

a prayer handbook
tips for a fruitful prayer life

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*"Contemplative Prayer in my opinion is nothing
else than a close sharing between friends;
it means taking time frequently to be alone
with Him who we know loves us."*

-- Theresa of Avila

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Please share this book with others, especially young people who want to learn to pray. You can support this ministry by making a donation at

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Introduction

+ Who may benefit

This handbook is for anyone who desires a fruitful prayer life. I commonly hear people say they do not know how to pray, or that when they do pray they do not hear a response. If this sounds familiar, this book is for you. It may be especially helpful for young people and those new to the spiritual life.

+ How to use it

This book outlines a method of prayer that is designed to be the first step to a conscious, dynamic, intimate companionship with God. Nothing in this handbook is new, but it may be organized or explained in a way that resonates with you.

There are four sections. Part I suggests an approach to prayer. Part II recommends specific ways to facilitate prayer. Part III proposes a series of simple spiritual exercises designed to invite a recognizable and intimate encounter with God. Part IV offers guidance on how to deepen this connection with God and extend it to the rest of your day.

It is most helpful if you read this guide from cover to cover. Each section builds on the previous, and all sections shed light on one another. Take only what is useful for you, but it's best to read the handbook in its entirety before you determine what that is. To get the most out of it, do invest the time needed to do the proposed exercises.

+ What to expect

This handbook is written from a Roman Catholic perspective. Catholicism names the mystery of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is how we try to understand how God has shown God's self to us: a loving Creator who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, wholly and completely takes on flesh as Jesus to reveal to us the true and uncompromising love of God's heart. It is through the framework of the Trinity that Catholics seek to know and love the One we are addressing—the One who is addressing us.

+ A note on language

I generally refer to our Creator as God. There are some places where I specifically invoke a particular person of the Trinity. I do this purposely to invite a specific aspect of God. Always feel free to modify the exercise as needed. For example, if you feel Jesus is more approachable, talk to Jesus rather than God. If you relate to God as Mother, address God as such. The most important thing is that you call on God in a way that encourages intimacy and resonates in your heart.

+ Who I am

I became Catholic in 2008 and soon after discovered Ignatian spirituality. Ignatian spirituality is contemplative, passionate, and rooted in the conviction that God is present and active in our everyday lives, longing to be in intimate companionship with us. I have since worked in multiple parishes, earned a Master of Divinity from Jesuit School of Theology, and I will be ordained in 2021 by the [Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests](#). Contemplative prayer is still the foundation of my spiritual life. It is out of this foundation that this guide flows.

PART I:
APPROACHING
PRAYER

What is prayer?

To begin, it is important to understand what prayer is. Prayer is the opening of your heart to God. God at every moment is waiting for you, eager to listen to your thoughts and dreams and struggles. Yes, God already knows what's on your heart and mind, but consciously articulating your dreams and desires to God rather than God simply observing you without your awareness is a much different experience for you both. In prayer, you let down your guard and intentionally open the door to the authentic you. You don't tell God what you think God wants to hear; rather, you share with God what you think, how you feel, who you are—just as you would share with your closest friend.

Prayer is also the acknowledgment of God's role in your life and in the world. Engaging in the act of prayer signals to God that you understand God's unparalleled role as Creator—as the One who is always on your side, who constantly cares for you

and all of creation, who never gives up on you, regardless of anything you may have done. When you pray, you are acknowledging the special position of God as God. Any guidance you seek, any consolation you need, any graces you desire can be found in connection with God through prayer.

Most importantly, prayer is the invitation to authentic companionship with God. Just as you share with God as a close friend in prayer, God shares with you. God invites you to enjoy God's smile, experience God's joy, receive God's wisdom, feel God's heartbreak. God invites you to see how God sees and to love like God loves.

In prayer you experience who God is and what God desires, and you discover who you are for God and for the world. When you discover who you are for God, the purpose of your life becomes clear and life makes sense. Together the two of you build a love that leads to the fulfillment of both yours and God's deepest desires for you and for all creation.

