

ACTIVE
PRAYER
SERIES

P *Praying* *with the* **body**

BRINGING THE PSALMS TO LIFE

Roy DeLeon, ObISB

Foreword by Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP



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Praying with the Body: Bringing the Psalms to Life

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Dedication

For the bodies, hearts, and souls of St. Placid Priory,
my spiritual community in Lacey, Washington.
And for retired Monsignor Arsenio Bautista,
a model of joyful holiness,
uncle and spiritual guardian of Annie,
the angel who became my wife
and the mother to Xenia and Marita.

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Preface

*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.*

PSALM 63:1

“My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you.” How down-to-earth the psalmist is; how human in his relationship with God. His physical and spiritual worlds are intimately bound together. Here these two worlds seem so interchangeable they might well be one and the same. He couldn’t pray and talk with God without mentioning and discussing his physical condition. When the psalmist writes, *Deliver me, O my God!* he means these words with both his body with his soul. Thus in this book, the body is treated as an equal partner with the heart and soul during prayer. “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,” Paul told the Corinthians. “God’s Spirit dwells in our bodies.” Paul added, “Therefore glorify God in your body.” Thus, including God’s holy temple, our bodies, in our prayers glorifies the One who created us.

St. Benedict of Nursia, the father of western monasticism, was fully aware of this. Even in death, St. Benedict suggested that the body was an active participant in our spiritual journey. In 2005, as I and fellow Benedictine oblates were guided on a tour of the Abbey of Monte Cassino in Italy, a monastery established by St. Benedict, I was transfixed by a bronze statue of the dying St. Benedict. The statue was inspired by St. Gregory the Great’s account of St. Benedict’s last days on earth:

*Six days before he died he gave orders for his tomb
to be opened. Almost immediately he was seized with
a violent fever that rapidly wasted his remaining*

energy. Each day his condition grew worse until finally on the sixth day he had his disciples carry him into the chapel, where he received the Body and Blood of our Lord to gain strength for his approaching end. Then, supporting his weakened body on the arms of his brethren, he stood with his hands raised to heaven and as he prayed breathed his last.¹

Following St. Benedict's example, this book includes the body in each prayer session. This allows us to fully acknowledge, appreciate, and praise God and his work. It also gives us the opportunity to practice good stewardship of God's creation. For example, tight shoulders and neck muscles might inform us that we are not managing our stress levels well. Or back pain might indicate we are carrying extra weight that we don't need, or indicate we are spending too much time in a static position in front of our TV or computer. A shortness of breath might be a clue that we are holding on to something, which calls for practicing patience or forgiveness. So, being aware of our bodies during prayer, we might notice where our bodies need our care and attention.

This same body awareness signaled St. Benedict to prepare for his death. He was aware of his waning energy and the rapidly worsening condition of his body. He, like the psalmist, was very much in tune with his body. He knew his body would help him in his journey to "God's holy mountain." Perhaps, if we learn how to listen to the body like St. Benedict, we too might lead a life that better proclaims and glorifies God.

So, fellow seeker, let us glorify the Almighty with our body, heart, and soul. With all our being, let us pray with the ancient psalms, the most embodied text of our Holy Scriptures.

*I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!" PSALM 122:1*

Foreword

Within the first thirty pages one becomes aware that this is a book that, like a fine wine, has come to maturation slowly. The various prayer components are arranged in a repeated pattern, like good ritual: opening invocation, psalm prayer, silent reflection, praying with the body, heart, and soul, sitting with the Divine Presence, living your prayer, contemporary psalm, closing prayer.

At the heart of this ritual pattern is the author's desire to offer ways—gentle, doable ways—of making our worship more truly holistic, of going to God not just with our hearts and minds, but with our bodies as well. This is a much-needed encouragement. Christians and Jews in the Western world may be surrounded by playing fields and fitness centers, but when we step into the church or synagogue to enter into conscious discourse with the Divine, we by and large check our bodies at the door.

By contrast, the Muslim at prayer is constantly bowing and kneeling, touching the head to the floor, and moving the arms and the head to incline the heart. The Buddhist enters into a series of prostrations. The Hindu learns yoga in order to meditate with greater stillness in the body and focused awareness in the mind.

While Christians may have one of—if not *the*—highest theology of the body among the religions of the world; they also have one of the lowest levels of embodied spiritual *practice*. The great Christian festivals of Christmas, Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost all make profound and radical statements of faith about God's esteem for our embodied being. And in Judaism, the body-mind-spirit is a seamless entity named not by three different words but by a single word: *nefes*.



