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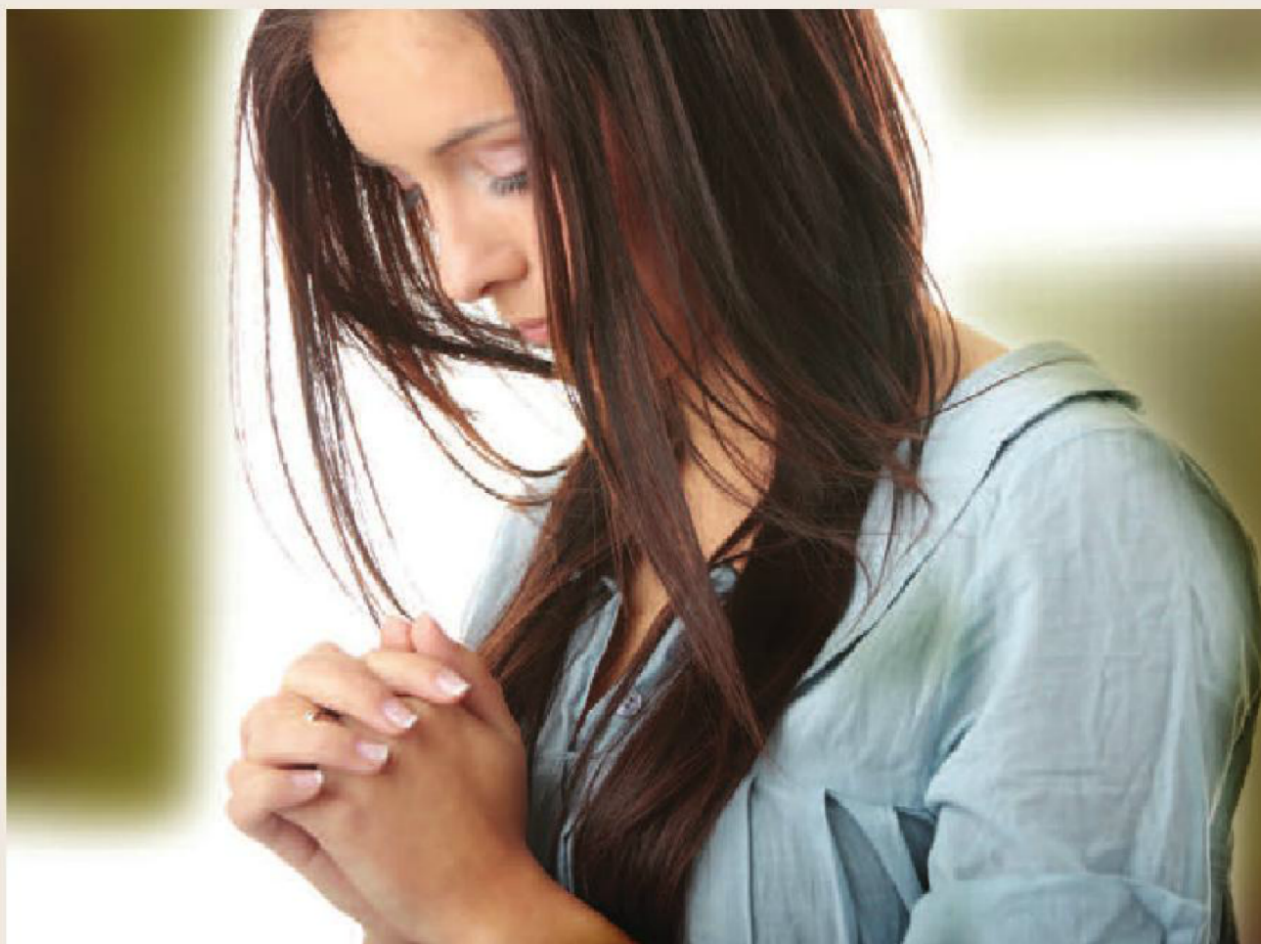
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## AN INVITATION TO PRAYER A GUIDE FOR DEEPENING OUR PRAYER LIFE

We must discover ways to remind ourselves that God is present in our daily lives. Prayer can show us the way. *by Father Edward Hays*



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**T**his brief guide for a richer prayer life is, first of all, an invitation to answer the deepest call of the human heart—to journey home to God. It's an invitation for each of us to seek and embrace God in prayer.

