

SESSION 4

ORATIO: CONVERSATION WITH GOD

SESSION OVERVIEW

Read this overview in advance to familiarize yourself with the session.

In the previous session we began to ascend the ladder of *lectio divina* by studying the first two rungs: *lectio*, reading, and *meditatio*, meditation. These first two steps establish the subject matter of prayer with careful reading of and reflection on Scripture.

In this session we move on to the third rung of the ladder, *oratio*. Although this word is often translated as “prayer,” a better translation would be “conversing” or “conversation.” Often we are tempted to begin with *oratio*, with our own thoughts and words. But Guigo the Carthusian in his ladder of prayer teaches us that if our conversation is to be fruitful, the place to begin ascending the ladder is on the first rungs. Having heard God speak to us in his Word on the first two rungs, we are able to respond on the third rung of *oratio*.

Dr. Gray will spend time looking at St. Augustine as a model of prayer. In his *Confessions*, we see St. Augustine recounting the episodes of his life and understanding them in light of God’s Word, just as we are invited to do in *oratio*. From the *Confessions* we also learn that when we do not walk according to God’s will and let sin “set up shop” in our lives, we put up barriers that disrupt our prayer. Reconciliation and obedience to God break down these barriers, opening the way for intimate conversation.

Oratio is simply a heart-to-heart conversation with the friend who is “more inward than my innermost self” (St. Augustine), but it still takes practice. This session offers not only the writings of St. Augustine, but also the Lord’s Prayer and the Psalms as our guides for growing in our ability to converse deeply with God.



CONNECT

*Begin this session by leading the **Opening Prayer**, and then read or summarize the **Introduction** for your group. Both can be found in the Study Guide.*

*If you have time, review the last session with your group. Can anyone recite the **Memory Verse** (Psalm 84:4-5) without assistance? Otherwise, look it up (page 38) and recite it as a group.*

*Also discuss any highlights or questions the group may have had from the last session’s **COMMIT** reflections. Then continue.*

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What makes it easy to have a deep, meaningful conversation with a close friend?

Having a close, healthy relationship makes it easier to have a deep conversation. It's often awkward to try to talk about something intimate or important with a friend who we do not know well. It's also helpful to have time and space set aside for the conversation—have it be intentional rather than random. And there must be an actual topic of conversation; it's hard to have a deep conversation about nothing in particular. In this session we will be looking at how to make the most of our time conversing with God in oratio.

Think of a time when you felt distant from a friend and had a hard time talking with that person. What was getting in the way of conversation?

Answers may be very personal. The details aren't necessary, so encourage participants to share their experiences in general, to help them feel comfortable. A disagreement or a fight can put distance in a relationship and make conversation difficult at best, sometimes leading to a complete breakdown in communication. This question sets the stage for understanding how moral barriers that disrupt our relationship with God also become major barriers to conversing with God in prayer. Just as a fight with a friend or spouse makes it hard to talk with him/her easily, so also our sin makes it hard for us to hear and talk to God.



Play the video segment, which will last about 31 minutes. The Study Guide provides participants with a brief outline of the topics covered in the video teaching, along with the following discussion questions.



DISCUSS

After the video segment, discuss the following questions. Familiarize yourself with the comments after each question; these are meant to guide you in the conversation.

CONVERSATION WITH GOD

1. What was one thing you heard for the first time or that was an “aha” moment for you?

St. Augustine's Confessions and the model of prayer as a dialogue in that work may be new or particularly striking to some participants. The idea of moral barriers disrupting both our relationship with God and our conversation in prayer make another striking point, as well as the connection between almsgiving, fasting, and fruitful prayer.

2. What are some examples of moral barriers to prayer (either general or from personal experience)?

What are some specific ways to overcome these particular barriers?

Encourage participants to share general examples if they are not comfortable sharing from personal experience. Some examples of moral barriers: addiction to pornography, abuse of alcohol or drugs, sloth (e.g., too great an attachment to sleep), excessive time spent watching TV or playing online games, etc. For any habitual sin or attachment to things of this world that is brought up as an example, participants can find a virtue to help overcome that barrier. Practicing temperance with food, drink, or time spent with technology (or fasting from something to which they are too attached) would be one example. Making a point of getting to Confession would be a great place to start.

3. What is your experience with praying the psalms? What is your favorite psalm? Why?

Encourage those with experience praying the Liturgy of the Hours to talk about that. Others may pray with some favorite psalms or use hymns and songs based on the psalms in their personal prayer. Everyone who attends Mass has experience with praying the Responsorial Psalm during the liturgy. If participants don't have a specific favorite psalm, encourage them to share what type of psalm they prefer—praise, thanksgiving, lament, or happy, sad, in danger, etc.

