

Treasures

Holy and Mystical

A Devotional Journey
for Today's Catholics

Philip Neri Powell, OP



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Introduction

Anyone who prays will tell you that praying brings you closer to God. But what does it mean to be “closer to God”? If it’s true that we “live and move and have our being” in God, how is it possible to get closer?

One answer: Prayer is the best way to clarify and improve awareness that we live and move and have our being in God. We don’t actually move closer to God in prayer. God is always with us, but we are not always with God. Prayer sharpens *our sense* that God is always with us.

This excellent answer is one almost any good Catholic would give. But being proficient at prayer—being someone keenly aware of the presence of God—is only halfway to being what our tradition calls a *mystic*.

You may say you not only have no desire to be a mystic, but you have no vocation to living a mystic’s life—an understandable response given what most people think it means to be a mystic, but it’s also an unfortunate one. Being a mystic is what you’ve already agreed to become. By denying your call to the mystical life, you deny the very vocation you took at baptism.

What? You thought baptism was all about washing away original sin and becoming a member of the Church? Well, it is. And what do you think being a mystic is all about? Living in a cave, eating locusts and berries, and having visions of angels and such? Not so much.

However, that too could be the life of a mystic. It's just not the life most mystics live.

What we might want to call "ordinary mystics" live in the suburbs, have kids, go to work, pay bills, eat fast food, and occasionally have a vision of what the world would be like if we allowed God's love to prevail over the sin in our lives. Ordinary mystics pray on the run, ask God for help in desperation, cry out in grief and in joy, and even manage to share a moment or two of godly peace with fellow mystics at the office or at church. In other words, ordinary mystics lead extraordinary lives in the midst of the most mundane circumstances, for no other reason than practicing the good habit of trusting in God.

How radical is that! I mean, how like the call of Abraham or Moses or Samuel is it to go about the regular tasks of life trusting that everything you do and everything you say completes you as someone called to be Christ right where you are? It's radical. It goes to the root of your baptism, the very ground of who you were made to be.

When we pray, we place ourselves consciously, intentionally, purposefully in the subsisting presence of the divine so we might become more and more like the one we worship.

This is what it means to be a mystic. Or, at the very least, this is what it means to begin our adventure in becoming the best mystic we can be.

No one will doubt that prayer is the spiritual engine that moves us along the way toward God. Being fiercely aware of his presence in our lives is the jump-start we need to get us moving forward. But, as we have already noted, being aware of God isn't enough to fuel the sputtering engine of the reluctant mystic. Our prayer lives often flood out or stall from ill use or simply run out of gas.

How long can human flesh and blood stand in the awesome presence of God and fail to grow, fail to flourish, and still produce good fruit? Who among us hasn't stopped praying altogether because prayer became a mummer's play or vain repetition?

Of course, being with God is excellent beyond measure. But the purpose of prayer presupposes a willingness, an eagerness to improve, to develop, to be perfected in holiness. For this to happen, the ordinary mystic must be determined to become not only a presence with God but an actor for God, among others. In the same way that the mystic derives her spiritual progress from soaking in the Love that loves her, she must turn to her ordinary world and be the love that loves all creation.

Yes, exactly, the ordinary mystic is a sacrament of God's grace right where she is, wherever she is. Knowing this, our graceful prayer is the means we use to tune ourselves into becoming better instruments in the hands of the Divine Musician.

Traditionally, the Church has understood the mystic to be one who comes to mystery and lives there in enlightened ignorance; that is, once a person enters the mystery of God, takes up the work of prayer and ministry in his presence, and knows that complete knowledge of the divine is impossible, that person becomes a mystic.

As difficult as this path sounds, it is the path that all the baptized have committed themselves to. What else is the sacramental life of the Church but an immersion in the active presence of Divine Love for the sole purpose of preaching the Gospel to the world in word and deed?

I put together this book of mystical prayers in the hope that it will help you find the fuel you need to not only live and move in the pres-

ence of God, but also to begin an adventure toward finding perfection in Christ. When we move inward toward holiness, we simultaneously move outward toward a world starved for love and mercy.

The first volume of this series, *Treasures Old and New*, was published last year. My purpose in composing the prayers in both books is to provide the earnest pray-er with the means of worshipping our Lord, learning more about our Catholic Tradition and, at the same time, pushing the adventurous soul toward the mystery of God, toward and beyond the limits of easy images and concepts.

Trusting fully that God's promises to us have already been fulfilled in Christ Jesus, our prayerful task is to live as if we were already in his presence, knowing him as we ourselves are known by him. And even though right now we cannot know him as he is, we can place our desire to know him in danger of fulfillment. Truly, this is what the ordinary mystic will risk: forgetting the idols of divinity to see him face-to-face.

Part One
The Novenas

Novena for Suffering (*Spe salvi*)

In November 2007, Pope Benedict XVI published his encyclical letter *Spe salvi* (Saved in Hope), in which he teaches the Christian meaning of hope lived as a means of our salvation. In a section on suffering, our Holy Father challenges those who live by hope to suffer in such a way that their hope manifests itself as compassion for others, especially for those who suffer without hope. This novena draws you into a daily meditation on the meaning of suffering in light of Christian hope.

