

Journey to Prayer: An Interview with Ernest Larkin

Art Winter is an editor with NCR Cassettes; his wife, Betty, is a nurse. This article is one in a series of interviews they have had with teachers and writers on prayer about their own prayer experience.

I was seventeen years old and just out of high school when I went into the Carmelite novitiate, the year of intense practice and study of the spiritual life. I was young and eager, and I bought the whole package that was given to us. That meant high ideals and especially religious observance. Life was pretty much measured by performance and basically that meant physical presence at all the exercises. As long as you were present in the chapel, it was presumed that you were working at your prayer and spiritual life.

I have always been an observant person in my religious life, especially in the novitiate and afterward as a student. There were ups and downs, of course, but basically I thought I was doing all that was expected of me if I was at chapel or recreation or study according to the schedule. We spent almost four hours a day in chapel, counting Mass, meditation, and the divine office which we said in choir. In the novitiate there was the additional Little Office of the Blessed Virgin recited daily. The burden of so much chapel prompted one of my class to opt out after a couple of weeks with the remark that he had not expected that the Carmelite life meant living in church. Then and later, however, I took all this observance in stride. Even so, my prayer life really was not that significant to me. It was not that influential. Prayer was one corner of my life, but all the rest was where I was really living.

Both before and after ordination I lived a very ordered life. My assignments were in an academic world—on the high school level, in the seminary, and at Catholic University.

Because I was observant, I was looked upon as a “good religious.” But actually I was what I now decry as mediocre. In the language of spiritual theology, mediocrity is being a “good person.” You do all the things you are supposed to do, but there is no life inside and there is little growth. You look the same spiritually at fifty as you did at twenty-five. Everything is external, even prayer, and my life as a religious and priest for thirty years was all of a piece; it was that of a good servant, a good worker.

But then along came the Charismatic Renewal in the late 1960's. This was the last of a number of awakening influences in my life in that decade. I had gone to the seminary and got into a tight system at a tender age, with the result that I missed a lot of the normal experiences of an adolescent and young adult. The 1960's gave the possibility to people like me of having some of those missed experiences, like having more independence, rebelling against the system, and getting involved in close relationships, especially with women; the last mentioned was the most significant. All my life I had been a friendly person, but I was dominated by my role; I was always very professional, hence aloof and distant. But in the 1960's, because of the atmosphere in the Church, which spilled over immediately into the academic world, I was able to live more personally and more freely, to start moving from role identity to a more personal and autonomous existence.

I think all this had something to do with the way my prayer life was about to move. When I was first introduced into the

Charismatic Renewal, I did not buy it. I was right in on the ground floor, because it was now 1968, and my contacts were some of the early leaders in the “Pentecostal Movement,” as it was then called. I used to go to a lot of meetings, including national ones. But I was always the inquirer, the critic, and the seeker, rather than a believer. But the contact affected my prayer life, because I started to realize the possibility of a personal relationship with our Lord. Little by little I was moving in the direction of being a more personally convinced Christian, a more prayerful person.

There were conflicts. I had, at that time, the life-giving but giddy experience of falling in love. Yet I was committed without recourse to what I was as a religious and a priest. I had to work through the emotional upheaval of separation when my friend wanted to move toward marriage and family. At the same time I had other dependent relationships as well, and I was pulled apart by the conflicting demands, expectations and advice of different people. I could not handle any of this very well, because my whole background had made me a “pleaser” rather than an independent agent. Besides, there were the burdens of academic obligations and involvement in administrative tasks in my own religious community. The result of all of this was a physical breakdown.

In January, 1970, I had surgery for bleeding ulcers. My doctor said it would be good to get out of the academic world for a while, and I was lucky enough to find a berth in the new diocese of Phoenix, Arizona. The bishop was looking for a theologian to work with clergy and other adults in continuing education. I went there for one year, supposedly. I found a welcoming environment in the still-infant Charismatic Renewal there. But I was still an outsider, not willing to put my nickel down. Every time I would go to a meeting, I would have a thousand questions.

In January, 1972, I realized I had either to get out of the Charismatic Renewal totally, or to get into it with both feet. I decided to get into it. I had always loved the people in the Renewal. They were marvelous folks. There were some kooks, too, and that was okay. I went through the “Life in the Spirit” seminar. I was prayed over. The people were happy because they wanted priests in the Renewal, especially theologians, who might bring the added dimension of teaching to the movement. I, too, was happy to be among these enthusiastic Christians. I did not have any big conversion experience at my baptism, no fireworks, no sensation or experience when I was prayed over, other than a warm sense of being beloved of God.

