

Meditatio Talks

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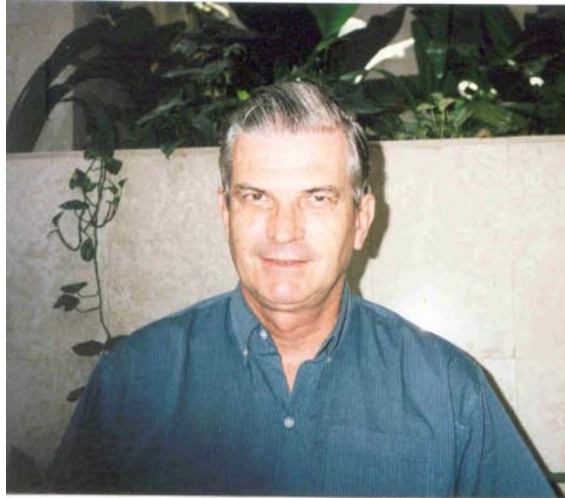
Oct – Dec

The Prayer that Jesus Taught

by

FR GERRY PIERSE CSSR

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FR GERRY PIERSE (1940-1999) was a Redemptorist priest who came from County Kerry in Ireland. He went to the Philippines in 1961 as a seminarian at the age of 21 and was ordained there in 1964. In the early years of his ministry, he served mainly in the rural missions. Later he was parish priest in three Redemptorist city parishes before he became prefect of the major seminary.

In later years, he specialised in giving retreats. This apostolate coincided with his moving deeper into contemplative prayer. He was greatly inspired by the teaching of Benedictine monk John Main, a fellow Irishman. From his own experience in the practice of Christian Meditation, he formed and led meditation groups in his parishes and in the provincial prison.

Gerry Pierse had a gift with words that made his teaching always simple, clear and effective. In a short period of time, he produced five books to help others tread and persevere on the path of Christian Meditation. When he gave talks on meditation, he had the extraordinary gift of illuminating the teaching with engaging stories, amusing anecdotes, and self-deprecating humour. The meditation communities in the Philippines, Ireland, Singapore, Australia, Malaysia and Mauritius benefited greatly from his teaching. This series of the *Meditatio Talks* is compiled from recordings of his talks to meditation groups in those regions.

Gerry Pierse died on 12 July 1999 from a swimming accident in Queensland, Australia. His body was found on the rocks of the Gold Coast. There is something that inspires awe in the way he returned to the Lord. For Gerry, the Sea and the Rock was home. The sea and the rocks were the place where the Celtic monks of old found silence and God. This was particularly true of those living near Skelligs in the South of Kerry. We pray that he rests now with God, his Rock and his strength.

31. Faithfulness And Discipline

1 The basic idea of Christian Meditation is contrary to our whole culture which is geared towards immediate success. “Transcendental” and some other kinds of meditation promise immediate first time achievement of transcendence. Christian Meditation makes no such promise.

2 In meditation, we just try to be present here and now, we try to let go of all that is not God, so as to be at home with God in a totally uncluttered and uncontrived way.

3 One of the great obstacles to prayer is our obsession with success. In all walks of life, we are under pressure to be successful. We tend to be the same in prayer, and we tend to judge our success or failure by the presence or absence of distractions. But we do not pray to be successful. We pray to be faithful. The more often we come back to our mantra in fidelity after being distracted, the more faithful we are.

4 This vital truth is summed up beautifully by T S Elliot in “East Coker” when he says,

*For us, there is only the trying,
The rest is not our business.*

5 In meditation, we open ourselves to God with no prior agenda. This was also beautifully expressed by the poet, Henry W Longfellow (1807-1882):

*Let us, then, labour for an inward stillness –
An inward stillness and an inward healing
That perfect silence where the lips and heart
Are still, and we no longer entertain
Our own imperfect thoughts and vain options,
But God alone speaks in us, and we wait
In singleness of heart, that we may know
His will, and in the silence of our spirits,
That we may do his will and do that only.*

6 Meditation is a discipline, not a technique. For John Main, the distinction between a technique and a discipline was very important. In many popular forms of meditation, emphasis is put on techniques that will lead to peak experiences. These have no place in John Main’s teaching. A technique is something to be mastered. To master it is to be successful and so to boost one’s ego. This can be spiritually counter-productive.

7 Discipline, on the other hand, is to follow a way. The discipline of meditation is external and internal. The external discipline is to meditate twice a day. The internal one is to keep coming back to your mantra, no matter how often you become distracted.

8 We follow the way, not in order to be successful, but in order to be faithful. The measure of success, if there is such a measure, is our faithfulness in returning to the mantra, not our success in staying with it.

32. Washing Socks

1 For some years now I have been hand washing my socks every few days. In those years I have learned a trick or two. At first I used to dip the socks in water and swirl them around for a while. Then I would hang them up on a line or put them on a window still. This process did not have very much effect on either the socks or the water. Later I learned that it was advantageous to use soap. I would soap up my socks and scrub them between my fists and get soap up to my elbows. The water became dirty and I presume the socks became somewhat cleaner and I became a little more tolerable in company because of this process.

2 Then I discovered detergents. I just put the socks in a basin and added a little detergent. I would come back some time later and most of the work was done. There would be a coat of dirt at the bottom of the basin equalling presumably what had been dislodged from the socks. The thicker the coat of dirt, the more satisfied I was. Then a few more rinsings and that was it. I seemed to be doing nothing and yet the job was being done.

