

Listening Prayer

“Apophatic Prayer”

Adapted from “Creating a Life with God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices” by Daniel Wolpert

“My heart has heard you say, ‘Come and talk with me’. And my heart responds, ‘Lord, I am coming.’” (Psalm 27:8)

This prayer practice is sometimes referred to as “Apophatic Prayer.” Apophatic prayer is another form of silent contemplation. “In this prayer we are drawn into that vast space that is God without words, names, concepts. In this prayer we begin to take seriously the comment often made but not practiced, that God is beyond all that we know of God.” (pg 66) We are not emptying our mind; we are opening our mind specifically to God, surrendering to God and waiting with desire for God to form our prayer. We are listening for God and are open to the movement of the Holy Spirit to lead us in our prayer.

Apophatic prayer has ancient roots and in the 14th century an unknown author wrote the book, “The Cloud of Unknowing” which sought to explain and describe silent contemplative prayer. This style of prayer relies upon and develops the contemplative skills of paradox and non-thought. A short explanation of these terms from Wolpert’s book:

Paradox – simultaneously accepting two apparently opposing concepts such as ‘we can know God by not knowing anything about God.’ It might sound a little strange to our minds which tend to seek out linear logic. If we can let go of that way of knowing, God can infuse a deeper knowing.

Non-thought – this can be one of the most challenging aspects of this type of prayer. We give up trying to understand through our usual logical thought process and allow God to do the thinking for us. It’s not a matter of right and wrong answers; it’s really the realization that God’s vastness makes it impossible for us to completely know him. What we must do is simply surrender and wait for God to know us. (pgs 65-66)

- ❖ **Relax! God speaks to us. Be willing to listen. Ask God to help you to hear from him and the grace to receive what he gives.**
- ❖ **Pick a simple word that captures your desire to know God. Choose a short word, perhaps one syllable word such as “God” or “love” that’s easy to retain.**
- ❖ **The word you choose symbolizes our cry, “I am here, God” to which eventually comes the soft reply, “You are mine and you are loved.”**
- ❖ **Each time your mind wanders (and it most likely will) don’t berate yourself, simply return to the word you have chosen.**
- ❖ **Ask God for the grace to hear and receive from him. It’s a gift not an accomplishment. Know that it’s God’s desire to be known. It is reality of his vastness that makes this prayer feel so vast. Worry not! God shows up!**
- ❖ **You may at different times experience an overwhelming sense of your own brokenness and the darkness that accompanies that awareness. You may also experience a union and peace with God that elates you. Don’t let either experience lend too stringent an understanding of this experience. Both tend to come from the world of images that we live in. The practice of apophatic prayer encourages us to move continually beyond any thought into the silence of God. Whatever arises....go back to your word.**
- ❖ **Sometimes “nothing” happens. Pay attention to the nothing. Ask God about it. What does it mean? You may be out of practice and need to wear down your native resistance to God and your inclination to try to fill that void. You may be resisting the obvious things God is saying elsewhere in your life. God may be speaking – to remind you of God’s absence. Return to your word.**
- ❖ **The point of apophatic prayer is simply to place ourselves at the mercy of God and allow ourselves to be filled with the grace of our Creator.**