

An Introduction to  
*Prayer*



An Introduction to  
*Prayer*

*Bishop Robert Barron*

WORD  on FIRE.

Published by Word on Fire,  
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

© 2024 by Word on Fire Catholic Ministries  
Printed in the United States of America  
All rights reserved

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Michael Stevens,  
Clark Kenyon, and Rozann Lee

Scripture excerpts are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition (copyright © 1989, 1993), used by permission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.  
All rights reserved worldwide.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America copyright © 1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used by permission.  
English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica* copyright © 1997, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops—Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Sections 1 and 12–15 are excerpted from Robert Barron, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (New York: Image Books, 2011).

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews. For more information, contact Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330 or email [contact@wordonfire.org](mailto:contact@wordonfire.org).

ISBN: 978-1-68578-146-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024934033

# *Contents*

Preface	vii
---------	-----

## **Part I: What Is Prayer?**

1. Raising the Mind and Heart to God	3
2. A Conversation Between Friends	6
3. The Christian Difference	11
4. The Disorienting Quality of Real Prayer	14
5. Transfigured Prayer	19

## **Part II: Principles of Prayer**

6. The Four Rules of Prayer	25
7. Why We Should Address Jesus as Thou	30
8. The Prayers of the Saints	34

## **Part III: Types of Prayer**

9. Contrition and Cleansing the Temple	41
10. Adoration and Right Praise	46
11. Give Thanks in All Circumstances	50
12. Prayer of Petition	54

## **Part IV: Contemplative Prayer**

13. John of the Cross and the Dark Night of the Soul	61
14. Teresa of Avila and Finding the Center	67
15. Thomas Merton and the Virginal Point	71

## **Part V: Liturgical Prayer**

16. The Mass	77
17. The Liturgy of the Hours	83
18. The Creed	87

## **Part VI: Devotional Prayer**

19. The Holy Hour	93
20. The Rosary	95
21. The Stations of the Cross	98
22. The Jesus Prayer	103

## **Part VII: Scriptural Prayer**

23. <i>Lectio Divina</i>	109
24. The Our Father	112
25. The Psalms	119
26. The <i>De Profundis</i>	123
Notes	127

## Preface

POPE FRANCIS HAS DESIGNATED 2025 as a Year of Jubilee, and in preparation for that celebration, he has, in turn, designated 2024 as a Year of Prayer. It is in response to the pope's call for renewed catechesis on prayer that Word on Fire presents this small collection of texts from my writings and talks on the subject.

Though I certainly prayed as a child and attended Mass every Sunday with my parents, I did not become fascinated with prayer until, as a teenager, I came across the works of Thomas Merton, especially *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, and *The Sign of Jonas*. These marvelous books opened my mind and heart to the mystical tradition stretching from the biblical authors, through the Fathers of the Church, up to figures such as Bernard, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, and especially John of the Cross. And Merton's own witness made that tradition come alive for a young man eager to find his way to speak to God. Another very important step on my itinerary of prayer was my first visit to St. Meinrad Archabbey just weeks before my ordination to the priesthood. Though I had heard recordings of monastic chant before, I had never actually experienced the sound and texture of that ancient form of song. I will never forget the moment when I entered the abbey church, a little late for Morning Prayer, and heard those seventy voices crying out harmoniously and longingly for God.

Perhaps my greatest teachers in the way of prayer have been the people whom I have served in the course of my pastoral ministry. How often as a priest I have heard the plaintive cry “Father, pray for me!” or “Father, pray for my mom, who has just gone into the hospital” or “Father, pray for my kids; they’re feeling kind of lost.” Those urgent requests taught me a lesson that John Paul II knew very well: at the end of the day, all prayer is a form of petition. They also compelled me to see that authentic prayer *always* connects us to others in love.

My hope for this little book is very simple: that it might lead you on the road to prayer; that it might teach you something about prayer; and that, most importantly, it might prompt you actually to pray. And take great comfort, as I do, from this saying of St. Josemaría Escrivá: “You say you don’t know how to pray? Put yourself in the presence of God, and once you have said, ‘Lord, I don’t know how to pray!’ rest assured that you have begun to do so.”