3 I find a wonderful paradigm of my journey in prayer in this. For a long time, my prayer was dipping into the Lord. I tried to be with him but little washed off from him to me or me to him. He and I remained much the same. Bit by bit I discovered better ways of engaging him. And then I discovered John Main and the mantra, and in some ways I was never the same again. I had found a way home. The mantra is the detergent, and the dirt at the bottom of the basin is the flood of distractions that beset the meditator. The more the merrier. The more dirt there is, the more effective the detergent has been. The more distractions that emerge in meditation, the more the meditation is being effective in dislodging ego material.

4 Distractions are always from our egos, our pride and vanity, from our regrets about the past and our desires and daydreams about the future. The more they surface to our consciousness and we let them go, the less of them are left behind. So to see distractions flying off is like seeing the dirt at the bottom of the basin. They are a sign that the meditation is working.

5 The mantra, like the detergent, is very necessary. Just as I was for a long time ineffectively washing my socks, so too I was for a long time praying ineffectively. I was saying prayers but not engaging with God or maybe not engaging or disengaging with the opposite pole, the ego. We cannot grasp God. But by being filled with ego, we make it impossible for God to be in the space that he could occupy. If we can dislodge the ego from that place, God will be there. He will have a true home at our centres.

6 When we meditate then, we should be joyful when distractions gush forth. We should not engage them or grapple with them – just observe them and let them go. There is nothing particularly discreditable about socks getting dirty. They pick up dust from outside and perspiration from inside. If there is nothing to pick up and they remain clean, well and good. If they get dirty, we face that reality and wash them. So too when we come to meditation. If there are no distractions, well and good; if there are distractions, be glad to let them go. Like the dirt in my socks the more that it goes, the less there is left behind.

7 No matter how clean my socks are now, I know that, as I travel the dusty tropical roads, they will accumulate dirt again in a short time. So too, as we leave meditation, the forces of the ego reconvene. Just as the washing of socks is a twice daily process, so too the washing off of the ego manifestations is a twice daily necessity.

33. Dealing With The ego

1 There is an Indian story about a king who was given a totally dutiful servant. The servant would perform, indeed anticipate, all of his wishes, and when not given a task would be restlessly demanding things to do. At first the king was delighted to have such a wonderful servant who relieved him of many chores. After some time, however, he found that providing chores for the servant was becoming more exhausting than the chores themselves. Then he got an idea. He had the servant erect a forty foot pole in the garden and instructed him to climb up and down when there was nothing else to do. In this way, the king got his freedom back.

2 The ego is a little bit like that servant. It is a part of us, an essential and useful part of us, but it can also be a demanding tyrant. When we say the mantra, we are sending it up the pole, and giving ourselves space from it. Perhaps the greatest thing that Christian Meditation does for us is that it helps us to deal with the ego.

3 I would like to define the ego as the selfish self in contrast to the true self which is the selfless self. The true self and the ego are part of the light and shadow within us, and through meditation we learn to hold them in balance. We learn to moderate our ego which will bully us if not checked.

4 Our egos are part of our upbringing. We have all been fixated, at least to some degree, at some childhood level of our development. Our past experiences give us egos that are fearful and defensive because of the ways in which they have been indulged or deprived. This fearfulness hinders our ability to let go in transcendence; to see and live values for their own sakes; to love and seek justice without having a selfish motive. It smothers our true selves, our better selves, the selves we were called to be.

5 The ego is dualistic. There is me (ego) and other objects. It is observing, fragmenting, comparing and measuring everything in terms of what is in it for me. The true self on the other hand is whole, it seeks to integrate, to be one with the other, to have *agape*, to love without strings attached. The ego makes us love things and use people. The true self challenges us to love people and use things.

6 Our ego makes us desire to be great. If it is not transcended, it will stop at nothing to achieve that greatness. The ego makes us want to grab recognition, position, title, approval. It makes us slaves to the opinions and approval of others. The consumer society thrives on the ego. It makes us fear not having the right car, or smell or gadget. The ego loves shooting others down. It thinks, in some neurotic way, that it lifts itself by putting others down. It makes us jealous and competitive. It makes us feel threatened by the success of others.

7 The ego is a little bully. Most bullies are cowards at heart. When you stand up to them they back off. This is what we do when we meditate. We just stand our ground and the ego is exposed and backs off. As we meditate, we first become more aware of the ego. We become aware of when we are acting out of the ego. You may notice for example that you are getting angry. Before this, anger was just a reaction. It happened to you. What was repressed just squirted out at an unexpected moment. For the one who has been meditating, there is a moment of realization. This anger is not because something that is wrong but because my ego has been challenged. With this new awareness you have a moment in which you can choose to give in to the anger or you can set it aside. You can be mastered or you can be master.

8 The ego is not you. It is only a part of you. If you let it control you, you hurt others, you do a lot of harm. If you just observe it, you can grow. When you listen to the ego it tells you who you are. It can be your friend. For example, I have learned a lot about myself by listening to the times and places that I have felt inclined to tell a lie. Why did I feel like lying here? Why was I threatened? Was that a neurotic fear or was there a real reason to fear? As I face the fear more, I get free from it. When we recognize the ego as part of our external personality, we can distance ourselves from it and we can then be joyful, free people.

