

PRAYER

FINDING INTIMACY WITH GOD

STUDY GUIDE SESSION 1

SAMPLE



LECTIO™

UNVEILING SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

TIM GRAY

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SESSION 1

PRAYER: AN INTIMATE DIALOGUE



OPENING PRAYER

O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.

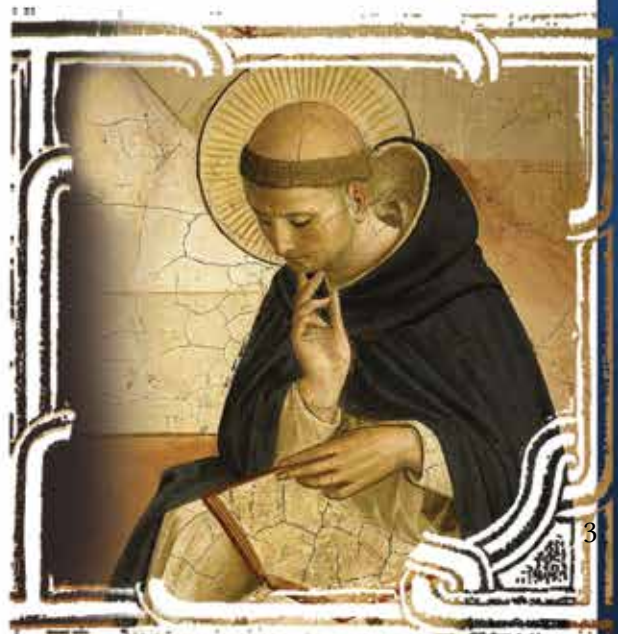
The sea is his, for he made it;
for his hands formed the dry land.
O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
Amen.

—Psalm 95:1–7

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had an experience in prayer where you felt deeply, intimately connected to God? Have you ever felt like you were merely talking to yourself during prayer? Chances are most of us have experienced both ends of the spectrum, and no matter how healthy our prayer life, there is always room for improvement. We begin our study on prayer by exploring the importance of approaching it as a two-way conversation. Our speaking to God is one part of the conversation. Often it's the other part, God speaking to us, with which most people struggle. Does God speak to us? And if so, how do we hear him?



*Saint Dominic / Gianni Dagli Orti /
The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY*



CONNECT

What is your earliest memory of praying?

How would you define (or explain) prayer for someone who had never heard of it?



DISCUSS



AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Watch the teaching on video. The following is a brief outline of the topics covered.

I. Prayer—An Invitation to Encounter God

- A. Benedict XVI: Christianity is not simply a creed, but rather an encounter with the living God (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1)
- B. We need to be taught how to pray (Luke 11:1)
- C. *Lectio divina* as a method of encountering God in prayer

II. The Problem of Prayer

- A. We know we “ought” to pray, but it often seems like an obligation
- B. Inconsistency of prayer in everyday life
- C. Experience of dryness and aridity in monologue prayer

- A. God loves us and speaks to us—he speaks the Word, his Son, Jesus
- B. God’s normative way of speaking is through his Word in the Scriptures
 - 1. St. Ambrose: “When you pick up the Scriptures, God speaks to you”
 - 2. St. Cyprian: “When you hear God in his Word, he speaks to you”
 - 3. St. Augustine hears “*tolle lege*” (take and read), reads Romans 13:11–14, and hears God speaking directly to him
- C. To whom is God’s Word in Scripture addressed?
 - 1. Historically, God speaks to Abraham, Moses, Mary, Peter, etc.
 - 2. The secret of the saints is that they hear God’s Word in Scripture as addressed to them in the present
 - 3. We need to come and listen to God; we need to “take and read” so that there can be a dynamic dialogue with God
 - 4. Prayer is God’s thirst for us (CCC 2560)



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

2. What obstacles to prayer do you experience? How have you dealt with these in the past? How might approaching prayer as an encounter and a dialogue affect your experience?

