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Can you describe the difference between meditation and contemplation? I've heard those

terms used interchangeably, but I don't think that is correct. Can you help me understand the differences in these kinds of prayers? – Anonymous

Dear Anonymous:

You are right. These two kinds of prayers are not the same and the terms should not be used interchangeably. One way of making sense of the difference is to understand that, according to our Catholic tradition, those who enter heaven will spend all of eternity contemplating God. This suggests that contemplation represents a fulfillment of all of our efforts to deepen our personal relationship with God. It has the character of a gift: we are given the grace of gazing lovingly on the very source of our life.

Before going any further, please remember that the goal of all types prayer is to help us grow in our relationship with God. We should not be so preoccupied with the particular kind or method of prayer that we lose sight of the reason for praying in the first place. As with all relationships, it requires concentrated effort, but it also an openness to receive from the other. Amid the many distractions of our daily lives, growing in intimacy with God will not happen without putting aside time each day to focus on the essentials of our lives. For us Catholics, this means focusing on the God who has created us for Himself and who, through his beloved Son, has redeemed us from our sins. By first giving attention to the relationship, you may then be prepared to discover what form of prayer suits you best.

Now to your question.

Meditation

There are many different kinds of meditation, but they all involve an engaged form of mental activity. When we meditate, we do some work. We might read the Gospel and ponder its meaning in itself and for our own lives. We can meditate on the mysteries of the faith, as we do when we recite the Rosary. This helps us to see that two elements of meditation are some kind of "raw material" and a disciplined practice. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, in meditation the " *mind seeks to understand the why and the how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what God is asking." (CCC 2705)*

Let's take an example. A recent Sunday Gospel passage narrated the miracle of the loaves and fishes in Matthew's Gospel. This is a scene that lends itself to meditation on a number of different levels. We might find ourselves pondering the hunger of the people after a long day without food and drink. That could lead us to think about those in the world, perhaps not so distant from us, who suffer from food insecurity, or we may get in touch with our own various hungers. We may focus our attention on the disciples and how helpless they must have felt when Jesus told them to provide food for the people themselves, echoing the helplessness we can often feel in the face of the needs of others. Or we may meditate on the miracle itself, and how the little they were able to give turned out to be enough to satisfy vast numbers of people. That is a powerful lesson in trust and humility, recognizing how much good, through the power of God, can be done with the few resources at our disposal. We may also wish to ponder the abundant mercy of Jesus, whose compassionate heart responds to the material and spiritual hungers of the crowd. Finally, we may do well to meditate on Christ's gift of himself in the Eucharist, so clearly foreshadowed in the blessing and breaking of the loaves. All of this, in turn, will lead us in the direction of contemplating the immensity of God's love for us.

There is enough in this one scene in the Gospel to provide "raw material" for a whole week's worth of meditations. So much of this will be personal, depending on the circumstances of one's life at any particular moment and how one is led, through the promptings of God's Spirit, to one or another aspect of the scene. Note that this is one scene, and that the Scriptures are an inexhaustible resource for *"understanding the why and the how of the Christian life"* and in deepening our relationship with God.

Contemplation

It is now time to speak of contemplation. No hard and fast distinction separates meditation from contemplation, but they are different. It is probably best to think of them as two ends of a continuum. As suggested above, there comes a time in meditation when the mental engagement, the "pondering" stops, and the focus of awareness shifts from our own thoughts and feelings to a silence that is deeper than anything produced by our mental efforts. In contemplation, we make ourselves radically available for the presence of God. It is perhaps best expressed by the psalmist, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

The Catechism puts it this way. *"Contemplative prayer is the simple expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus, an attentiveness to the Word of God, a silent love. It achieves real union with the prayer of Christ to the extent that it makes us share in his*

mystery."

As for the witness of the saints, here is St. John of the Cross: contemplation is *"naught else than a secret, peaceful and loving infusion from God which, if it be possible, enkindles the soul with a spirit of love."*

And St. Alphonsus: *"In meditation, God is sought after by a discursive effort; in contemplation there is no effort of this kind, as God has been found and is gazed at."*

We should pray, then, for the gift of contemplation. It presupposes a receptive heart, and most often, the effort to attach ourselves to Christ through the practice of meditation. It is a kind of divine peace in the midst of the chaos of our lives. In the spirit of St. Paul, who identifies love as the greatest of the theological virtues, because it is the one that endures, so too, contemplation will absorb us for all eternity. It is the loving gaze of the beloved upon the wellspring of all love.