34. The Fruits

1 People who criticize Christian Meditation, and who have not themselves practised it, talk about it as if it were some new-fangled idea, or as if it were a set of techniques for getting into peak experience or into altered states of consciousness.

2 Christian Meditation is a very earthy, tedious, unspectacular happening. It is just simply trying to say the mantra for twenty or thirty minutes twice a day, and that's about all there is to it. There may be some who have special experiences or find that their blood pressure has lowered as a result of meditation. If that's the gift they get, fine. But it is the journey, the process, that is important. It is not important to have achieved an end. It is important to be where we are now and to be going in the right direction. When we meditate, we set out to say the mantra well. Actually, we might not be able to say the mantra well but we will notice that there are side benefits that come to us. If we go fishing, we might not catch fish, but we could have a l very relaxing day with our friends.

3 When we start meditating, most of us begin for quite selfish reasons. We find ourselves meditating because we hope it will help us to be calmer, to be more patient. We may start out because of curiosity or because of the enthusiasm of a friend. As we meditate, the process itself purifies our motivations and our reasons for meditating. Ultimately, we meditate to become more God-like, to be more in union with the Trinity, to be able to live in perfect communion, and to be able to live in perfect love.

4 Meditation makes us more loving people. It makes us people who can be and live at our own centres. It makes us people who respond to others, not because of what we can get out of them, or out of a compulsive sense of obligation.

5 One of the big obstacles to loving is anger and irritation within us. We tend to get angry and irritated with others who don't conform to our standards, who don't do things the way we do, or who come along just at the wrong time and embarrass us or put us on the spot. When we get angry, we feel guilty and we're fearful of our own anger. So, anger often leads to fear. When we're meditating, we try to stay with our prayer word, our mantra and whenever we fail and get distracted, we keep coming back. If we come back with anger, too bad. We have to learn to be patient in our half hour of prayer and to be silent. When we lose the silence, when we lose the word, we come back to it with patience and perseverance, quietly and calmly, not getting angry, not blowing our top, but just quietly coming back. We will then find that in the rest of life, we will also be able to quietly come back and face difficult situations. When we meditate, we find that our passions, our egos, do not dominate us as they did before. We can seriously and quietly look at reality and respond to it more wisely, without violent feelings or thoughts.

6 Then meditation leads us to healing. We have a natural instinct to be always seeking balance. The negative feelings within us have an energy in them that wants to go back to balance, to go back to the positive. It is like when we see a crooked picture on the wall there is an instinct to straighten it. But what we often do is to try to hide our negative feelings by putting a nice feeling over them or by thinking about something else. Often we spiritualize the problem; we offer it up to Jesus. This helps us to cope with the problem, but it cuts off the process by which balance can be restored and healing can take place. If we can just stay with the negative feelings, the healing process will take place. If we're in a bad mood, and we just

stay with that and allow ourselves to be depressed or to be angry without doing anything about it, it will change itself to a better mood. But very often we drink, or take medicine, or try to jolly ourselves up with trivial stimulations. Then the natural healing never gets a chance to take place.

7 When we meditate in stillness, without wanting anything, the instinct to heal is given a chance. An up-righting can take place which cannot happen when we are denying our problems, racing around, thinking compulsively or talking incessantly.



35. Insecurity

1 One of the texts that was central to the teaching of John Main on Christian Meditation was, “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.” Prayer should be a path to fullness of life, a fullness of joy within that pours itself out in love and compassion for those around us.

2 Yet my experience has been that so many people live in fear, even people who pray a lot. For many, their praying was a sign of their fear because they prayed out of a sense of obligation. I experience many people who spent hours at their prayers and who are themselves very unhappy people and bring tension and unhappiness to all around them. I am aware too of my own fears and unfreedoms that continue in spite of my prayers.

3 This has led me to ask the question: “What is the root of sin, of unhappiness, of alienation, of evil in our world?” I had often heard that it was sin or greed, or lust or the desire for power. Now, I think that insecurity is the root which drives people into grasping, showing off, telling lies, domination of others, anger, flying off the handle, panic, compulsive behaviour, drugs, drink and the misuse of sex. Many people become addicted to their own insecurity and suffering, and project it and its causes into the people and the world around them.

4 The Lord called us to fullness of life, to joy. The world in which we live continues to give us false recipes for happiness. It teaches us through our families, society and the media what will make us happy. We will be happy if we are healthy, powerful, rich, have what others do not have. It teaches that sex and money will give us happiness. It fills us with desires for things that we must be attached to, because if we do not have them we are going to be unhappy. The trouble with these recipes for happiness is that they are also recipes for unhappiness because they are saying that if you do not have, and identify yourself with what they prescribe, you will not be happy. If you are convinced that you will not be happy unless your partner is a millionaire you are going to be very unhappy if he or she had only 999,000. If you are convinced that you cannot be happy if you are not healthy, then your life is in a shambles if you have a chronic illness.

5 Another problem about these recipes is that it puts happiness outside ourselves. Your happiness, and also your unhappiness, is determined by having some object outside yourself which will make you look better before others. So the external object and others are what determine your happiness. But happiness is ultimately within yourself.

