

The Prayer of Recollection

Saint Teresa of Avila



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taking time frequently
to be alone with the
One who we know
loves us.”*

Saint Teresa of Avila



St. Teresa of Jesus was born in Avila, Spain, in 1515. At the age of 20 she entered the Carmelite convent of the Incarnation in her native Avila. After 26 years in the Incarnation, she was inspired by God to found the convent of St. Joseph in Avila that would be devoted to a life of contemplative prayer. Before her death in 1582 she founded 17 convents, which formed the beginnings of the Order of Discalced Carmelites. Today Discalced Carmelites number about 12,000 cloistered women in 98 countries, nearly 4,000 mendicant friars in 82 countries, and some 40,000 lay Carmelites throughout the world.

Teresa believed the purpose of her new order was to pray for the needs of the church. During the course of her life she wrote several books and left other writings that teach the way of contemplative prayer for those who follow in her footsteps. In 1970, Pope Paul VI declared St. Teresa the first woman doctor of the church, primarily for her teaching on prayer.

Teresa, however, did not always find prayer easy. In the earlier years of her religious life, she was not able to follow the traditional methods of discursive meditation, or prayerfully calling to mind and reflecting on specific religious thoughts and images. Finally she discovered “the prayer of recollection,” which she said the Lord himself taught her. “I confess that I never knew what it was to pray with satisfaction until the Lord taught me this method” (*The Way of Perfection*, 29.7). It involved simply meeting Jesus Christ, true God and true man, in the deepest center of her being. She wrote: “I tried as hard as I could to keep Jesus Christ, our God and our Lord, present within me, and that was my way of prayer” (*The Book of Her Life*, 4.7).

Enthusiastically, she taught this way of prayer to others, assuring them that this method “is not something supernatural, but is something we can desire and achieve ourselves with the help of God” (*The Way of Perfection*, 29.4). It is a method she found “beneficial” in all stages of the spiritual journey (*The Book of Her Life*, 12.3).

“This prayer is called ‘recollection,’ because the soul collects its faculties together and enters within itself to be with its God.”

—The Way of Perfection, 28.4

The Prayer of Recollection

Preparation

Find a place suitable for prayer. This could be a church or adoration chapel, a designated place for prayer in your home, or a secluded place outdoors. Ideally, this place should be comfortable, quiet, and free from distractions. However, anywhere can be a place of prayer, even the car or train as you commute to work or the grocery store.

Assume a suitable position for prayer. You could sit, stand, or kneel. You should be comfortable, but not so much that you become drowsy. Your body should be relaxed but alert. You can close your eyes and take a few deep breaths if it helps calm yourself.

Next, quiet your mind. Acknowledge any thoughts, or preoccupations, or worries, or anxieties. Whatever concerns you may have for your family, or your work, or your daily activities, simply surrender them to God.

Meeting the Lord

Now recall that you are in God’s presence. Recall, too, that Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, true God and true man, is within you. Quietly sit with Jesus, aware of his presence within.

Use whatever method helps you to remain attentive to Jesus’s presence. Perhaps recall a passage from the Gospel, like Jesus with the woman at the well, or the risen Jesus with Mary of Magdala. Recall that Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, is present within you just as he was present before the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well or with Mary in the garden after his resurrection.

To keep your attention on Jesus, it may help to meditate on the mysteries of the rosary, gaze upon the Blessed Sacrament in adoration, or slowly recite the Our Father. Employ whatever methods of prayer that help you to be present to our Lord Jesus present within.

When you notice your mind wandering, gently and lovingly bring your attention back to the Lord present within you. You don’t have to think about him, you don’t have to reason about him, you don’t have to form an image of him. Simply look at him with eyes of faith. And in faith be aware that he is looking at you. Looking at a picture or icon of Jesus or repeating his name or a phrase like “My Lord and my God,” or “Come, Lord Jesus,” may help you look in faith at Jesus within you.



To remain attentive to Jesus's presence, recall a passage from the Gospel, like Jesus with the woman at the well. You may want to ask for that "living water" he promised the Samaritan woman.

Intimate Sharing

As you look in faith at Jesus present within you, you may feel moved to speak to him. You may want to speak to him as father, or brother, as spouse, or friend (*The Way of Perfection*, 28.3; *The Book of Her Life*, 37.5). You may want to ask for the "living water" he promised the Samaritan woman. You may want to tell him that you love him or to thank him for his many gifts to you. You may want to ask a favor of him, for strength in a trial you are going through now. Just speak to the Lord however your heart moves you to speak.

If you do not feel moved to speak to him, just remain quietly with Jesus, looking at him with eyes of faith and love. Come to him as you are. If you are joyful, look at him as risen; if you are in pain, look at him in his suffering (*The Way of Perfection*, 26.4–5). No matter what you are feeling, you will find the Lord looking at you with understanding and love.

At times, you may experience a deep peace, or recollection, or communion with Jesus. Rest in this deep communion as long as it lasts. When it passes, let it go. Do not cling to it. With eyes of faith and love bring your attention back to the Lord present within you.

If your mind wanders again, say to yourself nonjudgmentally, "Oh, my mind is wandering again," and gently bring your attention back to Jesus within you. With eyes of faith and love look at him who is looking at you, and allow your heart to express whatever your love desires to say to the Lord.

Conclusion

Try to make time for this prayer every day. Fifteen to thirty minutes is a great place to start. St. Teresa teaches that with dedication and determination, this prayer of recollection is a habit we can all acquire. She explains that it is the foundation from which our Lord may raise us to higher forms of prayer.

Reminders

Make Time for Regular Periods of Mental Prayer

“Mental prayer ... means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us” (*The Book of Her Life*, 8.5). Teresa speaks of “the hour I had determined to spend in prayer” (*The Book of Her Life*, 8.7). “I should consider the time of prayer as not belonging to me and think that He can ask it of me in justice when I do not want to give it wholly to Him” (*The Way of Perfection*, 23.2).

Distractions Are Normal

Distractions are “unavoidable ... and should not be a disturbance or affliction for you ... Pay no attention to these thoughts ... and let’s not blame the soul for what a weak imagination, human nature, and the devil cause” (*Interior Castle*, IV.1.13–14). “I consider [distractions] an incurable disease” (*Letters*, October 9, 1581).

Be Prepared for Dryness

“As for ... dryness, it seems to me that the Lord is now treating you as one who is strong. He wants to try you in order to know the love you have for Him, whether it is present in dryness as well as in spiritual delights. Take it as a very great favor from God. Don’t let it cause you any grief, for perfection does not consist in delight but in the virtues. When you least expect, devotion will return” (*Letters*, August 7, 1580).

Pray Always

“The true lover loves everywhere and is always thinking of the Beloved! It would be a thing hard to bear if we were able to pray only when off in some corner” (*The Book of Her Foundations*, 5.16). “If you grow accustomed to having Him present at your side, and He sees that you do so with love and that you go about striving to please Him, you will not be able — as they say — to get away from Him; He will never fail you; He will help you in all your trials; you will find Him everywhere” (*The Way of Perfection*, 26.1).

Works of St. Teresa of Avila for further reading

The Book of Her Life, chapter 12, par. 2–4

The Way of Perfection, chapter 28, par. 4–8

The Interior Castle, “The Fourth Dwelling Place,”
chapter 1, par. 7

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