

# Why Use Prayer Beads?

Prayer beads are an aid to achieving a type of prayer called Contemplative Prayer. Contemplative Prayer is well described by one of its great modern proponents, the Cistercian priest and monk Fr. Thomas Keating who lives and works at a Benedictine monastery at Snowmass, Colorado.

Fr. Keating tells us that all true prayer is based on a conviction of the presence of the Spirit. True prayer can go in two directions. These are called discursive prayer and contemplative prayer. In discursive prayer, we pray into the Spirit using our thoughts and words. In contemplative prayer, we detach ourselves from our thoughts so as to open up ourselves to letting the Spirit pray in us (Keating, 1994).

So a goal of contemplative prayer is interior silence. Achieving this interior silence is an important step we must take to open up ourselves to letting the Spirit pray in us. We are, in essence, listening rather than speaking (Kelsey, 1976).

There are a number of practices that “spontaneously or deliberately” free the mind of dependence on thinking to go to God (Keating). These practices include lectio divina (a method of prayerfully reading the Scriptures), use of repetitive prayers such as the Jesus Prayer or the Hail Mary, the use of a repetitive mantra (often a word or short phrase such as “love” or “peace” or “Come Lord Jesus” or many, many others), the Veneration of Icons, devotionals such as the Stations of the Cross, and prayer beads.

So just what do prayer beads do? There may be no better description than that of a prayer bead authority, Fr. Basil Pennington of the Roman Catholic Dominican Order.

Fingering beads often helps our concentration. This is one of their greater benefits. While they occupy and integrate our external senses into our prayer, our mind is left freer to attend to its own level of reality. There are mysteries to be pondered and experiences to be had, moments of enlightenment and touches of the divine, while the beads and their accompanying formulas keep the lower faculties occupied. Even when the rational mind is occupied in conversation or some other simple task, beads can be support the spirit in its course of prayer. Deliberately holding the beads can in itself be prayer, especially when the mind seems unable to formulate any meaningful thoughts. The chain of beads can reach far beyond itself, bonding us with a higher power – with heaven itself. A lifetime of absorbed myth, rich legends, frequent use, and association with significant moments can endow a little chaplet (a small loop of beads) with powerful symbolic meanings very personal to the hand and heart that hold it (Pennington, 1985).

So for people used to discursive prayer, prayer beads are a step toward contemplative prayer, one way to take the step from “talking to God” to “listening to God.”

*Keating, Fr. Thomas, Open Mind, Open Heart, The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel, the Continuum Publishing Company, New York, 1994, particularly pages 13, 145, and 147.*

*Kelsey, Fr. Morton T., The Other Side of Silence, A Guide to Christian Meditation, Paulist Press, 1976, p. 93.*

*Pennington, Fr. M. Basil, Praying by Hand, Rediscovering the Rosary as a Way of Prayer, Harper San Francisco, 1985, p. 4, et. Seq.*