

Personal Prayer and Scripture: Drinking from the Well which is Too Deep for Words.
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Before undergoing my initial adult conversion experience as a young adult, my experience of personal prayer was limited to formal prayers such as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be, and to the public liturgical prayer of the Church at mass. Since being baptized in the Spirit, I have been led by the Spirit into both a variety of ways of praying personally, and into a deeper appreciation for the richness of our Catholic prayer tradition, including formal prayers, simple devotions, liturgical prayer, and various forms of meditative and contemplative prayer. Over the last 47 years, I have found commitment to daily personal prayer a key to living the spiritual life. Our Catholic tradition of prayer and piety is so rich that I cannot do justice to it all. But I can address a few basics about personal prayer, praying with scripture, and some common obstacles to prayer.

Some of the most necessary orientations to personal prayer are reflected in the most simple prayer of all—the sign of the cross: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The sign of the cross reminds us that our prayer is “Trinitarian.” We pray “in the name of” the Trinity because we live in the Trinity, and the Trinity lives in us (John 14-16; The Lay Members of Christ’s Faithful People #12, 18, 19). When we are baptized, we are baptized into Christ. We live in him. We are a part of his body. We participate in his prayer to the Father. At our baptism we also received the Holy Spirit, God’s own life, Who cries out to the Father within us, “Abba, Father.” We thus pray as sons and daughters to our Father, and not as strangers. Christian prayer, moreover, is more the work of the Holy Spirit than our work, for He is the master of prayer.

Personal prayer is more a matter of expressing a relationship with the persons of the Trinity than about using particular methods. It is a relationship of self-giving: God giving himself to us, and our giving ourselves to him. We invoke persons—God the Father, Jesus the Lord, the Holy Spirit—not some abstract, impersonal force, not some divine consciousness that is in everything, not some projection of our imaginations, but God who has broken into history and revealed himself.

Over the years I continue to be impressed by Abraham’s first invoking God by name (Genesis 12.8). What was it like before God broke into human history and addressed Abraham? Perhaps human beings groped about, mystified by natural forces, and attempted to appease these forces by various forms of sacrifice. Perhaps God was silent. But God speaks to Abraham, and Abraham hears him. Abraham responds in obedience to God: he simply does what God says. He also builds God an altar and invokes him by name—he “calls on the name of the Lord.” This is the beginning of prayer as a relationship between Abraham and God.

God broke into my life over 45 years ago in a similar way. Before that, I only had a vague awareness that God might exist. He appeared so distant that his existence really did not affect much how I lived. But when he broke in, when I responded even a little to him, I had a personal encounter with him. He revealed something of himself to me, just as he did to Abraham. During the first week of my initial decision to submit my life to Jesus, the Holy Spirit began to lead me into prayer. He would lead me to stop whatever I was doing, and praise and thank God. He would turn my mind to God. He led me to a

chapel to give me the gift of tongues, a charismatic prayer gift. That first week was the beginning of personal prayer for me. That initial experience of Jesus, of the Father, and of the Holy Spirit is why I pray today.

Besides reminding us of our relationship to the Trinity, the sign of the cross also reminds us of the central event in salvation history, the Paschal sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. As the central icon of Christianity, the sign of the cross conveys the central mystery of Jesus' death as the source of our life. Because Jesus offered himself to the Father on the Cross on our behalf in atonement for our sins, we have been reconciled to the Father and live his own life in the Holy Spirit.

The sign of the cross is a reminder of how we should live. Jesus tells us, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14.27). Self-denial, hardship, suffering, are part of the daily Christian life. For as the master is, so shall his disciples be. In this regard, the sign of the cross is a reminder that prayer is not simply about having experiences, but about our living the life of Jesus. The proof of sound prayer is living a holy life. For "everyone who hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 John 3.3). This does not mean that experiencing God in prayer is unhelpful. Experiencing God in prayer is very helpful to developing an affective love for God. While not the measure of our holiness, sensible experiences of God in prayer provide encouragement in our relationship with him. Yet a relationship with Jesus does not just involve prayer experiences, but a whole way of life. It involves following Jesus' teaching, his moral code (Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter, *The Splendor of Truth*, 1993). This is quite different from New Age chanting, transcendental meditation, or other adaptations of Far Eastern religious meditation, where the focus is more on feeling good or peaceful. God makes demands on us.

But God also aids us, tremendously. One of the most freeing things I heard about prayer over 45 years ago was that Jesus is the Lord of prayer. That means that he will lead you and teach you how to pray through His Holy Spirit. Ask him. Many times over the years I got stranded somehow, not knowing how to approach the Lord. I would ask Jesus to guide me, and he would lead me to a particular scripture passage, or a spiritual book, or give me a perspective, or help me persevere in prayer, or encourage me through another person. Jesus' Spirit has taught me how to praise God by reading the psalms out loud, how to open myself to his prompting in reading scripture reflectively, how to examine my conscience, to recognize my sins and turn away from them in order to clear up my relationship with the Lord. He has prompted me to ask forgiveness of people I have wronged. He has shown me aspects of myself I would never have known. He has led me into an interior posture of worship that reflects God's greatness and my littleness. He has made Jesus known to me, and the Father, and Mary. He has taught me to quiet my own thoughts and to attend to God's real but unseen presence. Often over the years, the Holy Spirit was the one who was instigating a change in the way I prayed, and it took awhile for me to catch on. Anyone who has prayed consistently for more than a few years can tell of the Holy Spirit's leading and working through different stages of both prayer and the Christian life.

Making a commitment to pray daily at a specific time and in a specific place has been the key to allowing the Holy Spirit shape my prayer. While I started with 15 minutes a day, I gradually increased my prayer time to an hour a day, especially after hearing that an hour is only 1/24 of my life. Does not the most important Person, the key

relationship in my life, deserve at least that much? Setting a specific time not only establishes the commitment as a priority, but allows me to bring myself before the Lord in a variety of psychological states: whether I am happy, angry, sad, feeling holy or sinful. Thus, like the personas or speakers in the Psalms, I end up bringing my whole self in its varied human condition before the Lord. This makes for authentic encounters with the Lord.