3. Do you feel it is easy or difficult to hear God speaking directly to you in Scripture? Why?

MEMORY VERSE

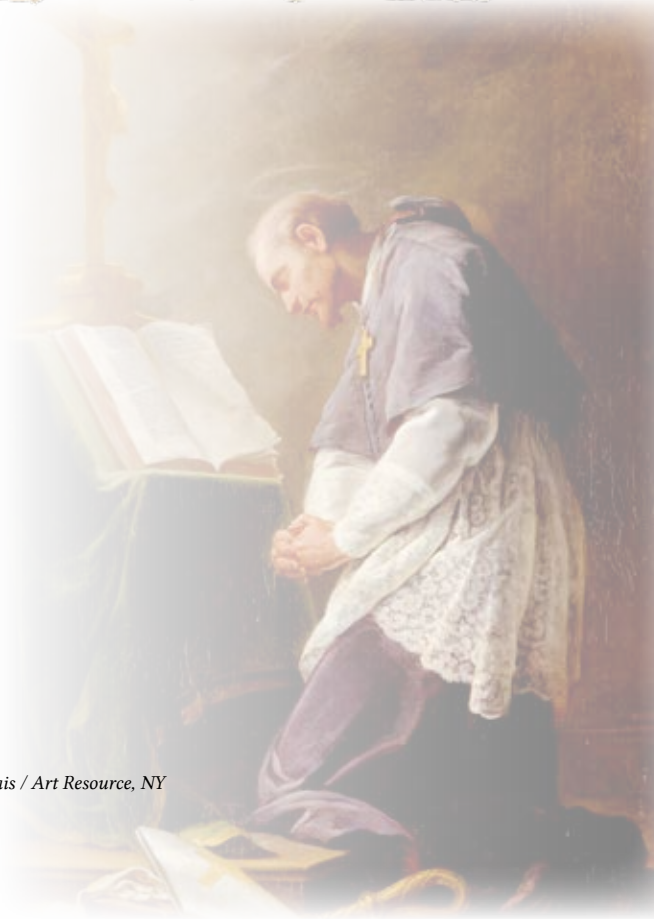
“I will seek him whom my soul loves.”
—Song of Solomon 3:2



CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,
thank you for calling us to intimate conversation
with you in prayer.
Give us the strength and the perseverance
to continually work to overcome all obstacles
to prayer in our lives.
Teach us to listen as you speak to us in the Scriptures.
Guide us into an ever-deepening love for you.
We ask this in the name of your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Saint Francis of Sales / © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



FOR FURTHER READING

Tim Gray, “Introduction: The Problem of Prayer” and “Chapter 1: The Secret of the Saints”
in *Praying Scripture for a Change* (Ascension Press, 2009)

Catechism of the Catholic Church on Prayer, paragraphs 2558–2696

COMMIT—DAY 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER



“Pray constantly.” —1 Thessalonians 5:17

Scripture has a lot to say about prayer. Almost anywhere you turn in the Bible you will find: someone praying; instructions for where, when, and how to pray; accounts of God answering prayer; psalms praising God for his answers to prayer; prophets scolding God’s people for not praying; etc. Prayer is everywhere in Scripture, and St. Paul’s instructions to the Thessalonians—and to us—sum up the biblical attitude as concisely as possible: pray constantly!

“For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.”

—St. Therese of Lisieux

The story of salvation begins with God creating mankind for union with himself. That union is destroyed by sin, but no matter how great the distance between God and man, “God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer” (CCC 2567). God wrote this call to prayer into the very structure of time from the beginning when he blessed the seventh day and established it as a day of rest and worship (see Genesis 2:2–3 and Exodus 20:8–10).

How do you keep Sunday, the Lord’s Day, as a day of prayer? How does this influence the rest of your week?

To keep his people close to him, God gave the Israelites detailed instructions on when and how to encounter him in prayer. Two pillars in the life of prayer for God’s people in the Old Covenant were Israel’s annual liturgical feasts and the Book of Psalms. The liturgical feasts provided a rhythm of prayer corresponding to the changing seasons and were rooted in God’s saving actions in Israel’s history. The structure and repetition of the feasts brought Israel together in prayer as a community. The Book of Psalms was the prayer book of Israel, essential not only to the annual feasts and the Temple liturgy, but also to the prayers of the family and individual at home. God’s laws regarding prayer and worship, where the initiative of God’s mighty deeds for his people were recalled and his people responded with praise, are a reminder that prayer is a dialogue—God starts the conversation, and we respond.

Look up the following psalms: Psalm 73:28 and 105:1–4. Take a moment to recall and praise God for his many works in your own life.

In the New Testament we see the ultimate example of prayer in the life of Christ. Jesus often takes the time to go off on his own for prayer. He prays with and for his disciples. And he gives us the most explicit instruction concerning how to pray in the Our Father (Matthew 6:9–13).



Prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane / Scala / Art Resource, NY

After his death and resurrection, Jesus' disciples continued to practice what the Master had taught. In the early Church we find prayer as an important pillar of the Christian life: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Prayer, both communal and individual, has always been a necessary part of life for the people of God, under both the Old and New Covenants.

What does your life of prayer have in common with prayer as lived throughout Salvation History?

COMMIT—DAY 2

THE PROBLEM OF PRAYER



What are some activities you know to be good and important, but that you simply don't like to do—the ones that always seem to get moved to the bottom of your “to do” list?

Whether it's going to the dentist or folding laundry or cleaning the gutters, we each have our own list of chores and duties that are important, but not particularly enjoyable. If prayer has ever made an appearance on this list for you, don't worry—you're not alone!



To Do List © chrisdorney / shutterstock.com

We all know that prayer is a necessary and important component of our spiritual health, but it doesn't always seem like it's working. Prayer appears throughout the Scriptures, but for many of us, prayer doesn't come easily. We often feel like we are just going through the motions but not accomplishing anything. Or sometimes we feel like it is a one-sided conversation—we show up but God doesn't. It's hard to keep doing something faithfully when we aren't seeing results!

What is your greatest struggle with prayer right now?

The problem of prayer is nothing new—Jesus' own disciples asked him to teach them how to pray (see Luke 11:1), and St. Paul lamented that “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Romans 8:26). In our modern world, we face a particular stumbling block to fruitful prayer. We live in a culture that has done its best to completely eliminate silence and stillness from our daily experience. We are constantly bombarded with images, sounds, and ideas. It's impossible to read an article on the Internet without a pop-up ad interrupting us before we have finished. We have been conditioned to constantly move from one piece of information to the next, without completing anything. In fact, a recent study found that the average person in our technology-saturated society has an attention span that is literally shorter than that of a goldfish: only eight seconds for humans, compared to nine seconds for goldfish.

This combination of constant distraction and an ever-shortening attention span makes it difficult to be quiet long enough to even start prayer, let alone enter into a true dialogue. In the midst of all the noise surrounding and filling us, we might be able to speak the first words in our conversation of prayer, but it is certainly not so easy to listen for a response. And so often, when God doesn't respond immediately, we quit. Listening to God in prayer requires patience—a patient willingness to sit with God in silence in order to hear.

In one of his encounters with God, the prophet Elijah also had to wade through a lot of noise and distraction to hear God.

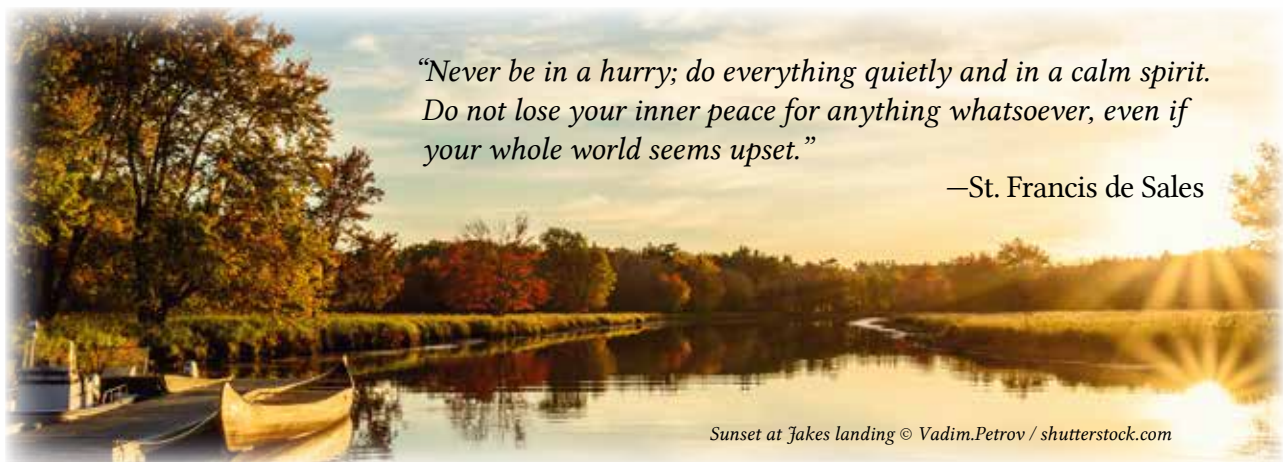
“And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.”