6 Another part of our conditioning is that there is a big God up there. If we do not play along with this God, we are in trouble and will be punished like naughty children. If we play along with him, he will give us what we want to be happy. So our relationship with God is conditioned by fear and greed. We fulfil our obligations to keep him off our backs and also so that we can coax out of him what we want. Our source of happiness is outside us, and again this is a recipe for disastrous suffering. If we are full of desires and fears when we come to prayer, and are using God to fulfil these desires and avert these fears, we are destined for frustration and suffering, rather than growth and joy.

7 The recipe offered by Jesus was quite different. In the beatitudes, he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of God”. Poverty is the secret of blessedness, of

happiness. In another place Jesus said that if we are to follow him we must leave everything behind – yes, everything. Jesus also tells us that the Kingdom of God is within us. His life, his joy, can only be found within our own selves!

8 It is the genius of John Main that he rediscovered a way for prayer in the Christian Tradition that does what Jesus told us to do. By praying the mantra for twenty to thirty minutes twice daily we are leaving self behind. We are also leaving our desires and plans and attachments behind. We are no longer striving to fulfil our wants, and being disappointed when they are not fulfilled. We are no longer slaves of people and events and objects or even of a God outside of us. Now we are transcending our attachments, desires and wants. We are just being with God, no longer untrusting, insecurely telling him what he should be doing to make us happy, but knowing that it is enough to be with him and to be clay in his hands.

9 For me, the discovery of the mantra and the teachings of John Main and of Laurence Freeman was the discovery of a way to freedom, a way to joy, a way to transcendence, of enslavement to the ego and to what others think and impose. It was a road to integration of self, to the recognition of the passions that are within and of sorting them out so that they could be constructive rather than destructive in my life. The prayer of the mantra is a prayer that leads from fear into freedom, from insecurity to un-attachment and from fear of a transcendent God to joy in an immanent one.

36. Poverty

1 There were two things that people said about Sister Maria: she spent remarkably long hours in prayer and she was, to put it charitably, desperately hard to get on with. Generally, one's way of prayer, one's relating to God, is pretty consistent with the rest of one's life so we can make a guess at what she was doing when she prayed.

2 When she was not praying, she was either fawning on those above her or tormenting those under her. She had a way of charming bishops and parish priests. She was so courteous, self-demeaning, and theologically with it. She knew all the right answers, and was able to convince those in authority that she could solve all their problems for them. She got herself put in charge of Family Life or Liturgy or prison apostolate at parish level and sometimes on diocesan level. And then she went to work.

3 By the power extricated by her or invested in her by ecclesiastical authority, she set out to "free the people". And would be well until some one expressed an idea. This was ignored. If it was an idea contrary to her's, the person was quickly put in place. After all, she had the authority of the Bishop behind her and, what's more, she had prayed over what she was doing and so had the backing of God almighty. So who could tell her anything?

4 It would seem logical to deduce that, for her, prayer was aligning with power, the power of God. She was fawning on him to get his backing and then using that power to assert her own ego.

5 This is not an uncommon form of prayer. Behind it there is a fear mechanism, a seeking for security that is very far from what true prayer should be. I can describe it because I can identify with it and recall it in my own behaviour.

6 In my efforts to meditate over the years and in the constant education that I receive from the daily interchange with parishioners, I have seen that the first essential of prayer is to get away from power and to embrace poverty. Freedom is to learn that it is okay to be weak and powerless. It is fine for others to have other opinions. It is fine for them to have negative views of your projects and even of yourself. It is fine to be put under scrutiny. Criticism, if coming from the other person's anger or jealousy, is their problem. Otherwise, it is valuable feedback to be received gratefully. So, why be upset about it?

7 This was the message Christ was constantly trying to and it seems failing to get across to his apostles. After Peter's confession of faith, he tries to tell them about the suffering involved in following him, but they cannot hear it. Then there are constant squabbles about precedence, about who will be first in the Kingdom. They squabble at the Last Supper. They are even hoping, as he ascends into Heaven, that "even now he will restore Israel". They are hoping for a solution by power, but the way of Jesus is through poverty and conscious suffering. His attitude is entirely different and, in my experience, the best path to this attitude is the path of the Christian Meditation.

8 The effort to say the mantra for 20 to 30 minutes each day is itself one of the greatest experiences of poverty. In ten years of meditating I doubt that I have ever been able to stay with the mantra for as long as two minutes. It is always a losing struggle. It is the experience of being a child, being powerless in the face of might. Still, somehow God's strength emerges from this surrender to weakness.

37. Guarding Our Space

1 Internationally, the matter of space is very important. When there is aggression on the space of one nation by another, it can make the whole world go to war. It is also very important for all of us. Neighbours can quarrel over space if one infringes on the property of another. Building a wall or dumping garbage into the property of another can cause deep hurts, deep pain between neighbours. Each of us personally needs space, we need physical space, the right distance between one another. When people sit down with one another, they often adjust their chairs backwards or forwards to find just the right distance. Some people need more space than others.

2 We also need psychological space. We feel a need for others to respect our privacy and our time. If people demand our time when we are busy, or if they demand too much of our time, or if they are nosey about things that we consider private, we can feel that our psychological space has been infringed. Invading my space is invading my person and it can make me feel desecrated or violated.

