

An Exploration into the Country of Prayer

With a guided day-long retreat
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For many of us a key to growth in our relationship with God is a gradual transition from a primarily discursive way of prayer to a prayer that is defined more by what God communicates to us. Growing in the mutuality of our relationship with God requires that we do not just talk but also listen and respond to God. This is a growing edge for many of us.

Some hindrances:

As we grow in listening to God, there are a few obstacles to overcome.

- We live at a point and time in history in which we have lost access to the tradition that placed listening to God in the center of our faith. There is mistrust towards the mystical dimension of the Christian life, both in and out of the Church, and we have developed a basically cautious mentality to the practice of listening to God. Whether this is due to an overreaction or needed caution, most of us have not been taught the responsive dimensions of prayer. We are largely untrained and unfamiliar with listening prayer.
- Secondly, our age makes listening to God difficult. We have many resources in the way of Christian books, good theological schools, and all kinds of religious activities. And we have Christian newspapers, conferences and radio or TV stations. Our shelves, calendars, and minds are full of so much data, in fact, too full! Too many things are competing for our attention. Many of our lives are overcrowded and we are drowning in a sea of possibilities. Listening to God—especially hearing Him above all the other sounds and voices—is clearly counter-cultural.
- Thirdly, listening to God involves a personal risk. It requires the giving up of our desire for earning the validation of men. For although we know that our identity should not rely on what people think of us, we often long for human affirmation. And while we can impress people by letting them know how busy we are, and earn respect by letting them peek into our crowded calendars, if we take listening to God more seriously, they might begin to wonder about us. What are we producing with our time? Are we getting lazy? We might lose some respect from those whose support means a lot to us. By not letting our urge to be productive (or at least to maintain the appearance of productivity) rule us, we give up a significant source of validation and thus need to start finding our deeper significance in more appropriate ways.

These hindrances to listening prayer weigh heavily on one side of the scale. Because listening to God is an activity and posture that is unfamiliar, counter-cultural, and even a bit threatening, what do we find on the other side of the scale that would make us willing to take it on?

Some benefits:

God cares for His people. He does not intend for us to be blindly driven by the destructive forces of this world. God pursues us, loves and wants to guide us. He wants us healed and free. It is possible for every Christian to live out of the same center and serve from the same place of supervision from which Christ, our Lord, lived and served. Actually, doing what the Father is doing, thinking and willing what He is thinking and willing, is what we are called to. This is what living from the inmost core of our God-given being—our “new man”—means for us: loving others out of our love for God, and serving them by the power that God grants us. Theresa of Calcutta spoke about this privilege and responsibility in a powerful way:

“Our activity is truly apostolic only in so far as we permit Him to work in us and through us, with His power, with His desire, with His love.... The essential thing is not what we say but what God says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within. Words which do not give the light of Christ increase our darkness.”
(*Something Beautiful for God*, pp. 65, 66)

By becoming better at noticing and obeying *God's* work in our life we become better connected to the center of our own existence. If we want to minister with God's ‘resources’—the attitudes, strength, and understanding that flow from God—then we need a lifestyle and an attentiveness that is consistent with God's working in us. The giving of our self and the receiving of God are as important for us twenty-first century Christians (whether Protestant or Catholic) as it was for the first century followers of Jesus. Helping leaders not only begin as good followers of Jesus but also remain His followers on a day-to-day basis is the most crucial help we can give. We are all called to grow in responsive prayer, regardless of our gender, age, personality type or temperament. Responsive prayer is not about precise descriptions or particular methods; since mutuality requires receptivity, at the heart of responsive prayer lies our surrender to God.

The criterion of mature prayer, then, is not a fixed standard but a dynamic mutuality between God and man so that we respond to God in resonance with His self-giving to us. Growth in prayer is a process of convergence between the way we relate to God and the way God relates to us. The goal is that the two become so much in harmony that they are one, and our coming to God matches His coming to us.

Since prayer is a matter of interpersonal and dynamic relationship, and not a schematic or mechanical process, it cannot be *taught*; it can only be *caught*. It is certainly more fruitful to learn about prayer by *getting into* the creek that leads into the wide river of a living relationship with God than by merely describing it. In this article and the retreat described here, our purpose is to help the reader *get in*, and experience this mutuality with God.