—1 Kings 19:11b–13a

Disposing ourselves to listen for that still small voice is a habit that requires practice and patience. Not only do we need to create a quiet external environment in which to pray, but we also have to learn to cultivate internal silence. The room we're in might be so quiet we could hear a pin drop, but can we hear God speaking to us over the sound of our own thoughts?

What are some things you can do to cultivate a habit of exterior and interior silence, and practice the art of patient listening?

Put it into practice. Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” When Elijah heard the still small voice, he “went out and stood at the entrance of the cave” and waited. Hear God speak in the passage of 1 Kings above, or in Psalm 46:10, and now take time to sit in silence before the Lord. Can you make it 5 minutes?



“Never be in a hurry; do everything quietly and in a calm spirit. Do not lose your inner peace for anything whatsoever, even if your whole world seems upset.”

—St. Francis de Sales

Sunset at Jakes landing © Vadim.Petrov / shutterstock.com

COMMIT—DAY 3

LECTIO: “I THIRST”



The *Catechism* tells us that God thirsts for a relationship with us, and that prayer is our response to this thirst (CCC 2560–61). Today’s *lectio divina* explores Jesus’ declaration of thirst during his crucifixion. Christ’s cry from the cross, “I thirst,” expresses a reality beyond the physical torment of crucifixion and communicates a deep desire, a desire that is only quenched when each of us personally responds to Jesus.

LECTIO: The practice of praying with Scripture, *lectio divina*, begins with an active and close reading of the Scripture passage. Read the verse below and then answer the questions to take a closer look at some of the details of the passage.

“After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, ‘It is finished’; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (for that sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him; but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe.”

—John 19:28–35

What need or desire does Jesus express in this passage? What does he receive?

What does Jesus give in this passage?

What reason does St. John offer for presenting his testimony in this passage?

MEDITATIO: *Lectio*, a close reading and rereading, is followed by *meditatio*, time to reflect on the Scripture passage and to ponder the reason for particular events, descriptions, details, phrases, and even echoes from other Scripture passages that were noticed during *lectio*. Take some time now to meditate on the verse from page 11.

The following meditation on Jesus' thirst for each one of us is attributed to Mother Teresa and was read by Father John Riccardo on "Christ is the Answer" on Ave Maria Radio:
<https://avemariaradio.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Jesus-I-Thirst.pdf>



Mother Teresa statue in Prem Dan house, Kolkata
 © Zvonimir Athletic / shutterstock.com

"I Thirst for You. Yes, that is the only way to even begin to describe My love for you. I THIRST FOR YOU. I thirst to love you and to be loved by you—that is how precious you are to Me. I THIRST FOR YOU. Come to Me, and I will fill your heart and heal your wounds. I will make you a new creation, and give you peace, even in all your trials I THIRST FOR YOU. You must never doubt My mercy, My acceptance of you, My desire to forgive, My longing to bless you and live My life in you. I THIRST FOR YOU. If you feel unimportant in the eyes of the world, that matters not at all. For Me, there is no one any more important in the entire world than you. I THIRST FOR YOU. Open to Me, come to Me, thirst for Me, give me your life—and I will prove to you how important you are to My Heart."

—Blessed Teresa of Calcutta

From the cross Jesus said, "I thirst," and in response he was given vinegar or sour wine—a common drink of the lower classes that, although cheap, was considered refreshing. What does Christ thirst for from you? What can you offer him on a daily basis? Weekly? Over the course of your whole life?

The *Catechism* states: "Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him. . . . Prayer is . . . a response of love to the thirst of the only Son of God" (CCC 2560–61). Why is it important to understand prayer as a response to God rather than something we initiate? What effect might this view have on your prayer life?

In John 19:28–35, Christ thirsts for us, but we cannot even respond to him in prayer without his help. From the cross Jesus gives up his Spirit (verse 30) and blood and water flow from his pierced side (verse 34). How do the Holy Spirit and the life of the Church (symbolized by the blood and the water) enable us to respond to God in prayer?