3 Sometimes parents can manipulate or pressure their child to do what they want and this can create deep anger in the child who feels that his or her integrity has been invaded. We all want to be true to ourselves and when somebody does not give us the necessary space, we get angry. Often we need space to mourn a loss and can be greatly harmed if we do not get it.

4 I believe that in coping with this matter of space, meditation is very important. In a sense, when we meditate we create an open space within us. We remove thoughts and images, we are just being alone with the mantra. The Russian school of prayer talks about the *postinia*. It is a little house, a space, in which the meditator lives. When we meditate, we enter our *postinia*, an open clear space within ourselves, and look at the rest of the world, from this sacred space, unperturbed. Gradually, the whole world becomes our *postinia*. When we have peace within ourselves, we can have peace with the whole world and we feel that the world will not infringe on us, or, if it does, that we can deal with or adapt to the infringement.

5 There are three important points about meditation and space. First, when we meditate, we have a better capacity to realize that we are angry when our space is infringed. If the infringement of our space is because of our ego, we become aware that our ego is being hurt and this awareness enables us to deal with it better.

6 Secondly, we are helped to express our feelings constructively when our space has been infringed. How we express these feelings is very important. We can assert our rights and express our feelings but we should not be aggressive in doing this. Aggressiveness comes from the ego, assertion comes from a confident self-acceptance. If we are aggressive, we will probably cause even greater trouble. When we're aware of how much our ego is involved, we will have a greater capacity to be assertive rather than aggressive. To be assertive is not harmful. To be aggressive is to invite aggression from the other and does not really help things at all. Meditation gives us the strength to assert our rights without being aggressive and gives us the wisdom to know the difference between them.

7 Thirdly, meditation develops in us the capacity to let go and accept gracefully other people's encroaching on our space or not responding to our request for space. If they refuse to give us what we want, we can freely let go of the desire for it if the matter is not important.

While watching television with another person, we may feel that the volume should be lower but the other person feels it should be higher. Both are in a sense legitimate demands but we feel that we are being imposed on by having it too loud while the other person feels he or she is being imposed on by having it lowered to please you. When we meditate, we come to realize that this is really a trivial matter and there is no point in breaking relationships because of this. We can be quite happy, having asserted what we feel, to then let go.

8 There are two stories of Dietrich Bonhoeffer which are particularly remarkable when told side by side. When Hitler set up his own church in Nazi Germany, his friends and students tried to persuade Bonhoeffer to join the Reich Church. They told him that by joining it he could continue to teach and preach. To this he said, "One act of obedience to conscience is more than a hundred sermons." He died for this conviction. On another occasion he was in a hall where the Nazi salute was given. His companion was horrified to see him give the Nazi salute with apparent vigour. To which Bonhoeffer said, "Put up your arm; this thing is not worth dying for."

9 This matter of space, when we claim it and when we yield it, is very important for our happiness and for our fulfilment in life. Meditation helps us find the necessary wisdom.



38. Compulsive Behaviour

1 During a time when the newspapers were reporting scandals daily, from presidents to bishops, from financial manipulation to blackmail, from adultery to child abuse, a colleague said to me, "I just do not know how a person like that could do such a thing!" I did not know whether to treat him with admiration, disbelief or pity. From the quirky feelings and tendencies that I sometimes find within myself, I find myself identifying more with St Paul in Romans 7:18: "I can want to do what is right, but I cannot do it." I find myself praying like Philip Neri, when he saw the convicts being paraded to execution, "there but for the grace of God go I."

2 There are inconsistencies and alienated areas within all of us, and we do need God's grace to be able to handle them in a non-destructive way.

3 In today's world there is much alienation, perhaps, even more so than in the past. We are rushing, doing so many things that we tend to lose our centres, often because we did not have good role models in our parents or other significant adults in our lives, or because we ourselves are not willing to invest the time and effort, we may not be able or willing to form loving relationships. When people are in love they take a lot of notice of one another and give one another a lot of attention. Very often instead of loving another, we try to get attention. And instead of intimacy we try to get intensity. This is very noticeable in the world today. We try to get love, and if we cannot get love, we get attention. A child will throw something down and the mother comes along and spansks the child. At least it is getting attention. It is not a nobody. Adults can also seek to avoid being nobodies by having the latest car, dress or gadget or by competing for prestigious positions.

4 People can seek intensity in extraordinary ways. For example, kleptomaniacs can be quite well-off people. A politician's wife who feels ignored may go into a store and steal things. She finds an intensity of sexual excitement in doing this and in the thrill of almost being caught. There are a host of ways in which people can find excitement, sexual or otherwise. This gives them intensity and substitutes in some way for intimacy or a deeper relationship with a person.

5 These intensity-making incidents can quickly become compulsive. The events or actions are used to change our mood, to get us out of depression or a feeling of alienation. At the beginning they may work but after a while, people still use them even if they don't work. An alcoholic starts by taking a drink to cheer himself up, and then later on, even if the drink is no longer effective, still drinks. He is now addicted to it.

6 The more alienated we are, the more we seek fulfilment in this sort of things, rather than in intimacy, in true sharing and love for one another, in love for God and in true love for ourselves. The more we are out of touch with ourselves, others and God, the more we will need this kind of attention and intensity. Likewise the more we are in touch with ourselves, others and God, the less we will need these attention-seeking intensity-making incidents in our lives.

