There are three basic expressions of the Christian life of prayer: (1) vocal prayer, (2) meditation, and (3) contemplative prayer.

Common to all three is the recollection of the heart toward God in faith, which is the essence of prayer. This recollection is either an act of the will or a supernatural gift received from God.

Faith is either natural and based in reason, or supernatural and based in grace.

Meditation (also called “mental prayer”) is a spiritual reflection that begins in divine revelation (Scripture or Tradition). This is the path that leads to contemplative prayer.

Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire in order to deepen our faith, convert our heart, and fortify our will to follow Christ.

The practice of meditation is the initial step toward the full union of knowledge and love with our Lord.

Each meditation should culminate in an informal loving conversation with our Lord, aloud or silently, in response to his love for us.

The Degrees of Divine Virtue (Union with God through Faith, Hope, and Love) in St Teresa’s Mansions

A. Ascetical Mansions (Acquired Recollection: Active, Habitual Union with God)
   1. Vocal Prayer (State of Grace with a Need for Self-Knowledge and Humility)
   2. Mental Prayer (Hearing and Heeding the Call to Cognitive and Affective Meditation)
   3. Prayer of Simplicity (Habitual Union of Will, Intellect, and Memory with God)

B. Mystical Mansions (Infused Recollection: Passive, Continual Union with God)
   4. Prayer of Quiet, Prayer of Faith (The Dark Night of the Senses)
   5. Prayer of Union, Spiritual Meeting, Illumination (Passive Union of the Will with God)
   6. Spiritual Betrothal, Death and Burial, Apostolic Mission (The Dark Night of the Spirit)
   7. Spiritual Marriage, Resurrection (Passive Union of Will, Intellect, and Memory with God)

There are degrees of divine virtue on the Christian way of perfection, as described by the Doctors of the Church, especially St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross.

- The Purgative Way (Beginners) = Teresa’s Mansions 1-4.
- The Illuminative Way (Proficients) = Teresa’s Mansions 5-6.
- The Unitive Way (the Perfect) = Teresa’s Mansions 7.

Each stage requires a new conversion and transformation.

- Mansions 2 (mental prayer), 4 (dark night of the senses), and 6 (dark night of the spirit) are transitional.
- Mansions 1 (state of grace), 3 (state of simplicity), 5 (state of union of the will), and 7 (state of full transforming union) are stational. (See Venerable Fr Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus on this.)

We typically spend many years at each stage before advancing.

We typically receive a particular apostolic mission in the dark night of the spirit (Mansions 6).

The contemplative life is inseparable from the apostolic life, and it is the subjective path to Pentecost and Heaven. The objective path to Pentecost and Heaven is constituted by the sacraments.
- The transition to infused recollection (the dark night of the senses) requires God’s positive intervention.

- Contemplation is a gift, but it is offered to all who truly seek it.
  - “God can certainly grant this grace to a person without any effort on the person’s part, but ordinarily the Lord waits for the soul to reach this point by being faithful to the paths of vocal and mental prayer, because it is by this way that the soul is purified and lets go to the things of earth in order to entrust itself to God alone.”—Sister Lucia of Fatima, OCD

- The degrees of divine faith, hope, and love are cumulative and build on one another.

- Strictly speaking, we do not leave one stage behind as we pass to another.

- We do not ever abandon the active practice of vocal prayer and meditation, even though in the higher degrees of faith and prayer God may occasionally suspend the natural operations of our faculties through extraordinary trials or raptures and thereby temporarily prevent us from engaging in it.

- Desolations and consolations typically move us to practice mental prayer more frequently and fervently as we undergo them, and they contribute to our perfection.

- The various forms and stages of contemplative prayer are a single gradual process in the soul.

- At some point, when we have prepared ourselves and drawn close to God by meditation and self-discipline, God draws close to us and infuses his knowledge and love in our souls in a new way, and our prayer becomes contemplative.

- When God offers this grace, typically we begin to experience a great deal of darkness and desolation.

- Gradually his love conquers the will, if we remain in the state of grace, cooperate sacrificially, and do not resist his action in us.

- Our life of prayer and our souls must undergo a gradual but radical transformation.

- The captivation of the will by God is intermittent at first but gradually becomes constant.

- So the development from “passive recollection” to “the prayer of quiet” to “the prayer of union” can be understood as the process by which God supernaturally conquers our imperfections and conforms our will to his own with his own divine power.

- The experiential dimension of this process is described by the Doctors of the Church and in the lives of the Saints.

- The infusion of divine love in the will is delightful but it also places the soul in darkness and confusion.

- Divine love brings with it a divine light which initially blinds the soul and leaves it in the dark, so to speak.

- Gradually the soul will adjust to the supernatural activity and light of God within it and grow toward a more perfect union and spiritual marriage with God.