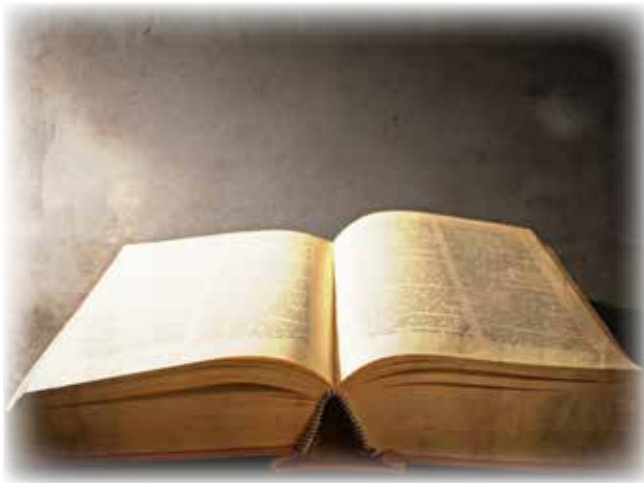
ORATIO, CONTEMPLATIO, RESOLUTIO: Having read and meditated on today's Scripture passage, take some time to bring your thoughts to God (*oratio*) and engage God in silence (*contemplatio*). Then end your prayer by making a simple concrete resolution (*resolutio*) to respond to God's prompting of your heart in today's prayer.



Crucifixion from manuscript Book of Prayers of Jeanne de Laval, Queen of Naples / Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY

COMMIT—DAY 4

GOD SPEAKS



Old open Bible © Manczurov / shutterstock.com

Do you know someone who claims to have heard God speak to him or her? Maybe you have experienced God speaking to you. Because prayer is meant to be a dialogue, not a monologue, we can trust that God will speak to us. Even so, it's not typical to hear a voice from a burning bush or an angel bearing a message or even the still small voice that Elijah heard. As much as a big booming voice from heaven might make prayer easier, that's not God's normal way of communicating. So how are we supposed to hear God speak to us? God speaks to us primarily through his Word in the Scriptures.

"Prayer purifies us, reading instructs us. . . . If one wants to be always in God's company, he must pray regularly and read regularly. When we pray, we talk to God; when we read, God talks to us."
—St. Isidore of Seville

At first it may seem like a bit of a stretch to take words written thousands of years ago for a particular audience, in a specific time and place, and read them as being addressed to each of us personally. But God's living Word is big enough for everybody—it is just as relevant and personal for each of us today as it was for the authors and the original audiences for whom it was originally written.

Is there a Scripture verse that is particularly meaningful or applicable to your life right now? (It might be something you have memorized, something you heard or read recently, or even something that made an impression, but you can't remember the exact verse.)

The Church has always recognized both a literal and spiritual sense (meaning) in the words of the Bible. One passage often has multiple layers of meaning—the literal sense of the words, the way the passage points forward to Jesus, the way it applies to each of us individually, and the truth it teaches about eternity (see CCC 115–119 for more on the senses of Scripture). Thus it is possible, for example, to recognize that while Jesus' direction to St. Peter to "put out into the deep" (Luke 5:4) was a direction for St. Peter to literally put his boat deeper in the water of the Sea of Galilee for a catch of fish, we might also hear Jesus speak those words to our own heart as a call to enter into a deeper relationship with him in our own life.

St. Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). This doesn’t mean that our common approach to Scripture should be to flip through the Bible as if it were a divine Magic 8 Ball™ and expect to quickly get an answer for any question. God can direct or speak to us in this way, just as he directed St. Augustine to “take and read,” and St. Augustine’s heart was moved as he read Romans 13:13–14. However, while this method of opening the Bible to a random page and taking the first verse we see as God’s response to whatever is on our mind might produce helpful results at times, at other times we might unexpectedly get an answer about how to properly butcher our sacrificial goat from the Book of Leviticus or a lengthy royal genealogy from 2nd Chronicles.

Just as finding silence for prayer takes practice, prayerfully reading Scripture is a habit that also takes time and effort to establish. A habit of praying with Scripture gives God the opportunity to talk to us and allows us to learn how to listen. This is the secret of the saints: immerse yourself in God’s Word knowing it is addressed to you, and you will hear God speak to you.

“Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man. For ‘we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.’” —CCC 2653 (Quoting St. Ambrose)

Consider your current habits for reading Scripture. Do you read the Bible on a regular basis? Is it for prayer or for study? What are some steps you can take this week to begin praying with Scripture or to increase the time you spend praying with Scripture?