Yet I can almost identify the point at which I had a whole new style and depth of relating to God. And it came through being prayed over and entering into the Charismatic Renewal as a disciple, as a believer. I closed off my theological questioning for the time being and followed the official thinking of the Charismatic Renewal as it was presented by the leaders of the movement. I, too, assumed leadership roles, especially locally in Phoenix.

For the next three years, I was deeply involved in Charismatic activity—prayer groups, talks, meetings. Eventually we formed a covenant community called “The People of Joy,” and followed the patterns set down by the People of Praise community in South Bend and the Word of God community in Ann Arbor. I was one of the coordinators: I was also liaison between the Renewal and the local bishop.

My style of prayer through those years became much more personal. Jesus was very real to me. I used to enjoy the prayer meetings very much. My own contemplative, meditative prayer life, never particularly strong, was helped by my new involvement. But I think my prayer life was more public than private. Still, it was very, very real, and I did grow in those years.

I had not been able to pray in tongues when I was in Washington. I recall my friends trying to “teach” me how, telling me to relax and utter a couple of syllables as if to get started. I think they were on the right track, but the block to this form of praying is our own inhibitions. My theology of praying in tongues is very simple, utterly lacking in mystery. I think tongues is simply a way of expressing oneself in non-sensical language that one finds an authentic vehicle for prayer.

After I got into the Renewal with a personal commitment, I found it easy to pray in tongues. I was now free enough and excited enough about God to talk “gibberish” and sing “gibberish”—and find it all very meaningful. The words have no intrinsic sense; they are a non-sense language, finding their sense in the “reasons of the heart.” If the experience of tongues is ever in a real language, that is an exception and a miracle. I am willing to admit the possibility of such a miracle, but I would demand that it be proved. Praying in tongues, to put it straight, is no more miraculous, no more supernatural, than saying the Our Father. And that, of course, is supernatural enough, because it is the work of grace.

In 1975, I made a 30-day retreat. Here was a new shift in my prayer life, a quantum leap of sorts. My prayer became experientially my personal relationship with Jesus. I saw the hour I spent at the beginning of each day in quiet prayer as the most important hour of my day and something to which I should be faithful no matter what. Through this retreat I returned to seeing my daily contemplative prayer as central and of the highest priority.

In those days my contemplative prayer was basically scriptural. I would reflect on the Scripture and/or just try to be present to the Lord. It was formless, without any good method or pattern. The Lord was quite real to me, and so the hour passed, although sometimes it was a marathon with me just

hanging in there. But it was generally a rewarding experience. It certainly was an experience that I thought was important in my life. For the most part, as I recall, I was very faithful to it.

But I suffered because I lacked method. That is where Centering Prayer came in. Praying through centering came into my life about 1979 when my effort to be faithful to an hour of prayer each day was running into more and more difficulty. My daily prayer had become old hat: the prayer became more and more dry. Hopefully there was interior growth here and the aridities were a sign. But at the same time I needed techniques to support me through the wear and tear on the psychological and even physical level. Till then, I was just there, giving some Scripture to myself, then maybe looking at the trees outside to remind me of God’s presence and his gifting the world, then engaging in dialogue with him, and so forth. In short, I was all over the place. Even though I had moments of good prayer, the whole process lacked order; it lacked pattern. I can recall being very easily moved to tears at times. I remember thinking, “Gee, that’s really neat. I must be getting somewhere, because I can cry over my love for Jesus.” I think now that some of those tears were authentic, and some of them were just sentimental. Without a method or theory, though, I had no way of measuring my experiences at the time.

From my retreat in 1975 on, there was a definite pulling away from my Charismatic involvement. I had gotten sick again in 1975, long before the retreat, and I had to curtail my activism. I withdrew from the Charismatic Renewal little-by-little. First, I resigned my leadership positions. Then I stopped going to meetings, and eventually, by 1978, I had simply dropped out. I was still close to the Charismatic people, who were always and still are dear to me, but I was no longer a “card-carrying member.” The Charismatic Renewal does not speak to me anymore. It had done its

good for me; it awakened me, shifting my thinking from a production-oriented, achievement-oriented existence, from doing a lot of things to a more receptive stance before God. It was providential in my life, and I am very grateful to the Holy Spirit and to many people in the Renewal for what I was privileged to receive through this vehicle. But I am not served by it any more. In fact, I am “turned off” by what I consider its shortcomings, especially its fundamentalism, its single-issue stances, its lack of an historical sense, its rejection of the complex and gray nature of human existence. I had been willing to live with these deficiencies as problems, and to deal with them as best I could; but I am not really willing to do that any more, at least in terms of being served personally by the Renewal. I have, since 1979, cast my lot with the contemplative currents and movements in the Church today. One such current is centering and Centering Prayer.