Our search for God in our prayer lives is not restricted to special times and places. The Holy Spirit invites us, in the words of St. Paul, to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17). To pursue this call, it's important to have a balanced attitude about the world in which we find ourselves.

How does one respond to the invitation to pray always? We need to discover ways to remind ourselves of God's loving presence in our everyday world. God is present to us 24 hours a day. It is our awareness of God that needs heightening.

Rituals can help us in this regard: not only familiar rituals like morning, evening, and meal prayers, but other simple rituals that we create for ourselves.

## CREATING A PRAYER SPACE

In ancient times, every home had its shrine to the gods and goddesses. These were small altar areas where sacred images were displayed. To create such a shrine is a deep instinct in the human heart. And just as the earth has its particularly sacred places—mountains, rivers, and shrines of natural beauty—so our own personal words should reflect the wisdom of creation.

Jesus said that God is spirit and should be worshiped in spirit and truth. But that truth does not exclude the need for a special place of prayer, an environment in which we are especially disposed to the Divine Presence, just as Jesus went off to the desert or the mountains to pray. The danger of all shrines and sacred places is the temptation to view what lies outside their boundaries as secular. The entire cosmos is God's temple, and within it are billions of shrines. All land is holy land, but we easily forget that reality. Special, set-aside spaces remind us that all space is sacred.

The typical home in the Western world has rooms for all the important activities of life. There are rooms for eating, sleeping, bathing, storage, and relaxing.

While your entire home is a sacred space where you pray and journey to God in different ways, it can be valuable to set aside a particular place for your inner exercises and for communing with God. For a fortunate few, this personal shrine could be an entire room, such as an unused bedroom or small den. But for the majority it will mean a corner of a room.

If you are a highly visual person, you may desire to use a variety of symbols, icons, or images to grace your personal prayer area or shrine. If you are not visually oriented, you might want to create a space that is void of all images. The very simplicity of an empty wall can help clear your mind and heart of clutter and help open you to prayer.

## FINDING THE SILENT CENTER WITHIN

While the methods and practices of meditation are many, they all are directed toward the same end: namely, to still the flow of thoughts and desires that keep the mind and heart constantly occupied, and thus to make one more fully available to God.

Many shy away from the idea of meditation, believing that it is only for special people. In reality, everyone meditates, but the subject of meditation differs. Those who desire to be Olympic athletes literally think, eat, and sleep their sports. Persons who believe that money is the source of happiness also meditate daily, as thoughts about making and investing money constantly absorb their minds. For spiritual seekers, the Divine Mystery is the subject of meditation.

There is a saying in the *Upanishads*, the scripture of India:

“If men and women thought as much about God as they think of the world, who would not attain liberation?”

While God is present to all things, God is also beyond anything we can put our fingers on. Moreover, God cannot be contained by our concepts and thoughts. In silent prayer or the prayer of meditation, the pilgrim seeks to still the endless river of thoughts so to find the center from which all thoughts arise, the center within which peace and the Divine Mystery reside.

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*Father Edward Hays is a well-known spiritual guide and the author of more than 30 books.*

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## DIG DEEPER

Has your prayer life ever stalled?  
How did you revitalize it?

What are the benefits and drawbacks  
of prayer groups?

How do you block distractions  
when you pray?



## A METHOD OF MEDITATION

**T**he following exercises suggest one way of meditation. If you presently do not meditate and desire to do so, this can be a vehicle for the essential journey inward.

### 1. Sit Still and Quiet the Body.

The first requirement for any journey inward is to quiet the body, which so easily absorbs the countless energies of life that surround it. Without straining, intend to sit with your head, neck, and back erect. If possible, sit on the floor since chairs tend to create the need for constant shifting or a dullness of the body. It is thus easy to become distracted or sleepy, instead of fully present and available to God. A cushion or prayer bench can help you sit comfortably yet alertly. If you need a chair, sit on its forward edge so that the upper body can be in a straight line.

For a few moments, simply notice what's happening in your body without trying to change it. Be aware of where you are stiff or tense. Then, without slouching, let your body be supported by the floor or the chair; let it become quiet.