With this book, Roy DeLeon invites us to claim that rich tradition and to give it expression in concrete ways in our manner of praying. Make no mistake: while this book contains many pictures of different bodily postures, it is a *prayer* book. And the four basic ways of praying—oral, mental, affective, and contemplative—are all contained in the ritual pattern.

One begins with an invocation and reading of a psalm (oral prayer). Then one reflects on what one has just read (mental prayer). The reflection then moves from the head to the heart, stirred by such invitations as “Feel compassion for the poor, the sick, and the old” or “As you inhale, feel love pouring into your heart, and feeding your soul” (affective prayer). As Roy reminds us in the Introduction, in order for the poses and gestures in this book, to become *blessed* movements, they need to be guided and supported by a relentless longing.

These feelings of the heart are given corporeal expression through simple bodily movements and gestures. And in the end, there is quiet sitting with the Divine Presence (contemplative prayer), one-ing with the One. The closing suggestion for “Living your Prayer” is also utterly appropriate, as the divine command in the Abrahamic traditions is never content to leave one in the pew or on one’s knees, but it is a hand on the back moving the prayer outward to pass on the experience of God’s love in concrete terms by helping someone meet their very real needs.

The Silent Reflections and Living Your Prayers are wonderfully creative and varied, and the prayerful movements in response to psalm lines are bound to bring your prayer alive in fresh and renewing ways. And once you have experienced from the inside how natural and fulfilling it is to pray in this way, you have the author’s full encouragement to give free rein to your own devotional heart in response to the movements of God’s Spirit within.

In other words, this book that you hold in your hands may be the beginning of a whole new unfolding in your dialogue with the Divine.

—Thomas Ryan, CSP

Introduction

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

Thus, Psalm 84 begins, revealing how integral the body is in our spiritual tradition's way of prayer. Here the heart and mind and the psalmist's soul are in dialogue with God. This ancient tradition of praying with the body, heart, and soul is the foundation and source of this book. The ancient book of Psalms, the most embodied text in our Scripture, inspires, guides, and counsels this book.

When the body participates fully in our spiritual journey, our relationship with all of creation and with God our Creator is enriched. This book offers prayer methods and companionship for the spiritual pilgrim discovering how to pray with the body and invites you to taste, explore, and perhaps discover a new or different dish in the divine banquet.

This book opens the door to a way of prayer that, depending on our readiness, could influence most of our life. The meditations and reflections connect us to our deepest desire to be with the Beloved even as the body movements let us act out our hunger and longing for true happiness, for freedom from fear, and for deep peace.

The body movements and gestures presented here are based partly on ways we in the West already involve the body in worship. Other poses are unique to yoga. Regardless of origin, the poses and gestures in this book become blessed movements when they are guided and supported by a relentless longing and a faithful intention to be united with the Divine.

Seeking the Divine with the Psalmist

The Psalms contains every human experience there was, there is, and will ever be. Telling the story of pilgrims and seekers of the Promised Land, it is an intimate journal of their travel from captivity to freedom, from mourning into dancing, from death into life. And it is also our story—then, now, and always. The psalmist acquired wisdom, not from study, or attending retreats and workshops, but from living a down-to-earth, full-bore life. The Psalms present an audaciously honest relationship with an image of God that both avenges and saves, that both punishes and forgives, and that is both jealous and loving. Whatever our image of God is, the ancient psalmist can be a blessed companion for us as we yearn for a deeper and fuller prayer life.

The life conditions of ancient Israel are obviously different from ours today. Yet the deep and lifelong need for happiness and freedom from difficulties apply now as it did then. By experiencing the psalms in our whole being, we meet the psalmist when our feelings and emotions take us to the edge of our cliff. We might see the psalmist's heightened emotions in other people when they are angry and hopeless, or when they jump in joyous celebration. We might hear the psalmist's cry in the oppressed, the poor, the sick, the old, and even in the oppressors and other wrongdoers, as we watch the news from a comfortable sofa. Maybe the psalmist's experiences will teach us that our personal experience is the human experience: we are angry and hurt and crying for the same reason, longing and craving and asking for the same thing, singing and dancing with the same joy.

Then maybe the psalmist will help us realize that we are all, excluding no one, brothers and sisters. We are all beloved children of God.

