

An Oratory at Home

A Hebrew Catholic Perspective

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An Oratory at Home

Catholic Perspective

What is an oratory?

An oratory is, as the Latin word for prayer, "ora", signifies — a place we dedicate for prayer and spiritual matters. Ideally we should think of the whole of our home dedicated to God and in this sense, every member's home is a church — a place where the Body of Christ is alive and thriving. However, setting aside a space, corner or even a room specifically for worship in its various forms, is a practice which has remained alive in the Church right up into our own era. It is true we see these less often now, but that is not to say the custom is not still widespread. We are, here and now, advocating that you, our reader, look favourably on this wonderful tradition and give thought to setting aside such a space in your home. Our intention, here, is to offer enough support to give you confidence to proceed, no matter what your Christian affiliation.

Note: These notes deal only with informal centres of devotion in one's home and not in any way with official premises formally approved by appropriate ecclesiastical authority. It is for that reason only we attach the word "private" when referring in this paper, to an oratory

Why have an oratory?

If you live in a home with religious articles scattered literally "all over the place," and this is accepted as part of the family culture, then setting up a specific place for such things may be entirely unnecessary. For example, many old traditional Catholic, and indeed Jewish homes, have articles and emblems in every room. In such cases a candlestick or two, plus a few other items used in regular household rituals may sit on the dining room mantelpiece and be placed on the table when the family gathers for prayer. The whole place is a beautiful sanctuary and a testimony to God's Presence in that home. But even in these homes, there is often a particular spot where certain articles are given a place of honour and this is a reminder of the priority we ought to give God in our lives. Many of us have not grown up in such a culture. If we can redress the situation and establish that culture in our homes, well and good. These notes are to assist our members who live in different circumstances from what we have described, and who want to give physical expression to the traditions associated with the Biblical vision of life.

In support of a home oratory, some will offer as their reason the "nice feeling" aspect, or a place one can claim a bit of peace and quiet, and "leave the world outside". These are understandable, but they are not why traditional Christians dedicate part of their home to be set aside for religious purposes. Nor is the reason to draw God "down" among us, since God already dwells in us. Traditional Christians understand that and hold dearly the Blessed Apostle Paul's reminder to us: "Know you not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Cor. 6: 18 and 20).

Our Tradition teaches us that Church sanctuaries are extensions of God's sanctuary in Heaven. Likewise our little space at home dedicated to honouring God is an extension of the sanctuary at Church where we gather to worship — especially for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, or the Mass, as many of us call it.

We establish an oratory in our homes, therefore to **proclaim and celebrate God's presence and His drawing us into His Divine Presence**. No matter how simple, small or modest, our oratory is (or chapel if we wish to call it that) — it proclaims our belief and faith in Jesus Christ and our commitment to try and live in a manner which befits members of His household: those who have been baptised into His Body, the Church.

As background reading on this topic, we attach two appendices and one Internet link:

Appendix 1 **[Return to the Desert by Carlo Caretto.](#)**

Appendix 2 **[Your Own Oratory — A Place for Stillness and Reverence](#)**

Link: **[Making Our Home a Sanctuary](#)**

Is there any real advantage in having an oratory?

Traditional Catholics, (and no doubt other traditional Christian readers), find constantly that the modern world exerts unrelenting pressure on us, (and especially our young people), to "give it away" and "go with the flow". This has the effect of an on-going undercurrent diverting us away from the basic fundamentals of the Christian Faith. It is hard to detect this, at times, and it is very difficult not to be influenced by some of the modern forms of atheism in our society, We are immersed daily in a strong tidal flow of materialistic influences — so let's be realistic about how some are likely to cling to us, unnoticed, and quietly spread like a virus throughout our framework of religious beliefs and practice. In order to counter this unfortunate situation, it helps to put very deliberate disciplines in place. Frequent visits to one's private oratory, and its use for regular daily prayer are two such disciplines which can have very real benefits.

What is the real purpose of a private oratory?

An oratory in the home provides us with a dedicated space wherein we can give visual, physical expression to our Faith and develop it as a centre of devotion. This can be a powerful antidote to the lack of Christian cultural expression which used to be more common in our communities. Here we can design, in a very personal way, a Christian cultural oasis where we can rise above the noise and distractions of the world. Carefully chosen religious articles, whether photographs, statues, posters, icons, crucifixes, scrolls, menorahs and Bibles, candlesticks as well as carefully chosen meaningful symbols not only give dignity and prayerful atmosphere; they exert a strong emotional and inspiring influence. They help us to **remember** and to **listen** to our Lord Jesus Christ. These two words are vital in the maintenance of Biblical Judaeo-Christian culture and vision.