Centering is basically a new language for the contemplative approach to life. The term was coined by Thomas Merton to describe moving beyond one’s empirical self, which is our false self, the self that judges everything by appearance and by sense perception, into a deeper level of spiritual awareness and wholeness. Centering is getting in touch with your whole being, being in touch, not just with the outside world or with your own psychic world, your own ego world, but with the deeper reality that we call our heart or center.

Centering prayer is a way of fostering centeredness. Following the lead given by a respected friend and theologian, the Jesuit Father Tom Clarke, in two or three short paragraphs of an article in the British publication *The Way* in 1977, I have developed in my own practice and teaching three methods of centering prayer: *guided imagery*, *centering prayer* as such, and *consciousness examen*.

The first is guided imagery. It is a way of getting into depth contact with yourself and God by using images. The image in question is any symbolic activity, any activity that is expressive of your deepest will, your freedom, your deepest identity. Guided imagery is not just “visual,” nor is it just “audio.” It can be movement, like dancing. It can be a whole gathering of many experiences, like the liturgy, or a charismatic prayer service. Somehow this imagery allows us to pull together our outer and inner selves. The imagery is a symbol. It puts together our consciousness and our unconscious, our outside and our inside.

Guided imagery is a very natural way of praying, one might say the most normal way of praying. Its most frequent expression today is scriptural prayer, in which one allows oneself to be swept up in some scriptural passage, such as a scene from the life of Jesus or an Old Testament story. You can, for example, identify with one of the characters. You listen to a passage in Scripture as being spoken to you by God or by Christ. For instance, you read or listen to the story of the woman at the well, and, as you do so, you become that woman at the well. You hear her responses as your responses. You let the story speak to you. You don’t try to analyze it or control it. Rather you let the story carry you wherever it takes you. It is easy to do that if you are relaxed enough, listening enough and willing to be led rather than standing in judgment on the story.

The woman at the well speaks to me very much. I have used it many times in my own prayer. If I am going to use this story as the vehicle into my center, then I open the Scripture to the fourth chapter of St. John’s Gospel and read a few lines. I see Jesus moving through Samaria; he is tired and he sits down at the well in the middle of Samaria at Shechem, modern Nablus in the West Bank. As he is sitting there, I let him emerge into my consciousness. I try to let an image of him

form there. I do not necessarily say, “What does he look like?” But I let an image form in my mind. I let it happen. Perhaps his face comes into view or the perspiration on his garments, dust on his tunic or the sight of his feet worn and weary. I visualize him as he addresses this woman—who is myself. She has come there for a practical purpose, to get water. And I hear this man say to me, “Give me a drink.”

This whole re-presentation moves very slowly. I do not press it. I allow the imagery to emerge out of me, not out of the book, not out of some picture I have seen. The imagery is best when it is *my* imagery, when it comes out of my own history, my own unconscious, my own past. Those images will come if I am patient enough, quiet enough and slow enough. And they translate the story in to a conversation between Jesus and myself.

I see Jesus concerned and gentle and forthright with me. I hear myself say to him, “How come you’re asking me for a drink? I’m not one of your people, and I’m a woman, a nobody.” What does this language say to me? Maybe it says: “How come you are asking me, who am taken for granted by my peers, maybe also ill-equipped to do my job!” A reflection like this may come forward in my own thought. But mostly I just want to be there with him.

Guided imagery as a contemplative form of prayer—like all contemplative forms—leads to presence to the Lord. I just want to be present to him. If there are reflections, fine, but the main reason for the images is being present to the Lord. The whole story, if I listen to it carefully, evokes my story. I start realizing a little bit more that I am a person who is related to Jesus, and he is a person who is related to me, and my life in many ways mirrors that woman and Jesus.

In the years between 1975 and 1978, I was largely proving to myself that I could do an hour of prayer every morning. I would hang in there no matter what. Many times I

would check the clock. But once I learned a method like guided imagery and saw it as a method of contemplative prayer, one that is as valid as simply being attentive to the Lord in silence, which is the more traditional Carmelite concept of contemplation, new possibilities opened up. I started to structure my prayer. I would spend the first half of the prayer in silent attentiveness to the Lord (which is actually the second method of centering prayer, which I shall discuss momentarily), and then in the second half of the prayer I would use the liturgical readings of the day for guided imagery. In those days I always tried to stick to an hour. I do not do that any more. Have I regressed? I don’t think so. My total meditative prayer time still adds up to an hour or so, but I am not hung up on the time. Actually, my time frames now are about twenty minutes of simple attention to God in what I call “mantric prayer,” the second form of centering prayer, then another twenty minutes on guided imagery prayer, in which I usually use the Scripture. Usually I offer Mass at this time and then after Mass spend time doing my journal, usually another twenty minutes.