*Direct participants to this session's **Memory Verse** in their Study Guides, and read it together. Then lead the **Closing Prayer**. Encourage participants to do the **COMMIT** reflections on their own before you meet again as a group.*



COMMIT

*Following are suggested answers to the questions participants will be asked in their daily **COMMIT** reflections.*



DAY 1 – ST. AUGUSTINE: MODEL OF PRAYER

Participants will look at St. Augustine and his Confessions to find a model of prayer as dialogue and prayer using the words of Scripture.

What questions does St. Augustine have for God in this passage?

St. Augustine wants to know whether knowledge and understanding of God come first followed by prayer, or whether praying to God comes before knowledge and understanding.

Look up the following verses. What answer does St. Augustine find from God in Scripture?

Romans 10:14 – We can't pray to God if we don't know him or believe in him. To know and believe in him we must have heard about him from someone. (Prayer requires some level of understanding.)

Psalms 22:26 & Jeremiah 29:13 – If we seek God, we will find him and praise him. (Seeking leads us to prayer.)

St. Augustine finds that the answer is "both." God will reveal himself to all who seek—we can pray (seek) and understanding will follow; but we cannot truly pray to God if we don't know him, so understanding will lead us to better prayer. It is a cycle. Each continually leads to the other.

Try it on your own using the passage from John 5:2–9.

Lectio—Carefully read the passage. What do you note?

The detailed location of this miracle: Jerusalem, Sheep Gate, Bethesda pools. Passage gives detail of the "multitude"—invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed—and notes the "one man." This "sick man" has been "ill" a "long time"—thirty-eight years. Jesus asks the man if he wants to be healed even though his illness is readily apparent and Jesus already knows that he has been there a long time. Jesus gives direct, active instructions to the man—"rise," "take up," "walk." The man was healed "at once."

Meditatio—Reflect on the meaning of what you noted during *lectio*.

The detailed/specific location reminds us that God enters into human history—any first-century Christian could go to the location of this miracle, and even today it is possible to visit the location on a pilgrimage—and God wants to enter into “my” history. The details about the individual ailments of the multitude, and the “one man,” remind us that God also knows our exact needs. Jesus asks if the man wants to be healed. He doesn’t go against our free will, but rather invites us. Jesus starts the conversation with this question. We might reflect on whether the man’s response is an excuse, blaming others, or an honest assessment of his troubles. Even though the passage doesn’t record the man’s “yes, I want to be healed” or any verbal response to Jesus’ question, this man must have responded immediately in his heart because “at once” he is healed.

Oratio—Journal your conversation with God.

The reflections above might lead participants to journal about these types of questions and responses: I thank God for his intimate and personal love for me. I ask God to open my eyes to the things of which I need to be healed. Even though God knows what I need, I still need to ask him for it in prayer. Asking God for what I need helps me become more aware of what my real needs are and reminds me that it is God who meets my needs. Even though I might have had an infirmity or trouble for “a long time,” do I still trust that God can heal me? That God loves me? I might take stock of whether God is giving me direction in my life. Am I responding to this direction? Am I responding honestly? Or am I making excuses?



DAY 2 – BARRIERS TO CONVERSATION

Participants reflect on what gets in the way of conversing with God in oratio.

Read Psalm 32. How do we break down the barrier of sin and repair our relationship with God?

In Psalm 32 the psalmist says, “I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin” (verse 5), and with forgiveness comes instruction, teaching, and counsel from the Lord.

What attachments might be hindering your *oratio*? What steps can you take this week to cultivate a deeper intimacy with God and break down any moral barriers to prayer?

This is a chance to take a more personal look at what was discussed in general after watching the video. Personal sins, attachments to things that may be good in and of themselves but still distract us from God, or frustration with God over an unanswered prayer or difficult situation—all of these can disrupt our prayer. Confession, time in Adoration, and fasting from something are examples of steps to take to break down these barriers. Simply recognizing and acknowledging the existence of a barrier is an important first step!

Practice *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* using the passage from Psalm 139:1–6.

Lectio—Carefully read the passage. What do you note?

Participants might note the primary theme of “knowing”: “All my ways” are known—when I sit, when I rise, my path, my lying down. God searches, knows, discerns, is acquainted...knows it “altogether”...and such knowledge is described as “too wonderful.”

Meditatio—Reflect on the meaning of what you noted during *lectio*.

Reflections on the careful reading might include: The psalm’s repetition and numerous examples emphasize how deeply and intimately God knows me. There is nothing I can hide from God. If God knows a word before I speak it, then he must know me better than I know myself!