7 This is where Christian Meditation is very healing. As we meditate, we first become aware of areas of compulsiveness in our lives, even in simple things like smoking and coffee drinking. Then we can admit them and, as we begin to feel more at home within ourselves,

gradually let go of them. As we meditate daily we create a vacuum in ourselves and the alienated parts tend to come together slowly. What is disconnected becomes reconnected. Gradually we become reconnected with ourselves, we become still within ourselves, we become at home within ourselves, we can love ourselves.

8 If we can love ourselves, we can love others. If we can be honest with ourselves, we can be honest with others, we can share with others, we can share with God and this is what intimacy is all about. The more that we have this genuine self-love and intimacy, the less we will have the need for attention-seeking or compulsive activities.

9 Meditation can help us a lot towards giving us healthy minds in healthy bodies. The milder addictions and dependencies that we have are constantly being cured through our meditation. Those who need professional assistance will find their therapy greatly helped by meditation.

39. Accepting Reality

1 One of my parishioners had two married daughters. One Saturday, he went to visit them. After some small talk, he asked the first how things were. “Fine,” she said, “apart from the fact that my husband is a rice farmer and we can do nothing at the moment because we do not have enough rain. Could you pray for rain when you go to Mass tomorrow?”

2 In the afternoon he visited the other daughter. Again he asked how things were with her. “Fine”, she answered, “except for the fact that my husband is a salt farmer and we can do nothing at the moment because we have too much rain. Could you ever pray for dry weather when you go to Mass tomorrow?” He came and asked me what he should do.

3 His problem brings up an interesting question. What is prayer for? Is it to change God’s will, to make him conform to our plans? I am certain that this is often the popular understanding of prayer but is it the correct one? Often our prayers could be translated “My Kingdom come. My will be done on earth” rather than the opposite.

4 On a more sober look I think we can see that prayer is not to twist God’s arm and to get him to do our will. Rather it is to help us to find his will and then to surrender to it. By prayer we listen to his tune so that we can dance to it. This is clear in the life of our Lord himself. He listened to the Father in prayer before all the major events of his life. In the garden he prayed, “Would that this chalice would pass from me” and then he added, “But not my will but yours be done” and that’s the way it worked out. It was the Father’s will and not his that was fulfilled. He too had the experience of apparently unanswered prayer.

5 Above all, prayer is to open us and help us to accept reality because it is only in accepting and being with reality that we can be with God.

6 Let’s look at the case of Joe. When I visited him in hospital he almost jumped on me with his eyes popping out of his head. “Don’t I look fine, Father. You can see that I am not sick at all. Isn’t that right, Father? Anyhow they have a cure for everything now. Isn’t that right, Father?” From my clinical pastoral education and my pastoral experience, I could see that I had before me a very frightened man who was denying the reality that he was seriously sick. I could see too that he was not now ready to deal with that reality. He was only 42 years old, he had a wife and five children and had just been diagnosed as having a serious form of cancer. I saw my pastoral task as being with him, of hearing his feelings, and knowing that there was no need for me to tell him anything. He would sooner or later talk about his fear and then go beyond it. I visited him almost daily and after two weeks he could calmly accept that he was seriously ill. He began to talk about his relationship with God from this new perspective. He was also able to talk about practical things like making his will and checking up on his insurance.

7 Then one day I came to see him and he had regressed almost to day one. Everything was going to be alright, his sickness was gone. He was sure a miracle had happened. When he calmed down, I found out that some group had come to “pray over” him. They had told him that, if he had faith, he would be cured. That was all he needed. He went back into denying reality again. I felt rather annoyed about what happened but decided not to let this interfere in my relationship with Joe.

8 Every now and then a prayer group, or a group with a relic of a holy person, go to pray over the sick. Often they visit the sick and dying who are in no way dis-eased. The patient is often quite at ease even with facing death. It is the pray-ers who are dis-eased and are working out of some need of their own to be God. This can be particularly horrible when they lay the line on the parents of a sick child. "If you have faith your child will be healed." If the child dies, the parents are left with a double burden, the loss of their child plus the fear that the child died because of their own lack of faith.

9 As a pastor, I am really concerned about this kind of prayer which often comes out of the need of the praye-rs than out of the need of the person being prayed for. It can be destructive and cause a lot of unnecessary pain. It often hinders a true Christian attitude and acceptance of God's will.

40. Miracles

1 The sheer multiplication of reported visions and apparitions in our time is quite astounding. Miracles, visions, paranormal happenings are reported from all over the globe and from different religious traditions. According to Dom Bede Griffiths OSB, the great spiritual leader who has been in his ashram in southern India since 1955, that continent abounds in people who can work miracles, bilocate and levitate. They have extraordinary powers which can be used for good or for evil.

2 Explanations for such powers also abound. There is a faith healer in my parish who can diagnose sickness by touching a person and praying and then he will “feel” where the sickness is. He says that this is a gift given to him by the Infant Jesus. On the other hand, I know a water diviner who can do exactly the same thing but sees no need for a supernatural explanation. Dom Bede Griffiths says that all of these paranormal happenings, whether miraculous or malicious, come out of the psyche and are not necessarily spiritual or transcendent. Some people have special power in their psyches which can be used for good or evil. Hitler and Stalin would be people who used such powers for evil. Healers may be very spiritual people and God may be using them to heal but what happens is still basically a psychic phenomenon.