Looking into the Role of the Body in Western Spirituality

Western religious ceremonies and services usually employ three major gestures. We *kneel* to signify homage, penitence, adoration, or reverence. We *sit* to listen and meditate on readings and lectures. We *stand* for openings and endings of services, during the reading of the gospel, or while greeting one another with peace. Some of us might make the sign of the cross. Some bow with hands in prayer position to acknowledge and reverence the Holy One present within everyone. We *genuflect*, bending either just one knee or both knees, to pay respect to God in the sanctuary. Religious icons and paintings show images of angels and saints and other holy beings with heads turned up or facing down and the body bent forward or arched back. The hands may be clasped and pressed to the heart, or the arms might be extended toward the ground, or form a cross, or be held heavenward. Monastics may lie face down on the floor, prostrate either in thanksgiving, in penitence, or in reverence.

The Catholic Encyclopedia offers this information on the role of the body in prayer:

Postures in prayer are also an evidence of the tendency in human nature to express inward sentiment by outward sign. Not only among Jews and Christians, but among pagan peoples also, certain postures were considered appropriate in prayer, as, for instance, standing with arms raised among the Romans. The Orante indicates the postures favored by the early Christians, standing with hands extended, as Christ on the cross, according to Tertullian; or with hands raised toward heaven, with bowed heads, or, for the

faithful, with eyes raised toward heaven and, for the catechumens, with eyes bent on the earth; prostration, kneeling, genuflection, and such gestures as striking the breast are all outward signs of the reverence proper for prayer, whether in public or private.²

Reading and Listening to the Psalms

The book of Psalms can be read literally, for historical information. Yet, this is the least helpful approach if our intention is inner transformation and conversion of heart. For Huston Smith in his book, *The Soul of Christianity*, the kind of literal interpretation of sacred text is the lowest of the four steps (which include in order: literal, ethical, allegorical, and anagogic) on the ladder of exegesis. *Classical Christianity took it for granted that literalism could not do the full job, which is why Jesus spoke to [the disciples] in parables.* The psalms can also serve as a source of ethical and moral advice. Its concrete images (like enemies, worms, and arrows in the night), or its highly-charged words (like *kill*, *avenge*, and *crushed the heads*) can be symbols that may help us understand or offer a different view to our present situation. These sacred texts can be read as sources of inspiration, wisdom, and clarity for the present-day pilgrim. Praying with the body works from the inside out. Reading the psalms and reflecting on how its words might affect our living relationships applies anagogic, allegorical, and ethical interpretations. Then the literal interpretation through body prayer incarnates these sacred words. This embodied way of prayer cultivates partnership among the members of our being. The body, heart, and soul experience better balance

and coordination, tighter bonding and therefore more peaceful and satisfying movement toward God. It is similar to being on an extended unplanned trip with your best, truest, most reliable friend!

As Love, God has equipped us with everything we need in our journey toward goodness, truth, and beauty. God, absolutely compassionate to all and eternally faithful in his love, is always with us. There is nothing we or anyone can do to separate us from that divine Love. Therefore, we read and pray the Scriptures, particularly the difficult passages of the Psalms, with awareness of God's loving presence. Enfolded as we are in the love of the Creator, we still cry and beg for deliverance and demand protection like the psalmist—because we are human. Even though we know that Christ conquered death, we still cry out in frustration like the psalmist. Because our fears, worldly desires, and need to control still “lurk in secret like a lion in its covert,” waiting to tear us apart, we join with the psalmist, saying: *Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me!*

This book, then, provides us ways to pray with our bodies and to offer our whole being to God. We ask God to deliver us from the pain and suffering of this life. We ask God to bring us quickly to paradise. And so we bow, praying hands pressed to our chest. We bend. We kneel. We stretch our arms toward God, our hearts open, our souls thirsting for the One in whom we live, and move, and have our being.

Using This Book

You are invited to make this book your own personal prayer book. Mark in it. Write in it. Adapt or modify the words, images, and gestures to fit your present condition. But whatever changes you decide to make, remember the intention is to unite your body, heart, and soul with God.

The main offering of this prayer book is divided into three sections: *Alleluia*, *Sanctus*, and *Amen*. The intention for each section is expanded on the first page of each section.

