



Yoga and the Catholic Church

In 1989, Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) published a letter as Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, responding to what he called an “urgent need.” The 13-page document described the “spiritual restlessness” of the times marked by the “driving pace of a technologically advanced society.” Recognizing the desire in many to find greater peace and balance in their lives, he noted the growing interest among those seeking non-Christian methods of meditation, the most notable being the practice of yoga. But is there a place for yoga in the Christian tradition? Noting confusion on this issue in the Christian world and the need for pastoral guidance, Ratzinger sought to establish solid doctrinal criteria by which the question can be answered.

Sourcing a Response

Ratzinger writes that the appropriate way for the Church to source an answer to the question is to draw from the structure of the Faith, which informs one’s understanding of prayer and the spiritual life. From this, he explains that prayer can be “defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God.” He adds, the “essential element” of “authentic Christian prayer” is freedom. In true and authentic prayer, the “infinite freedom” of God meets the “finite freedom” of man.

What About the Bible?

Biblical revelation, Ratzinger notes, teaches us how to pray. In the Old Testament, the Israelites “acknowledged and praised God present in all creation and in the destiny of every man.” They also prayed the Psalms, a collection of ancient prayers now integral to the daily prayer of the Church. In the New Testament, God reveals Himself in the mystery of Christ made known to us by his words and deeds. The Gospel of John, for example, contemplates “him who from the beginning is the Word of God made flesh.” When we read the Bible, we can discover “the deep meaning of Sacred Scripture.” This then becomes a source of that dialogue between God and man, which we know as prayer.

Fusion Confusion

Ratzinger also notes that attempts to “fuse” eastern methods of meditation onto Christian forms of prayer have led to confusion and error. This is because prayer cannot be reduced to a state of illuminative knowledge nor to an experience of wellbeing in a pure psychological sense. Further, Church fathers and spiritual masters have consistently taught that moments of “affliction or desolation” in prayer may constitute an “authentic participation in the state of abandonment experienced on the cross by Our Lord.” Therefore, any attempt to merge Christian meditation with eastern techniques in ways that go beyond simple preparation for prayer requires a closer look.

Contemplative Christian Prayer

Ratzinger writes, “To find the right way of prayer, the Christian should consider . . . the Way of Christ” who was always about doing the will of His Father. With this attitude of perfect obedience, “Jesus lives no more intimate or closer a union with the Father than this, which for him is continually translated into deep prayer.” We are reminded here too that God is love (1 Jn 4:8). Knowing this, we better understand that “contemplative Christian prayer always leads to love of neighbor, to action, and to acceptance of trials, and precisely because of this it draws one close to God.”

Conversion and Question of Method

The well-formed Catholic understands that methods of prayer should not be dismissed simply because they are non-Christian. “On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured.” And yet, we are reminded of Jesus’ words, “*Blessed* are the clean of heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). For this reason, the one who seeks union with God in prayer must be willing to walk a path of spiritual conversion. To aid those seeking advancement in prayer and the spiritual life, the Church recommends seeking the guidance of a spiritual director, one “who is an expert in the life of prayer” and spiritual counseling.

More on Methods: the Body

The Church understands that both body and mind are important in prayer for “it is the whole [person] who must enter into relation with God.” For this reason, techniques centered on posture and bodily functions such as breathing and the beating of the heart, can help prepare the person for prayer. However, the positive feelings of relaxation are not to be interpreted as “authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit.” There are times when praying can seem more like a wandering in the desert when a person “feels nothing of God.” Knowing this, one can more readily understand that genuine prayer does not remain focused on self but “stirs up” an “ardent charity” for serving others “for the greater glory of God.”

The ***Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*** was signed by Pope John Paul II on October 15, 1989. The summary text above is by Deacon Anthony Clissem Ed.D, the Diocese of Joliet Office of Catechetical Formation Lead. To read the document in its entirety, please visit the Holy See’s website, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html.

I am the Way . . .

In this doctrinal treatment on Christian prayer and meditation, the future Pope Benedict XVI, recognizes the efforts of all the world’s great religions to seek union with God but adds that there is a “wonderful discovery [to be made] that all the aspirations which the prayer of other religions expresses are fulfilled in the reality of Christianity *beyond all measure*.” Because the foundation and fulfillment of Christian faith is found in the mystery of love between God and man, this fulfillment occurs “without the personal self or the nature of a creature being dissolved or disappearing into the sea of the Absolute.” We are reminded once more that “God is love.” This “profoundly Christian affirmation” reconciles “perfect union with the *otherness* existing between lover and loved, with eternal exchange and eternal dialogue.”

Final Thoughts

When His disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray,” Jesus responded with the words of the “Our Father.” At the Last Supper, when the Apostle Thomas asked—“Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”—Jesus replied, “I am the way and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” After foretelling his own passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus added, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” Is there a place for yoga in the Christian tradition? The best answer is “No.” As disciples of Jesus Christ, we pray with Sacred Scripture. We receive grace from the Holy Spirit in the Sacraments of the Church. We pray to Our Father Who is in heaven. At every Mass, we bring to Christ our past and all of life’s difficulties, including our sin and sorrow. We ask Him in our reception of the Eucharist to transform our lives. We pray with Our Lady and the saints. There are many ways to pray but only one Way to the Father. His name is Jesus Christ. He calls us into relationship with Him. In the end, union with God in prayer is not a method nor can it be “mastered” by anything we do. Authentic prayer is a grace— a gift from a loving Father Who knows us personally and cares for us more than we can ever imagine.