- Gradually God will captivate and elevate not only the will but also the memory and the intellect.

- We must understand this process, accept it sacrificially, and cooperate with it effectively.

- We should endeavor to understand the process both abstractly and concretely.

- Concretely we come to understand the process by undergoing it.

- Analogies can more or less help us to understand the process in the abstract.

- Prayer is a covenant relationship and involves what are called a spiritual meeting, a spiritual betrothal, and a spiritual marriage (a marriage between Christ and the self). Marriage is a basic analogy in the Scriptures.

- In contemplative prayer, the soul learns to respond to God as God takes the lead.

- In contemplative prayer, the soul learns to move at the impulse of divine knowledge and love.

- Contemplative prayer is analogous to the journey toward the sacrament of Baptism (a marriage of Christ and the soul), and it terminates in the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost and apostolic mission).

- The self (mind and heart) must gradually come under the direction of Christ in the soul (intellect and will).
The lives of the Saints in general manifest the process concretely.

The lives of the Saints therefore help us to understand the process of spiritual growth concretely and inspire us to advance in it zealously.

God has given us the Science of the Saints. May we learn to imitate their virtues. Nothing else will make us truly happy in this life. Faith is happiness of the mind.

Happiness in general is exercising the physical, intellectual (knowledge, understanding, wisdom, art, prudence), moral (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance), and theological virtues (faith, hope, charity).

Aristotle was basically right about happiness and human nature, and human nature is perfected by grace.

The force of habit, for good or for evil, is the most powerful natural force on earth.

In order to grow and be perfected in us, the virtues must be practiced and put to the test.

Our spiritual life is thus analogous to our physical life, our intellectual life, and our moral life.

The unifying concept is virtue.

The spiritual life is a matter of growing in the virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

The ascetical aspect of our lives is what we can do naturally to grow and perfect the virtues in us.

The mystical aspect of our lives is what God does supernaturally to grow and perfect the virtues in us.

Both naturally and supernaturally, growth in virtue entails hard work, difficulties, trials, and tribulations.

The saints of every time and place have passed through these in their lives: Job, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David, Joseph, Mary, the Apostles, Benedict, Scholastica, Francis, Clare, Teresa, John, Edith Stein, etc.

The only way to grow in virtue is to incline yourself to what is difficult rather than to what is easy.

“No pain, no gain” is the universal law of growing in any kind of virtue.

Wisdom is understanding the Cross; holiness is embracing the Cross.

God will send us on a particular personal mission, but not until we have undergone a suitable formation.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is the perfect model of faith and holiness.

And next to her Son Jesus, no one embraced the Cross as much as Mary did.

Mary and the Apostles received their formation directly from Christ.

They passed through the dark night of the senses (the Passion of Christ) and the dark night of the spirit (the Ascension of Christ) before being sent on their apostolic mission (the Day of Pentecost).

Mary carries out the apostolic mission of the Church in manner different from that of the Apostles.

Mary had the greatest intimacy with God and continually practiced apostolic prayer.

Mary experienced the greatest sorrows, trials, and temptations, but also the greatest joys and consolations.

She would have been tempted to despair, just as Therese and most other Saints were tempted to despair.

Mary accepted and inclined herself to that which is difficult: the way of perfection.

Of all the Saints, Mary has the highest degree of virtue (faith, hope, and charity) and holiness.

Because Mary was chosen to be the virgin mother of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, she is the most holy creature of God who ever lived.

From the first moment of her conception, the Blessed Virgin Mary was full of grace and was preserved immune from all stain of original sin. This is the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

She was redeemed from sin by the merits of Christ even before the Incarnation.

Furthermore, she never committed any personal sins her whole life long.

That is the reason why we call her the “All Holy One.”

She freely consented to this unique human participation in the divine mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and through the redemption thus became the New Eve, the Mother of the New Creation.

Mary is the All-Holy Ever-Virgin Mother of God.
• She perfectly possessed perfect union with God through faith and spiritual marriage.
• She had perfect conformity with the will of God and possessed an abiding knowledge (i.e. an intuitive, indirect, connatural, infused, contemplative, loving, intellectual vision) of the Holy Trinity in her soul.
• She was perfectly divinized by sanctifying grace and participated perfectly in the life of God by faith, knowing and loving him as he knows and loves himself.
• She possessed a perfect identification with her Son Jesus through the Holy Spirit.
• She possessed the mind and heart of Christ perfectly and was perfectly conformed to his likeness.
• God wants us all to imitate the faith and works of Mary and to become like her by grace through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
• But the only way to advance is by way of the Cross (suffering in imitation of Christ).
• The Blessed Virgin Mary especially intervenes to help us through the dark night of faith.
• After the Cross comes the Resurrection. After the dark night comes the light of day.
• Our Lady of Mount Carmel, pray for us!