Having a specific place to pray that allows both solitude and freedom of expression provides stability in developing a habit of prayer. I would usually pray in the same comfortable chair in the living room before my children were up. I sit, rather than kneel or stand, because I can attend to the Lord most easily in this posture. Sometimes, however, God will have me lying flat on my face in adoration.

Fr. Michael Scanlon, previously president of the University of Steubenville, calls the commitment to pray daily at a certain time and place “an appointment with God.” We would not miss an appointment with the Pope or the President of our country, would we? Why would we ever “stand up” the Creator of the universe?

While I have prayed differently at different times over the years, the following composite concretizes the basic approach. First, I “turn to the Lord.” This turning of the inner person is a key orientation, and can be explained through two more philosophical concepts. The notion of “intentionality” comes from phenomenology and refers to a person’s consciousness. We have all had the experience of thinking of something else while someone is talking to us. In that case our intentionality, our consciousness, the inner person, is focused on what we are thinking about instead of the other person and what he is saying. In “turning to the Lord” I focus my attention, my whole inner consciousness, on God Himself—usually on one of the Persons of the Trinity—on the Father or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Although God is unseen, He is present. So I turn my attention to Him.

The second notion is “patient attending.” Most of us have had the experience of stopping and listening attentively to the silence in the desert or a forest, or to a sequence of notes in a piece of classical music. Or we have stopped and looked carefully at a wildflower. The psalmist compares such patient attending to God with the attentiveness of a servant to the least gesture of her master in Psalm 123:

To thee I lift up my eyes,
Oh thou who art enthroned
In the heavens!
Behold, as the eyes of servants
Look to the hand of their master,
As the eyes of a maid
To the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the Lord our God,
Till he have mercy upon us. (vs. 1-2).

Of course, in regard to prayer, we are talking about the “inner eye,” the inner person’s consciousness being directed to the Lord. All of this is what I mean when I say I begin by “turning to the Lord.”

After turning to the Lord, I deal with what is going on with me at that time. If I

am aware of any sin, I bring it before the Lord, and ask His forgiveness. If I am aware of being distant, I try to humble myself and submit myself more fully to the Lord. If I have concerns, I try to release them to the Lord. If I am happy about something, I express my gratitude by giving thanks. If I am disappointed or angry, I try to get at the root of it by bringing it before the Lord, and then giving it over to him. The basic idea is that I come as I am, but I try to clear away any obstacles to my hearing the Lord, to my taking a posture of worship before him, or to my responding to him.

Then I will use something objective for God to reveal himself or speak to me—usually a particular book of scripture that I am reading reflectively, or the Psalms, or a few pages of spiritual reading, or poetry which I have found to be particularly helpful in bringing me to the Lord (for example, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Herbert, or John Donne). The objective content is designed in part to offset my own subjective orientations. It also often challenges me and helps me grow in my relationship with the Lord, much as reading running magazines will stimulate runners, golf magazines will help hone golfing skills, home and garden magazines stimulate decorating ideas, and the Wall Street Journal keeps businessmen informed about currents in the broader business world.

Then, I will sit and listen before the Lord. Sometimes a particular scripture or image from scripture will come to mind, or a particular thought or personal orientation. I will turn to the scripture and read it. I try to respond as appropriate. I consider these to be promptings of the Holy Spirit. This is part of a personal interchange with the Lord. Often I end up sitting in God's presence, simply attending to him.

Finally, I end with petitions and intercessions. I pray for my wife, each of my children, and others who have come to my attention with any of a variety of needs. I usually also pray for my work.

Although my approach to personal prayer over the years has varied from time to time, although I will describe praying with scripture through the method of *lectio divina* in more detail, and although I spend much more time just sitting in the Lord's presence now than when I started, this composite characterizes some key things I have learned through experience. If you are not praying now, start with just 15 minutes a day—but every day. I guarantee you that if you seek Jesus through personal prayer each day in the way I have described, you will know him and know that you know him. If you are praying already, make sure your prayer is personal. Trust the Holy Spirit to lead you. Do not let methods or books alone determine your relationship to the Lord. Gradually extend the time you are praying to a half an hour each day. Pick the time that is best for you. If you are able, gradually extend the time to 45 minutes, and then to an hour. Not everyone, however, is able or even should pray an hour a day.

We are all different. We will all pray differently, depending upon our temperament, our state in life, our duties, our generosity, our capacity for discipline, and upon the state of our relationship with God. St. Francis de Sales, in referring to personal prayer as “devotion,” suggests that we all must pray, no matter what our state in life, but that we will each pray differently:

I say that devotion must be practiced in different ways by the nobleman and by the working man, by the servant and by the prince, by the widow, by the unmarried girl and by the married woman. But even this distinction

is not sufficient; for the practice of devotion must be adapted to the strength, to the occupation and to the duties of each one in particular. Tell me, please, my Philothea, whether it is proper for a bishop to want to lead a solitary life like a Carthusain; or for married people to be no more concerned than a Capuchin about increasing their income; or for a working man to spend his whole day in church like a religious... Is not this sort of devotion ridiculous, unorganized and intolerable? Yet this absurd error occurs very frequently, but in no way does true devotion, my Philothea, destroy anything at all. On the contrary, it perfects and fulfills all things. In fact if it ever works against, or is inimical to, anyone's legitimate station and calling, then it is very definitely false devotion.... Not only does it [true devotion] not injure any sort of calling or occupation, it even embellishes and enhances it.... Through devotion your family cares become more peaceful, mutual love between husband and wife becomes more sincere, the service we owe to the prince becomes more faithful, and our work, no matter what it is, becomes more pleasant and agreeable.

It is therefore an error and even a heresy to wish to exclude the exercise of devotion from military divisions, from the artisans' shops, from the courts of princes, from family households. I acknowledge, my dear Philothea, that the type of devotion which is purely contemplative, monastic and religious can certainly not be exercised in these sorts of stations and occupations, but besides this threefold type of devotion, there are many others fit for perfecting those who live in a secular state. Therefore, in whatever situations we happen to be, we can and we must aspire to the life of perfection.

If you are a beginning pray-er, set a reasonable goal in light of your duties, and remain faithful to that.

