

Eucharistic Adoration at St. Patrick
Article 6: Meditation and Contemplation
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(First, my apologies for confusing the titles and numbers of these articles. The last one should have read "Article 5: Adoration and Our Personal Relationship with Christ." The first four are as follows: Introduction, The Real Presence, Reserving the Blessed Sacrament, Adoration and the Mass.)

My reason for writing about meditation and contemplation is that such forms of prayer can be the best answer to the question: what exactly should I be doing during my time of adoration? Of course, it is perfectly alright to just use set prayer forms, to use a book or pamphlet, to read from the Bible, to pray the rosary, or just to speak to God in your own words. These are traditional forms of "raising the mind and heart to God," which is how the ancients often defined prayer. It is up to each of us to find the form that best suits our personality and preferences.

Meditation and contemplation, however, can be deeper, more intense, than these other forms. The other forms may actually lead us into meditation and contemplation. If that happens, we should just abandon for a few moments those more formal types of prayer and let the Spirit guide us into that deeper presence of God we call meditation or contemplation.

Are meditation and contemplation two different things? Most traditional spiritual writers would say that they are. There is not enough space here to explain the difference and the attempt to do so would probably be quite boring. It will be best to just go ahead and let the difference explain itself.

You can find many "how to" books on Christian meditation. Most of these will outline some steps to take, which will usually be something like this. 1. Clear your mind and put yourself consciously in the presence of God. 2. Focus on some scene from the gospels, on some words from Scripture or a spiritual author, or on *the reality of Christ's Eucharistic presence on the altar*. 3. Allow that biblical scene, those scriptural words, or the fact of Christ's presence to sink deeply into your heart and open yourself to his loving presence. 4. Rest a while in that presence. 5. Give thanks to God, and, if it seems appropriate, come to some conclusion or resolution.

How long should this take? There is no set period of time. These days our attention span is brief. We should not measure the effectiveness of this or any kind of prayer by its length. It takes as long as it takes!

One of the best-known approaches to such prayer is the one called the "Ignatian Method." It was elaborated by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, and is still practiced and taught by the members of that Order. Typical of the intellectual nature of Jesuit spirituality, this method is elaborately described in precise steps. My own preference is for a simpler approach, but the Ignatian Method has been quite fruitful for many people. Google it, if you are interested!

Sometimes in the course of our mediation, whatever method we use, we find ourselves intensely experiencing the presence of God. Words and images tend to disappear and we are aware of a wordless communion with God that is totally absorbing and totally simple. This may not happen often. When it does, it's a gift from God. We simply relax and let the Spirit fill us with peace and love. This is more properly called "contemplation."

There is a tradition of Christian prayer that directly seeks such moments of contemplation. You find this in the great mystics such as St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila. Their writings are spiritual masterpieces.

Today you can also find books about "centering prayer," which involves a deliberate emptying of the mind in order to experience the presence of God. This form of prayer derives partly from oriental mysticism, such as we find in Buddhism. In my opinion, Christians who favor these methods need to take care to focus them on Christ and not just on mental exercises, however "relaxing" they may be. Christian prayer is not for relaxation or personality development. It may well have some of those results, but that is not what it is for. It is for a deeper union with God.

Finally, I should note that none of these forms of prayer, whether the more formal or the more meditative and contemplative, need to be confined to Eucharistic Adoration in church. They are ways of coming closer to God wherever and whenever we have the opportunity for silence and concentration.