A day-long silent retreat

Prayer could be described as a vast country with huge plains, deep lakes, and high mountains. It is a place where we can spend a lifetime roaming and exploring, becoming very familiar with some of its regions and yet caught off guard by others. New discoveries await us day after day in this place with God.

After some years journeying through the country of prayer, most of us find that we are not where we started. We are not perfect at this, but we are moving ahead. This we describe as ‘growth’ in the spiritual life. The Church has always insisted on the progressive nature of our growth in prayer and life with God. Each of the various phases of this growth contributes to the same goal, an *open and worshipful posture before God* in which our soul is being transformed into the image of Christ. Thus, it is good to realize the distinctions among the phases of this growth, because the expectations—both on the outside and within—reflect the ideals we hold about this growth. Realistic views will lead to realistic expectations while unrealistic views will lead to unrealistic expectations.

Traditionally, the church has distinguished different phases in prayer. We could call these differences ‘provinces’ within the vast territory of prayer. These ‘provinces’ could be identified in several ways, but let us now identify them according to the actions that characterize them most. We can talk about the ‘province’ of (i) experience, (ii) focus, and (iii) transcendence. These three nouns describe the various phases of the movement from self-centered prayer to God-centered prayer.

Let’s structure our silent day around these consecutive stages, first surveying the big picture, and then spend time in each of these three provinces or phases of prayer.

Introduction to the journey (A) and the format of the day (B)

A.1. An increasing awareness of our true self

We all begin in prayer by noticing where we are. This is not incidental, and there is nothing to be ashamed of in this fact; it is our needs that drive us to God:

*“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;
O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.
If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?
Therefore you are feared.”*
(Psalm 130:1-4)

It is this needy self that Jesus speaks to when He first bids us, “Come.” He, too, starts with who we are when He says, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened”* (Matt 11:28-30).

Similarly, Paul encourages us to pray by including everything we feel or need: *“In everything, by prayer and petition ... present your requests to God”* (Phil 4:6). The pattern we see here is basic

to prayer: we can only approach God with our actual self, not our phantoms or fantasies. As we draw near to God we are made increasingly aware of who we are, so we can only continue drawing near to Him if we are willing to own who we are and expose our whole self to Him. *“Lord, you have searched me and known me ... Where can I go from Your Spirit? ... For You created my inmost being ...”* (Ps 139).

Thus, when we come before God it is always our actual self that we are first faced with. This self-knowledge in the presence of God can be referred to as “year-one” in the school of prayer. The more we expose ourselves to God, the more we find to expose. Like the psalmist said, we bring to God our worst fears and greatest desires. We cannot overemphasize this: we can only pray authentically by acknowledging who we are. This is always where we must begin.

As we embark on our first silent hour of prayer, some guidance will be given to help us bring our whole self to God. But let us continue surveying the whole process first.

A.2. A sharpening focus of our search for God

As we bring our actual selves to God, we discover that our life reflects more than who and what we are. It reflects a plan much greater than ourselves. We begin to see ourselves as “raw material” for a work of art, the significance of which is greater than we can create. The center of our attention begins to shift at this point from the created to the Creator, from the changes and sensations that take place in and around us towards their ultimate Divine Source. We start to realize that at the end of the day, it is God whom we are dealing with, and it is God whom we seek in and through all our prayer. So, having started out with our own needs, they seem to eventually shrink and even disappear into the background of Someone Greater who is hidden but very much present. We continue our prayer with a new quest:

“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord. More than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning”
(Psalm 130:5-6).

As it begins to be clear that God has the Lead Role in the drama, we start to search for Him. We become more conscious of and intentional about Who we are after. It is God whom we seek, and with God-expectancy, we quiet our souls. We put our own demanding distractions aside, or at least we try to, as we get ready for God.

The center of Jesus’ call to us is now beginning to make sense. In calling us to Himself, He is offering us an *exchange of yokes*. He wants to remove our heavy burdens by offering us another assignment instead: *“Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart”* (Matt 11:29). He asks us to turn our attention toward Him and learn from Him.

