

## New Theological Seminary of the West

### PRAYING CEASELESSLY—A SUMMER COURSE ON PRAYER

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Janna Gosselin, PhD

Summer 2017

Location: La Canada Presbyterian Church

July 26--September 13

Foothill Blvd, La Canada, CA and online via Moodle

Time: 7-8:30 pm and  
online

The class meets on Wednesday evenings from July 26 through August 23 and online. Additional materials and video viewings will be available online. A self-directed retreat will be scheduled at the student's convenience.

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION

**“I have abandoned all particular forms of devotion, all prayer techniques. My only prayer practice is attention. I carry on a habitual, silent, and secret conversation with God that fills me with overwhelming joy.” –Brother Lawrence**

Although Brother Lawrence claimed to have abandoned all prayer techniques to find a way to carry on this habitual, silent and secret conversation with God, most of us find it difficult to achieve this constant conversation with God without some form of devotional practice or technique. In this class, we will consider the forms of devotion—the “prayer techniques”—that have helped Christians over the years to develop that sense of the presence of God. Our analysis will hinge on two categories of prayer: cataphatic and apophatic prayer. We will examine the “cataphatic” approach by learning of methods of prayer expressed in Scripture, poetry and other types of “word” prayer. We will also consider the apophatic approach, which has included wordless prayer, silence and solitude to find and unite with God.

This class will examine both approaches by reading works written by or about both ancient and modern Christian prayer exemplars, including: Gregory of Nyssa, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Brother Lawrence, Jonathan Edwards, Simone Weil, and Howard Thurman. We will also read some of the more obscure experts on prayer, including the Eastern Orthodox monks who originated the *Jesus Prayer* and the practice of hesychasm, as well as the Western monk who composed the *Meditationes Vita Christi* and the Puritan authors of the *Valley of Vision*.

Each class will feature a primary required reading, which is best purchased as a book. However, each class will also offer online readings through Moodle of short excerpts from the works of other writers. Each class will also feature required video viewings online.

## **SIGNIFICANCE FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

As discussed above, historical Christian prayer techniques offer transformative opportunities. This course will provide students with the learning and resources required to both understand these prayer techniques and practice them, thereby opening themselves to transformation by God. The goal of the class is that the students will not only deepen their own spirituality and connection to God, but that they will learn to share these practices with others, thereby facilitating that openness to transformation for others.

## **COURSE FORMAT**

The course will be taught as an interactive lecture, with an extensive use of power-point images and discussion. Classes will meet once per week on Wednesday nights for two hours for 5 weeks and/or in an online format. It will then continue for three more weeks in person and/or online in an interactive format. Each class will examine a particular prayer practice, together with the life and writings of one or more prayer pioneers who helped to develop and/or memorialize that practice. The class will also consider relevant theological, spiritual and Scriptural themes in the context of the readings for the class. The class will also include a four-hour self-directed spiritual retreat where the students will practice one or more of the prayer techniques as a more sustained fashion.

## **ASSIGNMENTS AND ASSESSMENT**

Students taking the course for credit will be expected to attend class and participate in the self-directed retreat, read the materials in the books and online as assigned, keep a journal briefly recording their responses to the reading and class lectures, participate in spiritual exercises, and write an 8-10 page final paper. Auditing students will be encouraged to read from the assigned readings, participate in the discussion and participate in the spiritual exercises. Students taking the class for credit will be expected to write a 2-page reflection paper on the self-directed retreat.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **Class One: The Jesus Prayer**

This class will examine the origins of and scholarship behind the Jesus Prayer, a formulaic prayer originated in the Orthodox church and used to quiet the mind and open the heart. Going back as far as the Seventh Century, the Jesus Prayer was discussed in the *Philokalia* as well as by St. Gregory Palamas. Scripturally, the prayer has its origins in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Luke 18:10-14. In the practice segment of this class, the students will be given the opportunity to meditatively practice the Jesus Prayer. The primary required reading for the class is the first half of *The Jesus Prayer* by Kallistos Ware.

