

Introducing kids to contemplative prayer

This article is adapted from the book [77 Ways to Pray with Your Kids](#).

Contemplative prayer is one of the three “expressions of prayer” described by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (the others are **Vocal Prayer** and **Meditative Prayer**). Contemplative prayer is a simple resting in the love of Christ. Rather than taking the initiative (as with vocal prayer and meditation), contemplative prayer is about silencing ourselves so God can work in us. “In it the Father strengthens our inner being with power through his Spirit ‘that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith’ and we may be ‘grounded in love’ (Ephesians 3:16-17)” ([Catechism 2714](#)). St. Thérèse of Lisieux described contemplative prayer as a close sharing between friends, while St. John Vianney described it as gazing at Christ and allowing Christ to gaze at us.

Theresa of Avila famously described her experience of contemplative prayer in this way:

“When picturing Christ in the way I have mentioned, or sometimes even when reading, I used unexpectedly to experience a consciousness of the presence of God, of such a kind that I could not possibly doubt that he was within me or that I was wholly engulfed in him. This was in no sense a vision: I believe it is called mystical theology. The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory, I think, is almost lost; while the understanding, I believe, though it is not lost, does not reason—I mean that it does not work, but is amazed at the extent of all it can understand; for God wills it to realize that it understands nothing of what his majesty represents to it. This is a favor neither wholly of

sense, nor wholly of spirit, but entirely the gift of God.”

Contemplation may not seem suited to wiggly, squirmy, eye-rolling, “Are-we-done-yet?” kids. But this intimate basking in Christ’s love is something kids deserve to know about. Even if they aren’t mature enough to fully enter into the experience, being exposed to the practice might lead them to try it later in life. And they might just surprise you—after all, Jesus did tell his disciples to “let the little children come to me” (Matthew 19:14).

How can you practice contemplative prayer as a family? Because it is a gift, it is not something you can “do.” But you can make your children aware of what it is, and you can create conditions that are favorable to entering contemplative prayer. Generally, contemplative prayer begins with and emerges from [meditation](#). (See [Meditative Prayer for Catholic Kids: 10 Ways to Get Started](#).) You may also find it helpful to light a candle, display an icon of Jesus, or [take your children to Eucharistic adoration](#).

Here are more strategies to try with your kids.

Young Children

With younger kids, focus on modeling prayerful silence, e.g., “Mom and Dad are going to be quiet to listen to God now. You be quiet, too, and listen to what God (or Jesus, or the angels) might be saying to you”—and then close your eyes and really pray quietly for a minute or so. Ignore their chatter and noise (it might help to strap them into a high chair first!). Your goal with very young children is to simply model this form of prayer. With enough repetition, even very young children will eventually begin to imitate your example. In the meantime, this moment of silent resting in God’s presence might just become a refreshing “reset button” that makes it easier to deal with your kids patiently.

Older Children and Teens

With older children, try contemplation for increasingly longer periods of time: three minutes, then five, then ten, and fifteen minutes or longer for teens who have more training with this spiritual exercise. When first beginning this practice, their goal might be to simply maintain an attitude of quiet alertness.

Here is one way to teach older and children contemplative prayer:

1. Prepare. If you are able, create a prayerful environment by lighting a candle or striking a bell (see [Smells and Bells](#)).

2. Listening to “sheer silence.” Explain to your children that contemplative prayer is all about creating a space inside of ourselves to meet the loving presence of Jesus. This involves a quieting of our minds and an alert attentiveness to God’s presence. As an example, you might read this passage about the prophet Elijah waiting for the presence of the Lord:

[The Lord] said [to Elijah], “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

3. Enter contemplation via meditation. Even people who have long experience with contemplative prayer rarely enter directly into it—it’s not like flipping a light switch. Many people find it helpful to enter contemplation via meditation. For instance, your children might choose a sentence or phrase

to occasionally repeat interiorly to help them focus on Jesus, or to call on the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Another technique involves focusing on a mental picture of Jesus—perhaps even in a peaceful setting. See **Meditative Prayer** for more ideas.

4. Let go of outcomes. As much as possible, spend the time praying rather than monitoring your kids' prayerfulness . . . and don't worry too much about results. Focus on simply introducing them to this spiritual exercise; the invitation to contemplative prayer may be one they respond to at a time of conversion or crisis later in life.

Besides trying this type of prayer during your family prayer time, you can suggest that older children practice contemplative prayer after receiving the Eucharist, during Eucharistic Adoration, or before falling asleep.

See also:

- [Catechism 2709-2719](#)
- [Christian Meditation for Young People](#): This is a comprehensive website from the Catholic Diocese of Townsville (Australia), which has been teaching meditation and contemplation to children for years. See especially [Stations of Contemplation and Children](#), a resource originally used at World Youth Day in 2008. You may also be interested in the [Catholic FAQ](#), which addresses questions Catholics may have about meditation and contemplation.