3 It is clear that Christ had great power and could and did often heal people. I have heard one practitioner of pranic healing, who sometimes performs extraordinary and instant cures, explain some of the miracles of Jesus by saying that Jesus released the prana the healing power, in the person.

4 Biblical scholars, while not discounting miracles, are unanimous that the stories of extraordinary happenings did not lose in the telling as they were passed on in oral tradition. Rudolf Bultmann would even say that the miracles were invented or played up so as to make Jesus as good as the Greek wonder workers in the eyes of the early Greek audiences to which the Gospel was preached. In the Gospel accounts, we often find Jesus apprehensive about healing. He refuses to work miracles to show off his power (Mt. 4:5-7, Lk. 23:6-12, Mk. 8:8-13, Mt. 12:38-42, Mk. 15:13-32). He tells those healed not to tell any one else (Mk. 7:33 8:23 9:25). He does not want people to be coming to him because he heals or feeds the body. He wants them to come to him out of faith and love. Faith is something that transcends signs. “Blessed are those who have not seen and who have believed.”

5 I think that this whole area of miracles and visions is one of major pastoral importance. The question is not so much if these things happen, but how helpful it is for Christian maturing that a lot of spirituality is directed towards bringing about extraordinary intervention or inducing special powers. I think that the penchant for this kind of spirituality comes to a great extent from the tradition of preaching. The stories told and the letters read in novenas and other popular devotions generally emphasize some supernatural or almost supernatural happening. This is still the bias in the teaching of many popular directors and directresses of clergy retreats. Prayer is explicitly or implicitly taught as a way of getting around or behind God’s ordinary way of acting. It is often taught as a way of circumventing reality.

6 The remarkable thing about Jesus was not that he worked miracles but that he was in such total relationship with the Father, his “Abba”. He was faithful to the Father and sought to

do his will, not only when things were going well but also when they were going badly. He was ever trying to find truth and reality and willing to face up to it. He was challenged to show his power by coming down from the cross. He always refused to prove himself by signs. His will was to do the will of the Father, and in doing this he came to the peace and joy of the Resurrection.

7 When people start to pray they usually do so for selfish motives. They may pray because they were told it was something that they should do and they are afraid “something might happen” if they do not. They may pray because they want something, even something like to be holy, to be calm, to be chaste. St John of the Cross warns that spiritual riches can be as enslaving as material ones. The main motivation is the fear of punishment or the gratification of needs.

8 I am amazed at the number of otherwise mature people who have never gone beyond this approach to prayer. Their prayer is to a God “out there” whom they want to “fix things” for them. Being a little fearful of “Him”, they also try to get around him through their devotions to Our Lady or to a favourite saint. Prayer that aims only at the fulfilment of needs is a spiritual cul-de-sac and can become a dead end for the soul.

9 The Lord’s Prayer, the model of all prayer, gives us a very different perspective. It begins by setting up priorities of reverence. The first priority is reverence for God who is our Father/Mother, whose Kingdom is to come and whose will is to be done before all else. After that we reverence ourselves and look to our daily needs, our daily bread. Then we look with reverence to our social relationships and the unending need to be letting go of hurt if we are to grow in these relationships. Our actual prayer often goes very differently. It would be more like “*My Father in Heaven, holy be my name, my kingdom come, my will be done on earth ... Give me all that I can get And change all those people who make life difficult for me.*”

10 Prayer is not just to fulfil desires but to help us to the peace and freedom of transcending them. Let me illustrate this point with a story.

This man was given three wishes and he said, “The wife is breaking my heart. I wish I were rid of her and then I would be a happy man.” Presto! His wife was gone. A week later he was broken hearted, he had not realized how much he had loved his wife in spite of superficial differences. “Oh, if only I had my wife back I would be happy!” Presto! She was back again. Now he realized that he had only one wish left and that he would have to be more careful about it. He asked advice. He was told by one to ask for money because money can buy anything and everything. Another said, “What good is money if you do not have good health; the thing to ask for is good health.” Yet another said, “What good is health if you are to die anyhow!” In his confusion he went to the enlightened one and got this advice, “Ask that you be contented whatever you get.”

This is the freedom to which prayer should bring to the Christian.

11 There is a place for petition in Christian prayer. The Christian who knows that he or she is loved by God will present his or her petitions to the Divine in full confidence of a loving and caring response. The more confidence there is in this response, the more every prayer will be answered. When God’s will is asked for first of all, what is asked for will always be received, what is sought will always be found. People have to face most desperate problems in their lives. They have been taught to turn to prayer as a way of achieving what they want to solve their problems. But what they ask for may not be God will. What seems right in their wisdom may not be right in his.

12 True prayer is not for having our desires fulfilled but to enable us to transcend them. It is not to give us our wants but to enable us to transcend wanting. Prayer is not to make God conform to our wills but to free us to conform to his. Prayer is an act of being, of worship, before our loving God.

13 But we must have great reverence and respect for where people are at. We must reverence the faith and devotion of our people. If we hear of extraordinary happenings we must hear them through with reverence and discernment. God does allow marvellous and mysterious happenings. They may be miraculous or malicious. We need not get too excited about them because they are peripheral to the core message. We do not need to unpreach or trivialize or condemn people's beliefs. We need only offer them a better menu and when they find what is better they will let go of what is not so good. When one is aiming at transcendence, one stumbles on peace and joy. These are found not in the fulfilment of desires but in the transcending of wanting. This is why a form of prayer, like Christian Meditation, that helps one to leave self behind, to transcend the ego and wanting, seem to be a more desirable starting point.

