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Mental prayer

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Mental prayer is a form of [prayer](#) recommended in the Catholic Church whereby one loves [God](#) through [dialogue](#), [meditating](#) on God's words, and [contemplation](#) of his face. It is a time of silence focused on God. It is distinguished from [vocal prayers](#) which use set prayers, although mental prayer can proceed by using vocal prayers in order to improve dialogue with God.^[1]

One of the foremost writers on mental prayer, St. [Teresa of Avila](#), stated: "Mental prayer [oración mental] is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us."^[1] Since the emphasis is on love rather than thought, modern authors recommend that it be called **interior prayer**.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [meditation](#) and [contemplative prayer](#) which takes place in mental prayer are "major expressions of the life of prayer" in the Christian tradition. The practice of mental prayer is necessary for reaching the goal of [Christian perfection](#), said Blessed [Mother Teresa](#). "Holiness is impossible without it." All saints, according to St. [Alphonsus Liguori](#), Doctor of Church on Moral theology, have become saints by mental prayer. Thus, spiritual theologian [Adolphe Tanquerey](#) concluded that mental prayer is "the most effective means of assuring one's salvation."



Mental prayer is the most effective means of assuring one's salvation (Adolphe Tanquerey)

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Nature and history

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Tanquerey distinguishes between vocal prayer, which is expressed by words or gestures, and mental prayer, "which takes place wholly within the soul". Thus Francis Luna states that vocal prayer uses set formulas while mental prayer is "prayer that issues from ourselves".

Mental prayer was defined by Fr. John Hardon as a "form of prayer in which the sentiments expressed are one's own and not those of another person. Mental prayer is accomplished by internal acts of the mind and affections and is either simple meditation or contemplation."

Mental prayer has always been practised in one way or another, according to Tanquerey. He refers to the meditations shown by the Psalms and to the example of Jesus Christ who talked about worshipping in spirit and in truth, who spent whole nights in prayer and who prayed his long personal prayers in Gethsemane and in Calvary. Benedict XVI wrote that as Son, Jesus was always in communication with the Father.

[John Cassian](#) (5th century) and [John Climacus](#) (6th century) discussed the ways of mental prayer. Among the Fathers of the Church who have recommended mental prayer are St. [Augustine of Hippo](#), St. [John Chrysostom](#), St. [Jerome](#) and St. [Basil](#). [Boethius](#) praised it and St. [Bernard of Clairvaux](#) argued for it.

Early in the sixteenth century the [Dominican](#) chapter of Milan prescribed mental prayer for half an hour morning and evening. Among the [Franciscans](#) there is record of methodical mental prayer about the middle of that century. Among the [Carmelites](#) there was no regulation for it until Saint [Teresa of Avila](#) introduced it for two hours daily. Although Saint [Ignatius of Loyola](#) reduced meditation to such a definite method in his spiritual exercises, it was not made part of his rule until thirty years after the formation of the [Society of Jesus](#). His method and that of St. [Sulpice](#) have helped to spread the habit of meditating beyond the cloister among the faithful everywhere.

Modern authors recommend that this prayer be called "interior prayer". Jacques Philippe said: "It would be better to say interior prayer instead of mental prayer, because in our modern culture, the word "mental" is associated with thoughts—as something cerebral—whereas this form of prayer is more an affair of the heart, instead of reflection. St. Teresa of Avila said that it is not an act of thinking much, but of loving much."

Importance

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Blessed [Mother Teresa](#) said that, "We must never forget that we are bound to perfection and should aim ceaselessly for it. The practice of mental prayer is necessary to reach that goal. Because it is the breath of life for our soul, holiness is impossible without it. It is only in mental prayer and spiritual reading that we cultivate the gift of prayer. Mental prayer is greatly fostered by simplicity— that is forgetfulness of self and of the body and of the sense, and by frequent aspirations that feed our prayer." (*No greater love*)

"He who neglects mental prayer," affirms Saint [Teresa of Avila](#), "needs no devil to carry him to hell. He brings himself there with his own hands." Her fellow Carmelite, Saint John of the Cross, also said, "Without the aid of mental prayer, the soul cannot triumph over the forces of the demon."

On the reason for mental prayer, Saint [Alphonsus Liguori](#), the Catholic Church's Doctor of Moral theology, explained: "Mental prayer is the blessed furnace in which souls are inflamed with the love of God. All the saints have become saints by mental prayer" He said that "It is morally impossible for him who neglects meditation to live without sin," because of its incompatibility with sin: nobody can continue the practice of mental prayer in the state of mortal sin. He will either repent or quit the practice of mental prayer.



Mother Teresa: Holiness is

In his work, *Necessity and Power of Prayer, The Great Means of Salvation and Perfection*, St. Alphonsus Liguori explained the effectiveness of mental prayer:

impossible without mental prayer

This is the chief fruit of mental prayer, to ask God for the graces which we need for perseverance and for eternal salvation; and chiefly for this reason it is that mental prayer is morally necessary for the soul, to enable it to preserve itself in the grace of God.