We see the same kind of shift in the prayer of Apostle Paul in Phil 4. The way we deal with ourselves should always be adjusted to and controlled by the reality of the Living God. Otherwise our self-awareness can become self-focused-ness. If we want to make sure our prayer is not tyrannized by our ego, we let all things self-centered go, and focus on what matters most.

Paul is emphatic that when we pray *for something* we should always do it “*with thanksgiving.*” Thanksgiving and contentment are crucial signs of our awareness of God’s central place.

We may use a variety of means by which we turn our attention to God and fix our hearts and minds on seeking Him. In Psalm 1, David’s activity of focusing his attention on seeking God is called meditation. The essence of this activity is that we focus our heart and mind, and center our selves, simplifying our awareness so that we become more prepared to seek just “one thing”.

“One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord...” (Ps 27:4).

A.3. A deepening realization of God’s search for us.

In this process of turning our attention upon God, we realize the truth that God is always seeking us. He always *is* and always *has been*. Whether we are seeking Him or not, He is already seeking us. Even before we were even interested in Him, “when we were still in our sins”, He loved us and was calling us to Himself (Rom 5:6). This is why we were able to even *start thinking about Him* in the first place, and why we were able to search for Him when we did not yet know Him.

There are times when we are clearly aware of God’s seeking us. Sometimes in the midst of our good intentions and good deeds and preoccupation with ourselves, God suddenly addresses us and we feel taken by surprise. On these occasions a reversal takes place: we become less attuned to what we are doing to find God, and more attuned by what He is doing to find us. All of a sudden, we realize we are secondary players in the game. It is not that we lose focus, not at all, but in some way we recognize His part and forget about our own. We continue praying but with a little different focus, being more aware of who God is and what He does for His people:

“O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with Him is full redemption. He Himself will redeem Israel from all their sins”(Psalm 130:7-8).

The recognition of God’s centrality in our life calls us to attention. In becoming more and more aware of the God-centered-ness of this world, we start to relate to God more and more on His terms, according to His Triune mystery. We see ourselves as participants in what He does and who He is. We enter into the experience of Christ, and His comforting words become more meaningful to us: *“For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light”* (Matt 11:30). The promise He gave to us when we came to Him tired and heavy-laden is now being fulfilled: *I will give you rest ... and you will find rest for your souls* (Matt 11:28-29).

Our prayer reflects this shift as well. It is not only the Psalmists and the first disciples who had the privilege of a direct knowledge of God; every Christian has that privilege. With Paul, we can be assured that after we bring our requests to God with thanksgiving, *“the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”* (Phil 4:7).

As we are called to partake in His divine nature as coheirs of Christ, we rediscover in a fresh way that in losing our self, we actually find a new self. In this prayer of self-abandonment, we are invited to join the mother of Jesus in her prayer: *“I am the Lord's servant ... May it be to me as You have said”* (Luke 1:38).

B. The format of the day

Throughout our day, then, we will follow the movement of prayer from self-awareness, through our search for God, to self-transcendence, resting in His finding us. We will have three blocks of silence (with some breaks in between) and each of these blocks will be 60-90 minutes. Some of you are familiar with this type of exercise, and for others, this will be a new experience.

Here are some simple ‘do’-s and some ‘don’t’-s:

- About silence: We will meet here for some guidance for 15-20 minutes at the beginning of every session. Please listen at those times, but you do not need to take notes. The difficulty in prayer is not in the lack of precision but in our struggle to give our self wholly to God. After this short time, we will spread out, and you can go wherever you choose. You can have a drink or go to your room if you’d like, but, please observe silence.

What you are being asked to do is to just quit doing anything. Please do not listen to a tape or read anything during this time (not even this outline) except if there is a prescribed text. And do not talk to anyone.

Please keep our silence while we are having lunch as well. We may listen to some reading while we eat, but continue on in silence. After our last 60-90 minutes segment, there will be no more restrictions and we will come together again to share about our day.

- It is important to remember the nature of the challenge we face today. In spending a day like this, it is our mental habits that make things somewhat difficult. Our minds are accustomed to solving problems, explaining things, producing something. So now when these are the very things that are not needed (and, in fact, are counter-productive to what we are after), we may feel disoriented. This is quite normal.

Today we will hopefully be getting out of the driver’s seat. Most of us are so well practiced in driving that it is difficult for us to quit planning and controlling and thinking ahead. You are not alone; we are all in the same boat in this challenge to abandon control of the process and be led by God.