In short, prayer is the most important thing in life.

How to approach prayer

Your approach to prayer can make a big difference in how you pray, how often you pray, and even whether you pray at all. Here are some fruitful ways to understand prayer.

+ Prayer as gift

Prayer is a gift, not an obligation. Human beings have been given the invitation to enter into conscious companionship with God. We have the capacity to identify God and marvel at who God is, what God does, how God loves. We have the ability to create a give-and-take relationship with God. This is a great honor and privilege for us to savor.

Prayer is also a personal gift to you. God loved you into being because God wants you here. God welcomes your personality and your quirks. God appreciates your strengths and your weaknesses. God delights in your gifts and your sense of humor. God loves you exactly as you are, and God desires your companionship. Prayer is the gift through which the two of you create your relationship.

Prayer is our gift to God as well. God places hope in us, yearning for us to say yes to this opportunity, yes to spending conscious time together, yes to opening up our hearts to being in relationship.

When you enter into prayer, you answer God's prayer of hope. This is the greatest gift you can give to God, and God deeply rejoices at your "yes."

Importantly, no one can give this gift of prayer for you. Like a child to a parent, you are irreplaceable in the heart of God. Therefore, if you do not give your gift, then it simply goes ungiven. God then longs and longs for you, continually praying for your companionship until God's prayer of communion is ultimately fulfilled when you leave behind your body to rest in God eternally.

The question is: if you have been given the chance to experience communion with God here on earth, will you take it?

+ Prayer as priority

Prayer is a priority rather than an afterthought to tack onto a long list of things to do. It is true that God is the source of all goodness, and any blessings we experience in our life and prayer come from God. Yet, paradoxically, God gives us agency. We are free to participate or not to participate. In other words, God gives us a say in how our companionship develops—even whether it develops at all. This is the mysterious power God grants us. Therefore, you must do your part to nurture your companionship with God. The decisions you make

such as whether to show up to prayer, whether to share your true feelings with God, whether to take time to say thank you: all of these decisions have a role in building intimacy with God. Like any relationship, it is a two-way street. God faithfully waits for you to make this relationship a priority.

+ Prayer as lifestyle

Prayer at its best is a lifestyle, a way of living. As God teaches you how to listen in your prayer, you grow in your ability to tune into that listening from moment to moment. Maybe you share a chuckle with God at an old photo. Maybe you ask God's guidance when you mull over a purchase. Maybe you request that the Holy Spirit point you to your misplaced keys. Prayer has become a lifestyle when your first instinct in any situation is to tune into God and share what you see or ask for what you need. Prayer becomes a lifestyle when there is nothing that is out of bounds in your relationship with God—no part of you or your life that you do not consciously share. With time, practice and grace, your connection with God grows to permeate your days, transforming ordinary life into extraordinary joy.

PART II:
FACILITATING
PRAYER

Preparation

+ Set aside preconceptions

Before you start, it may be helpful to be aware of any preconceptions you have about God or the process of getting to know God. We all have them, and sometimes they can be damaging and even prevent us from having an open and healthy companionship with God.

For example, some see God as a harsh and critical judge waiting to condemn our every mistake. Some see God as a disinterested spectator who sits back and watches us for entertainment. Some see God as a high king far too lofty and busy to approach with our everyday concerns.

Whatever your preconceptions may be, do your best to set them aside for now. The purpose of these exercises is to create the opportunity for you to have an encounter with God so that God can

reveal to you directly who God actually is. Give your whole heart to the exercises, and be open to receiving what God wants to give you.

*RECOMMENDATION: Keep a journal
to reflect on the exercises below.*

+ Clarify what you want to build with God

Take time to clarify the kind of companionship you desire with God, then set your intention to create it.

Such clarity initiates a clear request to God and enables you to recognize when and how God is responding to your request. If you don't know what you want, how will you know when God grants it?

Clarity and intentions also guide your actions. For example, someone committed to building an affectionate friendship with God is less likely to put off prayer. Someone committed to an open and honest relationship with God is less likely to avoid prayer when something is bothering them.

