulness and attentiveness. This particular kind of presence to

[Quiet, contemplative prayer nurtures an intimate relationship with God.](#)

continues on page 3

Case Study | Father Ed

Father Ed is a theological scholar, a thinker. He has written extensively about the Christian spiritual tradition, and the world of ideas is his comfort zone. He came to Saint Luke Institute because depression left him without his usual energy to teach and write.

Depression can affect a person's spiritual life by diminishing, or even taking away, not only their affective experience of prayer, but their desire to pray. Father Ed said that he still desired a spiritual life, but he was experiencing very little of the affective response to prayer that had previously sustained him. He said that he could recall a time in his life when he felt God's presence and response to him in prayer, but that was several years in the past.

While Father Ed's prayer life was disciplined and varied—faithfully reciting the Liturgy of the Hours, meditation on Scripture for homily preparation, a daily rosary—his prayer life seemed to his spiritual director rather mechanical, arising more out of a sense of obligation than an intimate relationship with God. Rather than a deep desire for an encounter with God, his motivation for praying seemed to be simply the belief that he *should* be praying.

Going through the motions of prayer is sometimes a lifeline, a reminder that prayer is important and a reminder of

"Focus on breathing in and out also helped, imagining breathing in God's love, breathing out any negativity."



times when it was deeply nourishing. In Father Ed's case this was not to be discouraged, but respected as a sign of his commitment. Still, he needed to get back in touch with the experience of God in prayer. However, moving "from the head to the heart," is not simple. It is opening the thinking mind to the penetrating awareness of spiritual experience, illuminating what is known with the light of something more intuitive than knowing.

Since Father Ed was aware of the spiritual tradition in a cerebral way, his journey of spiritual healing needed to begin there, with the rich tradition of contemplative prayer. Saint John of the Cross and others—including contemporary scholars³—have written about the experience of spiritual darkness, moments of impasse that happen in everyone's life from time to time, when the way forward is not clear. Impasse can lead to cynicism and

despair, and depression only increases the temptation to give up. Father Ed needed encouragement to find the inner stillness and silence, to sit with God in the impasse, and to invite God into his experience of darkness and depression; but it was unfamiliar to him to pray without words and simply be.

Replacing words with images helped: placing his struggles into God's hands or resting his head against Jesus' heart as the Beloved Disciple does in John 13:23. Focus on breathing in and out also helped, imagining breathing in God's love, breathing out any negativity. Most of all, Father Ed needed to invite God into the messy places in his life, to cry out from the depths of those places, then be still.

One evening as he prayed in the chapel, tears began to fall. Father Ed cried out to God, "This is where I need you, right here in this messy place, right here in this darkness." The immediate

continues on page 3

Father Ed *continued*

feeling was relief, as if some of the burden, the heaviness, had been lifted and became lighter for sharing. Then, gradually, the darkness of impasse began to lift, and God's light began to glimmer around the edges of the darkness.

It was a new experience for Father Ed to make space routinely and faithfully in his day for this quiet time with God. He found it most beneficial in the early morning, before the demands of the day pressed in. As he grew more accustomed to the routine, he found that if his day

did not start that way, something was "off." The stillness and silence also opened new insights into himself. He got in touch with a deep feeling of unworthiness before God and was reminded that he is God's beloved and that his growing desire for an intimate friendship with God was already God's work in him.

For confidentiality, reasons, names, identifying data, and other details of treatment have been altered.

Prayer as Friendship *continued*

God, inviting God's companionship on their journey of healing, can be a new way of praying.

Nurturing the Friendship

Contemplative prayer is a movement from the head to the heart. The heart, as we mean it here, is more than just the seat of emotions, and more like one might use the word *soul*, that innermost point in each person, where God speaks. This movement is a shift in attention from the analytical mind to the point of simple presence, where the thinking mind is brought to silence.

Such stillness and silent attentiveness is a challenge for anyone. It is difficult to find the time, and there are many distractions. There can also be a fear of what will be encountered in the silence. Clergy and religious are also susceptible to searching for their self-worth in what they do, rather than

in who they are at the core of their soul, and contemplative prayer diverts their energies from the doing.

Saint Luke Institute clients are encouraged to enter into this silence to nurture their friendship with God. They are assured that even when they feel lost, God has not abandoned them. A sense of separation from God may be a very real, felt experience, but it is not the last word. As spiritual author Martin Laird has written, "God does not know how to be absent."² An intimate, loving friendship with God is the source of energy for ministry.

Friendship with God is important for inner peace, which can be a source of healing. Friendship with God is important for discernment, not just decision-making, but the disposition of a heart attentive to God's voice. When points of impasse are encountered on the spiritual journey, surrendering to

this intimate relationship allows God's healing grace to break through.