To **remember** is to re-mind: to regain presence of mind i.e. the state of calmness in which all the powers of the mind are on alert and ready for action. This is like a "spiritual shower", to clean-up after being engaged in all manner of activities which are part of contemporary life. This freshens the body as well as the soul and prepares us to regain our spiritual composure and return to a consciously chosen focus on the things of God.

To **listen**, for the Christian, is to obey the commandments of God (Genesis 12: 1 — 8 and Luke 9: 28 — 36). In Luke 9: 35, in the midst of the Cloud of God's Holy Presence, God the Father declares: "This is my beloved Son; **Listen to Him**". The Christian needs to take every step necessary to ensure that they listen to their beloved Shepherd, and carry out what He requires of them.

A private oratory provides for the human necessity of taking spiritual rest in order to be refreshed and strengthened for the Lord's service. Jesus said to His followers, "Come to Me all you who labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you; I will give you rest". (Matthew 11: 29)

No doubt you will have noted that we have not talked of retreating from the world just to escape the noise and the hustle and bustle, etc. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to do and enjoy. However, the principal purpose behind going to one's oratory is not so much "to escape" or "do nothing" but to be **re-freshed**, to **re-gain** presence of mind and a state of calmness in which all of the powers of the mind and soul enable us to turn our whole focus on God. We need the counter-balance an oratory can provide, to help us **see** and **hear inwardly** at a higher spiritual level, for which, after all, we were given the faculties to enjoy. It is there we can engage in meditation and appropriate devotions to give honour and glory to God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is how we respond to our loving Lord who desires us to be with Him, and desires us to share these blessings as widely as we can.

Appendix 3, The Transfiguration of Jesus, emphasises the importance of listening to Jesus Christ — of obeying God's command to us: "**Listen to Him**". This great event, this climax in the revelation of Jesus Christ, as the embodiment of God's teaching throughout the ages is an important key to the valuing of our heritage above all else, and defending it against all the powers of darkness which will gather more persistently against Him as the time of His Return approaches. We encourage you to ponder this account of Christ's Transfiguration from time to time and let its profound message help strengthen your personal relationship with Him. (See Appendix 3 — **The Transfiguration of Jesus**)

You may find two of our articles helpful in reflecting upon the holiness of time and space:

- **Sabbath Time**
- **Boldly Declaring The Boundaries**

Where is an oratory best located?

Under the second heading, "Why Have an Oratory", we acknowledged the ideal situation in which the whole of one's home is a place of celebrating openly our living Faith, and letting it give witness to our love of God and the desire to honour Him worthily. If that is not realistic or practical for us, then perhaps setting up a modest oratory may help give witness to God's love and presence. In fact, even if our whole home reflects strongly our Faith and love of God, there are still reasons why an oratory can help us be effective ambassadors for our Lord. Jesus Christ: can help us strengthen our convictions, sharpen our focus to go forth and share the light of Christ with those around us.

The positioning of our oratory, as well as all of the decisions regarding it, are choices for each person to make according to one's circumstances, needs and personal preferences. Our clergy and religious can give advice on many aspects, and consulting them will always bring its own rewards. Some of us will opt for a corner in the lounge / sitting room, or at the end of the hallway. Some will be somewhat restricted in what they do and may need to be discreet. Others may have a spare room or a space which can be set aside in a basement. Don't forget, the first Christians in Rome met in caves or catacombs for their worship. Our suggestion is to take some time to think through where you feel you want this very special place to be located. Do take the time — it is a very important first step. Talking of the first Roman Christians, it is helpful to remember that the catacombs were the safest places to establish their oratories. From the beginning these were decorated with striking images of our Lord to help them in their worship and Christian education. So let's take a moment to reflect on how appropriate it might be to incorporate religious images in our oratory.

Where does the practice of using religious images in Christian Worship come from?

Note: Some of the ideas in this section were taken from, "Introducing Icons" by Paul and Christine Hodgkinson. 1991.

The word "image" is used in the Bible in the first chapter of the first book, Genesis 1:27. "God created man in his own image: in the divine image he created him, male and female he created them." So all human beings are in some mysterious way, icons of the living God. This reaches its perfection in Jesus, the Son, who proclaimed that He was the full revelation of the Godhead, "To see me is to see the Father" (Jn. 14:10). St Paul reinforces this; "Jesus is the image of the unseen God."

(Col: 1: 15). So God has taken the initiative by revealing himself in visible, material form.