**Part I**

*What Is Prayer?*



## *Raising the Mind and Heart to God*

PEOPLE PRAY ALL THE TIME. Studies show that even those who describe themselves as nonbelievers pray. What precisely is this activity in which so many of us willingly engage? Prayer has taken on myriad forms over the centuries. Speaking, processing, singing, remaining silent, emptying the mind of all imagery and conceptuality, reading sacred texts, dancing, and petitioning from the bottom of one's heart have all been construed as modalities of prayer. But is there a common denominator, some fundamental characteristic? St. John of Damascus, a monk and theologian from the eighth century, said, "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God," and St. Thérèse of Lisieux said that prayer is "a surge of the heart, it is a simple look towards Heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." Prayer is born of that awareness, felt more than thought, that the transcendent realm impinges on our lowly world and hence can be contacted. A basic Christian conviction is that this reaching for God meets an even more passionate divine reaching for us. Perhaps we would put it best by saying that the mystical coming together of these

two longings—our longing for God and God’s longing for us—is prayer.

I don’t know any other place on earth that evokes the power of prayer more than the magnificent Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Built by King Louis IX (St. Louis) in the thirteenth century as a grand repository for the relic of Jesus’ crown of thorns, the Sainte-Chapelle is a jewel box of stained glass and Gothic tracery. When you enter the building, you have the distinct impression of having stepped across a threshold into another, higher world. Lord Kenneth Clark, the great twentieth-century art historian, said that when the light pours through the colored glass of the Sainte-Chapelle, it sets up a kind of vibration in the air, an electrical charge. It is, if you will, the artistic representation of the electric meeting of two spirits, human and divine. It is what a human heart, elevated to and by God, looks like: transfigured, luminous, radiantly beautiful.

This elevation through prayer is, ultimately, from God. One of the most fundamental truths in the Bible is that the spiritual life is not primarily our quest for God, but rather God’s quest for us. Therefore, as Herbert McCabe argued so clearly, whatever is good, true, and beautiful in our prayer is God already praying, as it were, in us. Karl Rahner defined prayer as God’s self-communication, given in grace, and accepted in freedom. And a contemporary commentator on St. John of the Cross, who is maybe the greatest master of prayer in the Catholic tradition, said that God is like a helicopter, and prayer is a bit like clearing the ground in order to make the landing of the helicopter easier. It is not as though God is off in the distance waiting for us to come crawling to him; no, God

is waiting to come and inhabit our hearts. The problem is that the landing ground is all cluttered. Prayer on this reading is clearing out all those attachments, preoccupations, and addictions that prevent God from fully landing in our hearts.

The Lord says—and all of Christian spirituality follows from it in a way—“You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). God wants to come into our lives, and prayer is an opening of the door, a clearing of the ground, to let him come. Fr. Paul Murray, quoting from the Dominican writer William Peraldus, puts it this way: “Prayer is such an easy job!” It is like breathing: we were born for prayer. To open the door to Christ is the easiest thing of all.

## *A Conversation Between Friends*

PERHAPS THE BEST IMAGE for prayer is a conversation between friends. What should this ongoing conversation, this deepening friendship, look like? Let me offer four suggestions.

First, the most important thing with regard to any friendship is that we *take the time*. Thomas Merton, the greatest spiritual teacher of the twentieth century, was once asked, “What is the best thing I can do to improve my prayer life?” His simple answer: “Take the time.” If you claimed that a certain person was your best friend but had to admit you spend almost no time with him, people would laugh at you. But a lot of people will say that God is the most important person in their life and yet spend next to no time speaking or listening to him. Don’t say blithely, “I find God in all things.” Reserve time for God—both when you feel like it and when you don’t. Perhaps it is in the morning; perhaps it’s late at night. Maybe it’s in the car (which can be a very good place to pray—your own little monastic cell); maybe it’s an hour or even a half hour before the Blessed Sacrament. In a way, it doesn’t matter, as long as it is substantial and

intentional time with God. Under this rubric, we might even speak of prayer as *wasting* time with God.

When you speak to God during this time of prayer, you also must *speak with honesty*. What would happen to a human relationship in which honesty did not hold sway? It would quickly grow cold and superficial. How do you feel when a friend is keeping important things from you, dissembling, or covering up? Far too often in prayer, we tell God what we think he wants to hear, presenting ourselves as pious; things that seem messy, dirty, or unkempt in our lives, we sweep under the carpet.

