

# How to pray like a medieval monk...

*(Based on The Ladder of Monks by, Guigo II)*

## Introduction

Guigo II was a medieval mystic who put down the classical process of Christian prayer in four easy steps. While these steps spring from the Catholic tradition, they can certainly be applied by anyone from the Abrahamic faiths. They may even be fruitfully applied by those who are simply *spiritual* and believe in a higher power that guides/watches over us. Here I've expanded on Guigo's guidance in light of history subsequent to his writing.

Prayer can happen anywhere, but wherever you are be sure to compose yourself. Adopt a posture that is suited to inner thought and humility before God. This could be kneeling, sitting upright with hands on our lap, or even lying prostrate on the ground before God. Lying sleepy in our beds doesn't count as you're more likely to fall asleep! This is not only conducive to inner thought, it also acknowledges that as human beings we are a joining of body and soul. Harmonizing the two will only help us pray more effectively.

For our officers: if you're able, take just a few moments to step out of your vehicle, even just slowly strolling around it to take in the fresh air, get your blood flowing and enjoy the relative quiet of the outdoors. If you are in your vehicle, park somewhere safe, turn off the AM/FM radio, raise your seat back a bit, and place your self in God's presence.

Postures of prayer utilizing only our hands - maybe you're in a more public setting: waiting in court, or riding with a colleague. Even here you can adopt *postures* of prayer that are discrete but helpful. One of my old mentors, Msgr. Bill Lyons taught us to sit upright, quiet our minds as best we can and simply use our hands.

- Placing our hands in our lap, open to the sky indicates that we are receptive, ready for God to act in our lives and fill us with his gifts.
- Folding our hands together *embraces* others in an act of intercessory prayer on behalf of others.
- Forming two gentle/loose fists in our lap is a sign of strong resolve to act on what God has asked us to do, confident not in our strength but in his.
- Extending our hands flat across our lap is like an act of humble prostration before God's mighty love.

## The 4 Steps

### Read

The first step of prayer is reading. Classically this meant reading the Word of holy scripture, or the writing/preaching of a saint, but we may reasonably expand this concept. In Eastern Christianity, for example, people *read* icons, gazing up on the holy images of Jesus and the saints that remind us of the events of their ministry. In the West, saints have frequently counseled gazing at the crucifix to *read* the work Jesus accomplished on the cross. We might -just as well- *read* a piece of sacred music, the way the sunlight lands on a leaf etc. St. Ignatius Loyola advises his students to read their lives: What happened yesterday? What are my goals today? How am I doing at achieving the goals God has set for me? What passions, thoughts, distractions have I encountered along the way? Etc.... Whatever we choose to read, we want to review the material multiple times, slowly... looking for the particulars wherein God holds our

attention. Then ask the question, “Why?” “Why does my attention get caught on this detail, this word, this event etc.?”

### Meditate

Once we have thoroughly read, we meditate. Meditation is the application of my human senses and powers of thought to a given issue. Meditation can include exercises such as mindfulness because by them we quiet and focus our human faculties on the issue at hand, whatever it may be. That said, it is distinct from mere mindfulness because it invites God into the picture. Meditation is our part of a dialogue with God. It can include “thinking through” issues. It can also include simply trying our best to quiet ourselves. Meditation can also - crucially - include integration. It’s one thing to have a lot of good things going on in our lives, but it’s another to see them all working harmoniously together and according to God’s plan. This is what we mean by integration.

### Contemplate

Though we often think of meditation and contemplation synonymously, they are distinct. If in meditation we use our natural human capacities, contemplation is us staring into the eyes of God asking him to apply his faculties to the issues at hand. Again, if this is a dialogue, contemplation is us saying, “Lord God, I know what I think about what I’ve read... what do YOU think?”

Rarely does contemplation involve a direct or immediate answer to that question. Yes there will be incremental guidance... and we should rejoice in that because it means we are being touched by the Divine. Overall however, contemplation includes perception of God’s promptings over the course of time. Looking back on a long series of little signs, we will often perceive a pattern take shape, leading to a larger life lesson.

### Act

Having arrived at some conclusions (be they big or small) we then resolve to act. Our action should always be -in some way- an act of thanksgiving to God for the gift of being in touch with things heavenly. This has two effects on our action: (a) it honors God and (b) it guards our actions from going awry. For example, after a family fight, on my own I might resolve at the end of prayer - tempted by my own weaknesses and biases - to “give a family member the silent treatment.” On my own I might deceive myself into thinking this reasonable and healthy. But anyone would be hard pressed to think of this as a reasonable act of thanksgiving to God. Understanding resolutions as acts of thanksgiving is a safe guard against such self deception.