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## 1. ESTABLISHED IN TRADITION

### *Life Experiences as the Focus of Prayer*

When we are private and alone, we each pray in our own way. As we open our hearts to God, our prayer arises out of our personal joys and sorrows, our unique desires and longings. The general pattern that our prayer takes, however, is often similar to one or more of the three ways that people over the centuries have ordinarily prayed. The Christian spiritual tradition has called these three ways of prayer reflective prayer or meditation, affective prayer, and contemplative prayer.

*Reflective prayer or meditation* is a mind-centered approach to prayer, employing discursive thought and often including the use of the imagination to focus on an incident of the Scriptures or the lives of the saints. In this prayer, we might reflect in a meditative way on a situation in the life of Jesus, such as his passion and death, applying to our life a challenge from the example of Jesus' life. Or we may think through the significance of a saying of Jesus, or ponder the meaning that a parable offers to our own life. Or, in our imagination, we may participate in a scriptural scene, deriving inspiration and meaning from the interaction with the figures in the scene.

*Affective prayer* focuses more directly on our willingness to share our feelings with God, to talk to Jesus about our life, our anxieties, and our desires. We might express our affections in words from Scripture: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68) or "Lord, be my shepherd; be

my joy” (see Psalm 23). We might simply recite slowly the Our Father or Hail Mary. We might pray the rosary or repeat a short aspiration: “Lord, I love you,” “My Lord and my God,” or just repeat slowly a form of the Jesus prayer, “Lord Jesus, Son of the living God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Or we might simply say the name of Jesus. In each case, we let our personal expression of faith carry the longings and sentiments of our heart.

*Contemplative prayer* is the name given to the form of prayer that doesn’t primarily focus on reflecting on the Scriptures or the life of a saint, or even focus primarily on expressing our feelings and sentiments toward God. Rather, in contemplative prayer, we simply rest in the presence of God in loving, listening awareness. We are available and open to the reality of union with God and rejoice in that union.

These three ways of praying, of course, do not tell the whole story of prayer, since the Holy Spirit prays as the Spirit wills. Each of us prays in our own way; and, in a sense, it is not really “our” prayer at all, since the Spirit prays within us—within our personal gifts and limitations—in ways that we do not even know (see Romans 8:26-27).

Nor, of course, are these ways of prayer mutually exclusive. We do not pray solely one way to the exclusion of other ways. Our starting point for personal, private prayer can be where we are most comfortable. We do well to begin our prayer where, at the moment, we are drawn to begin. But even when we have a preference and an intention to pray in a specific way, and even if we do indeed begin to pray in the way we prefer, we may sometimes find our prayer changing. Our prayer certainly changes over the