

LORD, TEACH US
TO PRAY

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An intimate look into a
maturing prayer life

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AWAKENING VOCATIONS

Eugene, Oregon

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To Brother Martin de Porres Gonzales
of Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey,
who showed me early on what a soul
in love with God looks like.

CONTENTS

	Introduction	1
1	In the Beginning was the Word: Prayer as encounter	5
2	The Intimate Conversation of Holy Trinity: Prayer as holy conversation	37
3	Prayer as Invitation to Something More: A retreat in three movements	87
	Epilogue: How I Pray ... and Why I Pray	115

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first was invited to speak on prayer on the spur of the moment. And I remember the moment well.

Back in the mid 2000s I was leading a group of Episcopal priests, along with their bishop, The Right Reverend Michael Smith, Bishop of North Dakota, in a Lenten retreat.

In my closing talk, Bishop Smith raised his hand, with the look of a question on his face.

Instinctively I did an interior check: Had I spoken some heresy? Or perhaps some theological foolishness?

“Can you speak to us of prayer,” he asked.

Speak to us of prayer.

So I spoke of what I knew to be most true of prayer, and what I knew deeply in my own experience.

What I shared seemed to find a place, a resonance, in the hearts and minds of those present.

Sometime later I received a phone call, out of the blue, from Mike Benton, who worked in the offices of the Catholic Diocese of Boise, in Idaho. Although I had met him only once, many years earlier, he said that he had been following my work.

And he invited me to teach on prayer at the Fall Conference for the Diocese of Boise.

So again, I spoke of what I knew to be most true of prayer, and what I knew deeply in my own experience.

And again, what I shared seemed to find a place, a resonance, in the hearts and minds of those present.

More recently, a small group of pastoral-hearted laity surrounded me after a morning talk on prayer at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Grove City, Ohio. Among them was Karen Cook, who invited me to return to their parish and offer an expanded version of the talk over the course of three evenings.

So I warmly thank Bishop Smith, Mike Benton, and Karen Cook for planting the seeds, for calling forth a harvest of thought from a maturing prayer life.

Wherever you are in your lives, may you walk in grace.

INTRODUCTION

Praying is like breathing, I often think. It simply is what we do, we of Christian faith.

Yet everyone breathes. So I like to think that, at some essential level, everyone also prays.

In fact, as I walk in my back yard beneath the canopy of big leaf maple and Ponderosa pine, beneath the predawn canopy of stars, raising my intercessions to God, I find all of creation breathing, praying, attending to the promise of a new day.

My apprenticeship in prayer began at age four. So what I share with you emerges from a lifetime of awakening to a living relationship with the Lord. Awakening to an invitation which is personal, unique, and given to everyone.

I was not aware that I had signed up for this apprenticeship. But apparently the student was ready, because the Teacher appeared.

The title, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, suggests a book on the Lord's Prayer. Many spiritual giants in the Christian tradition have written deeply and extensively on the Gospel accounts of Jesus' famous teaching. Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross come to mind.

And while we will explore the Lord's Prayer, I sense that I have much still to learn and precious little to add to the insights of these spiritual masters.

I am interested in exploring other lessons, other experiences, which the Lord offers in the school of prayer, lessons which draw forth and form and sustain the likes of you and me.

Each lesson, I notice, is customized to the student, and delivered when the student is ready for the learning. I discover that the student does not determine the season of readiness. The Lord does.

Nor does the student design the curriculum. The Lord does.

Yet what I discover is that the student must intentionally embrace the status of "student," and undergo the work of apprenticeship.

In short, showing up and being present to my life in its many assignments and challenges and invitations is perhaps the only way I can become this intentional student, the only way I can undergo discipleship on the way to being sent as an apostle of the Lord.

So I am speaking here of prayer that matures and readies us for actual apostleship—each of us, sent out, richly anointed, living our mission in the world.

I am speaking of prayer which bears actual fruit in the real world, in the circumstances which shape our lives and which touch the lives of others with grace and good.

I am not speaking of a program of study I might sign up for, but a way I am impelled to live my life, radically available to being shaped by the Master. Or, in the words of Saint Paul, embracing a way of life that seeks always to be "conformed to Christ."

