



SAINT PAUL
Evangelization Institute

Basic Evangelization Training

Course 5: Introduction to the Spiritual Life of the Evangelist

5.4 What are some good spiritual disciplines to embrace?

Supposing you want to begin (or begin anew) the path of prayer, and mature in intimacy with the Lord God. Supposing you want to learn gradually to pray constantly, turning to God in good times and bad to thank Him, praise Him, worship Him, petition Him, and ask Him for forgiveness and grace. How do you do this concretely? There are many spiritual practices that help us grow in friendship with God. Among them, there are a handful of essentials. First, right prayer requires right action: we must regularly repent of our sins, do works of mercy, and strive to keep the commandments. Second, a life of prayer is built upon spiritual disciplines: under normal conditions, we must pray daily (especially in the morning and the evening), meditate on the Word of God in some fashion, give alms and fast (if possible), attend Holy Mass, and receive the sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist.¹ *By building these practices into our lives, gradually making them into habits, we build a strong foundation for our spiritual growth.*

The following are some of these practices explained, together with others. Each of them come highly recommended. Attached to this lesson is an addendum with even more spiritual disciplines.

Morning Offering & Daily Review

Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar: two lambs a year old day by day continually. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer in the evening. (Ex 29:38-39)

It is essential to pray everyday, especially in the morning and the evening. The morning offering and daily review are common ways to do this. Offer your heart to God everyday. Begin each day with a “morning offering,” such as this one:

O my God, in union with the Immaculate Heart of Mary and your heart, I offer you the Precious Body and Blood of Jesus offered on all the altars throughout the world today, together with my every thought, word and action.

O my Jesus, I desire today to gain every indulgence and merit I can and I offer them, together with myself, to Mary Immaculate ... that she may best apply them to the interests of Thy most Sacred Heart.

Precious Blood of Jesus, save us! Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us! Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us!²

In the evening, look back and review the day you had offered to God in the morning. First ask God for light, and then ponder: “What blessings and graces did I notice?” Thank God for all of them. “When did things seem to break down—when was I not at my best?” Ask God’s forgiveness for these times, and ask Him for the grace to do better. Then, look ahead to the next day: what’s coming up that you will need God’s special help with? Ask Him for the help you will need tomorrow.³

Dedicated prayer time in Sacred Scripture

The sacred writings ... are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, ... that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tm 3:15-17)

¹ Most of these are represented in some way in “the precepts of the Church,” which are required of all Catholics. See Catechism, sec. 2041-2043.

² There are many “morning offering” prayers out there to choose from. See the Catholic ministry “Apostleship of Prayer” for some good options: <http://popesprayerusa.net/daily-offering-prayers/>.

³ This is a form of what is also known as “the daily examen.” Saint Ignatius of Loyola teaches a particular method in his Spiritual Exercises.

Introduction to Evangelization

Course 5: Introduction to the Spiritual Life of the Evangelist

5.4 What are some good spiritual disciplines to embrace?

Start with 15 minutes a day (or more) of dedicated, consecrated quiet time—reading, meditating, and praying with Scripture. Get yourself a bible that suits your age, stage, and interest.⁴ One of the main criteria for choosing your prayer bible is that you enjoy reading it. And make sure it feels comfortable in your hands and is made to last, because it won't just remain sitting on your shelf!

Along with the Bible, have a strategy for your bible reading. You don't want to spend any of your precious prayer time deciding what to read. There are many bible reading plans available online and elsewhere. You might also do your bible reading from a book that lays out your daily readings for you, and many of these include also pre-written meditations. One such book is called *My Meditation on the Gospel*.⁵ It takes you through the life of Christ, using all four Gospels, and uses a meditation style recommended by Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Alternatively, you might want to focus on the readings that the Church places in her liturgy for the day. If so, you can use a devotional magazine with these daily readings and pre-written meditations, like *The Word Among Us*, or *Magnificat*.⁶ If you want to use the daily readings but don't need the pre-written meditations, you might use a *Daily Roman Missal*.⁷ However you choose your readings, try to spend at least 15 minutes a day with the Word of God.

How do you pray with the Bible? Begin by calling upon the Holy Spirit to be with you and inspire you. Then read the Scripture selection prayerfully and reverently. Then reflect upon what you have read, especially any words, phrases, or whole sentences that may have caught your attention during your reading. Then pray to the Lord in response to the Scripture. Praise Him, thank Him, or just talk to Him from your heart. You may go back and reread and reflect and pray again. Sometimes, the Lord will stir up a flame of love in your heart, and you will become deeply aware of God's love. Treasure these moments. This "method" is a form of what the Catholic tradition refers to as "lectio divina."⁸ At its heart, lectio divina is simply listening carefully to God speaking in the Scriptures, and speaking to Him in return in the words of your heart.

Other practices can also be helpful as you pray with Scripture. In response to what you read, for example, you might try writing a letter to Jesus in a journal, and then in prayer share with him the parts that especially seemed to relate to what's going on in your life. When you finally conclude your Bible prayer time, it is helpful to write down or remember one sentence or phrase that you want to bring to mind again throughout the day.