Suggested Reading to Begin Praying: Ralph Martin. [Hungry for God: Practical Help in Personal Prayer.](#)

Understanding the Scriptures

In the Old Testament, the "tent of meeting" and the Temple were privileged places where God would come down to earth and meet with his people. The tent of meeting was constructed specifically according to God's design (Exodus 25-27). Exodus 33. 7-11 describes how God would descend in a cloud to meet with Moses face-to-face in the tent of meeting:

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; and he called it the tent of meeting. And every one who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose up, and every man stood

at his tent door, and look after Moses, until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the door of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the door of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, every man at his tent door. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

At the dedication of the Temple, God also descends in a cloud, and so filled the Temple with his presence that the priests could not remain standing (1 Kings 8.10-11). Solomon prays that God's "eyes would be open night and day" toward the Temple, the place where he promised to dwell (1 Kings 8.27-30). After Solomon's long prayer describing the different conditions in which the Israelites might seek the Lord by praying at the Temple, the Lord responds, "I have heard your prayer and supplication, which you have made before me; I have consecrated this house which you have built, and put my name there for ever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time" (1 Kings 9.3).

The tent of meeting and the Temple served as privileged places on earth where God would come down and meet with his people. For Catholics, the seven sacraments are privileged meeting places with God on earth, ways in which we come into life-giving contact with the Risen Lord Jesus. For Christians of all traditions, the sacred scriptures, the Bible, is also a privileged meeting place with God, where he has chosen to meet us. In the Catholic tradition, scripture is understood as a *part* of "revelation," of how God reveals himself to us in words and in deeds. The three key avenues of revelation which depend upon one another as the three legs of a tripod supporting revelation are scripture, tradition, and the magisterium of the Church. "Tradition" refers to "what has been handed on" and includes much of the way the Church as a people have lived the faith, prayed the faith, thought about and taught the Faith. The "magisterium" refers to the teaching authority of the pastors of the Church, what the bishops throughout the world teach in union with the Pope. A brief but exquisite document of Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution On Revelation" (*Dei Verbum*) describes the Catholic understanding of revelation.

Whereas previous Church teaching had emphasized God making himself known through precepts and principles about how to live, the emphasis of *Dei Verbum* is on God making himself known as a person and inviting us into a relationship with himself: "Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself" (*DV* #2). God reveals himself to us in his words and in his deeds. He communicates not just his plan for humankind, but himself. "For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them..." (*DV* #21). The scriptures as a whole, but especially the gospels, reveal Jesus Christ, who is both the very Word and Image of the Father (Hebrews 1:3; *Catechism* #102). Ignorance of the scriptures, therefore, is ignorance of Christ (*DV* #25). The scriptures present an ever new opportunity to encounter and get to know the living Risen Lord.

The scriptures do not just communicate intellectual knowledge, but the very life of God. This is a mystery. The way *Dei Verbum* talks about this is that the scriptures convey the power of God. "The word of God, which is the power of God for the

salvation of all who believe, is set forth and shows its power in a most excellent way in the writings of the New Testament” (*DV* #17). And again in section 21:

...and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: “For the word of God is living and active” (Heb. 4.12) and “it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified” (Acts. 20.32; see 1 Thes. 2.13).

I have experienced this power in several ways. From the first days after my initial conversion, reading the scriptures daily gave me faith, inspired me to work against ordinary daily problems, and gave me zeal to share the gospel with others. For a person I lived with, his beginning to read the scriptures daily sharpened immensely his capacity for discerning good from evil, that which came from the Lord from that which came from the Evil one. I continue to experience the scriptures as a probe which helps me look at my attitudes and motivations, and calls me to give more of my life over to the Lord. Like the Eucharist, the Word of God in the scriptures is bread from heaven, given to nurture us on our journey home to the Father. For God made us spiritual beings, beings who cannot live by bread alone, but who must live from the nourishment of the Word of God (Deuteronomy 8.3; *DV* #21; *Catechism* #103).

The Word of God

The scriptures are the Word of God in the words of men (*Catechism* #101). Just as God became a man in Jesus, so the words of God are expressed in human language so that we might understand them (*DV* #13). This is the “incarnational principal.” Just as Jesus remains completely God and completely human, so the scriptures remain the word of God in human words. The books of scripture have two authors, one divine, the other human. The books of scripture, however, were not simply dictated by God to the human author. Nor did they come down from heaven complete like a manuscript or a cassette tape. God respects the human author, and the human processes of writing and editing over time, even as he inspires and oversees what is written.

Because the scriptures are the word of God, what is necessary for us to know for our salvation is contained in them. They contain the truth about life. They present reality. For example, the doctrine of original sin is derived from the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3. This story tells us why human beings are the way they are: why God appears distant to us, why we fight with one another, why our passions are so difficult to control, why we continue to do evil even when we would rather do good, why a good social environment and a good education are not sufficient to deal with human problems, why we need a Savior. Another example is in the first chapter of the book of Job. Here it is as if a veil were removed from ordinary life, and we see some of the spiritual reality behind Job’s temptations: there is an evil presence, a personal evil, who hates Job and wants to destroy him—Satan. Thus, while our secular culture does not admit the existence of such a personal spiritual evil, revelation in the scriptures provides an open window to what is real, and to what the Church continues to teach about the

existence of the Evil One (cf. general audience of Pope Paul VI on Nov. 15, 1972 appearing in *The Pope Speaks*, Vol XVII, No. 4, winter 1973, pp. 315-318; The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Christian Faith and Demonology, 1975, appearing in *Vatican Council II: More Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing, 1982, pp. 456-485).

The Holy Spirit is the primary author of scripture. To understand the scriptures, then, one needs the gift of the Holy Spirit (*Catechism* #111). The Holy Spirit is given that we might understand the depths of God (1 Corinthians 2. 10-13). He gives us the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2.16). Jesus’ opening up the true meaning of the Old Testament scriptures to the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24. 13-27) and Philip’s guiding the Ethiopian eunuch to understand how the song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 points to the good news of Jesus (Acts. 8.26-38) are examples of how the Holy Spirit makes us “insiders” rather than “outsiders” in reading the scriptures. “Outsiders” can have a full grasp of all of the human processes involved in forming the scriptures—historical context, literary form, editorial development, etc.—and still not receive or understand God’s revelation. Receiving God’s revelation in the scriptures requires the Holy Spirit.