Sometimes I use other forms of guided imagery, like nature—like Lake Michigan, which I can see from my window. It is a beautiful image of God for me. I look at that lake and let it tell me things about God, and it does not disappoint me. It speaks eloquently of God at this point in my life. It’s amazing.

The second centering prayer (which I refer to as strict centering prayer, because the name has been co-opted by some writers to describe this one form and no others) can be called mantric prayer. It uses the mantra or holy word as a focusing agent. Mantric prayer is a centering process in which I try to be both relaxed and alert at the same time in an attitude of total presence to the Reality of God. I try to keep myself in that attitude by repeating a holy word or holy phrase rhythmically, in synchronization with my

breathing. The mantra has to be a very short phrase, because I repeat it over and over again with my slow breathing. Mantric prayer is thought-less, concept-less, image-less presence to the Lord. It is based on the premise that just being near the Lord is enough. Mantric prayer does nothing for my imagination, intellect, or feelings. But it holds me at attention to the Lord, and that is what real prayer is, loving attention to him.

Being a Carmelite, I have always identified contemplation with this stance in prayer. The mantra is not part of our tradition, but simple presence is the whole contemplative effort. So the mantric form of contemplation became most natural to me as a Carmelite; the only new element is the mantra itself, the holy word. This may not sound like a significant addition, but it is such, because the mantra gives you something to hang on to. It is a sign that something is going on. If you don't use a mantra, you are unmoored. If your attachment to the Lord is not strong enough to automatically and spontaneously repel distraction, ennui and boredom, you will wander all over the place. The mantric form of prayer brings order into contemplative prayer. I use the mantric form as an entree into prayer. If I really want to pray—whether it is assisting at the liturgy (guided imagery) or using reflections on my life, which is the third form of centering—I find that I best begin with mantric prayer. That gets me in touch with the Lord. From that vantage point I can move into other contemplative forms as well, which in another setting, without that presence to the Lord, would be just active forms of reflection or meditation and not contemplative at all.

I use “Abba” as my mantra about ninety percent of the time. The other times I use “Jesus.” I say the mantra more or less continuously, not out loud but in my mind. I get in touch with the Lord in a minute-or-two act of faith, in which I identify the Lord's reality within me. Then I hold myself at

attention by saying. “Ab--ba,” saying “Ab” as I breathe out, and saying “ba” as I breathe in. It is a very simple and natural approach. The mantra does not call attention to itself. Eventually you say the mantra unconsciously. It starts being said in you, you hear yourself saying it. This may sound strange, but it is true. This happens to me, not in any extraordinary way, nor at all times, but as a consoling support, as part of my consciousness, almost part of my breathing at prayer.

The third method of centering prayer that I use is consciousness examen. In this form I reflect on my life. I use the experiences of my life, which are part of me now, to reveal God to me. They can do that if he was really present and acting in certain past actions. I can retrieve that presence by re-living the experience, now at a deeper level of my being, with more awareness of what perhaps at the time was not noticed at all or noticed only vaguely and without appreciation.

For example, I recall that this morning I felt very threatened by the prospect of having to give a presentation on prayer to a given group. I recall how inept I felt, what anxiety gripped me, what fears assailed me. I had awakened frequently in the night and rose early because I was worried and troubled. I remember that experience. It is part of my life. I bring all of this to prayer and try to locate God's presence in the experience. Was he there at all? if so, why did those negative feelings assail me? As I relive the sequence of events, “tasting them interiorly,” I begin to grasp that I felt beleaguered precisely because I was unaware of God's presence in the anticipation of that talk, I recall that in my prayer at the time, both formal and informal, I had protested that this ministry was his work. I recall having said: “Maybe you can use me better in my weakness than if I am confident and feel totally equal to the task.” At the time there was only dry faith, raw resolution, and

no feeling of God's support. But as I am praying over the experience now, I start realizing that God was sustaining me through the ordeal. He was there and my faith tells me he was supporting and sustaining me. I experience a certain quiet joy, peace, presence. I am now able to recognize other dimensions of the whole experience, namely, the working of God in a conflictual situation. I had been unaware earlier, too preoccupied to notice. But now I notice and I identify the fact that God was really there, allowing me to rise above the situation and act in it. At the time, I was thinking only about my ineptness and fears; I was feeling only threat and anxiety. That was I not allowing a faith vision. In retrospect I experience the resolution of conflict by re-doing the original episode. I say: "This is the Lord's work and I am doing it on his terms." That brings liberation in the playback. In the prayer, I experience the joy of that liberation and gratitude for it. And so I get in touch with God that way.