Regular praying of the Rosary

Behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. (Lk 1:48)

A very popular devotion is the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is a great way to meditate on the Word of God, focusing on important parts of the lives of Jesus and Mary. By it, we draw near to Jesus and Mary, and call upon Mary's powerful intercession for our needs. Many Popes and Saints have recommended it, and it has been called our "weapon." Pray weekly, even daily!

Examination of conscience & confession

If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. (Rm 8:13)

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⁴ If you are a teen just getting started, perhaps the Good News Translation (GNT) will be suitable (also known as Today's English Version, Second Edition). If you are an adult, get the New American Bible (NAB), which corresponds with what you hear at Mass. You might also try the Jerusalem Bible or the New Jerusalem Bible. If you are also going into more in-depth academic biblical study, you might get the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (RSV-CE), or the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (RSV-2CE).

⁵ Published by the Confraternity of the Precious Blood.

⁶ For *Word Among Us*, go to <https://wau.org/>. For *Magnificat*, go to <https://us.magnificat.net/>.

⁷ Roman Missals also help you follow along with the prayers of Holy Mass.

⁸ See our Saint Paul Street Evangelization tract, *Lectio Divina*, for a more thorough explanation on how to pray using this method.

Introduction to Evangelization

Course 5: Introduction to the Spiritual Life of the Evangelist

5.4 What are some good spiritual disciplines to embrace?

Address the sinful patterns in your life. Every month or two weeks, examine your conscience by prayerfully reflecting on what you have done wrong, and then bring your sins to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When you examine your conscience, write down all the sins you can remember having committed since the last time you went to Confession. Never omit to include all mortal sins that you can remember. Then go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Deal with the big stuff first. If you are in the habit of breaking any of the Ten Commandments in a serious way (committing mortal sin), focus most of your attention on them, and go to confession more often, until these sins have been overcome. Even if you have to go to confession two or three days in a row, it is worth it to receive grace and the inner motivation to stop sinning mortally. Once you have conquered your habitual mortal sins, you can move on to the finer points—the venial sins.

Receiving the Eucharist as often as possible

He took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (Lk 22:19)

One of our greatest privileges as Catholics is the grace of being able to encounter the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist. Imagine: you are feeding upon the one through whom the universe was made! Doesn’t that make all your problems seem insignificant in comparison? If as the eternal Word of God, Jesus had no trouble putting the universe in order, will He be stumped by your problems? There is so much grace to be received in the Body and Blood of the Lord. Why go only once a week? Go as often as you can!

Avoid the “checklist mentality”

As we build spiritual practices into our lives, we should not forget that all spiritual practices ought to flow from our hearts as so many loving responses to the Lord and His gospel. For this reason, we should focus on our relationship with the Lord, avoiding what some have called “the checklist mentality.” Father F. X. Durrwell wrote,

From an inborn pride ... [man] behaves as though he were master even when he tries to give honor to his God. ... He treats his works as though they were of value in themselves, and offers them to God with the idea that they give him some right to a divine value in exchange, a right over the things of heaven. Yet the only way in which he can give anything to God is to accept God’s gift, to submit to God’s salvific will.⁹

When our spiritual practices are the focus instead of receiving the Lord’s love and responding to it — when we treat the spiritual life as a checklist — then we’re on the wrong path. “Checklist spirituality” can lead to burn-out, or judging others, or both. Be patient with yourself, and with others. Be humble: start with what you can manage without excessive difficulty. In your daily prayer, be sure to entrust your heart to the Lord; praising Him, thanking Him, and asking Him for what you need. Then add to your spiritual practices gradually, in ways that are in keeping with your responsibilities.

We are imperfect creatures but loved by God right now, as we are. He calls us to perfection, but He takes us by the hand and helps us get there—step by step. When we fall, He is ready to help us up again. He is a good Father.

5.4 Addendum: What are some other good spiritual practices to embrace?

Regular fellowship with other faithful people

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. (Heb 10:24-25)

⁹ F. X. Durrwell, *In the Redeeming Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2013), 28-29

Introduction to Evangelization

Course 5: Introduction to the Spiritual Life of the Evangelist

5.4 What are some good spiritual disciplines to embrace?

One of the most dangerous temptations of the spiritual life is the idea that we can “go it alone.” One may do okay for a time, but every person will eventually realize that the Christian life requires the help of others. This doesn’t mean we all have to be extroverts. But we do need spiritual friendships with people who will pray with and for us, and who will challenge and encourage us in living the Christian life. It may happen in the form of a small faith-sharing group, a weekly prayer group, an accountability partner, or some other group. The point is to connect with others spiritually in a non-superficial way. Not only do we need others, but they also need us. We need their gifts, and they need ours.

Continual participation in the mission of Christ

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. (Mt 25:35-36)

The Church teaches that “man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”¹⁰ This gift finds its expression in three key areas: (1) living our vocation, (2) evangelization, and (3) acts of solidarity with the needy. In each of these three ways, we participate in the mission of Jesus.