14 I was asked recently if Christian Meditation was for healing. I think it is for more than that. Real healing is to go beyond the desire for healing, just as real wealth is to be beyond the desire for wealth.

41. Beyond Desire

1 Frustration is the feeling we have when our expectations are not fulfilled. It is fear of what will happen to us when the recipes for happiness that we have set ourselves do not materialize.

2 We can experience frustration with ourselves. You may be frustrated because you wanted to be a beauty queen or a football star. You may be frustrated because you are not as good or as competent or as well treated as some people around you. Envy and jealousy often lead to frustration. Or you may be frustrated because of your expectations of others, a spouse, a child, a religious superior. When they do not behave according to your plan for them, you are frustrated. Stress arises when there is a significant difference between what we expect and what actually happens.

3 We can be frustrated also with God. Almost everybody seems to know what God should be doing, and they spend their prayer time telling him. But he has his own plans and, dare I say, possibly wiser plans. I once heard an Irish friend describe another by saying, "He is as contrary as the will of God!" God's plans are really contrary, unpredictable and if we place our happiness in changing them, we are due for frustration.

4 Jesus told us again and again that following him would not be easy. After Peter was put in charge of the Apostles, Jesus told him that they would go up to Jerusalem where he would suffer and be rejected. Peter remonstrated and considered this preposterous for the Messiah. But Jesus said to him, "Get behind me, Satan, your thinking is not God's thinking."

5 Jesus said, "Come to me all you who labour and are over burdened and I will refresh you, I will make your burden light" but it would still be a burden.

6 He who was God became human, yet he had to face every kind of frustration and eventually death. That pretty well shreds the expectation that we should be trouble-free and worry-free if we follow Jesus. Yet, we hold on to it and in holding on to it keep ourselves juiced up for frustration.

7 Most people seem to bring along a bag of recipes for frustration when they come to prayer. They come expecting to find Mr Fix-it. We expect that God is there to fix up all our little needs. That he will pass our exams for us even if we did not study. That he will cure our great grandmother who is now 115. That he will win the lottery for us.

8 We come with a load of desires and we want him to fulfil them for us. By our prayers we want to control him, to manage him. But God will not be controlled. He will not be controlled by our goodness. We cannot force him to be, as we see it, good to us. Likewise, it is well to note, we cannot control God by our badness. Sometimes people say that something happened because God is punishing them for their bad deeds. But God has never given us control over him. He has not said that he will do bad because we do bad. On the contrary he has taught us that he will do good even if we do bad.

9 It is very foolish for us to set ourselves up as knowing what is good and bad, and then to expect God to follow us. The story of the Emperor and the Prime Minister who were out hunting illustrates this.

One day the Emperor broke his thumb. As the Prime Minister tried to bandage the thumb he remarked, “Emperor, we never know what is good and what is bad for us.” In his pain, the Emperor could see no point in such philosophizing and angrily pushed the Prime Minister into a deep well and left him there. As he proceeded on his journey he was captured by a cannibal tribe who were looking for a human sacrifice. They were just about to sacrifice him when they noticed the bandage and the broken thumb. They immediately released him as nothing blemished could be offered in sacrifice. At this the Emperor became very remorseful about the Prime Minister and went back to pull him out of the well, full of apologies. But the Prime Minister said, “Why do you apologize? Can’t you see that you saved my life?”

10 This matter was dealt with very directly by St James in chapter four of his epistle:

“Where do wars and battles between yourselves first start? Isn’t it precisely in the desires fighting inside your own selves? You want something and you haven’t got it; so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force. Why you don’t have what you want is because you don’t pray for it; when you do pray and don’t get it, it is because you have not prayed properly, you have prayed for something to indulge your own desires.”

11 We see then that prayer is not to fulfil our desires but to enable us to let go and transcend them. It is not to give us our wants but to enable us to transcend wanting. So often we pray that our ego be pandered to. God loves us too much to answer such prayers.

12 St John tells us that “Love drives out fear.” Yet, we pray mostly out of a sense of duty or of obligation. It was drummed into us as children that we had to pray, we had to go to church; otherwise we would go to hell. What a sad starting point for relating with God! We pray to placate a God up there. But how can we love someone that we are afraid of. When we are afraid, we cannot grow because when we are afraid we are insecure, and our energies are going into defending what is threatened inside us.

13 To pray we need freedom, freedom especially from fear and expectations. This is precisely why Christian Meditation is so important. In meditation we just *be*, fully honest and true, basking in the sunshine of God’s love.

14 When we meditate we repeat the mantra. When we start off we think that we will have this mastered in a week or two and that we will be “super” meditators. Soon we let go of this and all expectation. We find that we can’t hold the simple little mantra. Do we get angry and give up in frustration? Or do we come to understand that prayer is a journey, a discipleship, a way. We do not pray to be successful. We pray to be faithful. As we let go of our ambitions and desires about the mantra we will find that we are also letting go of many of our desires, dreams and plans for ourselves, others and God. We are getting out of the prayer “trap” and becoming open to the God whose wisdom is beyond ours and whose love is beyond anything we can hope for or imagine.