

**SUSTAINING VOCATION:
FINDING AND KEEPING
A PERSONAL PRAYER PRACTICE**

Pacific School of Religion
The Graduate Theological Union
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COURSE OVERVIEW

Even under the best of circumstances, ministry can be a lonely path. With the current decline in membership across the mainline churches, many folks whose deep love of God and humanity propelled them into religious service find themselves weighed down with concerns about dwindling resources and aging congregations. Congregations themselves are anxious about their future; and the church resides in and partakes of a culture that is focused on working harder, longer, and more frantically. Worry and isolation, overwork, life imbalance, and continual stress take their toll on clergy. Even the spiritual disciplines have been twisted by contemporary culture to make us believe that enlightenment is simply a matter of training the mind; therefore, anyone who lacks a sustained and sustaining relationship with the Divine simply is not trying hard enough or hasn't found the one, true way.

Is revitalizing your call simply a matter of better time management and new techniques? Can one be alive and responsive to God even in the midst of perceived failures and marginalization? Can traditional Christian prayer practices provide a substantial enough foundation for ministers under stress?

This course starts from two assumptions. First, a deep spiritual practice is the best resource for good ministry; and what God has asked for, God will sustain. Spiritual leaders throughout time acknowledge when we recognize our own particular needs, gifts, and challenges in the realm of spiritual practice, then we open a path for the sustaining Spirit.

Through a process of personal assessment, identification and practice of disciplines, and group discussion and support, participants will develop a personalized program of prayer, meditation, and reflection that will be do-able in day-to-day ministry. In addition, participants will learn to recognize common stumbling blocks on the path, the resources

available in their own community, how practices can ready one to receive grace, and how to find partners on the path.

While practices from a variety of religious and non-religious sources will be introduced, the course will place particular emphasis on sustaining Christian ministry through the use of traditional Christian practices. The course will also examine ways to uncover and deal with the underlying cognitive assumptions inherent in the use of practices from other traditions.

Course Goals: To introduce students (persons working in ministry, M.Div. and M.A. students) to a broad understanding of the range of spiritual disciplines; to help participants identify their personal needs, gifts, and challenges on the spiritual path; to help students develop a realistic and sustainable practice.

Student Learning Objectives: By the end of this course, students will be able to

- Identify their own gifts and challenges in spiritual practice;
- Identify and use four prayer practices;
- Understand how different practices can affect one's mind and heart and prepare the way for deeper graces;
- Identify community-based resources for support in their practice.

Course Outline

Monday: A New Frame

Common cognitive frames for practice; the problem for Christianity; self-assessment. Conceptual frames and easy does it: the noblest failure of all.

Practices: repetitive prayer practices.

Tuesday: Craving and Gratitude

Exploring the roots of attachment in Christian perspectives; acedia, novelty, and suffering. How gratitude practices can change us. Conceptual frames and generalization of behaviors.

Practices: detachment, gratitude practices.

Wednesday: Depth and Stillness

Meditation and failure; cultivating Christian imagination. Discussion: what is, what is not, meditation. Lights on/lights off spirituality. Conceptual frames and the entailments of religious perspectives.

Practices: Breath awareness, mantra meditation, lectio divina, self-guided meditation.

Thursday: Embodied Spirituality.

Music, rhythm and physical labor. Walking as practice: the neighborhood and the labyrinth as practice ground. Finding the present; the work of sacrament.

Practice: Labyrinth walk, walking meditation, making music, sacramental ritual.

Friday: Forgiveness and Healing.

Revisiting the Lord's Prayer; unforgiving or unforgiven? Understanding the connection between forgiving ourselves and others; "cheap grace" versus clarity and release.

Practices: Forgiveness meditations, healing prayer.

Practice: Forgiveness meditation.

READINGS

Required readings will include short selections from the following, to be found in the course reader:

"Frames," *Playing Telephone with God* (working title), DesCamp, Howe and Sweetser. In press, De Gruyter.

Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel, Twentieth Anniversary Edition, Thomas Keating. Continuum International Publishing, 2007.

Disciplines of the Spirit, Howard Thurman. Friends United Press, 1963.

Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life, Kathleen Norris. Riverhead Press, 2008.

The Conferences, John Cassian; Boniface Ramsey, O.P., editor. Paulist Press, 1997.

The Way of Perfection, Teresa of Avila. Paraclete Press, 2000.

The Practice of the Presence of God, Brother Lawrence (translated by Robert J. Edmonson). Paraclete Press, 1985.

Letters of St. Therese, Volume 2, Therese of Lisieux, (translated John Clarke, OCD). ICS Publications, 1982.