The Bible also reveals how we are and how we are not to relate to images. In the Old Testament we read that to worship a graven image **as a god** is forbidden by the first commandment: "You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, your God, the Lord Almighty, am a jealous* God" (Exodus 20: 4).

* Jealous God — To bow down and serve other gods is **to belong to them**. God is zealous for us to remain His loving and loyal children and thus to rejoice in **belonging to Him**.

We need to understand this direction in context. The commandment is not saying that the making of graven images as such is forbidden, but the **adoration of these is forbidden**. How do we know? Moses who gave these commandments from God, goes on to describe the design God gave him for the tabernacle and the ark (Exodus 25).

Exodus 25 — 30 records God's instructions to Moses regarding the construction of the Tabernacle of His Presence in the desert. The holiest part of the Tabernacle was the Ark to contain the tablets of stone later in Exodus inscribed with the Commandments. These were especially sacred in that they represented the Word of God residing in the midst of His people.

Moses subsequently built this ark, as commanded by God, which had the images of two gold cherubim on the top (Ex. 25: 18 – 21; 37: 8 – 9) and arranged for the weaving of the curtains with the embroidered cherubim for inside the tabernacle (Ex. 36: 35). He later made the bronze serpent at God's direction, to heal the people in the desert. Buildings were adorned with images throughout Jewish history (Solomon's temple is one example). It seems it was only after the conquest by Greece and Rome that images were banned from Israel's life. Jesus was challenged one day and asked for the coin of tribute. It bore the image of Caesar. He said, "Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22: 19 – 21). Jesus reinforces the truth that we are made in the divine image and, as such, we all belong to God. Images are created, but are never to be adored.

Paintings, frescos, statues and icons when associated with worship are not idols to receive our worship. Their purpose, on the contrary, is to give us a message. The message is **always** one of the relationship of man with God through God's revelation of himself to man. Of course anything can become an idol when we use it incorrectly. Christians who cannot, or will not, grasp this truth carry an unnecessary burden. They need not prohibit themselves from responding to beauty and allowing this experience to bring them closer to God. **Did not God**, at creation, surround Adam and Eve with a vast array of beautiful objects, animate and inanimate, to heighten their sense of His Presence, and their relationship to him? Surely we would not stop admiring or using a tree just because Satan appeared in one to tempt our first parents. The same applies in our spiritual life. **To deny the place of images in our worship or demonstration of respect towards God just because, in some religions, people worship statues, etc, is therefore entirely unbiblical.**

How does one set up an oratory?

Oratories vary from the simplest of settings in a little corner, with perhaps just a scroll, a Bible, a crucifix, a menorah, or a statue, to much larger and grander examples. They also vary according to one's culture and local traditions. We are therefore not in a position to lay down prescriptions but seek instead to offer a few possibilities to help you "get started". It is your place to set up how you want it, and to love it and look after it.

Step One:

Reflect again on the purpose for which we set up an oratory. In essence it is:

- a place where we are re-freshed and where every aspect of our being is re-vitalised so that we become recollected and totally open to God's presence in order to give Him our whole and undivided attention in worship;
- a place to be still and to **remember** and **listen** to Jesus Christ our Lord, our Torah: our Word of God.

Step Two:

Think about where such a blessed space would be best situated as to who would use it (numbers and age range). Consider the possibility of situating it so that it faces East, and reminds you at every moment that you belong to a people preparing for, and waiting upon the Lord for His glorious Return. (See Appendix 4 — **Facing East**)

Step Three:

Consider now the scale of what you wish to set up: a tiny corner with a few articles (or whatever) for one person — or a place which can hold the family and / or a few friends. This will enable you to think about the type of atmosphere you wish to promote and how you would like to enhance it. At this point you may have some ideas about how you would like to arrange the setting.

Step Four:

Choose your favourite furnishings and devotional items which are going to constitute the area and define its special character. We have attached an appendix to this paper listing some of the items you may wish to include with a few notes about some of them. It is a good idea not to overload the space all at once; but rather to add items as you get the feel for it and become aware of what is needed. (See Appendix 5 — [Setting Up An Oratory](#))

Step Five:

Dedicate your chosen space to God's glory so that it is forthwith recognised for what it is — a holy place. If you have access to a priest or any member of a religious order, who is willing to help, invite him to visit with a view to, making suggestions as well as arranging a formal blessing of your oratory.

An attached appendix offers a simple **provisional** dedication of one's private oratory whilst awaiting a formal blessing. (See Appendix 6 — [Asking God's Blessing.](#))

Appendix 1

Return to the Desert

By Carlo Carretto

If the prophets did so, and if Jesus did so, we must go out into the desert from time to time.