Opening Prayer

God of the Cross and Empty Tomb, you sent your only Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer for us and with us. He taught that we cannot follow him unless we follow him to the cross. Though we often fail to follow closely, we bear our crosses as we can. With the vigor you give us and by the example we have from your martyrs and saints, we lift our burdens and carry them, knowing we carry them always to you. Help us to not only suffer well but to suffer for others so our suffering will open the doors of hope. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading

*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as
the day, for darkness is as light to you.
For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made
in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed
for me, when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

PSALM 139:11-17

Reading

The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through “com-*passion*” is a cruel and inhuman society (SS 38).

To suffer with the other and for others; to suffer for the sake of truth and justice; to suffer out of love and in order to become a person who truly loves—these are fundamental elements of humanity, and to abandon them would destroy man himself. Yet once again the question arises: are we capable of this? Is the other important enough to warrant my becoming, on his account, a person who suffers? Does truth matter to me enough to make suffering worthwhile? Is the promise of love so great that it justifies the gift of myself? In the history of humanity, it was the Christian faith that had the particular merit of bringing forth within man a new and deeper capacity for these kinds of suffering that are decisive for his humanity. The Christian faith has shown us that truth, justice and love are not simply ideals, but enormously weighty realities. It has shown us that God—Truth and Love in person—desired to suffer for us and with us. Bernard of Clairvaux coined the marvellous expression: ...God cannot suffer, but he can suffer with. Man is worth so much to God that he himself became man in order to suffer with man in an utterly real way—in flesh and blood—as is revealed to us in the account of Jesus’s Passion. Hence in all human suffering we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering with us; hence *con-solatio* is present in all suffering, the consolation of God’s compassionate love—and so the star of hope rises (39).

Meditation

The most profound question for the Christian is this: do I care enough about my humanity—the divine gift of life as a person loved by God—to suffer for others?

Why should we define our humanity in terms of suffering for others? When we understand that suffering is not simply the experience of pain, but the gift of being able to give meaning to pain, we can see that we imitate the love of Christ on the cross when we lead others away from the mere feeling of hurt into a closer relationship with their created end.

How do we do this? Nothing is more despairing to someone in pain than to be abandoned, left to suffer alone. As our Holy Father makes clear, it is precisely because Christ suffered for us that we are able to suffer in kind for others.

Having been spared the final pain of endless death, we are freed by Christ to take on the work of loving those in pain so that they too might be able to find love and give their hurt meaning beyond crushing despair. Our Christian hope in the fulfillment of God's promises for eternal life is the engine that drives us to compassion. Looking faithfully at our end in Christ, we cannot be but moved to stand with those in pain to show them what we so clearly see.

Do I care enough about my humanity to suffer with others as Christ suffered for us?

Closing Prayer

God of Consolation, you are with us in our rejoicing and in our mourning. When we shout your praise, you hear us. When we cry for help, you hear us. In this time of great suffering among your people, hear us and help us. Give us the courage to look to the cross of your Christ, to learn to suffer well for the benefit of others. Our pain, our sorrow, our desolation will find their final meaning when we suffer as Christ suffered for us. And despite our sorrow, we live in your eternal hope, always breathing and speaking your Word. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Novena of the Word of God (*Dei verbum*)

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has suggested that the wisdom of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council is best understood when interpreted through the lens of that council's document *Dei verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation). This document defines and teaches how God has revealed himself to his creation and how that revelation is handed on through the Church that Christ founded on the faith of the apostles. The readings for each day of the novena are taken from *Dei verbum*. The biblical citations will lead you to a deeper understanding of God's Word.

Daily Opening Prayer

Lord God, in your goodness and wisdom you chose to reveal yourself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of your will, so that through your only Son, Christ Jesus—the Word made flesh—and in the Holy Spirit, the love you share, we may have access to you and come to share in your divine nature. Make us sharers in your Word; give us tongues of fire to preach your Good News; bring us to peace everlasting. Amen (adapted from DV 2).

READINGS BY DAY

DAY ONE

Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having in inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. (2)

DAY TWO

God, who through the Word creates all things (see John 1:3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (see Rom. 1:19-20). Planning to make known the way of heavenly salvation, He went further and from the start manifested Himself to our first parents. Then after their fall His promise of redemption aroused in them the hope of being saved (see Gen. 3:15) and from that time on He ceaselessly kept the human race in His care, to give eternal life to those who perseveringly do good in search of salvation (see Rom. 2:6-7). (3)

DAY THREE

Then, after speaking in many and varied ways through the prophets, “now at last in these days God has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb. 1:1-2). For He sent His Son, the eternal Word, who enlightens all men, so that He might dwell among men and tell them of the innermost being of God (see John 1:1-18). Jesus Christ, therefore, the Word made flesh, was sent as “a man to men.” He “speaks the words of God” (John 3:34), and completes the work of salvation which His Father gave Him to do (see John 5:36; John 17:4). (4)

DAY FOUR

To see Jesus is to see His Father (John 14:9). For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover He confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal. (4)

DAY FIVE

“The obedience of faith” (Rom. 13:26; see 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6) “is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,” and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving “joy

and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.” To bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts. (5)

DAY SIX

Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind. As a sacred synod has affirmed, God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason (see Rom. 1:20); but teaches that it is through His revelation that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude and with no trace of error, even in this present state of the human race. (6)

DAY SEVEN

In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations. Therefore Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion (see Cor. 1:20; 3:13; 4:6), commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching, and to impart to them heavenly gifts. This Gospel had been promised in former times through the prophets, and Christ Himself had fulfilled it and promulgated it with His lips. (7)