Take time to reflect on what you desire with God, and identify the behavior that reflects such a desire. Begin somewhere that feels authentic to you. You can always adjust as your journey unfolds.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

Journal your reflections in detail:

- ❖ What kind of companionship do I desire with God? Describe it in detail. What you envision should excite you.

- ❖ What kind of companionship does God desire with me? Try to see it from God's perspective.

When you have some clarity about the kind of relationship you desire, distill your intention into one clear sentence. For example, “My intention is to create a passionate love affair with God that opens my heart to the world.” “My intention is to create an authentic friendship with God where we share everything and trust one another in my daily life.” “My intention is to praise God every day and let God know how much I truly appreciate everything God is and does.”

Once you have this intention, hold it in your heart and lift it up to God. Consider reading it regularly so that it eventually comes to permeate your being and guide your actions.

+ Define your commitment

Now that you have a picture of the kind of companionship you desire with God, take some time to get clear with yourself and with God on how often and how long you will pray.

Defining your commitment helps you by providing a structure that you can use for support. When things are difficult in prayer or when life gets busy, it's easy to let yourself off the hook. Once you break your word it becomes easier and easier to let your prayer time slide. Having a clear commitment in place helps keep you on track: you know what you agreed to give God and at the very least you can honor that agreement. This doesn't mean that you cannot miss a planned prayer session from time to time. This is about putting into place a prayer discipline that shapes your life.

Use the reflection below to honestly determine what you can give to God, and then resolve to give it.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

Reflect on your schedule and commitments.

- ❖ How much time can I realistically commit to prayer?
- ❖ Are there any commitments I can strip away to make room for alone time with God?
- ❖ On what days and times will I pray?
(e.g. M-F from 6:00 am to 6:20 am, or MWF from 8:00 pm to 8:40 pm).
Be specific.

Be realistic but also generous when defining your commitment. If you are an extremely busy individual, do not make a commitment you know in your heart you cannot keep. It will only frustrate you, or worse, sabotage the whole effort. You can always adjust your commitment as your journey unfolds. It is better to begin with a smaller commitment that you can increase upon rather than a bigger commitment that you need to scale back.

+ Designate a place to pray

Now that you know what you want to create with God, and how often and how long you will pray, it helps to designate a place to pray. By designating a place to pray, you are sending a clear signal to yourself--and to God--that what you are doing is significant and deserves a place in your life. You are literally making room in your life for prayer.

In addition, a place of prayer takes on its own sacredness. God is indeed always present, yet for whatever reason some places lend themselves better to experiencing God. By designating a prayer space you are inviting God to make that space a privileged place for you to encounter God. Over time, the place will grow into a spiritual home for you and bless you with a sense of peace and comfort that nurtures your prayer.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

Reflect on where you will pray:

- ❖ What space would make a good place of prayer?

Choose a place that you feel will facilitate your connection with God. It can be inside or outside. It can be at home or at work, or even a third place like a local chapel. It can be in a favorite park.

If you don't have much space at home, consider designating a particular corner of a room as your place of prayer. You ideally want a place that is peaceful and quiet where you will not be interrupted.

Once you identify your space, make it special. Add some items that may aid in prayer: candles, prayer cards, a Bible, music. Perhaps include a special prayer chair. Get as creative as you like. Make the space beautiful so that you enjoy going there.

When you have selected your place of prayer, take a moment of quiet and ask the Holy Spirit to bless the space and use it to bring you in closer companionship with God.

PART III:
PRAYER
ITSELF

Understanding the exercises

+ An outline

Below is a series of four spiritual exercises designed to invite an identifiable, intimate encounter with God.

- ❖ The first exercise helps you tune into God's presence.
- ❖ The second exercise focuses on observing God so that you can begin to grasp how God is revealing God's self specifically to you.
- ❖ The third exercise focuses on becoming familiar with how the Holy Spirit feels in your body as it responds in you.

- ❖ The fourth exercise gives you an opportunity to make a decision based on prayer.