But remember, as we give this time to God, we give Him more space. This is why we have been “authorized” not to produce, explain, or solve anything today! Actually, this is our assignment. This may feel freeing sometimes, but at other times, it may also feel punitive. Never mind how it feels. God is awake and present, able to speak His mind to us, fully able to direct and act exactly the way He wants to. So we are not in a vacuum here today—even if it feels like it.

After this introduction we will start our first block of silence with some specific directions. Let us meet back here right at _____.

Questions?

Intro to Block One – Shifting our attention from the world to our self

The hardest thing in prayer is not that we need to import something new, a discipline or some special technique. It is the revelation of *our self* that poses the greatest challenge. When we start praying, we often start by thinking about concepts or tasks, forming opinions about others and trying to explain events. We are positioned to hear outside noises. We hardly notice our real inner self, and we are not really aware of what is inside our heart. Either we are not in touch with our feelings, or we allow our pains or desires to preoccupy us. In this way, we remain ignorant about the core of our being.

We must come to terms with this self-ignorance. We can only receive true insights about ourselves and knowledge about the real state of things if we are humble about our self-ignorance and allow ourselves to become self-aware.

The way to be intentional about knowing ourselves is to rely on the Light of God. We open our hidden boxes, let God read us, and ask Him to search our being. For it is only in His light that we see light. (Psalm 36:9)

For the following hour, remember this: Prayer starts with us.

- Often, as we open our life to God, we experience Him making order out of our mess. In His presence, things fall into place; we are put together and are even healed. These experiences—for these are either experienced or they are not real at all!—are wonderful gifts from God. They are foretastes of the fullness of the redemption that awaits those who will always be with Him.
- Yet, opening our life to God may also stir things deeply within us. This can be at times painful and troubling, but if it happens in prayer, then it is also a gift from God and necessary in our sanctification.
- If you notice numbness in your heart, bring it to Him. Pay special attention to the areas that appear to be gray in your life and also the ambiguities, frustrations and apprehensions you may have. Inner addictions, fears or attractions may surface in His presence. You may get in touch with unexpected feelings. This turmoil may indicate themes that could have been the subjects of recent or ongoing dialogues between you and God, but now they appear at a deeper level. Incorporate these into your prayer and see what God does with them.

We must stay in the Light no matter what it brings. Let us make sure that we expose as much of ourselves as we see to God, and leave the positive outcome that we so desire—the solutions and consolations, or the pain and desolation that may come—to Him. Let us avoid the danger of confusing our part with God's part. Our part is to give ourselves to Him, and the decision about what He does with what we bring is His. If we make a certain 'spiritual' experience (regardless of what we call it) the goal, then we remain in control and can be so blinded that our agendas and understanding eclipse God's work from our eyes. We have no need to worry. If He wants to speak to us, He will get His point across. Our task is to make sure that we, like Elijah, are ready to hear Him even if He speaks in a quiet whisper (I Kings 19:12).

For this first hour, you are being asked to acknowledge who you are before God. The Psalms encourage us to do this by giving us examples. Your real self is the only contribution that you can make in the divine work of art. You bring the raw material—your real self—to God, and He, the Divine Artist, will not fail to perfect it. He will bring His will to fruition in your life in a wonderful way. Own and expose your *real self* before God. Who will Jesus meet when He bids you, “Come”?

Intro to Block Two – Shifting our attention from ourselves to God’s work in ourselves

As we give ourselves to God, He re-centers us. He redirects our being. By encountering our real self and offering it to God, we put ourselves on the “operating table” so to speak, and allow the Divine Surgeon to change us as He pleases. Then we are enabled to resist the urgency of our senses and needs (without running away from our real self), and our inner life is being redeemed.

Now our difficulty is this: while the Gospel is about redemption (not suppression), and we want to be realistic about who we really are, we also do not want to be distracted by our not-fully-renewed self. We want to take ourselves seriously, but not too seriously. We want to pay attention to our experience, but we do not want to remain self-centered.

So our challenge is to pay attention to ourselves in such a way that God has the central stage. We respond to God by focusing our energy on Him, and now put our efforts into seeking Him.