But this is so much nonsense! Take a good, prayerful look at Psalm 139 sometime: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me” (Ps. 139:1). Tell the Lord what’s happening in your life—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Tell him what’s frightening you and what’s depressing you. Confess your sins before him in the manner of David and Peter, and tell him how guilty you feel when you sin. There is a lot of talk of tears in the Bible; in fact, the saints speak of the “gift of tears.” If anything shows that you’re not just going through the motions, this is it.

Speak your anger to him—especially your anger *at* him. I love the story of a woman whose husband was in the hospital for many months, dying of a terrible illness. There was a statue of the Blessed Mother outside of the hospital, and one day, the wife became so frustrated that, upon leaving the hospital, she began to pick up rocks and dirt and throw them at the statue. Security ran out to stop her, but one of the sisters held them back, saying, “No—don’t stop her. She’s praying.” Consider the number of figures in the Bible who regularly

expressed this sort of frustration, confusion, and anger to God: the Psalmist, Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and above all, Job.

Relatedly, when you pray, you must also *listen with attention*. Obviously, a conversation between friends cannot be a one-way street. If all you ever did was talk to a friend, he wouldn't be your friend very long. Far too often, we think of prayer as simply talking to God. It is indeed, but it is also taking the time to listen to him—both breathing out and breathing in.

Some people in our tradition have heard the voice of God in a physical or quasi-physical way—we could cite the many examples from the Scriptures and the great tradition, such as Mother Teresa's experience of hearing the voice of Jesus—but God speaks this clearly and unambiguously only very rarely indeed. Normally, God delights in speaking indirectly. It might be through reading the Scriptures or listening to a liturgical song; it might be in Eucharistic Adoration or during the Mass. Feelings of consolation or desolation, a sense of the whole body relaxing and finding peace, the arrival of an insight about a particular problem or of a memory of someone from whom we've grown distant—all of these can be carriers of the divine word, routes by which God communicates with us, sometimes with an extraordinary power and clarity, from beyond ourselves.

Sometimes, in prayer, we can even legitimately imagine what God would say to us in response to a question or a communication. This can be dangerous, of course, insofar as it begins to resemble a psychological projection. But based on our knowledge of God from



the Bible and the tradition, this imaginative exercise can be another way of discerning the voice of God.

Finally, one of the most important though underrated features of prayer is *silence*. When Mother Teresa spoke of prayer, the first thing she mentioned was silence: “The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; the fruit of love is service; the fruit of service is peace.” We have a very noisy culture; we are constantly stimulating ourselves with words and ideas, talking and listening to each other all the time. Do we sit in silence, allowing God to speak in that space?

Think here of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings, who, on Mount Horeb, does not hear God in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but rather in “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12). So it still is. How can you hear the voice of God unless you become silent? When the noises subside, the Voice can be heard. Think, too, of how many religious orders—the Carthusian order founded by St. Bruno, for example—are predicated upon this discipline. Most of us can’t be Carthusians, but we can learn a lot from their attitude of radical devotion to silence.

Thomas Aquinas speaks of the two basic moves of the will: to seek the absent good and to savor the present good, resting in it in a kind of silence. We’re rather skilled at the first but not the second: once we have the good, we restlessly go on to something else. When you have the good of God, a silent savoring of that good is key; that, too, is part of prayer. Notice how old friends can spend a good amount of time together without

speaking—and the better their friendship, the longer and more comfortable their silence.

So, when it comes to prayer, take the time; speak with honesty; listen with attention; and enter into silence. Your friendship with God depends on it!

## *The Christian Difference*

THOUGH PRAYER CAN BE FOUND in all the great religious traditions, there is something unique about Christian prayer—namely, that we address God as our Father. If Christians were to speak to God in an undifferentiated way, then we would not be praying in a manner different than the way a pious Jew, Muslim, or general monotheist would pray, petitioning, adoring, or begging God from “outside.” The Christian difference is that the one God has revealed himself in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and that the Father has sent his Son into our humanity, and indeed, all the way down into sin and death. Thus, when we pray, the Son stands *beside* us, so to speak, with his arm around our shoulder, helping us to pray to the Father *in* the Holy Spirit—the very love that connects Father and Son. In an extraordinary privilege, Christians have been drawn into these dynamics of the inner life of God; he has opened up the Trinitarian life and now includes us in it.