Note: These exercises build on one another and are to be done in the order they are presented. Proceed to the next exercise only when you receive the grace indicated in the exercise you are practicing.

In terms of how prayer is understood in this handbook, other types of prayer, such as petition (asking God for what you desire), adoration (sitting in God's presence and revering God), contrition (apologizing to God), and thanksgiving (naming that for which you are grateful), flow from a foundational connection with God.

In other words, these exercises will hopefully give you a breakthrough in your connection with God and bring other types of prayer more alive.

+ The graces to look for

In a nutshell, you are looking for two primary graces from these exercises: the grace to tune into God's presence, and the grace to recognize how God reveals God's self specifically to you.

Remember, you are not trying to "twist God's arm" into giving you something God does not want to

give. On the contrary, God wants to give you these graces. God is longing to share life with you and to create a loving, intimate companionship where you enjoy being together each day. It is the reason you were created. Trust that God wants to you to be able to do this.

+ The role of your body in prayer

Your body can help you connect more acutely with God. God gave the body its own intelligence, including the innate ability to sense its Creator. God is a living being and, like other living beings, God's presence can be perceived by your body's senses. When you sharpen these senses and learn to sense God's presence, it becomes easier to consistently connect with and identify God and God's work in your life.

In addition, it is the Holy Spirit that animates our bodies. God's Spirit literally dwells within our flesh. When God wants to communicate something, the Holy Spirit moves through our bodies in particular ways. By paying close attention and reflecting on your experiences, over time you can learn to recognize different sensations and what those sensations mean.

The more consistently you pray, and the more you reflect on your prayer, the better you will be able to identify both how your body senses God and how God uses your body to communicate. Eventually you'll be able to clearly recognize the ways in which God is speaking to you.

Spiritual exercises to encounter God

There is no set time for how long it will take to receive the desired grace of each exercise. Grace is not something that any of us can earn—it is given freely by God. When you receive the grace of each exercise simply rests on God. Be patient, show up to prayer, and allow God the time it takes to work in you.

RECOMMENDATION: Write your reflections in a prayer journal after every session of prayer. This will help you process your prayer. Look especially for whether you received the desired grace of the exercise.

+ Exercise One: Tune into God

The first step in this series of spiritual exercises is to tune into God's presence. This is the most challenging of the four exercises. When you receive the breakthrough from this exercise, the graces from the other exercises will hopefully come more easily.

- ❖ Close your eyes, take some breaths and become quiet. Take the time you need to settle in. Remind yourself that God is present with you, eagerly looking forward to your time together.
- ❖ Thank God for this time in prayer, for the gift of life, and for the opportunity to personally enter into conscious relationship with God. Speak directly to God.
- ❖ Ask the Holy Spirit for the graces you desire: in this case, to develop the senses you need to tune into God's presence.
- ❖ Sit silently and open your senses. There is an Awareness present with you. Try to tune into it.

A tip: Have you ever had the experience of someone watching you when you were caught unawares? At some point you felt eyes on you and looked up to meet the gaze of another. Go back and relive that experience in detail. Recall the moment you realized you were being watched and what it felt like in your body. How did you sense that gaze? God is gazing at you now.

- ❖ When you are ready to conclude your prayer, tell God frankly about what you experienced. Take some moments to listen for a response.
- ❖ Thank God for the time you shared together. Offer any prayers you have for yourself, your community or the world.
- ❖ Conclude with an Our Father or any favorite prayer.

You may have to do this prayer session repeatedly before receiving the grace to tune into God's presence. Keep returning to prayer. If you do the exercise multiple times and continue to struggle to tune into God, do this exercise in a setting that feels sacred to you, such as a Church or a favorite spot with a view of a river or mountain.

Images for prayer

Different people sense God's presence differently. Some feel God's presence as external, some as internal, some a combination of both. God chooses how God reveals God's self to each person. Imagining these images might help you start to notice your own sensations in prayer.