For if a person does not remember in the time of meditation to ask for the help necessary for perseverance, he will not do so at any other time; for without meditation he will not think of asking for it, and will not even think of the necessity for asking it.

On the other hand, he who makes his meditation every day will easily see the needs of his soul, its dangers, and the necessity of his prayer; and so he, will pray, and will obtain the graces which will enable him to persevere and save his soul.

"Sublime is the excellence of mental prayer, great are its privileges; to mental prayer heaven is opened; to mental prayer heavenly secrets are manifested and the ear of God [is] ever attentive," said Saint Peter of Alcantara

Spiritual theologian [Adolphe Tanqueray](#) thus concluded that mental prayer is "the most effective means of assuring one's salvation."

[Benedict XVI](#) told priests that prayer and meditation, "spending time in God's presence in prayer is a real pastoral priority; it is not an addition to pastoral work: being before the Lord is a pastoral priority and in the final analysis, the most important. [1] In the Foreword of his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI emphasized that "everything depends" on "intimate friendship with Jesus."

Learning mental prayer

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John Paul II in his program for the new millennium said that "We have to learn to pray: as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: 'Lord, teach us to pray!'" (Lk 11:1). This reciprocity is the very substance and soul of the Christian life."

Thus, St. [Josemaría Escrivá](#), whom John Paul II called "a master in the practice of prayer," replied to somebody, "You don't know how to pray? Put yourself in the presence of God, and as soon as you have said, "Lord, I don't know how to pray!" you can be sure you've already begun." (*The Way* 90)

Since sanctity is for everyone, according to Catholic doctrine, anyone can learn mental prayer, whether young or old. St. Therese of the Lisieux learned mental prayer when she was eleven years old. [2] "Mental prayer is not just for priests and nuns, but is for everyone. The youngest of children are capable of reaching great heights through mental prayer," is the teaching of the Franciscan Friar Minors.

Principles of mental prayer

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Relationship with a person

- Prayer means dealing with someone, a person, the living God. As John Paul II said, "We shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!" "Being Christian is... the encounter with an event, a person," said Benedict XVI. There is an I, a someone who wants to be with us, someone who listens, feels, sees, talks and interacts with the one praying.
- "Friendly dealing" (tratar de amistad) is the literal translation of St. Teresa's definition of mental prayer: "tratar de amistad, estando muchas veces tratando a solas con Quien sabemos nos ama". The literal translation is: friendly dealing, many times dealing one-on-one with Him whom we know loves us.
- And this person has a face which we can contemplate, a face that is a singular manifestation of his person.

The principle of divine action

- The first important principle is "What matters in prayer is not what we do but what God does in us during those moments," said Jacques Philippe in *Time for God*. "The essential act in prayer is, at bottom, to place one's self in God's presence and to remain there...This presence, which is that of the living God, is active, vivifying. It heals and sanctifies us. We cannot sit before a fire without getting warm."
- Allowing God to be fully present is key to the highest levels of prayer, according to John Paul II. "In prayer, the true protagonist is God," he said in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. "Man achieves the fullness of prayer not when he expresses himself, but when he lets God be most fully present in prayer." The biblical reason for this, according to John Paul II is: "we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings" (cf. Rom 8:26). As Mother Teresa said, "In vocal prayer we speak to God, in mental prayer he speaks to us. It is then that God pours himself to us." "Placing oneself in God's presence and remaining there" is the essential act of prayer, according to Philippe.

Basic decision is making time for mental prayer

- The basic decision then is to "make time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up." (CCC 2710)
- The recommended length of time per day varies from "a few minutes" (Friars Minor.org), "30 minutes" (Eugene Boylan), "several minutes" (Josemaría Escrivá), "one hour" (Francis of Sales), "minimum of half an hour in front of the Blessed Sacrament" (Alphonsus Liguori). The beginningcatholic.com recommends starting with 5–10 minutes.

Primacy of love

- The second fundamental principle, according to Jacques Philippe is "love is above everything else." As St. Teresa explained, in prayer, it does not matter as much to think as to love. This is in accordance with the commandment that Jesus aptly called "the greatest": Love God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole mind and your whole strength.

"Loving in the first place is *allowing oneself to be loved*," said Philippe. Benedict XVI stressed in *Deus caritas est*: "Anyone who wishes to give love *must also receive love* as a gift...One can become a source from which rivers of living water flow. 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." (Italics added)

Benedict XVI emphasized that this is "the heart of the Gospel, the central nucleus of Christianity": "In this is love, not that we loved God but that *he loved us*." (1 Jn 4:10; italics added). *We have come to believe in God's love* is, he says, the fundamental decision of a Christian's life.

Joseph Ratzinger emphasized that sanctity is "nothing other than to speak with God as a friend speaks with a friend, allowing God to work, the Only One who can really make the world both good and happy."

"Fundamentally, prayer is to place oneself in God's presence and to allow him to love us," says Philippe. And with this, the basic attitude of a Christian is humility coming from a knowledge of his own powerlessness and sinfulness in comparison to the grandeur of God. Thus Jesus criticized the self-praise of the Pharisees which showed them as people who "trusted themselves that they were righteous," while he praised the tax-collector's petition for mercy, because "he who humbles himself will be exalted."