This is why, whenever we pray as Christians, we begin with the sign of the cross: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This is the

distinctive metaphysical space into which Christians enter when we pray, and it makes a world of difference. We are not addressing God from some external standpoint; we are not approaching the divine simply as a seeker or supplicant or penitent. We are *in* the divine life, speaking to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. It has been said that Christian prayer is listening intently as the Father and the Son speak about you. It is this peculiar intimacy—praying in God and not just to him—that gives the Christian practice of prayer its unique texture.

This does not mean, of course, that the Christian cannot also pray to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit. God is one in essence—the Father, Son, and Spirit share the same nature—and the theological tradition signals this by speaking of the “circumincession” of the three persons. You never have the Father without the Son and the Spirit, the Spirit without the Father and the Son, or the Son without the Father and the Spirit; they are always together. Thus, a Christian can also pray, “Lord Jesus, help me,” because the Father and the Spirit are co-implicated in that petition; or they can pray, “Come, Holy Spirit,” because if they invoke the Spirit, they invoke, necessarily, the Father and the Son too. But the fundamental move, reflected in our liturgical prayers, is praying *to* the Father, *with* the Son, *in* the unity of the Holy Spirit.

However we pray, as Christians we pray *for one another*. If the essence of prayer is resting in God’s creative love, then whenever we pray, we are linked, willy-nilly, to everyone and everything else in the cosmos. In the divine still point, we find the ground from which all things proceed and by which they are sustained. And thus, the very act of prayer is necessarily communal and corporate.

Charles Williams took as the elemental principle of the Christian life the play of co-inherence—that is to say, existing in and for the other. Just as the Father gives himself away totally in the Son and the Son returns the favor by existing totally for the Father, so all creation is, at its best, marked by this metaphysics of co-implication, co-involvement.

There is a hint of co-inherence in the radical interdependency of the things of nature, but it is more apparent in the complex and dramatic interpenetrations of human psyches, bodies, and souls. I am able, in love, to place my mind in your mind and to project my will into yours in such a way as to bear your burdens. When Christians speak of praying for one another or, even more radically, of suffering on behalf of one another, they are assuming this ontology of co-inherence. Of course, its greatest archetype (after the Trinity itself) is the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross, whereby Jesus truly suffered *for* the world, his pain literally taking away the pain of a sinful world. This sort of language becomes coherent only in light of the unifying power of life in Christ.

*The Disorienting Quality of  
Real Prayer*

ONE OF THE MOST IMPRESSIVE literary figures of the twentieth century was the Irish-British writer Iris Murdoch. A careful examination of Murdoch's fiction and nonfiction reveals her consistently dark take on human nature. Left to our own devices, we are, she thinks, self-absorbed, violent, and all too willing to draw the whole world into the narrow confines of our egotism. In this conviction, of course, she is not far from the classical Christian doctrine of original sin. What we require, she concludes, are spiritual exercises that serve to break us out of the prison of our self-absorption; and since we are so ensconced in the pattern of self-reference, these must be rather shocking reversals of the status quo. We need the Good—in one form or another—to burst through the carapace of our fearful self-regard. Her insights about these spiritual exercises illuminate for us the disorienting quality of authentic prayer.

A first such exercise, Murdoch suggests, is the learning of a foreign language. Playing at another language

can be a mildly diverting experience, and it can convince one that the language can be used after the manner of a game. But when one is really compelled to learn a language well, for the sake of survival or success, one quickly discovers just how unyielding, how demanding, and how unforgiving that language can be. French doesn't care whether you learn its nuances, its vocabulary, or its sometimes-irrational spellings; German couldn't care less whether or not you appreciate its (to English-speakers) confounding word order; Greek is not the least bit put out if you cannot master its alphabet; and Latin is utterly indifferent to your struggles with its endings and cases. All of these linguistic systems are, in their objectivity, order, confusion, and beauty, massively there, and they compel the one who would dare to learn them to submit.

The demanding "there-ness" of the French language was symbolized for me one day soon after I had arrived in Paris for my doctoral studies. I was with some friends in a crowded restaurant at the height of the dinner rush when a stereotypically haughty and impatient waiter came to take our order. When he turned his imperious gaze toward me and uttered a curt *Oui?* I promptly forgot all of my carefully memorized restaurant vocabulary and every one of my past participles, and devolved before his eyes into a muttering, incoherent child. His reaction to my plight? He turned and walked away.