Close your eyes and use your imagination to bring to life these images:

- ❖ warm rays of sunlight shining down on your face
- ❖ a flame burning brightly or the sensation of a flower opening at the center of your chest
- ❖ a vibration that rims the edge of the room or a buzzing around your ears

Regardless how God's presence occurs to you, it has a certain timbre to it—a certain feeling or character. You will know when you connect with it. It may come as a slow recognition over multiple sessions of prayer or a quick flash of insight. Be open and attentive, and persistently ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to tune into God.

+ Exercise Two: Observe God

Once you are able tune into God's presence, spend some quality time observing God. This exercise will help you become familiar with the way God is revealing God's self specifically to you.

- ❖ Close your eyes, take some breaths and become quiet.
- ❖ Tune into God's presence as you did in Exercise One. When you connect with God, say hello. Thank God and rejoice in the gift of connecting.
- ❖ Ask the Holy Spirit for the graces you desire: in this case, to help you observe God's presence.
- ❖ Sit silent in God's presence. Observe God carefully: does God have a certain feeling? A particular sound? How would you describe the qualities of God's presence? Allow yourself to simply be present to God. Take time to linger.
- ❖ Share with God what you observed. When you are done sharing, listen for a response.

- ❖ Thank God for your time together and conclude your prayer. End with an Our Father, a verse to a hymn you like, or any prayer of your choosing.

Making a repetition

Whenever you receive movement in prayer, it is helpful to "make a repetition." Movement might be considered an experience of encounter with God—a feeling, a communication, a piece of guidance.

Making a repetition means that you repeat the exercise and dwell on anything that struck you, gave you strong feelings, or inspired spiritual joy or gratitude.

Going back and dwelling on these movements gives God the opportunity to deepen what God is communicating to you. You may receive additional healing, more insight, deeper confirmation, or a deeper connection with God. Whenever you have a movement in your prayer, make a repetition: do the exercise again, bringing back to prayer the grace you have received.

+ Exercise Three: Observe Your Body

In the former exercise you focused on how God reveals God's self to you. In this exercise you observe yourself while you are in God's presence.

There are two primary steps to this exercise: noticing how your body feels while in God's presence and noticing how your body feels when the Holy Spirit moves in you to communicate something. If you are doing short prayer sessions you will likely have to spread this exercise out over several sessions.

- ❖ Close your eyes, take some breaths, and tune into God's presence as you did in Exercise One.
- ❖ When you connect with God, say hello. Spend some time thanking God for sharing God's self with you. Offer up any other prayers of thanksgiving.
- ❖ Ask the Holy Spirit for the graces you desire: in this case, to become aware of how your body senses God's presence, and how the Holy Spirit feels when it moves through you.

- ❖ Sit silently for a few moments and observe God's presence. Begin to shift your awareness to your body. How is it responding? Is your skin tingling, heart quickening, chest expanding? Notice your body's sensations in the presence of God. Take your time as you begin to develop a double awareness of God and self.
- ❖ When you become present to how your body feels in God's presence, ask God a question or make a statement to God. Keep it simple. For example, "How are you?" or "I love you."
- ❖ Observe God's response. As you listen, notice any physical sensations you experience. Is there a wave that goes through you? A burning sensation that enflames? A tingling that travels?
- ❖ Repeat the phrase you said again several times, leaving some quiet in between. Observe your body.
- ❖ Share with God any insights you received about how your body senses God. After you share, listen once again for a response.

- ❖ Thank God for your time together.
Conclude with an Our Father or any
prayer that you desire.

God moves different people in different ways at different times. One person may feel a burning sensation in the chest as a felt sense of God's love. Another may feel a silent sensation in the ears that indicates God's voice. I have a friend that articulates God's presence as a set of hands placed gently on his shoulders like a loving parent. Another friend describes it like a sunflower opening in her chest.

It takes time to develop this level of awareness. Be open and attentive and patient. As you make repetitions of this exercise, you will see patterns of sensations and thoughts begin to emerge. Once you can identify the patterns, you will begin to grasp what they mean.