### 2. Gently Begin to Breathe Deeply.

As you breathe, be conscious of the act of breathing that you normally take for granted. At first simply notice your breath without any attempt to control it. Then gently let the breath become fuller and deeper. Do not strain, but let your breathing be slow, even, and deep. Imagine the air that you are inhaling as a pure, clear stream, luminous and full of peace. Without stress, draw out of yourself all impurities as you exhale.

And as you breathe in, fill yourself with peace and with the abiding presence of the Divine Mystery who breathed life into the nostrils of Adam and Eve and who, like a mighty wind, blew over the dark chaos before the cosmos was created.

### 3. Let Yourself Rest in Peace.

Sitting in stillness, allow yourself to be absorbed in peace and into God's presence. No doubt the mind will be at peace for a

while, but at some point a thought or string of thoughts will typically appear, as if from nowhere, and occupy the attention of the mind.

The problem, which is common to praying people everywhere, is how to stop this throng of thoughts from filling your mind. Use a single word or phrase that is repeated over and over with great devotion. The word can be a name of God (Jesus, Abba, Lord, etc.), a phrase from a psalm ("My soul rests in God alone," Ps 62) or other book of Scripture, or a word of great power like love or peace. Whatever method you use, it is good to remember that the ultimate intent is to be absorbed in God.

### 4. Go Inward, Silently Repeating Your Sacred Word.

Let your mind rest solely upon your sacred word or phrase. Invest it with as much devotion as possible. Inevitably, a thought or idea will rise up into your mind. Do not resist it or attempt to expel it. Instead of trying to push it away, quietly and with great devotion simply turn your attention back to your sacred word.

Avoid judging yourself. The reason most people fail in their discipline of meditation is that they judge themselves failures when they find it impossible to still the constant flow of thoughts through the mind. Regardless of how many times you find that your mind has been distracted, don't start judging yourself. As soon as you become aware that this has happened, simply return to your sacred word or phrase.

### 5. Be at Peace in God.

Beware of trying to force results. What we seek in prayer cannot be achieved by sheer force of will, by laboring, or by forcing the mind to concentrate. The purpose of meditation is to be absorbed in God. As a sponge absorbs water, so our mind should be absorbed by the sound of the sacred word and, beyond that, absorbed in God's presence. Let yourself rest peacefully in God.

## EVERYDAY PRAYERS

### A Morning Prayer

I bow before you in adoration, O my God. I arise to sing of my love for you. I absorb the light of this new day and soak up the love that ceaselessly flows out of your divine heart. With gratitude for the wonder of this day, for the rich gift of life itself, I enter into silent prayer.

Grant me the grace to look with respect upon all I will meet this day and upon every event I encounter. Mindful that I am a pilgrim, may I treat each and every one with reverence and love, as a manifestation of you to whom I journey. May the work of my hands—and even the trials I experience—be part of the redemption of the world and its eternal liberation. I dedicate this day to you and I begin it in a holy way in your Holy Name and in the name of your Son, Jesus, and in the name of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

### Psalm for a Stalled Heart

My heart is cold today, O God.  
I feel no burning desire, no zeal to pray or be with you.  
My heart is sluggish and stalled.  
Send forth your Spirit to revive my heart.  
Spark it with a relish for service, with a longing to pray.  
May I seek to love and serve you, even when my wintry heart declines to dance with springtime grace.  
And may my desire to be your flame of warmth and love spark other stalled souls to come alive, aflame in you.  
May this be so, O God, may this be so.

### Candle Prayer at a Time of Darkness

Divine Wisdom, I am confused and unsure;  
it feels as if I am lost in the darkness.  
As I light this candle, let your light enter my heart  
that I may see the path before me.  
May this holy light  
quiet the voices of fear that confuse my judgment  
and cloud my heart's true vision.  
Grant me the gift of divine wisdom  
that I may step forward with faith and courage.

### An Evening Prayer

Loving God of all creation, I thank you for the countless blessings of this day: gifts of sight, sound, touch, and smell, for wonders without end. I thank you as well for your endless patience with me and your pardon of my failings. Awaken my heart to journey inward to you, the source of life and love. May your Spirit lead me into prayer, as I now enter the innermost chamber of my heart.

I surrender myself to your safekeeping as night draws close to me. Bless with your presence those I love. Come and be with me in a sleep that will refresh me for a new day and for the work it holds for me. Grant comfort to all who face the darkness of this night with fear. Give shelter to those without a home and give peace to all. *Amen.*



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