A second spiritual exercise recommended by Iris Murdoch for the disciplining of the ego is a confrontation with a true work of art. Second-rate art is designed primarily to please. Comfortable, familiar, likable, it presents no particular challenge to the sensibilities of the one who takes it in. For example, the music heard in an

elevator or a doctor's waiting room is meant simply to provide a mild distraction or a feeling of calm in the listener; and the paintings that hang in most hotel rooms or corporate lobbies are intended to provide low-level entertainment. These works fit predictably into universally recognized canons of appropriateness and, as such, are forgotten almost as soon as they are taken in.

But a great and true work of art does not aim to please. Rather, it presents itself in its integrity on its own terms, remaining fundamentally indifferent to the reaction of the viewer or listener. In a scene from his autobiographical masterpiece, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce brilliantly displays the dynamics of confronting the truly beautiful. Stephen Dedalus (Joyce's fictional alter ego) is pacing listlessly on the strand outside of Dublin when he spies, standing out in the surf, a woman of surpassing beauty. He is stopped in his tracks—in the state of aesthetic arrest—and takes the woman in. She turns to him at one point and “quietly suffered his gaze” before turning back to look out at the open sea. Indifferent to his feelings or reactions, she allows him to watch. Finally, changed utterly by this encounter, Stephen cries out, “Heavenly God!” and resolves from that moment on to become an artist, a reporter of such epiphanies of the beautiful. The lovely girl standing just off the strand did not so much please Stephen Dedalus as change him, drawing him effectively out of his morose self-regard and giving him his vocation. Hans Urs von Balthasar observes, in a very similar vein, that the beautiful elects the observer and then sends him on mission to announce what he has seen.

Not many years ago, *Rolling Stone* magazine asked



a number of prominent popular musicians to name the song that first “rocked their world.” Some of the responses were relatively banal, but the vast majority of them had a Joycean resonance: the respondents knew instinctively the difference between songs (however great) that had merely pleased them and songs that had shaken them out of their complacency and rearranged their vision of things. This kind of aesthetic encounter is the spiritual exercise that Murdoch is speaking of.

It is against this Murdochian background that I would like to consider the familiar Gospel story of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14) and what it tells us about real prayer. Jesus tells of a Pharisee who, “standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’” This is, Jesus suggests, a fraudulent, wholly inadequate prayer precisely because it simply confirms the man in his self-regard. The words are, obviously enough, just elaborate self-congratulation, but even the Pharisee’s body language gives him away: he takes up his position, standing with a confidence bordering on arrogance in the presence of God. The prayer itself confirms the Pharisee’s world. Like a second-rate work of art, or like the tourist’s language spoken by the dilettante, it functions simply to please. And the god to which he prays is, necessarily, a false god, an idol, since it allows itself to be positioned by the ego-driven needs of the Pharisee.

But then Jesus invites us to meditate upon the publican’s prayer. First, his stance is telling: “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven.” This man realizes that he is in the presence of

a power that he cannot even in principle manipulate or control; and he signals with his body, accordingly, that he is positioned by this higher authority. Then, “beating his breast,” he speaks with a simple eloquence: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Though it is articulate speech, proceeding from the mind and will of the publican, it is not language that confirms the independence and power of the speaker—just the contrary. It is more of a cry or a groan, an acknowledgment that he needs to receive something: this mysterious mercy for which he begs.

In the first prayer, god is the principal member of the audience arrayed before the ego of the Pharisee. But in this second prayer, God is the principal actor, and the publican is the audience awaiting a performance the contours of which he cannot fully foresee. And therefore, the publican’s prayer is the kind of spiritual exercise of which Iris Murdoch speaks. It is akin to the experience of being mastered by the French language, or by Picasso’s *Guernica*, or by Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*.

Some of the most powerful prayers are simple, unadorned, even blunt. They have the essential virtue of knocking the ego off of its pedestal and rocking the world of the one who utters them. In this, they both open the sinner to transformation and honor the true God.