Feel free as you repeat this exercise to ask God different questions—just keep them simple and conversational. Once you start to grasp how God communicates with you, you can introduce more complicated dialogue.

The possibility of the exception

God generally connects with those who are honestly seeking God. Yet, it must be stated that God has something different in mind for some. You may do everything “right” and still the graces do not come.

God does indeed call some to a prayer life in which prayer remains consistently and even permanently dry. Those with this calling have a special place in the human family because it is through them that we see a profound model of faith: it takes a pure selfless heart to continually return to dry prayer. Without sensing or feeling God in any way, these people still believe and still show up to prayer. Mother Theresa is an example of someone who experienced dry prayer for the vast majority of her life.

This calling, however, is far more the exception than the rule—especially for beginners. Resist jumping to the conclusion that you are indeed one of these people unless you really have been pursuing prayer wholeheartedly and with discipline for a significant amount of time. If you think you fall into this category, talk with a pastoral minister or a spiritual director.

+ Exercise Four: Make a Decision

Now that you have a sense of how God communicates with you, take time to make a decision based on prayer. This exercise is more advanced with multiple steps. Resist moving to this exercise until you have received the graces of the first three exercises.

Before you pray

Before you pray, choose a decision to take to prayer. Pick one “small good decision” to work with rather than a big life decision. For example, maybe you have to decide what to do about a work situation. Maybe you are developing a pain in your back and you need to decide how to address it. Maybe you are mulling over an opportunity that has come your way. Keep the decision small.

It is important to do any research necessary for making the decision. For example, maybe you have to seek advice from friends or research information on the internet. Do the legwork that feel appropriate, recognizing that you may have to do more research as your prayer unfolds.

Step One

- ❖ Close your eyes, take some breaths and tune into God's presence as in Exercise One.
- ❖ When you connect with God, say hello and spend some time sincerely thanking God for teaching you how to communicate. Express any prayers of thanksgiving.
- ❖ Ask the Holy Spirit for the graces you desire: in this case, for God to guide you in making a decision.
- ❖ Sit silently in God's presence and observe God. Once you are focused on God, ask about the decision you need to make. Explain the situation and tell God how you think and feel about it. Present concerns, fear, or hopes. After you share, quietly observe God's presence for a response. Be silent.
- ❖ Explain to God the options you are considering one at a time. After each option ask God a yes or no question: "Do I choose this option?" Observe God for a response. Remember to pay attention to your body's physical sensations.

- ❖ Share with God what you heard in your prayer. Listen for God's response.
- ❖ Thank God for your time together. Conclude with an Our Father or another prayer.

You may realize during or after you pray that you need to do more research. Do that research and then repeat Step One above. Share the new information along with your thoughts and feelings and any new concerns, fears and hopes.

Step two

Make a repetition of step one. Make this repetition as often as needed until you have a sense of the direction to take.

Step three

When you have a sense of which option to choose, make one final repetition.

- ❖ Close your eyes, take some breaths and tune into God's presence as in Exercise One.
- ❖ When you connect with God, say hello and thank God for God's guidance and care. Express any other prayers of thanksgiving.

- ❖ Ask the Holy Spirit for the graces you desire: in this case, for confirmation of your decision.
- ❖ Sit in God's presence and observe God. Explain to God the option you plan to choose. Then ask God as a yes or no question, "Shall I choose this option?" Observe God for a response. Remember to pay attention to the sensations in your body.
- ❖ Share with God what you have heard in your prayer. Observe God again for a response.
- ❖ Thank God for your time together. Conclude your prayer with an Our Father or whatever you desire.

Step four

Based on your prayer and research, make a decision and sit with it for a day or two. Do not actually take any action to live out the decision; instead, sit with the decision and carefully notice your feelings and thoughts. Are you feeling at peace or agitated? Are you feeling excited or fearful? Do you feel conflicted? Journal about your thoughts and feelings.

Step five

Evaluate where you are interiorly. If you feel a sense of rightness and peace in regards to your decision, move to step six. If you do not feel a sense of rightness but rather a "sense of wrongness" or agitation, return to prayer and share freely with God what is happening within you. You may find God gives you an insight that brings you peace, or you may continue to feel something is still "off."