First, we must be Christ-like servants in the areas of work and family. This is (1) living our vocation, and is our first responsibility. Second, by words and deeds, we serve yet others. There are any number of ways to do this. It may mean, for example, leading a parish discipleship group, teaching a high school confirmation course, helping with RCIA, being involved in street evangelization, or sharing the faith with a co-worker or friend. These kinds of activities help us fulfill our call to (2) evangelization. But serving others also means acts of mercy like helping at a soup kitchen, visiting a lonely neighbor, giving financial assistance, or cooking a meal for a family that has had a new baby. These are (3) acts of solidarity with the needy.¹¹

Christian Hospitality

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Heb 13:2)

To those who are welcomed into eternal life, Jesus says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35). Among the works of solidarity with the needy, hospitality has a special place.¹²

Jesus teaches that hospitality is an opportunity to practice that sacrificial love that gives without receiving or expecting anything in return, so that our reward is not on earth but in heaven (see Lk 14:12-14). Hospitality is a powerful witness, because it shows genuine love and concern for a brother or sister, imitating the servant Christ who washed his disciples feet (Jn 13:1-7). True hospitality doesn’t seek repayment but offers rest; it is slow to speak, yet eager and willing to listen; it subverts temptations we have towards self-seeking; and in the person of the stranger, friend, or guest, it puts Jesus at the seat of honor.

Hospitality takes time, effort, and resources. We say that we “practice” works of mercy, because we often do them imperfectly; seeking recognition, losing our tempers, cursing the poor under our breath, complaining or making excuses. But these deeds are the one, five, and ten dollar bills that seem insignificant, but over time accumulate and build wealth. And living a permanent, embedded life of Christian virtue doesn’t just happen — it takes a lot of starts and stops sometimes before it becomes habit, and, hopefully, second nature.

If you want to show the love of Christ to others, don’t underestimate the practice of Christian hospitality. Build a habit of it. Open your home to the stranger and those who can’t repay you; offer your tea and table to those who need an ear to listen; cook for more than you have, and always keep a place setting reserved for unexpected guests. By this practice, you are able to offer “room at the inn” for the Christ child, who comes by night in humble disguise (see Lk 2:7). God loved us first and showed us what love is and looks like (see 1 Jn 4:19). When we show hospitality, we are sharing with others what we have first received.

¹⁰ The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world], December 7, 1965, sec. 24..

¹¹ “The spiritual and corporal works of mercy” is a great, traditional list of ways to serve others.

¹² See Gen 18; Rom 12:13; 1 Pt 4:9; 3 Jn 1:5-8; Heb 13:2

Introduction to Evangelization

Course 5: Introduction to the Spiritual Life of the Evangelist

5.4 What are some good spiritual disciplines to embrace?

Regular fasting & sacrifice

When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Mt 6:17-18)

One of the spiritual disciplines that is slowly making a comeback is the discipline of fasting. Many of us do some kind of fasting during Lent and Holy Week, but few are aware of the spiritual benefits that it affords us as a regular discipline.

For one thing, fasting helps us to grow in the virtue of self-control. It enables us to gain greater authority over our own body, exercising our own proper “king-ship” over that which we have been given rule. Why is this the case? Because faithfulness in small tasks is good preparation for greater tasks (see Mt 25:21)! Little acts of sacrifice and self-denial, like fasting, help to strengthen our will for the times when it gets more difficult to do good.

Another benefit of fasting is less well-known. Fasting helps to sharpen our spiritual sensitivity. It works kind of like a spiritual window-washing. It refines our discernment and our capacity to receive communication from the Holy Spirit. Many times, people experience greater-than-usual clarity in prayer after fasting—the word of God seems to speak more personally to them than normal. For example, it can happen when you are fasting that the Lord will call you very clearly to a very specific prayer of intercession for someone.

Many Catholics embrace a weekly or monthly discipline of fasting. They fast from food for a whole day, or they skip just one or two meals. Others limit their food to dry bread and water. Others abstain from meat or other delicacies. It is important not to harm yourself with fasting. If you cannot fast because of health problems, abstaining from certain foods that you enjoy will be useful.¹³

Always forgive

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. (Mk 11:24)

The constant challenge that Jesus puts before us is to forgive those who have offended us. Forgiveness is not a feeling, but a decision to let go of our “right” to get revenge on the person or to “hold it against them.” Jesus tells us to forgive those who offend us; but it’s just as much for our own sake as it is for the other party. Unforgiveness, it has been said, is like “drinking poison and hoping the other guy will die.”

Forgiveness means refusing to nurse resentment; it doesn’t necessarily mean that we have to like the other person; in some cases, we may never recover our warm feelings towards them. Forgiveness doesn’t even mean that we necessarily have to be in an ongoing relationship with them, or even have contact with them. It can also take years for the memory of some injuries to heal. Forgiveness is part of the healing process.

The disciples asked Jesus, “How many times must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? Seven times?” Jesus replied, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven times” (Mt 18:21-22). That’s a lot of forgiveness! The truth is that sometimes we must choose to forgive the same person for the same offense over and over again. In doing this, we imitate the Lord God, who is full of kindness and compassion for sinners—for us.

¹³ Abstaining from non-food-related activities like television, video games, or music can also be fruitful forms of sacrifice.