Endnotes

- ¹St. Francis DeSales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book 3.
- ²Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford, 2006), p. 15
- ³John of the Cross wrote about this in his commentary on *The Dark Night*. See also the work of Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, such as "Impasse and Dark Night" in *Desire, Darkness and Hope: Theology in a Time of Impasse* by Laurie Cassidy, ed. and M. Shawn Copeland, ed. (Liturgical Press, 2021).

Kathleen Hope Brown, D.Min., is Saint Luke Institute's Coordinator of Spiritual Formation in Silver Spring, Maryland.

HELP SPREAD THE WORD



#iGIVECATHOLIC

November 30, 2021

On Point and On the Move

The SLI Board and staff have been visioning, planning, and measuring for months. The new Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP) opened during the summer and now we are about to see our new reality come to full fruition as boxes are being packed and we ready ourselves to move to a new location.

The Silver Spring, Maryland-based IOP allows clients to live at various locations (religious house or retreat center, etc.) while receiving 5-6 hours of daily specialized therapy, Monday through Friday. This new program allows us to serve more clergy and consecrated religious and is a primary method of therapeutic services.

Our Services

- Vocational Assessments—We evaluate permanent diaconate, priesthood, and religious life candidates for vocational suitability during an in-depth, multi-day spiritual and psychological assessment.
- Clinical Evaluations—Identifying the problem is the first step in treatment. After a five-day comprehensive psychological and spiritual evaluation, we provide an informed diagnosis with corresponding recommendations to foster growth and healing.
- Outpatient Therapy—In addition to the Intensive Outpatient Program,

we offer regular outpatient services, including group and individual therapy and spiritual direction, for local laity, clergy, and religious to help them address and navigate daily struggles.

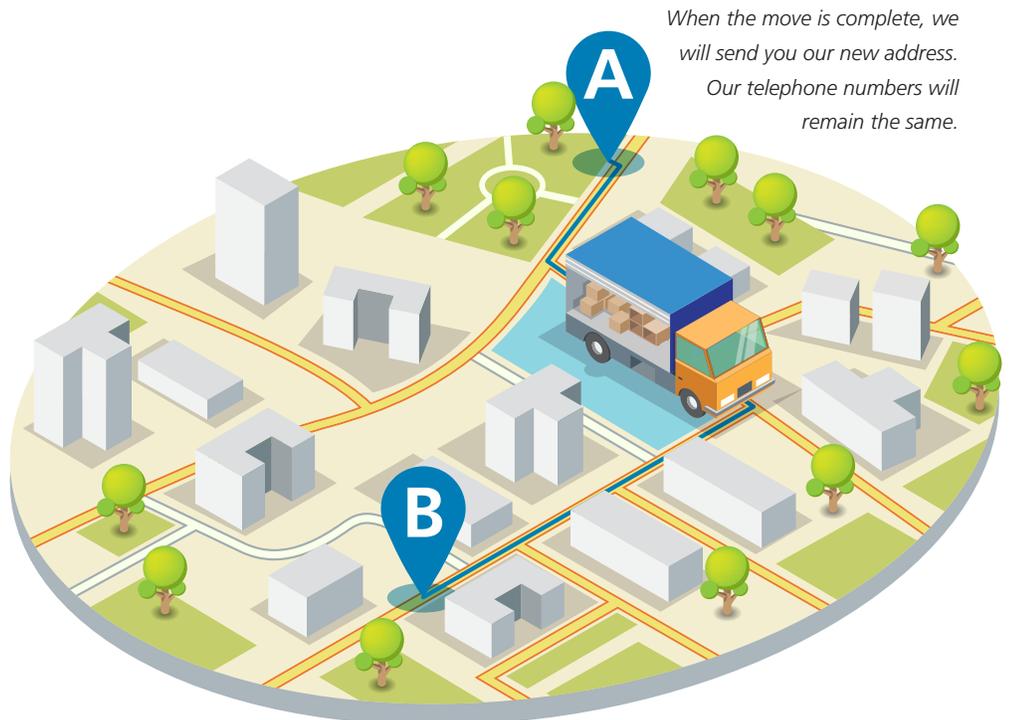
- Consultation—Confidential services provide Church leaders expert support to manage complex pastoral difficulties, including personnel or behavioral challenges that may disrupt community and parish life.
- Education—In-person and online educational offerings address the psychological, behavioral, and

spiritual health and ministry needs of Catholic clergy, religious, and laity. They provide in-depth learning for dioceses, religious congregations, and seminaries worldwide.

Our Commitment

Our mission is to foster healthy ministers for a vibrant Catholic Church. Our experience tells us that one in five adults will be affected by mental illness. Our expertise assures quality, healing care when it is needed most.

We Understand. We Are Here to Help.



When the move is complete, we will send you our new address. Our telephone numbers will remain the same.



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SLI's transition to an intensive outpatient program includes moving to a new Silver Spring office space in fall 2021.

LukeNotes is a quarterly publication of Saint Luke Institute. For address changes, please e-mail LukeNotes@sl.org or call 301-422-5405. Include both the new and old name and address.