The scriptures are meant to be read prayerfully, with faith, in the Holy Spirit, in the context of the Church (*DV* #25). Kathleen Norris’s *The Cloister Walk* records the discoveries of a young Protestant experiencing conversion through hearing the scriptures read daily in a Benedictine monastery. Norris’s acute spiritual observations can remind us as Catholics of our rich heritage in the scriptures.

In reading the scriptures prayerfully, attitude is the key. In the most prominent teaching on scripture from the early Church through the Middle Ages, St. Augustine tells us in *On Christian Doctrine* that the scriptures are to be read with *piety*. Piety is the gift of the Holy Spirit that enables us to both know God as our Father and to honor him as our Father. Piety recommends the stance, therefore, of not standing in judgment over the scriptures, but of allowing oneself to be judged by them. “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4. 12). One of the purposes of reading scripture, after all, is to grow in holiness of life (*DV* #8). It is so that we might become more like God: that we might take on his mind, his heart, his imagination, his actions, his character; that we might be transformed into Christ (Romans 8.29) and be recognized as the Father’s sons and daughters. Through encountering the living God in the scriptures we ourselves become “letters of recommendation,” “the aroma of Christ,” salt, leaven, and light to the world (2 Corinthians 2. 14-16, 3.2; Matt. 5.13-16). The scriptures are the Word of God.

In the Words of Men

But God has chosen to use human beings in revealing himself and his purposes. He uses particular individuals in a particular place writing to a particular audience with a particular purpose in a particular culture at a particular time using the words and images, the literary forms and devices of his era. Consider also that the individual author is a part of a social group, and that his writing may reflect the oral tradition of that group of its experience of God over time. Add to this that at least some of the books of the scriptures

were not simply set in writing one time, and then left alone, but reflected upon, re-written, and edited later in different historical circumstances and reflecting a different rhetorical purpose to a different audience. What is truly amazing is that God fully respects the human contribution to the formation of the scriptures, and yet oversees the process over time so that what is necessary for our salvation got written down.

To fully understand the scriptures, it is necessary to understand the historical and literary aspects of the human element in the formation of the scriptures (*DV #12*). Exegetes study the whole human process by which the scriptures are formed. They can help us determine what the human author intended by familiarizing us with the literary form, literary devices, the intended audience in its historical setting, the purpose for writing, the meaning of particular words or images, etc. The introductions and the footnotes in most bibles present some of this material. This is akin to studying the Bible as literature. In fact, we have all had the experience of approaching literature this way, where we look at the structure of a poem or novel, determine its theme, setting, the point of view of the narrator, the particular literary devices used, explore the author's use of metaphor, etc.--all to enrich our understanding of the author's meaning. Taking the same approach to scripture can prevent our reading scripture on its surface as 20th century Westerners interpreting it according to our own cultural orientations. It can also prevent our taking the meaning of all of scripture literally. While there are plenty of places where the intention of the author is to be taken literally, such as "Love your neighbor as yourself," there are many other parts of scripture which are written figuratively, or "spiritually" as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it (#115-119).

While the work of exegetes is critical in determining the intended meaning of the human author, which is an aspect of *God's* intended meaning (*DV #12*), elevating the work of exegetes as if it were the only way to approach scripture can be a problem. Focusing on the exegetical elements as necessary to even begin reading the scriptures often prevents the non-expert from ever beginning. As Pope Benedict, formerly Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, says of the research of exegetes:

Through historical-critical research...[s]cripture has again become an *open* book, but also a *closed* one. An *open* book: thanks to the work of exegesis, we perceive the word of the Bible in a new way, in its historical originality, in the manifoldness of the becoming and the growth of a history, laden with tensions and contrast, which, at the same time, constitute its unexpected richness. But, in this way, Scripture has again become a *closed* book. It has become the object of experts. The layman, but also the specialist in theology who is not an exegete, can no longer hazard to talk about it. It seems to have almost been withdrawn from the reading and reflection of the believer...The science of the specialists has erected a fence around the garden of Scripture to which the nonexpert now no longer has entry (*The Ratzinger Report*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985 pp. 75-76).

It ought not to be so. When asked whether a contemporary Catholic can begin to read his Bible without bothering himself too much over complicated exegetical questions, Cardinal Ratzinger replied:

Certainly...Every Catholic must have the courage to believe that his faith (in communion with that of the Church) surpasses every “new magisterium” of the experts...it is a prejudice of evolutionistic provenance if it is asserted that the text is understandable only if its origin and development are studied. The rule of faith, yesterday as today, is not based on the discoveries (be they true or hypothetical) of biblical sources and layers but on the Bible *just as it is*, as it has been read in the Church since the time of the Fathers until now. It is precisely the fidelity to this reading of the Bible that has given us the saints, who were often uneducated and, at any rate, frequently knew nothing about exegetical contexts. Yet they were the ones who understood it best (*The Ratzinger Report* p. 76).

The difference between approaching the scriptures in faith that God will speak to you and studying them as an exegetical expert might be compared to reading Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* as either an ordinary reader or as a literary critic. The ordinary reader is most interested in the story itself. He may derive great pleasure from the story, and some substantive truth for life. For example, he may learn something about lust and adultery from the psychological depiction of Anna and Count Vronsky, and decide to avoid similar “near occasions of sin.” This is substantive “truth for life,” which can be derived from ordinary reading. The ordinary person reading the scriptures prayerfully, in faith that God will speak to him, and with the desire to please the Lord is looking for substantive truth for life. The literary critic is often more concerned with how the text is put together, with what literary conventions are used to convey the truth for life. Different critical approaches can be taken to the text. It could be said that the critics deal with “textual” truth in one form or another: how the text came to be, the historical setting, the particular literary conventions used, etc. Sometimes literary critics get so involved in their own critical approach, or with the “textual truth” that they *miss* the substantive truth of the text. They might forget, for example, that *Anna Karenina* teaches us something about the human propensity to lust and adultery, and how society (here, the St. Petersburg’s high society) can contribute to this propensity. This kind of missing the substantive truth can happen with biblical exegesis as well.