### **Class Two: Visio Divina**

Visio Divina is a devotional practice whereby one meditates on a Christian piece of artwork or image, inserting oneself into the story or point of Christ's life depicted by the artwork in order to draw closer to God. Scholars argue that this practice may have been encouraged by the anonymous monk who composed the *Meditationes Vita Christi (Meditations on the Life of Christ)*. In this class, we will explore the medieval text, which is said to have inspired the great medieval artist Giotto. In the practice segment of this class, we will explore the practice of meditating on a piece of artwork as a form of prayer. The primary required reading for this class is excerpts from the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*.

### **Class Three: Praying with the Body**

Although Christianity has often had a mixed view of the body, ancient Christians discovered the efficacy of incorporating their bodies into their prayer practices by focusing on the breath and posture. In this class, we will explore the underlying theology, articulated by Gregory Palamas and others, as well as the hesychastic practice itself, which was meant to draw the head toward the heart. In the practice segment of this class, we participate in this bodily prayer practice in an effort to open our hearts to God. The primary required reading for this class is the second half of *The Jesus Prayer* by Kallistos Ware.

### **Class Four: Contemplative (or Centering) Prayer**

Popularized in the 20th Century by Thomas Keating, Centering Prayer is a prayer practice which goes back to the 4th Century, if not before. This class will explore the origins of and theology behind Centering Prayer. Said to have been memorialized first by Gregory of Nyssa, it was also advocated by the anonymous monk in his 14th Century work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In the practice segment of this class, we will engage in Centering Prayer. The primary required reading for this class is Thomas Keating's *Contemplative Prayer, Traditional Christian Meditations for Opening to Divine Union*.

### **Class Five: The Prayer of Quiet**

The Prayer of Quiet is perhaps most frequently associated with Teresa of Avila, but was also discussed by other Catholics, including Francis de Sales and Thomas Merton. Yet, Protestant authors, like Jonathan Edwards and Howard Thurman, also have addressed it. It is generally regarded as an intermediary stage in contemplative prayer between affective prayer and the Prayer of Union. In this class, we will explore Teresa of Avila's discussion of this restful stage of prayer where one fills with peace and learns to delight in God. In the practice segment of this class, we will engage in techniques leading to the Prayer of Quiet. The required reading for this class is the first half of Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castles*.

### **Class Six: Prayer of Annihilation**

Related to the concept of kenosis or self-emptying, the Prayer of Annihilation has its Biblical roots in 1 Samuel 1:15, where Samuel's mother says, "I have poured out my soul before God." Set forth by both monks and mystics, the prayer of annihilation is an important step on the way to the prayer of union with God. It is discussed eloquently by both John of the Cross and Madame Guyon, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French mystical writer and proponent of the Quietist School, in her book, *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer*. It is also discussed by other writers as wide-ranging as Marguerite

Porete, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Christian mystic, Witness Lee, and Simone Weil. We will take a look at these writers as we examine the concept of annihilation in this class. The primary required reading for this class is the second half of Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castles*.

### **Class Seven: Prayer of Union**

Madame Guyon calls the prayer of union “the ultimate Christian attainment.” Teresa sees it as the innermost chamber of the Interior Castle—the place from which the Divine Light within emanates. The renowned 14<sup>th</sup> C. monk called the Cloud author calls it “the cloud of unknowing.” Julian of Norwich calls it “wordless prayer.” All the mystics see this form of prayer as a God-given time when we experience his presence in a profound and life-changing manner. The primary required reading for this class is the second half of Thomas Keating's *Contemplative Prayer, Traditional Christian Meditations for Opening to Divine Union*.

### **Class Eight: Wrapping it All Up**

In this class, I will revisit the practices and figures that merit further discussion and attention. We will return to some authors, like Howard Thurman, who merit further discussion. Further, we will explore the deep spiritual resources offered by other authors in the class. I will also take input from class members as to which other figures and prayer practices merit more time. Finally, we will discuss the practices' potential for transformation of students' lives. The required reading is any reading students have not yet completed for class.