We can do this by centering our attention in a chosen object and keeping our attention there until it—or rather God through it—starts affecting us. We ‘stay there’ with the given object of our meditation for a time, and when our mind wanders away, we keep returning to this object again and again.

Psalm 1 and 119 illustrate this with the Word. This is where the root of the Hebrew term for ‘meditate’ (or ‘meditation’, which is the old term for this phase of prayer) comes from. When we meditate we ‘ruminate’. In trying to penetrate the meaning of the text we involve all the energies of our body, mind and soul, and we search for God while disciplining our self.

Historically, Christians used different means as objects of their meditation. Most characteristically, it was a Bible verse, but sometimes it was an artwork, an icon, a part of God’s created world (like a rock or an ocean scene), the words of the “Jesus-prayer” (*Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*), our own breathing, a memory from life, etc. In each case, Christians would pray by fixing their attention on a given object, and staying there, not shifting their attention.

We do not describe or try to understand and explain things in this process, as that would be taking over the lead. Instead, we discipline our mind to seek just “one thing”, and we trust God to be the One who reveals Himself to us. We take these ‘foot-prints of God’ and focus our attention on them so that we may find God *through* them. In other words, we are seeking to penetrate the essence of reality by using the objects or mental pictures as though they were gateways to God, not as items of knowledge themselves. We do not want to increase our knowledge horizontally at this time; we want to deepen our “knowing” vertically. It is the Truth Himself we seek through these means. We want to get beyond the surface and seek Christ, because He is present everywhere.

So our task for the coming hour is two fold: we focus our mind on a given object and allow ourselves to be impacted by it. We become ‘less’ (as did John the Baptist). If you catch your mind switching into task-mode or into explaining-mode, simply redirect your attention to the chosen “gateway”, and allow God to use it. If you are troubled or attracted by something, then

note your reaction, name it, but do not dwell on it. You may make it “sit beside you” or even seek God through it. But our search should be directed in one direction—God ward—and our energy focused there.

Please refrain from writing anything until the last twenty minutes of this time.

In the Gospel according to Matthew Jesus says, “*Learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.*” Let us now picture ourselves as participants in this story. We may recall characters from our own narrative, people whose gentleness impressed us. As our attention returns to Jesus again and again (He who is gentler than any of these people), as we immerse ourselves in the story, we immerse ourselves in His gentleness. Our self-awareness may fade into the background and even our inner turmoil may shrink, perhaps even without noticing it, as our focus upon and search for Jesus becomes more intense.

Intro to Block Three – A shift of emphasis from our efforts to participation

Seeking God is labor-intensive. It takes time, persistence, and saying “No” to other things. However, as we determine to seek God (or to use the words of Saint Patrick, as we “bind ourselves to the Trinity”), at some point a surprising reversal takes place in us. It is a subtle but significant shift: we become relaxed. Eventually, our purposeful exploration comes to a phase of rest in God.

The interesting thing is that as we arrive there we discover that God has been present with us all along. The distance that we had to overcome lied not between God and us, but between the surface and the inmost part of our being. Our journey upward is a journey inward, as our forerunners used to say. The temple of the Holy Spirit is not far away; it is at the center of our heart where Christ awaits us.

The essence of this season of prayer is that we give more room to God than to our search for Him. We let Him define what prayer is for us. There is nothing we can do to enter the ‘place’ of this direct vision or knowledge of God. We cannot produce anything in order to get there. What we do, in fact, is in some ways quite the opposite: we cease to strive to get anywhere.

Let’s be honest. Ceasing to do anything is hard for us. Sometimes we just simply cannot get beyond our working mode; we travel but never arrive. Our emotions, our will, and thoughts are just too wild. So we try harder to get rid of them. But there is a difficulty with that. The harder we try to achieve something the more self-conscious we become. We are tempted to take control of the process (or at least feel that we are in control) and often develop a possessive mentality, as if the end would be our own “success”. In prayer, however, the very object of our search requires that we let go—that we break our habit of control and submit simply to God. So we cannot just work ourselves up to an encounter with God; we need to abandon our selves to receive Him.

When we let our efforts go and expect God to be the more active, caring, and searching agent of the two of us, we give the management of our lives to Him. Then we find ourselves in a place where we are provided and cared for and loved.