The scriptures were written in the context of a community in a relationship with God. They are meant to be read and understood in the context of a faith community that ponders their meaning in light of its experience.

For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke 2: 19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her (*DV* #8).

For most of us, this pondering will take place at the Sunday Eucharist. But we should look for other opportunities for greater depth. In *The Cloister Walk* for example, Kathleen Norris describes a variety of experiences in being shaped by the oral reading of

scripture over time in a monastery. I have grown to appreciate this communitarian aspect of the scriptures through a small weekly men's bible study.

Each Saturday morning several of us gather to read and discuss the upcoming Sunday readings. The Bible study works because the leader is there *every* week, even if the all of the rest of us are not. After we pray together and after someone reads the particular passage, the leader will often present briefly the historical context. Then the discussion begins. Someone might note the literary context of the passage, or say something about the character of the biblical book of the passage. Another might share what struck him: a particular tone, or idea, or image used, or something the Lord has drawn his attention to. Someone else might share how the passage speaks to his life at work or at home, or to the way he conducts his relationships. Another might look up a cross-reference and read it. Someone else might center on a particular word used, and share something about the background of that word. Another might step back and look at the meaning of the passage in light of the whole plan of God in salvation history. Still another might relate contemporary Church teaching or issues to the passage. Although for most of my life I have approached almost all studying individualistically rather than communally, I have learned much more about how the scriptures work through this study than through personal study. I attribute this not simply to the diversity of the people, but to the activity of the Holy Spirit. I almost always am called to a deeper level of conversion through our discussion.

Over the years I have discovered the scriptures to be multidimensional. They work on many different levels. They tell the story of salvation history, how God has revealed himself to and worked with a particular people. They reveal what is in man, that is, the deepest levels of human psychology. They reveal both how to and how not to respond to God through stories and the presentation of particular characters: Abraham, Judith, Esther, Job, and David, for example. They can teach us how to pray in the Psalms and canticles. They encourage certain values like forgiveness, and service, and trusting God. In themselves they build faith, hope, and zeal. They can provide concrete guidance and principles about how to live. Much like poetry, the scriptures often work on an intuitive level through imagery and symbol. Not all that is in the scriptures can be understood by human reason or stated discursively. They can form one's imagination and reach into the inmost depths of the human heart. Through them the Holy Spirit can probe our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. They engage the whole person. They are, after all, a meeting place with God. Through the scriptures our Father speaks to us and forms us as his children. Our part is to set aside the time regularly to read them.

Suggested Beginning Reading on Scripture

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (St. Paul Books and Media). In less than 20 pages presents the Catholic understanding of the scriptures. A must to read and reflect upon every couple of years.

George Martin. *Reading Scripture as the Word of God*. A fine, Catholic, practical approach to developing a habit of reading scripture. A classic.

Damascus Winzen: [Pathways in Scripture](#). Presents a brief, insightful, book-by-book

overview of the Bible. I great introduction to the books of the Bible.

Michael Duggan. *The Consuming Fire* (Ignatius Press). A concise overview of each of the books of the Old Testament presented in a manner which reflects both the best of scholarship and a spiritual understanding.

Kathleen Norris. *The Cloister Walk*. Presents Norris' acute spiritual observations and experiences in the life of a Benedictine monastery. She communicates a deep appreciation for both scripture and the method of *lectio divina*.

The Window Opens

One of the easiest, most traditional, and most fruitful ways of combining reading scripture with prayer is *lectio divina*—"sacred reading." *Lectio divina* refers to the monastic method of reading scripture or other spiritual works in order to seek union with God. It is reading in the Holy Spirit. Its goal is to encounter God himself. While almost anything can be read in this manner, because the sacred scriptures are a privileged place for meeting the Lord, I shall focus upon reading them.

An analogy may be helpful. Most of us have read in high school or seen the movie of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The story is set in the South. Atticus, a white attorney played by Gregory Peck, and Scout, his young daughter, are two main characters. A minor character is Boo Radley. Boo is the mysterious recluse who hides away in his house, but keeps an eye on Scout to protect her. Boo goes out of his house so infrequently that his skin is quite pale. Now imagine that you are invited to Boo Radley's house. It is seven o'clock on a September morning. The air is fresh, and a bit cool, with the hint of the day's upcoming heat. You ascend the stairs of the porch of the large, unkept, brown-shingled house. You notice that all of the shades are drawn. You knock on the door. No one answers. So you try the door. It is unlocked. As you step inside, and close the door behind you, the sweet-sickening fetid scent of the closed-up house assaults you. It is so dark that it takes awhile to get your bearings. After three or four minutes your eyes and your sense of smell begin to adjust to the stuffy room. You begin to walk around, and notice that the parlor is a rather large room with only a few overstuffed chairs and light wooden tables placed here and there. No one appears to be home.

Suddenly, someone lifts a shade. Sunlight pours in. Next, a double-hung window is raised. The cool morning air rushes in to refresh you.

Now imagine that Boo Radley's house is where you live most of your life. The window opens, and the rush of light and of fresh air are experiences of God, of his self-revelation to you, of intimacy with him. God manifests himself to us in what both theological and literary reflection call "epiphanies." We can "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34.8). We can experience God himself. We do not draw up the shade or raise the window ourselves. Only God can. But we can put ourselves in a position for God to "open the window." *Lectio divina* is a method of praying with scripture which puts us in a position for God to reveal himself to us. And he wants to, for "in the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet with his children and talks

with them” (*Dei Verbum* #21).

Four main parts comprise *lectio divina*: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. These four aspects are interconnected. During any one session of praying with scripture, any one of these aspects can predominate. It all depends upon the Holy Spirit, who guides us into our relationship with the Father and the Son.

Reading

Reading is the basic activity of *lectio divina*. You do not “park” your mind, but you read intelligently, noticing things like who is speaking, to whom, in what context, for what purpose, and particular words or images. In *lectio divina*, however, you are not reading principally to gain information or learn facts. Nor are you reading to learn principles about how to live. Nor are you reading simply to gain a working knowledge of scripture or to fulfill an obligation. In *lectio divina* you are reading to encounter a Person. Read slowly, remaining alert to any word, phrase, image, or idea which might stand out. The Holy Spirit is the one who makes the word or phrase stand out for you. Read in faith that God wants to reveal himself to you, and can reveal himself through something so ordinary. The “in faith” makes all the difference between reading the scriptures as an “outsider” or as an “insider.” This is how many of the saints read the scriptures (*The Ratzinger Report* p.76).