Hands and Rosary © Kzenon / shutterstock.com

COMMIT – DAY 5

TRUTH AND BEAUTY

Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, c. 1450, Convent of San Marco, Florence



The Annunciation / Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Fra Angelico was a Dominican friar and early Italian Renaissance painter devoted exclusively to religious art. The 16th-century biographer Vasari said of him, “It is impossible to bestow too much praise on this holy father, who was so humble and modest in all that he did and said and whose pictures were painted with such facility and piety.” Fra Angelico was beatified by Pope St. John Paul II in 1982 and is a patron saint of Catholic artists.

Fra Angelico was among the Dominican friars who moved into Florence’s newly rebuilt friary of San Marco. There, in addition to his responsibilities as a friar, he set about the task of decorating the convent, painting some forty frescoes in the individual cells, as well as several paintings in corridors and communal areas. The above *Annunciation* fresco can still be seen where Fra Angelico first painted it, at the top of the staircase leading to the dormitory level of the north corridor of one of the cloisters. Light from an east-facing window in the corridor bathes the painting in the early morning hours, highlighting its colors, and the window’s location intensifies this effect in the early spring, in particular around the March 25th feast of the Annunciation. Fra Angelico sets his *Annunciation* scene under an arched portico, similar to those that encircle the

cloister's ground floor garden area. The painting's garden is populated with small white flowers, and just beyond the simple fence are Tuscan cypresses. The linear perspective draws us into the picture, and its vanishing point of the small window in the cell just beyond the Annunciation scene highlights the painting's setting. With its position along the corridor's south wall, the fresco acts as an illusionary window looking out onto the garden area and thus brings the sacred scene of the Annunciation into the physical reality of the convent. In viewing the fresco, one could expect to walk directly out into the garden and find Mary and Gabriel in conversation.

This *Annunciation* is simple, and almost austere. Mary sits on a simple wooden bench. There are no images of God the Father overlooking the scene, or of the Holy Spirit preparing to descend and overshadow Mary once she has uttered her *fiat*, her "yes." There are no symbolic objects, such as lilies denoting Mary's purity. There is nothing "extra" to distract our attention from focusing solely on Mary and the angel who has come to her on God's behalf.

Look up Luke 1:26–38. In this conversation between God (through his messenger Gabriel) and Mary, who initiates? Is this a monologue, or a dialogue? How does Mary's interaction with Gabriel change over the course of the conversation?

Both Mary and the angel take a stance of humility, with arms folded over their chests. Gabriel bends his knee and bows before the virgin, marveling at her who he is able to address as "full of grace." Mary does not bow as much as she looks directly in the face of this heavenly messenger. St. Luke tells us that she "considered in her mind" Gabriel's greeting (Luke 1:29). As the angel continues his message, Mary interjects to ask questions, to inquire and better understand God's word to her. The angel responds, giving greater understanding and also greater assurance by announcing what has already miraculously happened to Elizabeth. As Mary is able to consider, inquire, take in, and understand God's word and will, she then responds both in word and in deed, departing in haste to the hill country of Judah to serve Elizabeth (see Luke 1:38–40).

St. John Paul II, specifically noting Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, reflected that Mary "represents the model of the Church at prayer. In all probability Mary was absorbed in prayer when the angel Gabriel came to her house in Nazareth and greeted her. This prayerful setting certainly supported the Blessed Virgin in her reply to the angel and in her generous assent to the mystery of the Incarnation. . . . We could add that for the People of God, Mary represents the model of every expression of their prayer life. In particular, she teaches Christians how to turn to God to ask for his help and support in the various circumstances of life" (General Audience, Sept. 10, 1977).

As Fra Angelico's fellow friars passed by this *Annunciation* everyday, it certainly must have assisted them to follow Mary's example in their own life of prayer. By painting the *Annunciation* as though it were taking place in the garden and portico of the cloister, the artist created a simple but beautiful reminder that God desires to step into our lives—not only his fellow friars but each of us today—and encounter us in prayer.

Take a moment to journal your ideas, questions, or insights about this lesson. Write down thoughts you had that may not have been mentioned in the text or the discussion questions. List any personal applications you got from the lessons. What challenged you the most in the teachings? How might you turn what you've learned into specific action?

A background image of a hand holding a pen over an open book, with horizontal lines overlaid for writing.