As we become more and more centered on God, not even our work gets in the way. Our efforts, then, are replaced by a sense of leisure. This change can be illustrated with our experience in sport. Let us take horseback riding for example. Keeping yourself in the saddle, holding your back straight and legs tight takes work and practice. Doing them well is a matter of discipline, whether your legs hurt or not. But there comes a time, when you find harmony between you and the horse. You still pay attention to what you are doing, your body still works; yet there is an extent to which it is no longer you who are doing the riding. You are no longer responsible for all the motions. You participate in the ride. (We find similar analogies in swimming or learning to drive a car.)

It is important to clarify that it is this *harmony* that accompanies the horseback-rider or the swimmer, which I want to highlight here, and not the pleasure that may be involved. The enjoyment of our harmony with God, our sense of being lost in Him, can be a real and wonderful

gift from God. But its role is to take us beyond the first phase of prayer, and turn our attention to God.

It is important to remember that experience does not belong to the essence of responsive prayer. The fathers of our faith explicitly warned us about visual, sensual and mental images when we are after a more direct knowledge of God. The vision of God (or the ‘contemplation’ of God, as they used to call it) cannot be defined or understood by any natural or supernatural (‘charismatic’) experience. It can only be known by participation in the Trinity, whether with or without experience, and this actually transcends all our experience. The problem with experience, then, is not the joy it brings, but that when we focus on our experience, we tend to look at things from our perspective. And contemplation by definition is not self-focused. In contemplation we see things from God’s perspective. We realize that He is the Center of all things. We do not attribute much attention to our own feelings, perceptions, thoughts, experiences or visions—we transcend them.

Practically speaking, our job here is to continue our prayer, but do it in light of what is to come—with surrender and a giving of ourselves to God. Making an encounter with God happen is not possible. Any real knowledge of God always requires the sovereign self-revelation of God Himself. Intimacy is a free gift of God; it is only the Word who can give Himself to anyone (called “infused contemplation” in classical writing). But our part in growing in this direct relationship with God is to position ourselves in such a way that we can receive the Word. Our self-giving (called active contemplation) is our part. Our task is to position our self in a way that is appropriate to the self-giving nature of God. *Surrender, leisure, wonder and awe* are the characteristics of the phase of prayer in which God has the center-stage. God is seeking those who come to Him in this way in worship (Heb 11:6; John 4:23).

These self-transcending times may be rare, yet they are deeply transforming in our lives. Such encounters bear the fruits of true union and love so that we might represent Christ. These are the fruits of the Vine displayed in His branches. As the life of Christ transforms us, we become Christ-like and our spirit becomes ready to respond to God according to His love and will. This is our God-given destiny, the deep purpose of prayer.

In this third time of prayer, then, we can start by briefly repeating phase 1 and 2. We bring ourselves to God as we are, and fix our attention on a Bible verse, a memory or a scene, seeking God by focusing on Him and letting Him reveal Himself through it. We should not spend more than 10 minutes here and if we are ready for the next phase, we may skip it altogether. Our main assignment in this hour (phase 3) is to **receive God’s presence** and His initiatives. We do not need to feel or find anything, and actually hunting for some experience or any experience would be very counter-productive. Our task is to “let go and let God” (as Fenelon put it), to give our senses to Him without expecting anything, and to offer our presence to Him without demanding anything. Our task is to just be present, and if our needs or efforts begin to take over, just offer this hour and ourselves to God again afresh.

Debriefing time

After the exercise, we listen to each other without discussing what the previous person has shared. Our purpose is to hear from each other, to connect and help process whatever was going on in us during the day. The important thing in our reporting is to stay with our *personal* experiences or insights.