## *Transfigured Prayer*

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE STORY of the Transfiguration that is just so compelling? It is like a play or a movie that we can watch over and over again and still derive new insights. We can never fully exhaust its meaning. Indeed, the Transfiguration can serve as an occasion to reflect on the nature of prayer.

In Luke's version (9:28–36), we first hear that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him “up on the mountain to pray.” Now, mountains are standard biblical places of encounter with God, who was imagined as living in the sky. Thus, the higher you go, the closer you come to God. We don't have to literalize this, but we should unpack its symbolic sense. In order to commune with God, you have to step out of your everyday, workaday world. The mountain symbolizes transcendence, otherness, the realm of God. Those who say “I pray on the go” or “My work is my prayer” are not really people of prayer.

Like Christ and the Apostles, you have to step away—step up, if you want—from the ordinary routine in order to commune with God. What is your mountain, your place of encounter? It could be before the Blessed

Sacrament or in the hushed darkness of a church; it could be a special room in your house or a corner of the natural world—even a literal mountain. But it has to be someplace where you have stepped away from your ordinary business.

We hear next that “while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” The reference here—no first-century Jew would have missed it—is to Moses, whose face was transfigured after he communed with God on Mount Sinai. But the luminosity is meant in general to signal the invasion of God. In the depths of prayer, when you have achieved a communion with the Lord, the light of God’s presence is kindled deep inside of you, at the very core of your existence, and then it begins to radiate out through the whole of your being. This is why it is so important that Luke mentions the clothing of Jesus becoming dazzling white. Clothes evoke one’s contact with the outside world. The God discovered in prayer should radiate out through you to the world so that you might become a source of illumination.

Stay for a moment with the image of light. Light is that by which we see and understand. Who are the people who become sources of light to the world? Those who are rooted in prayer. They become beacons by which people around them see and understand their world more completely. We often depict the saints with haloes, with lights around them, which is making the same point: the saints are those who are so grounded in God that they become like torches or lanterns to others around them. You’ve probably had the experience of being with somebody who just seems to shed light in every

direction. When you're with that person, you not only feel better and more at peace; you actually come to understand things more clearly. That person is a source of light—which means, I can almost guarantee you, a person of prayer.

Now, when Jesus was transfigured, “suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.” In this beautiful image, Jesus is communing with the great prophet, Elijah, and the great representative of the Law, Moses. When you pray, when you step out of the ordinary world of space and time, you enter into the properly eternal realm of God. And this means that you come into contact with the past and the future. You establish contact with what the Church calls “the communion of saints”—all those friends of God up and down the centuries. That's why we speak of invoking the saints—even saints who lived and died long ago—speaking with them, seeking their help and intercession. This is not just pious talk; it is grounded in this metaphysics of eternity.

But what precisely are Jesus, Moses, and Elijah talking about? “His departure [*exodos*], which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” We notice, first of all, the wonderful thematic connection between the exodus that Moses led—a journey from slavery to freedom—and the exodus that Jesus would accomplish on the cross: a journey from sin and death to resurrection. In both cases, it is a great work of liberation and of life-giving love—and that is the key. The fruit of prayer in the biblical tradition is always action on behalf of the world. We are, essentially, a mission religion. Even the highest moments of mystical union are meant, in the end, to conduce to doing God's work in the world, to becoming a conduit

of the divine grace. Why do you pray? To commune with God, to commune with the saints, but finally, to become a vehicle of God's grace. Prayer awakens you to your duty and responsibility to the world. We have mystics, poets, and contemplatives galore in our tradition—just think of Bernard, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton—but they all saw this essential link between prayer and action.

This is why Peter's line is so important: "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing, as Luke points out immediately, what he was saying. When you're in prayer, lifted up outside of the realm of ordinary experience and into the realm of God's eternity, you don't quite know where you are or what to say. Peter seems lost here, and that's appropriate when you're in this "cloud of unknowing," as one of the great mystics called it. But the point of prayer is not to stay on the mountain. It is not to cling to mystical experience, however wonderful. It is to become so radiant with the divine life that you can share it with the world. You have to come back down the mountain and resume the hard work of following Jesus. And this is why the voice from the cloud, once it identified Jesus, specified, "Listen to him!" In other words, don't just admire him; don't simply worship him from a distance; rather, do what he tells you. Come back down the mountain.