The three forms of centering prayer are supposed to culminate in the presence of the Lord. Generally, I use them in patterns. I start with the mantric form, as I said, and move into one of the other two. That is what I do when I am basically together. But if I am worried about something, or if I am overly tired, or if I am out of sorts, I will probably start out with either guided imagery or with consciousness examen, they are easier to do if you are distracted or anxious. The mantric form does demand a certain amount of interior peace.

I am sometimes asked to relate these three forms of centering to classical Catholic meditation and contemplation. Meditation, as the term is used in Catholic tradition, refers to a style of prayer that precedes centering prayer. Meditation is a form of prayer in which there is much thinking and imagining about God, but less contact with him. It is about God, about me, about people. It is not as much presence to God as it is figuring out,

analyzing, making resolutions, making good responses. Meditation leads to contemplation. You come to the point where you now know *God*, and so you don't want to be thinking *about* him or even to be making affective acts like faith and love and contrition toward him. You just want to be with him. It is like two people who love each other. They don't want to be giving each other five reasons why they love each other. They already love, and they just want to be there together in silence, perhaps enjoying together some reflection or some beauty before them. Meditation is one step removed from real prayer, because real prayer is contact with God. Meditation is like getting the stage set for real prayer. And the real prayer is the contemplation.

The word contemplation has many senses. In general it means presence to God, attending to God, contact with God, knowing and loving God, loving awareness of God. Those are all acceptable descriptions. The three methods of centering prayer are contemplative in thrust. They are contemplative in hope. A person who is an actualized contemplative, a person who is really contemplative, is less dependent on any of the three methods than a beginner in the art. Contemplation in the true sense is not tied to methods. It is grace, a gift, God's very self communicated to us and experienced. It is really where you are spiritually. It is God influencing your life whether you are aware of it or not. The centering methods are helpful, because they make a person vulnerable to God: they keep one at attention, they provide order in your search.

What has God become for me through these prayer experiences? Definitely he has become much more a person as I have grown. By that I mean he is much more present to me precisely as person and as other. I have, thank God, a deep sense of his love for me. When I am struggling with a problem or working through a moral decision, I can start with the realization that the Lord is there and that he

loves me. I can get in touch with him and feel that if I “hang in” with the Lord I am bound to succeed, to come out with a good *because* he loves me and is the Lord. I think I would have to say that the Lord is more real for me now. He is more loving, he is more personal, he is more the desire of my heart. I do not like to miss my prayer. If I miss my prayer in morning, my day is fragmented. My efforts at contemplative prayer changed my own consciousness

I would have to say, however, that there is no image that immediately springs to mind which describes God for me. Even a word like “Abba,” which is a good word for me, does not do it. God is more like a pervasive influence, like a force. He is just there and there are no boundaries. I do not know what he looks like. I do not know what he feels like. He is just there. I believe he is there. It is a matter of faith, but it is a faith that has an experiential reality about it. It is not a theorem. I just have to say that through prayer God is part of reality. He is not the things I see, but he is in them!

Touching God on our deepest level – which is the spiritual level – is trans-historical. It is more than a metaphysical experience. It is something that is in the realm of faith and of God, and, therefore, it is not measurable psychologically or physically. There is, however, an overflow. God fills the emptiness of our spirit. If God is filling that emptiness, there is bound to be an overflow of one sort or another. The overflow might be darkness in

my consciousness, a kind of numbness or lack of feeling in my interior being. Or it might be light and warmth and felt love. As a matter of fact there are multiple overflows. Sometimes I feel very light and airy, precisely because I have been close to God. I feel the joy of being a believer, the joy of being a disciple of Jesus, of having the experience of spending time with him. That gives me a light feeling.

Here is one very specific experience that I have had, usually in terms of the third form of centering prayer—finding God present in some past experience and then re-living that experience. When I have discerned God’s presence in this way in an intense degree, I sometimes get a really good feeling in my solar plexus. It is almost as though my solar plexus were an indicator light on the dashboard of my psyche. Is it an accurate pointer? Does this experience prove God is there or not? I know this kind of experience is dubious, but when it occurs, I feel more sure, more joyful and more peaceful about the Lord. I get a warm feeling, and I praise God. I have not had this particular experience much lately. But I do recall that I used to refer to my “solar plexus feeling” as a high point of discernment. It could be open to deception, I am sure, and I am glad our God is greater, not only than any thought, but any feeling that we can have about him. The bottom line of all contemplative prayer, like the Christian life itself, is faith, and ultimately I am glad the search is on that level.