If you continue to feel a "sense of wrongness," consider choosing a different option. Go back to step three and select a different option in your prayer. You are looking for a sense of peace and rightness about your decision. Importantly, this does not necessarily mean that you like the decision you have to make, only that it has a sense of rightness.

Please note that there is a difference between a deep "sense of wrongness" and a superficial anxiety. Sometimes you may hear something very clearly in your prayer but once you leave your prayer you develop anxiety about following God's guidance. For example, God guides you in your prayer to confront a colleague and respectfully stand up for yourself. In prayer, it is clear that it is the right thing to do, yet when you approach her

office, your stomach churns with anxiety and you consider abandoning the effort.

These kinds of reactions are normal. The key is to stick to the decision you made based on the guidance you received in your prayer. Remember, God is always going to lead you to what is best for you, and for the whole human family.

For example, maybe God wants you to share your feelings with your colleague because she is unaware of how her behavior negatively impacts her own life by distancing her from others. By lovingly confronting her, you become the way through which God loves her and brings her to fullness. At the same time, she becomes the way you learn to set and uphold boundaries. God heals you both through one another.

In addition, just because God guides you to a particular decision it does not ensure that things will be smooth or easy. The important thing is simply to follow. We pray, act, reflect on our actions and then pray again. It is an unending rhythm that leads us through life and into the heart of God.

God wants you to have healing and peace, and so, too, for everyone. If you are feeling anxiety, pray to the Holy Spirit for courage or trust or whatever you may need to follow through with your decision.

Step six

With a sense of rightness, peace or joy, officially make the decision. Carry out any necessary actions the decision requires, such as phone calls, emails, or conversations. Be attentive over the next several days to what happens in your interior and in your life. Journal about the experience. Are things falling into place? Do you feel peace or anxiety? Are things going smoothly? Are you feeling challenged? Return to prayer and share all that you see with God.

Step seven

Once the decision is complete and you have had several days or a week to live with it, reflect back on the experience and make a determination as to whether you think you heard and followed God's guidance. It is helpful to close your eyes and examine the entire process from start to finish.

If you feel you heard God correctly, go back to prayer and savor this experience with God. Rejoice with God in deep thanksgiving for this amazing gift! You have had the experience of discernment—hearing and trusting God, including God in your everyday life, following the guidance God has given. It is thrilling for both you and for God. You

can always draw on this experience in the future when making decisions from prayer.

If you aren't sure or think it did not go well, even more reason to journal about the experience. Take heart: the practice of making decisions from prayer takes time. Choose a new "small good decision" and repeat this spiritual exercise. Remember, God wants to be involved in your everyday life. Persevere and you will receive the graces you desire.

+ Pray on

These exercises can provide you with months of fruitful prayer. Repeating them can lead to more insights, a deeper connection with God, and a sharpening of your ability to communicate with and recognize God in your everyday life.

Now that you have prayed through these exercises, you are free to do any of the four at any time. Remember to make at least one repetition whenever you receive any movement in your prayer.

If you would like to enter into a deep prayer experience over an extended period of months, I encourage you to do the Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life. Contact your local Jesuit institution for information on where you can find this retreat.

Happy praying!

PART IV:
DEEPENING INTIMACY
WITH GOD

Continuing the journey

This section includes three additional tips for deepening your intimacy with God: tuning into God throughout your day, being attentive to God's gifts in your life, and managing the temptation to stop praying.

+ Tuning into God throughout the day

As you become more graced in your ability to tune into God, you may desire to extend this connection to the rest of your day. Here's one possible way to do this:

- ❖ Set an intention to find moments throughout your day to connect with God. Maybe they will be while you are waiting in line, shopping for groceries, or washing the dishes after dinner.

- ❖ In your designated prayer sessions, ask God for the grace to connect throughout the day.
- ❖ When you find you have an opportune moment, do the first or second spiritual exercise from Part III of this handbook. Notice what happens.
- ❖ Bring your experience to your next designated prayer session. Share with God what happened and how you think and feel about it. Observe God's presence for a response.