- *Alleluia* Ten sessions suitable for morning prayers and the beginning of any endeavor
- *Sanctus* Twenty sessions appropriate for midday prayers, or for the middle of any activity
- *Amen* Ten sessions intended for evening prayer, or for the end of any project or activity

You will notice we have more *Sanctus* sessions than *Alleluia* and *Amen* sessions. *Alleluia* sessions generally apply to thanking God for another beginning, another chance to be more aware of God's loving presence—another chance to spread the Good News with your thoughts, words, and actions, as you go through your day. *Amen* sessions, on the other hand, are generally prayers reflecting on the life-giving and life-draining aspects of your day or journey. It is a time to review lessons learned and ponder places you might improve and better meet in uniting with God's will. Here are prayers asking for rest, mercy, or wisdom—preparing you for the next leg of the journey. Then the main section, or *Sanctus* sessions, which are for the middle part of your journey, usually have longer time spans than beginnings and endings. Between



the start and the end of your day or project, you are subject to an unpredictable wave of experiences. Your experience might swing between joy and tears, war and peace, fear and love. That is why the Sanctus section offers more sessions: to help you address the varied experiences you may encounter throughout the day or project.

Praying a Session

To prepare for each session, have your prayer space ready and free of unnecessary clutter. Use earplugs if the noise level in your area tends to distract you. Tell everyone at home you will be in prayer and would appreciate silence until you're done. Wear loose and comfortable clothing. Try to come to your prayer session with a half-empty stomach so your digestive system is calm and not competing with your focus and concentration. You may use a chair. A dining chair is suitable for prayer. The cushion is usually firm and the back is straight. I suggest using one without arm rests for more elbow room. And make sure your feet rest firmly on the floor and that the back of your thighs are resting comfortably. If your feet don't rest solidly on the floor, place a folded blanket under your feet. Sit toward the front edge of the seat. If you are comfortable sitting on the floor, have a firm cushion or bolster to sit on. A couple of folded blankets will do nicely too. Now you're ready for your prayer session.

To choose which session to pray, first, notice how your body feels, what your heart desires, and what your soul longs for. Then consult the table of contents, which lists all the sessions and includes the theme for each session. Find a match for your need, mood, or feelings at the moment. For example, the first Alleluia session is listed as "Alleluia 1: Psalm 8. How

majestic is your name in all the earth!” This theme line gives you a hint that this is an appropriate session to pray if you are in a celebratory or thankful mood. However, Alleluia 1 can also be prayed if things are falling apart around you and you are looking for things to be thankful for. The theme for Sanctus 4 is “Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?” This is your session if you feel out of gas, at the end of your rope, and there’s no relief in sight. Or maybe you feel your prayers are not being answered. So, as you search the session list for the “right” prayer session, rather than relying solely on “logical thinking,” ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit who knows what we need before we know it.

When you have chosen your prayer session, stop and close your eyes. Scan your body and check through the major body parts (neck and shoulders, the torso, the hips, arms and legs). Note where you feel tight and tense. Gently massage these areas. Then go to the warm up session on page 133. Perform the warm up sequences slowly, repeating the movements where necessary. Never go beyond your comfort level. The stretches should feel pleasant, not painful.

After the warm up, when you feel the body, heart, and soul are ready to meet with God, proceed to your prayer session.

When you are moving with the prayer gestures, always listen to your body. With regular practice of moving the body during prayer, you will learn how to listen to your body. Your body sensations will be like signals of coming events. For example, you might feel the back of your neck and your ears getting hot, or your breath is getting short and choppy. It might mean you are about to erupt in anger. If you are connected to your body as well as St. Benedict was, you can take corrective actions, like breathing into a prayer phrase expressing your

need, rather than exploding and hurting yourself or someone else. So as you pray with the body, listen, and remember to move with reverence because you are God's holy temple. Respect the limits of your body. Do not go beyond what you are comfortably capable of doing. Adapt or modify the movements to fit your present condition. Don't worry about getting the gestures "right." As long as you are moving in prayer, with the intention to be with the Divine, you are doing it "right." Sometimes slowing down, as if you are moving in slow motion, begins to transport you to that sacred space that seems to whisper, *You are on holy ground.*

Now, depending on how much time you have, each of these prayer sessions might be just right, or too long. There will be times when all you can manage is five minutes, or less. You only have enough time to breathe in and breathe out a prayer. Take heart. It is not the length of time but the intention and the sincerity of your prayer that fuels the transformation you seek. Any prayer that reminds us of God's loving and merciful presence with us draws us closer to union with the Divine. As you turn often to God, a stronger and deeper bond between you and the Holy One develops. For the Lord Almighty said, "Return to me and I will return to you."

Elements of Each Session

The session TITLE (for example, ALLELUIA 1: Psalm 8. How majestic is your name in all the earth!) offers the overall intention for the session. The different INVOCATION in each of the three sections reminds us why we are praying—that our intention is union with God. It alerts us that wherever we are invoking God, whether in the privacy of our bedroom, or in a quiet corner in the workplace,