Oratio—Journal your conversation with God.

Participants might journal on any of the following: I can't hide anything from God, so I might as well stop trying. If I don't recognize something that is going on in my own heart, I need to ask God to reveal it, because he sees it before I do. God lays his hand upon me...does this bring me comfort, safety? Or is there sin in my life that makes me want to pull away from God's hand? God's intimate knowledge of me is "wonderful"—does this intimacy bring me wonder at how the God of the universe knows me? Or is this maybe intimidating ("too wonderful")?



DAY 3 – LECTIO: LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Participants will reflect on Jesus teaching his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer.

LECTIO

What instructions does Jesus give concerning prayer (place, manner, how we address God, etc.)?

Pray in secret, do not use more words just for the sake of a longer prayer, address God as Father, forgive others so that our prayers for forgiveness will be heard and answered.

Look for the verbs used in the Our Father. What is the first thing we ask for in this prayer? How do the petitions progress? Is there a pattern?

We first ask for God's name to be hallowed (made holy or recognized as holy). The petitions progress from a focus on God in heaven to his kingdom and will being manifest not only in heaven but in us, to provision for us on earth, and to our relationships with others.

What is required of us in order for our prayer for forgiveness to be heard and answered?

We must first forgive others.

MEDITATIO

What is the significance of beginning prayer by addressing God as "our Father"? What does this teach us about prayer in general?

God truly loves us and cares for us—we can trust him to answer our prayer because he is our Father. It also means we approach him in boldness as sons and daughters, rather than as mere servants or slaves.

Which of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer stands out the most to you? Why?

A particular petition may stand out because a person understands it in a new way after the meditation (e.g., understanding why we ask for God's name to be hallowed when he is holy in and of himself without our help), or it may stand out because that need is particularly strong right now (e.g., "thy will be done" because I am struggling to align my will with God's over something in particular).

In Matthew's gospel, the Lord's Prayer is framed by instructions concerning almsgiving (Matthew 6:1–4) and fasting (Matthew 6:16–18). What relationship do these two practices have to prayer? Why are they so important?

We must learn how to live lives of love if we want to have intimate conversation with the God who is Love. Almsgiving and fasting teach us love for neighbor and detachment from self, and they therefore bring us into closer relationship with God, making prayer more intimate and more effective.



DAY 4 – PSALMS: A SCHOOL OF PRAYER

Participants will look at the psalms as a model of prayer as well as a crucial element of the prayer life of the Christian in union with the whole Church.

Read Psalm 28. According to this psalm, how do we avoid wickedness? How do we live righteously? The wicked “speak peace with their neighbors, while mischief is in their hearts”; they work evil deeds and “do not regard the works of the LORD.” So we must be honest in our dealings with others, do good and not evil, be mindful of God and his works, and trust in God as our strength and shield, in order to live righteously.

Look up the following psalms. What is going on in David’s life when he writes each psalm?

Psalm 3 – *Written when David had to flee Jerusalem because his son Absalom was leading a coup to take over the throne of David, his father.*

Psalm 51 – *Written after David sinned with Bathsheba.*

Psalm 57 – *Written when David was hiding from Saul because Saul sought his life.*

Now try it on your own using the passage from Psalm 130:1–8.

Lectio—Carefully read the passage. What do you note?

Participants might note any of the following: repetition of the divine name (LORD), repetition of the plea to be heard and forgiven, expression of trust that God will forgive, and comparison of the soul’s waiting to the watchman.

Meditatio—Reflect on the meaning of what you noted during *lectio*.

Psalmist doesn’t just cry out to God, but cries “out of the depths.” The watchman watches for morning, day, and light; he doesn’t leave his post until his time is over—just as my soul “watches” and “waits.” While the psalmist talks about God being feared, he also speaks of hoping in the Lord and finding mercy and plenteous redemption, so the fear of God is not something that keeps us away, but draws us to God in wonder. Psalmist speaks of “plenteous redemption”—God’s mercy is not sparse or limited, but full and abundant; it redeems “all” iniquity.

Oratio—Journal your conversation with God.

Some examples of what participants may journal: I am drawn to heartfelt expression of my contrition, my need for forgiveness, and my trust that God will forgive and heal. I feel anew the truth that God will lift up my soul from the depths of sin to the bright morning of his forgiveness and redemption. I have a new understanding that God can forgive “all” my iniquity. I share with God my joy in a new understanding of the hope I have in his mercy. I challenged to be like a watchman, in the sense that I am on the watch for occasions of sin so as to do better at avoiding them.