Over time, with practice and with God's grace, you'll be able to consciously tune into God and invite God to share your life in the present moment. Remember, God wants you to have these graces. Persistently pray to the Holy Spirit for what you desire.

+ Being attentive to God's gifts

Another way to deepen the intimacy with God is to be enthusiastic and reverent in regards to how God is blessing you in your daily life. As you enter into a conscious companionship with God, watch for how God responds to your needs. This is not to keep a tally but to knowingly relish in God's kindness and

marvel at how generous God is in God's response to us.

When you recognize that God has blessed you with a goodness, take this recognition back to prayer. Thanksgiving prayer can be some of the sweetest moments of communion you can experience with God. When you connect with God in your prayer, do not just say the words “thank you.” Instead, let the feelings of gratitude and joy well up in your body, then lift them up in an outpouring to God. Talk, sing, laugh, cry. Share your whole heart with God.

Sincere prayers of thanksgiving delight God both because you are recognizing God’s unique role in your life, and because you care enough to come back to say a genuine thank you. This prayer can be a very deep exchange of love as both of you savor together the goodness of the giving and the receiving—the nature of relationship.

+ Managing the temptation to stop praying

There will be times when you feel frustrated in prayer or furious with God or simply confused as to what God may be doing in your prayer and in your life. There may be times when things are so fantastic that you feel you “don’t need” to pray. These are times when you become most vulnerable

to letting your prayer discipline slide. Take heart; this happens to everyone, especially as you progress along the spiritual journey.

When you are experiencing this temptation, rather than keep yourself away from God, respond to the situation by sharing whatever thoughts and feelings surface. If you are frustrated at God, tell God. If you feel too distracted to pray, explain this to God. If you think you have to reduce your commitment to prayer, talk it over with God. The most important thing for a fruitful prayer life is keeping the lines of communication with God open: the only time your companionship with God will stall is when you stop actively participating in it.

It is particularly important to pay attention to any anger that you may have toward God. It is natural to think that you should not be angry with God, or if you are angry, that you should not express it. However, in reality, anger is a natural part of any truly deep and genuine relationship. God knows that you will not always agree on things, and God also knows you will be angry at times. Yet, God wants to work through any rough patches with you.

If you don't share your feelings, your unexpressed anger will erect a wall between you and can quickly interfere in your companionship. If you find

yourself angry at God, it is crucial that you go to prayer and share your feelings honestly. You are safe with God and can trust God to listen.

As long as you are honest with God, your companionship will continue to deepen. As the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus demonstrates, there is nothing—nothing—that you can say or do that will make God stop loving you, that can stop God from wanting to bring you more deeply into God's heart.

When you feel tempted to stop praying, above all else, show up to prayer. When prayer is uncomfortable, show up. When prayer is boring or dry, show up. When prayer feels pointless, show up.

Above all else, show up, show up, show up.

Resources

Below is a handful of resources that you may find helpful.

Books

- ❖ *Paying Attention to God* by Fr. William A. Barry, SJ
- ❖ *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* by Margaret Silf
- ❖ *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment* by Fr. David Lonsdale, SJ

Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius

All Jesuits pray the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in a 30-day retreat. The Spiritual Exercises

in Everyday Life (SEEL) adapts these exercises into a 9-month retreat in everyday life so that those who cannot afford to go away for a month can still pray the Spiritual Exercises. Contact your local Jesuit institution to find out if SEEL is offered in your area.

It might be tempting to try the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius on your own. I do not recommend this. The exercises are complex and can very easily lead to confusion or simply lack fruit. Before you start, find a spiritual director trained in the Exercises: it is best to have a knowledgeable companion walking with you as you pray the retreat.

Contact

Please email me at vaticanreject@gmail.com with any questions or insights you would like to share. Share this handbook with someone you love. To support his ministry, make a donation at www.FatherAnne.com.