You can read whole books of the Bible this way (of course, not at one sitting), or selected passages. I have found it useful to pick one book of the Bible at a time—the gospel of John, for example, and stay with that book until I have finished it. Then start another book. I usually set a time framework for each session of reading, such as 30 minutes, rather than a goal of reading a chapter. I have found that setting a goal of reading a chapter at a time gets in the way of my stopping and reflecting upon the words or phrases which the Holy Spirit wants to emphasize. Other people might use a reading guide that presents certain readings for each day, such as “God’s Word Today” or “One Bread, One Body.” Still other might use a daily missal to draw upon the readings from daily mass, the *Liturgy of the Hours*, or its shorter version-*Christian Prayer*- to direct what scriptures they will use for *lectio divina*.

Meditation

In our Catholic tradition, meditation usually refers to using our minds to reflect on particular passages of scripture or on particular truths of our faith. Meditation is not used in this sense in *lectio divina*. In *lectio divina*, while we do use our minds to read intelligently, perhaps in asking questions of the text, meditation in *lectio divina* primarily refers to stopping and dwelling upon a particular word or phrase or image that the Holy Spirit has emphasized. It can involve reading it over several times, “chewing” it over and over again as a cow might chew its cud. It does not involve a lot of reasoning about the text, or a great deal of analysis. Just dwell with the particular word, phrase, or image, and let the Holy Spirit reveal something to you. Perhaps he will feed your imagination or spirit rather than your mind. For example, one time I was reading the story of Moses’s calling in Exodus 3. God appeared to him in a burning bush. Suddenly, *I* was the one before the burning bush—in awe and adoration before God. God was present to me.

Then, in my spiritual imagination, the burning bush became an icon of Mary of the Sign. Although I knew that that icon referred to the Incarnation, I did not know what God meant. But I stayed present to it as long as it remained. Then I returned to my reading. On another occasion I was reading a passage from the book of Wisdom which personifies Wisdom and lists various characteristics (Wisdom 7.22-8.1). I read that Wisdom is “intelligent,” and felt drawn to pause. What does “intelligent” mean?” I asked. “Attentive to reality” came to me. Then the idea of Jesus the Messiah who judges not by appearances, but sees as God sees, came to mind from Isaiah 11.3. Through the word “intelligent” I was led to contemplate Jesus who “knew what is in man” (John 2.25). Through your dwelling with a particular word, phrase, or image emphasized by the Holy Spirit, sometimes other scriptures will come to mind, sometimes other images, sometimes a sense of God’s presence. Experiencing God’s presence is really the goal of *lectio divina*. Sometimes you will want to respond by saying something to the Lord, or by turning away from something wrong, by praising God or by resting in awe. Remain with the particular word or text as long as it is fruitful, and then return to your reading.

Prayer

Your prayer is in response to the particular word, phrase, image, or sense to which the Holy Spirit has drawn you. Prayer is primarily an expression of your relationship to God. How you respond—in repentance, praise, petition, intercession, or a myriad of other ways will always be personal and particular to God’s action at the time. Through your prayer you can personalize and make your own what the Holy Spirit has revealed to you. This comes about as you make a variety of choices in response to God’s revelation. You can acknowledge God’s greatness, decide to praise him out loud, turn way from sin, offer the Lord an area of your life, tell him how much you love him, ask him for his guidance, decide to obey him, or make a firm decision to please him. Prayer is both personal, and led by the Holy Spirit. *Lectio divina* is simply a way to yield to the Holy Spirit in opening up your relationship with the Lord.

Contemplation

Contemplation in our tradition is a form of prayer. But contemplation can mean different things depending upon the particular spiritual writer one is reading. For example, in the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, the term “contemplation” refers to the exercise of inserting yourself imaginatively in a scripture passage, and applying your five senses to the passage: seeing the other characters act, hearing them speak, smelling the salt water, etc. This is *not*, however, the sense of contemplation meant here. Contemplation in regard to *lectio divina* means one is brought into a heightened awareness of God’s presence. Sometimes by attending to a particular word, phrase, or image, “the window will open” and God will be interiorly present to you. You will have a heightened awareness of his presence. It is not something you can make happen. God does it. It is a gift. It is an experience of some kind of union with God, beyond the words or phrases or images of scripture. When this happens, you have no desire to read, think, or speak. You just want to be with God.

In *lectio divina*, one tends to move from one aspect to another, from reading to

meditating to prayer or contemplation. The goal, of course, is simply being with God, spending time with him, being open to his revelation of himself, getting to know him, growing in love for him, giving oneself over to him.

Summary

Lectio divina is perhaps the easiest and the most natural way to pray with the scriptures. It involves reading the scriptures reflectively in the Holy Spirit, alert to God's movement, and being willing to stop, rest with God, and respond. I usually begin by turning to God in prayer. I attend to him, and assess my state before him. I try to clear my conscience by acknowledging any sin and turning away from it.

Then I approach the scriptures as God's word, expectant that God will show me something. I start reading the particular passage, being alert to the context, the setting, who is speaking, the audience, and the tone of the passage. I ask questions of the text.

Sometimes particular words or phrases will stand out, as if my attention were being drawn to them. This is often quite subtle. But I will stop, and dwell with the particular word or phrase, sometimes repeating it several times. Perhaps it is an image of "living water" or "light" from the gospel of John. Sometimes the word or phrase or image works on a level other than the intellectual or discursive level: it seems to "feed" my spirit or affect my imagination. Sometimes another passage from scripture, or another image or phrase from the scriptures will come to mind: for example, the imagery of the water flowing from the Temple in Ezechiel 47.1-12 led to both the image of the water flowing through the center of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven in Revelations 22.1-5, and the water flowing from Jesus's side at his crucifixion (John 19.34; 7.37-39). I turn to the passage which comes to mind, and read it. Sometimes I will look at the footnotes, or cross-references, or a word in a bible dictionary in the midst of my reading.