Three important closing comments as we start our time of sharing:

- **The three phases described are best seen as reoccurring sections of an upward or inward spiral, and not as sections of a linear progress.**
These phases often repeat and overlap in our lives. There are times when we need to spend more time in phase-one or in phase-two, and perhaps at other times we are enabled to dwell more quickly or longer in phase three, by God's grace. Let us not measure ourselves by where we are in the process. We can expect times when we revisit stages where we have been before.
- **Let us use these phases only as a map to help us locate ourselves on the journey so that we can respond to God's work more adequately, and avoid the temptation of trying to turn the knowledge of our growth into a technology.**
It is God alone who gives growth. None of us has the power to move from A to B by our own will or strength. We cannot manufacture growth in anybody else either, and the times of change are not up to us. Our part is simply to position ourselves in such a way that we can respond to what God is doing in us, and do it in a way that is authentic and appropriate to the working of God.
- **May all our prayers, struggles and growth be to His praise!**

End of retreat

A Summary of the Biblical Pattern for the Change in our Attitudes to God

1. An increasing awareness of our true self	2. A sharpening focus of our search for God	3. A deepening realization of God's search for us
<p>We approach God in being aware of who we are. We approach God by exposing our actual and whole self to Him.</p> <p><i>"Lord, You have searched me and known me ... Where can I go from your Spirit? ... For You created my inmost being"</i> (Ps 139).</p> <p>We can only pray authentically by acknowledging who we truly are. We admit and expose our true self to God. This is how we begin.</p>	<p>We do not let our prayer become tyrannized by our ego. We let all things that are centered on us go and focus on what matters most:</p> <p><i>"One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord..."</i> (Ps 27:4).</p> <p>We may use various indirect means through which we seek God, but these are only indirect means. The value of focusing our heart and mind on these things (meditation) is to center and simplify our being so that we might become prepared for the coming of Christ (like John the Baptist).</p>	<p>As our spirit is made ready to receive God, we realize that His preceding and ongoing search for us is infinitely greater than our search for Him. He is greater than all our efforts.</p> <p>So we echo the receptivity of Mary: <i>"I am the Lord's servant ... May it be done to me as you have said"</i> (Luke 1:38).</p> <p>Real knowledge of God presupposes the sovereign self-revelation of God. Intimacy with the Trinity is always a free gift of God. We can do our best to position ourselves so we receive the Word ('active contemplation'), but it is only the Word who can give Himself to us ('infused contemplation').</p>
<p>We start praying by noticing where we are. We begin according to our need:</p> <p><i>"Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; O Lord, hear my voice. Let Your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness; Therefore You are feared"</i></p>	<p>We begin to see ourselves as raw material for a greater work of art. The center of our attention shifts from the changes and things that we sense in and around us to their final Source. It is God whom we seek through all these means.</p> <p><i>"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I put my hope. My soul waits</i></p>	<p>While our attention remains focused on who God is, at some point we become less centered on what we do to find God and more taken by what God does in finding us. We become secondary in the process, and in turning to God for His sake, we lose our self to some extent.</p> <p><i>"O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD</i></p>

<p>(Psalm 130:1-4).</p> <p>So whenever we come before God, it is our own real self that we first must face.</p>	<p><i>for the Lord. More than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning</i>”(Psalm 130:5-6).</p> <p>In God-expectancy, we quiet our souls, putting distractions aside and getting ready for God.</p>	<p><i>is unfailing love and with Him is full redemption. He Himself will redeem Israel from all their sins</i>” (Psalm 130:7-8).</p> <p>We begin to relate to God on His terms, according to who He is to His people and in His Triune mystery.</p>
<p>The call of Jesus also starts with who we are:</p> <p><i>“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened”</i> (Matt 11:28-30). It is our tired and needy self that Jesus first speaks to when He says, “Come”.</p> <p>The Apostle Paul also encourages us to pray by including everything that we feel or need: <i>“In everything, by prayer and petition ... present your requests to God”</i> (Phil 4:6).</p>	<p>Jesus offers for us to exchange our burden for His:</p> <p><i>“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart”</i> (Matt 11:29). We are called to turn toward Jesus and learn from Him.</p> <p>Like Jesus, Paul also warns us that our self-awareness should not become self-focus. Everything needs to be seen in light of the actions of God. So we should always pray <i>“with thanksgiving”</i> (Phil 4).</p>	<p>True peace is not our doing. We are beneficiaries of who He is:</p> <p><i>“For My yoke is easy”, Jesus says, “and My burden is light.”</i> (Matt 11:30)... <i>and I will give you rest; ... and you will find rest for your souls”</i> Matt 11: 28-29).</p> <p>As we turn our being to God and acknowledge who He is, we partake in His nature. <i>“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”</i> (Phil 4:7)</p>