My words about prayer cannot be a substitute for your prayer. There are no shortcuts to the one unique and intimate and honest conversation that means everything, and calls forth everything, and blesses everything in your life.

Over time you will notice patterns of prayer emerge, shaped by your life circumstances, colored by the lens of personality, and purified through disposition of heart and attitude and soul.

Your prayer forms, like mine, become a spiritual thumbprint—yours unique to you, mine unique to me. And through our prayer each of us shapes, in unique ways, the love and care and holy imagination which we bring to the world we touch in the course of our life.

In other words, prayer does not just happen. Any more than intentional and worthy and mature relationship with our closest others just happens. Prayer is the privileged conversation within the loveliest and most life-giving relationship you could ever imagine, a relationship that continually draws you forth, draws you beyond whom you have known yourself to be.

I might “choose” to pray in this way or that, and try out new techniques. But those deeper intimacies, those unself-conscious encounters with God, with the divine, choose me.

These holy encounters have been choosing me all along.

And you, no doubt, will begin to recognize the holy encounters that have been choosing you all along—whether you could name those encounters or not.

I am interested here in prayer which is a waking up, a maturing into anointed life in Christ, into life in Holy Trinity. I am vitally interested in waking up and maturing into a life which is a mission.

I am interested in prayer which is the flowering forth of your life and mine, in God, for the good of the world we touch.

Lord, Teach Us to Pray breaks into four sections. Part 1, “In the Beginning was the Word,” explores prayer as “encounter.”

Part 2, “The Intimate Conversation of Holy Trinity,” considers prayer as “holy conversation.”

Part 3, “Prayer as Invitation to Something More,” is a self-paced retreat in three movements.

And in the Epilogue I share with you how I pray and, most important, why I pray.

Right now I pray that this book might serve as inspiration as you mature in the holy conversation of your own prayer life, and as you continue your journey into the Mystery who is God.

Mary Sharon Moore
January 1, 2017
Eugene, Oregon

PART 1

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

Prayer as encounter

The sacred icon on the shelf beside my bed has intrigued me for years. For decades, really. It is called *Christ Pantocrator*, a sixth century icon from the Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai.

An opening reflection: Christ Pantocrator

You may know this sacred icon. It has a way of captivating the viewer. Once you see it, you cannot forget it.

When I contemplate this sacred icon, I see Jesus, preeminent Teacher, looking straight ahead, directly into me. But not quite. One eye meets mine straight on, delivering a gaze that originates in the place where wisdom and judgment meet, a gaze that demands from me an uncompromised accountability.

The other eye seems to gaze just beyond me, a softer gaze, compassionate. A gaze which is a cloak of sorts, to hide my shame. It is the eye of knowing, yes, and of deeply felt mercy.

I want to stay with the eye of softer gaze. Yet the eye of wisdom and judgment calls me back. The one, the other. The one essential to the other, if I am going to be honest as I stand before the Lord.

The truth of who I am in the Lord's eyes lies in their one penetrating gaze.

Now, I notice, the Master's right hand is raised in subtle gesture. Raised in benediction, perhaps. A quiet gesture, almost overlooked.

The index and middle fingers extend in duo, messaging his identity: the human and the divine dwelling together in this One, the Son of God.

His thumb and ring and small fingers touch, a small and quiet gesture which draws me to Holy Trinity.

Cradled in his left arm, secure against his chest, pressed close to the heart, is the book of the Gospels. The Word holding the Word. This treasure of words collected also reveals the Master's identity. Indeed, his mission.

Christ Pantocrator, Christ spanning all of creation, before and beyond all ages. "The Alpha and the Omega," I hear in Revelation, "the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (see 1:8).

Of the many icons which fill my rooms, this is the one, with those all-knowing eyes, which watches over me as I sleep, which blesses me as I rise. The Word made flesh.

And only recently do I come to deeply understand that this right hand raised in blessing is blessing *me*. Not an image of a gesture of blessing, but an actual blessing, in this time and place. Ever new. I stand before the One who is, and who blesses me now. A blessing which falls upon my heart and mind and spirit like a commissioning, as fresh as this new day.