Whenever I am drawn to the Lord himself, I stop and sit with him. Sometimes I am led to a deeper repentance. Sometimes to gratitude. Often to awe. Often I just want to sit with God and be attentive to him. As one person described it, "I gaze at him, and he gazes at me." When the time of gazing is up, I return to my scripture reading, if I have time.

While any book of scripture can be read this way, I recommend starting with the gospel of John. Read it simple to get to know Jesus. Let him show you, through the method of *lectio divina*, more about who he is.

Overcoming Some Common Obstacles to Prayer

Obstacles to developing a habit of personal prayer that will sustain you in living a spiritual life are quite varied. Some obstacles are practical: not knowing how to start, setting priorities, scheduling, having a fit place, ignorance about personal prayer. A second category is motivational obstacles. Motivational obstacles affect our desire to pray and include issues like the following: "Where is my heart?" "What do I really want?" "What or whom do I love?"; lack of discipline; lack of faith that God can or will speak to

me or guide me, or that I can experience him. Some obstacles are in our relationship with the Lord. We may want to avoid him because we want something in our lives which we think he does not want. Or we want to continue to live life on our own terms: we really do not want God to speak to us or to mold us to his will. Or we are doing something which we know to be wrong and do not want to give it up. Or we are afraid of God for some reason. Finally, some obstacles to establishing a habit of personal prayer are common to the practice of growing in prayer and in love with God: things such as distractions and “dryness.”

Practical Obstacles

Much of what is presented above in the orientation to personal prayer and to *lectio divina* is given to help persons who have little personal experience of prayer start to pray. Although prayer is primarily about developing a personal relationship with the Lord, you can use the simple methods provided above to begin to establish a habit. Sometimes it is easier to have a track to run on, or a method to begin with, before running spontaneously. It is often easier to steer a moving vehicle than one standing still. If you begin with a method and remain open to the Lord’s guidance, he can steer you better than if you do not start at all or start haphazardly. The other books recommended can provide additional help. Or if you prefer, you might browse a good Catholic bookstore for some beginning books on prayer or spiritual reading. Tell the manager something about your experience or lack of experience with prayer, and ask for his recommendations. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you, for he is the master of prayer who can and will work through ordinary means. For other people, just recognizing who God is, and beginning to converse with him, speaking to him from the heart, and being willing to give yourself over to him, can be a simple way to begin. Although developing any personal relationship can be a bit awkward at first, move forward in faith that the Holy Spirit wants to lead you into a deeper relationship with Jesus and with your Father.

Some people begin to pray, but do not continue. One reason is that they have not really made a commitment to praying daily. Perhaps the two most important commitments a Christian can make after committing his life to the Lord are to pray every day and to commit himself to a particular group of Christians to live out the daily Christian life. Making such a commitment often involves looking at one’s whole life, writing down and evaluating your priorities, and establishing a schedule which reflects your priorities. The old proverb is true: people usually find the time to do what they really want to do. If developing a personal relationship with the Lord through personal prayer is what you want to do, you have to schedule a particular time and place to pray each day. The busier you are, perhaps the more you need to pray. It is difficult for some of us to be realistic without looking at our whole schedule. It is difficult, for example, for someone to pray every day at 5 a.m. if she is staying up until midnight every night. Set a time when you are reasonably fresh and able to be undistracted and uninterrupted. Regularity is the key to developing a habit. I have usually found first thing in the morning, or just before dinner, or before going to bed to be the best times. Others might be able to use some of their lunch break.

Finally, ignorance about prayer and about the Christian life of which prayer is a mirror often derails people. Although one can read to get perspective, growth in prayer

takes praying and it takes time. One's prayer develops as his relationship with the Lord develops. There are, however, many aspects to growing in one's relationship with the Lord. What can move the process along is having either a small group with which to share your spiritual life, and/or a spiritual mentor of some sort. I am reluctant to say "spiritual director" because trained spiritual directors are a lot harder to find than a more mature brother or sister in the Lord who has lived the Christian life and prayed consistently for a number of years.

Motivational Obstacles

It is sometimes difficult to tell where the practical stops and the motivational begins. "I cannot find time to pray" can be a rationalization for "I do not really want to pray because it is too much effort, or because I do not have faith that God will speak to me, or because I am afraid that he *will* speak to me and make demands upon me, or because I am afraid that he will ask me to do something I do not want to or give up what I do not want to, or otherwise confront my motivations, my way of life, my plans, or my control over my life, or because I am angry at God for what he has done or allowed to happen to me." Addressing motivational issues means dealing with attitudes, heart issues, and relational issues with God. It takes both God and us.

Our part is to first of all be truthful, to be honest with ourselves and with the Lord in confronting the issues which face us. But honesty is not enough. Basically, once we know the issues, we have to make choices about them. The choices include choosing to open ourselves to God, to entrust either the particular issue or our whole life to him, to be willing to change, to invite the Holy Spirit to change us. God's part is to do most of the changing *in us*. We have to make choices, but often the power to change comes from God—and not always immediately.

Lack of faith that God can or wants to reveal himself to me, or speak to me, is a common obstacle. This separation from God is the result of original sin and is reinforced by both a culture which suffocates our spiritual inclinations and by the Evil One who intrudes in our thinking with lies. Faith is a gift from God. Ask him for it. Invoke the Holy Spirit. Ask for faith, for revelation, for openness to the Holy Spirit, for guidance. Then act in "expectant faith": make a choice; have your prayer time, read scripture, look for the marks of the Holy Spirit, persevere. Reading the scriptures in openness to the Holy Spirit is designed to build faith. So does the testimony of others.