- The Christian's love increases as a response to the love of God. "Contemplative prayer," according to the Catechism, "is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more." (CCC 2712)

St. Teresa of Avila said that "to love is to give everything and to give one's self. If my daily prayers steadily revolve around and return to one idea, which is that of rousing my heart into giving myself totally to the Lord, to keep on serving him, then such prayer would be poorer yet better!"

Practice of mental prayer

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Aids to prayer

St. [Francis of Sales](#) said: "Begin all prayer, whether mental or vocal, by an act of the Presence of God. If you observe this rule strictly, you will soon see how useful it is." He says that God is everywhere and is in our hearts and souls. Thus, "a blind man when in the presence of his prince will preserve a reverential attitude if told that the king is there, although unable to see him."

Mother Teresa said that "I always begin my prayer in silence, for it is in the silence of the heart that God speaks." Her "simple path" states: "The fruit of silence is PRAYER. The fruit of prayer is FAITH. The fruit of faith is LOVE. The fruit of love is SERVICE. The fruit of service is PEACE."

There are some formulas which can help start and end mental prayer:

Preparatory Prayer: My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence, I ask your pardon for my sins, and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Closing prayer: I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Topics for mental prayer

- *Calling God by his name.* As prayer means dealing with God as a person, then it is important to deal with God by means of calling him by the name by which he relates with us.
 - Jesus, the model of Christian prayer, used the word "Abba" or Daddy, an endearing Hebrew word to call God the Father. "A fundamental word in the mouth of 'the Son' is 'Abba,'" said Benedict XVI. "It expresses his whole being, and all that he says to God in prayer is ultimately only an explication of his being (and hence an explication of this one word)." The Catechism quotes St. Augustine: Our Father: at this name love is aroused in us . . . and the confidence of obtaining what we are about to ask. . . . What would he not give to his children who ask, since he has already granted them the gift of being his children?
 - "The name of Jesus is at the heart of Christian prayer. All liturgical prayers conclude with the words "through our Lord Jesus Christ". The Hail Mary reaches its high point in the words "blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." the Eastern prayer of the heart, the [Jesus Prayer](#), says: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Many Christians, such as St. Joan of Arc, have died with the one word "Jesus" on their lips." (CCC 435)
- *Focus on God.* Benedict XVI said in *Jesus of Nazareth*: "Prayer is not about this or that; it's about God's desire to give us the gift of himself, the gift of gifts – the one thing necessary." "The gift of God is God himself." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* thus questioned focusing on other things: "how could the prayer of the children of adoption be centered on the gifts rather than the Giver?" (2740)
 - "We are usually helped by books, and Christians do not want for them: the Sacred Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts of the day or season, writings of the spiritual fathers, works of spirituality, the great book of creation, and that of history the page on which the "today" of God is written." (CCC 2707)
 - Meditating on the life of Jesus Christ. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI kept on repeating Jesus' point: "He who sees me sees the Father." "The figure of Jesus is the mirror in which we come to know who God is and what he is like." That God is love. St. [Francis of Sales](#) said: "I commend earnest mental prayer to you, more particularly such as bears upon the Life and Passion of our Lord. If you contemplate Him frequently in meditation, your whole soul will be filled with Him, you will grow in His Likeness, and your actions will be molded on His."
- *About the self as friends of God.* St. Josemaria described prayer thus: "To pray is to talk with God. But about what?" About what? About Him, about yourself—joys, sorrows, successes and failures, noble ambitions, daily worries, weaknesses! And acts of thanksgiving and petitions—and Love and reparation. In a word, to get to know him and to get to know yourself—"to get acquainted!" (The Way 91). "God is interested in everything we do, because Christ wishes to become incarnate in our things, to vivify from within even our most insignificant actions... The theme of my prayer is the theme of my life... As I consider my situation, there comes to mind a specific and firm resolution to change, to improve, to be more docile to the love of God. It should be a sincere and concrete resolution. And we cannot forget to ask the Holy Spirit, with as much urgency as confidence, not to abandon us, because "you, Lord, are my strength." (Christ Is Passing By, 174)

See also

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Notes

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- [^] ^a ^b [Teresa](#), p. 141

References

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- of Avila. [St Teresa](#): Translated by [Benedictines of Stanbrook](#) (2007). *The Way of Perfection*. Cosimo. Inc.. ISBN 1602062617.

External links

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- [The Beginning Catholic on Mental Prayer](#)
- [Christian spirituality](#)
- [Catechism of the Catholic Church on Contemplative Prayer](#)
- [St. John of the Cross on Spiritual Poverty](#), article by Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm.
- [Catholic Encyclopedia on prayer](#)
- [Miracle of the rosary mission on mental prayer](#)
- [Progress through Mental Prayer](#) by Edward Leen in EWTN
- [The Practice of Mental Prayer](#) By Brother André Marie, M.I.C.M.
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- [St. Alphonsus: Master of Prayer](#) by Margaret M. O'Shea, IHM
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