

Monastic Scribe 100th Edition! January 30, 2026

PRAY ALWAYS!

Jesus once told a parable about "praying always and never losing heart" (Luke 18:1). Saint Paul said something similar, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing...." (I Thessalonians, 5:16-17). Many Christians have tried to take this seriously, including the early desert monks. They recited the psalms which, at some time, meant one or more of the monks was always reciting a psalm. The Jesus prayer and the way of the pilgrim were ways to pray always.

In my understanding to pray always means to live in relationship, that is with God, neighbor, all creation, and oneself. It is a way of listening, learning, attentiveness. Saying prayers at times helps to develop this relationship but saying, reciting, singing prayers is not always the same as praying. It might be helpful to remind ourselves of the ancient ways to distinguish praying, namely the apophatic and cataphatic approaches to prayer. Don't be scared by these old Greek terms.

Cataphatic prayer uses words. This involves prayers whether traditional prayers or your own prayers. The Psalms became the main prayer form for followers of Christ. Since he prayed the psalms, they said we should also do the same. A liturgy of "the hours" developed which assigned certain psalms to certain times of the day. In a more oral age than ours, young monks and other Christians would memorize the psalms. There are some other ancient prayers that developed as well. Reciting or singing the prayers of the Eucharist were at first in common but, as Latin gave way to vernacular languages, people became more silent or preoccupied in private prayers during Mass. Around the thirteenth century the Rosary developed as a common prayer for people. Other devotions such as the Way of the Cross, prayers for dying and others also grew in use. In general, knowing some regular prayers gives one a base for praying, for praying always and without ceasing.

Apophatic prayer is prayer without words, prayer in silence, prayer of the heart. It is a prayer of emptying the mind of thoughts, prayers of meditation and contemplation. But there is more to it than prayer without words. The mystics testify to us that such prayer also gets beyond any images, thoughts, mental constructs of any kind. It is facing the darkness of unknowing. It is approaching a God that is not father or mother or any human image. Saint John of the Cross believed that only when we get to a God who is beyond all thoughts and images that we really begin to have faith. We let go of anything to hang on to and

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completely trust what we do not see.

Though we cannot conceptualize this God, we do experience God at times. We know God's presence in dreams, in nature, in love. And we have the many mystics who share their experiences with us. Saints Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Therese of Lisieux, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Teresa testifies that in the later part of her life she could not see or feel the God who once was so close. This is typical of many people who pray fervently. The deeper they get into prayer, the more God seems to be absent. We think that God is known to us in our feeling good and holy and that might have been our experience in earlier phases of our prayer life. It is as if we finally get too close to the light and are blinded by God. God is as immense, as unknowable, as deep and awesome as a black hole in the cosmos. God is pure spirit, pure life, pure love.

Some people give up on prayer when they get to this stage of darkness. It actually is the time to begin real prayer, real relationship, real presence with God. What can we do? We need both types of prayers as was described above. We need regular prayers to say, especially the psalms.

Whether we are in the dark or not, these prayers keep us on a steady line. But we also need to adapt to quiet, wordless prayer. It might help to find a place to center ourselves, whether before a burning candle, or a leafy tree. Draw your heart and mind to one point and keep trying to be still. Stillness is more than not talking. It is a mode of body and soul whereby we embrace the emptiness, the darkness. Psalm 46:10 says it this way, "Be still and know that I am God".

Here is a prayer poem of Meister Eckhart, a fourteenth century Dominican friar and mystic. (My thanks to "Meister Eckhart's Book of Darkness and Light:", edited by Jon M, Sweeney and Mark S. Burrows.)

How can I believe that God is there,
ready to fill my willing emptiness?
I can't feel God. Realize, then,
that your awareness of God is
from God, not from your own powers.
There will be times of God-concealment
and times of God's revealment; Christ said as much to his friend Nicodemus:

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The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

I would be glad to hear from you at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.