Sometimes we know that the Lord can and wants to speak to us, but we are afraid that he will. This fear sometimes manifests itself in avoidance of prayer and of God, or a toleration of ambiguity about God's will. There is no real seeking of the Lord or of his will for your life. Perhaps one is in a relationship involving fornication or one is married and practicing contraception. You really do not want to ask the Lord if your sexual relationship pleases him. Or perhaps he is asking you to have another child, and you are afraid of the costs. Or perhaps he is calling for a greater self-denial in serving your wife and children at home, or in simplifying your lifestyle. Or perhaps he is challenging you to share about your life in him with others, or to confront some wrongdoing at work. Or perhaps he wants to deal, right now, with a deep sin pattern in your life, something that is so much a part of you that you despair of ever changing. Yet it makes you afraid. Sometimes we hide the bigger issues by "having a prayer time," –doing all of the right

things, but not really opening ourselves up to encounter God. Sometimes this behavior is rooted in our desire to control our own lives, to have our own plans. *Repentance* is the answer to control: a *turning away* from ourselves and our own desires and a *turning toward* God in trust that he loves us and wants the best for us. Isaiah 55.3 and its context points out the right attitude: a willingness to bow, to submit, to lower ourselves and our orientations in order to seek the Lord and hear what he wants to say. “Incline your ear and come to me; hear, that your soul may live.” To “hear” means to be willing to obey.

Sometimes we are afraid of God himself. We simply do not trust that he loves us. A wise old priest used to prescribe a simple antidote to such fear: give God permission to love you. Spend some time in his presence and “let him love you.” This is the work of the Holy Spirit, to convince us of the Father’s love and to melt our fear. Perhaps one of the best ways to “let God love you” is to sit before him at adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Sometimes the obstacle to our prayer is anger at God. Life has not gone the way we expected—we’ve lost a child, or a spouse, our health or reputation, or a business or our marriage has failed—and we blame God who seemingly could have prevented the problem if he wished. While each situation is different, our personal experience of suffering and our anger take us to the heart of the problem of evil. The “problem of evil” is a mystery philosophers and theologians in every culture have pondered for centuries. Yet unresolved anger is deadly to us and to our relationship with God. I find exercising humility and faith to be helpful in such a situation. Through humility I recognize that my anger is dependent upon my own perspective, which is fundamentally limited and may be wrong. Although I may not have God’s perspective, I pray to be able to give up my own view, and to offer my anger to God. At some point, I am able to give over my anger to God in trust that he loves me, that he knows what is good for me, and that he will accomplish the greatest possible good for me out of this situation. He is, after all, the God whose nature is to draw good from evil. But it requires trusting him because I do not see the reason for the situation, or its happy resolution. This does not mean burying the anger. Acknowledging the anger, but ultimately being willing to give it up are important. Often, repeated choices to trust God, to believe in his goodness, and to remain loyal to him in the midst of such suffering requires perseverance. What is at stake is the relationship with God. Continuing to turn to him in daily prayer is a way to keep the communication open with him until you have lived through the difficult situation.

Distractions

Distractions are common to everyone. We plan to spend some quality time with the Lord, and we end up thinking about a problem at work or in the family, planning our day, reviewing what we said to someone, rehearsing what we will say, or working out the details of a project in our minds. Usually, I try to bring these concerns to the Lord as I start to pray, in order to clear them away and attend to the Lord himself. But sometimes they arise later during my prayer time. As they come up, I offer them to the Lord. The Lord is concerned about our whole lives. Nothing is alien to him or too small for him to address. And then I turn back to him.

Sometimes the “distraction” will keep coming back. That can be a tip-off that something needs more attention. Perhaps I am anxious about something, or am resentful

in a particular relationship. To continue to reject the thought as a “distraction” in such a case would be a way of “burying” what needed more attention to resolve. Sometimes, however, I am distracted in thinking about things simply because I have chosen the wrong time of day to pray, or I am too busy in my life. Such distractions point to making an adjustment in my daily schedule. In other cases, some of us are action and achievement-oriented, and the “distractions” are extensions of our personality. We have to make a concerted effort to turn from ourselves, our plans, and our accomplishments to God and his concerns. Others of us have very active minds or imaginations. Here, using something objective to read, like the scriptures or spiritual reading, can help channel our thoughts and imagination and open us more fully to the Lord’s revelation of himself.

What we call “distractions,” then, as a whole can be incorporated into our prayer, since the Lord is concerned about everything in our lives. If they persist, they should be evaluated as to their source, and appropriate measures taken. In any case, what is most important is that you are making an effort to build a relationship with God. Do not get overly frustrated with distractions, nor measure the “success” of your prayer time according to whether you were distracted or not. The measure of your prayer is your whole relationship with God, how you give yourself to him both in prayer and in your decisions throughout the day.

Dryness

“Dryness” in prayer refers to experiencing little or nothing of God’s presence. As a friend once described it, “It is like praying to a wall.” If you pray more than a few times, you will most likely experience dryness in prayer. It is a part of the Christian life. Years ago a young woman had a tremendous conversion experience which launched her into intimacy with God. A week later she came to me in tears wondering where God had gone. Although her experiences of those few weeks were heightened by a retreat setting, this alternating experience of the presence/absence of God is normal. The Lord seems to use such times to develop our love, loyalty, faith and hope in a God who appears to be absent. These are times when you most show your love for God, because love is not based upon a feeling, but upon your willing, your choices to give yourself to God in prayer.

Still, dryness in prayer can and should provoke some self-examination. Are you still basically living to please the Lord, or have you drifted? Have you remained faithful to seeking the Lord in a daily prayer time? Are you following whatever direction you think he has given you? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor during World War II, suggests that we begin to “go deaf” when we disobey God. He suggests that if we are not presently hearing the Lord, that we think about what was the last clear direction we received from God, and see if we are doing it. If everything is “ok” in your relationship with the Lord, then view this time of dryness as a time to grow in love for him. Remain virtuous. Do not complain. Remain faithful to your prayer time. God is at work in you even if you do not feel him or sense his presence.

Sometimes too the Holy Spirit is initiating a change in your relationship with him, and he wants to change the way you pray. Adjustments in all relationships are difficult, but natural. Be patient. Seek his guidance. And share with a spiritual mentor or spiritual

group, if possible. A commitment to daily prayer, no matter what you experience or fail to experience, and a commitment to a spiritual support group, will enable you to grow through the changes in your relationship with the Lord.

While we all go through different cycles in both our relationship with the Lord, and in our prayer, sometimes the cycles are longer and more pronounced. This is really the pattern of growing in holiness that is normal to the Christian life.