It is not a question of transporting oneself there physically. For many of us, that could be a luxury. Rather it implies creating a desert space in one's own life. And to create a desert means to seek solitude, to withdraw from people and things, one of the undisputed principles of mental health.

To create a desert means learning to be self-sufficient, learning to remain undisturbed with one's own thoughts, one's own prayer, one's own destiny.

It means shutting oneself up in one's room, remaining alone in an empty church, setting up a small oratory for oneself in an attic or at the end of a passage in which to localise one's personal contact with God, to draw breath, to recover one's inner peace. It means occasionally devoting a whole day to prayer, it means going off into the loneliness of the mountains, or getting up alone in the night to pray.

When all is said and done, creating a desert means nothing more than obeying God. Because there is a commandment — arguably the most forgotten of all, especially by the "committed" — which requires us to interrupt our work, to put aside our daily tasks and to seek the refreshing stillness of contemplation: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy

Do not be afraid that your momentary withdrawal will be detrimental to the community; and do not be afraid that an increase in your personal love for God will in any way diminish your love for your neighbor. On the contrary, it will enrich it.

Appendix 2

An Oratory at Home — A Place For Stillness and Reverence

"And they shall make me a sanctuary and I will dwell in the midst of them."

(Exodus 25: 8)

Some commentators insist the above verse should be translated, "And they shall make me a sanctuary and I will dwell **in** (or within) **them**". It is actually important not to emphasise one translation to the exclusion of the other since, in the nature of the Hebrew language, both are correct. God dwelt both in each individual and in their midst — the latter really denoting that by establishing their orderly encampment around God's Tent of Presence, **they** dwelt in **His** midst. This beautiful concept of mutual indwelling is a constant theme throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and reached a very special high point in our Lord's final dialogue with His disciples a short time before His arrest. (John 14: 19 — 20 and 17: 22 — 23)

God's Presence in and among His people is a topic which is very widely interpreted and which receives a lot of attention. Most people reading this will be aware of the many levels or modes of God's Presence, and it is not our intention of supporting some and rejecting others. We believe God sanctifies both time and space. What matters to us is that we encourage you to develop your own sense of God's Presence, and to reverence that in a sincere and genuine manner. Let this be reflected in the use of times and places which are significant for you.

It is not difficult to find books, pamphlets, Internet articles and all manner of publications condemning one or other aspects of what people consider to be holy. Many commentators wax eloquently about how God must not be reduced to presence within a specific place or occasion. Almost always such discourses are based on quite significant misunderstanding of other traditions they are discussing; their comments are valid only within their own restricted field and culture.

The Church, from its earliest times, has encouraged respect for God's Presence in a variety of "modes":

- present throughout time and space;
- present within each person;
- present in gathered communities;
- present in occasions of worship;
- present in specific places, e.g. a Tabernacle holding the Blessed Sacrament;
- present in your holy place — your oratory;
- present in your home and in the gatherings and celebrations of your friends and family.

We therefore encourage you to continue developing in an on-going and relaxed way, your growing sense of God's Presence in the world, in your life, in your own self as well as within others. Each of us is called to do this as best we know how, according to our own culture, and in ways we find authentic — that "ring true" for us. If we pursue this course, God will bless us richly.

Link to:
Making Our Home a Sanctuary
By Yetta Krinsky

http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/2029655/jewish/Making-Our-Home-a-Sanctuary.htm

We highly recommend this beautiful article by Dr. Yetta Krinsky.

Appendix 3

The Transfiguration of Jesus

St. Luke 9: 28 — 36

Introduction

We are about to reflect on one of the most remarkable events in the history of the Lord's earthly ministry. We are encouraged to read it always with profound thankfulness. "It lifts a corner of the veil which hangs over the world to come, and throws light on some of the deepest truths of our religion" (Ryle) So, let us walk slowly through the text as the event unfolds. It will take some time because it is so amazingly rich in its content. But it will truly bless us.

Luke 9: 28 — 36

- 28 About eight days after he said this, he took Peter, John, and James and went up the mountain to pray.
- 29 While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white.
- 30 And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah,
- 31 who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.
- 32 Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him.
- 33 As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But he did not know what he was saying.
- 34 While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud.
- 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him."
- 36 After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen.

Reflections on Our Text:

Verse 28

A week before this event, St. Peter was asked by Jesus to state openly who he believed Jesus to be. He declared him to be the Messiah. The Lord was deeply moved and responded with some unique and very powerful teaching. (Luke 9: 23 — 27)

Our reading therefore opens with, "About eight days later," signifying the first day of the week, which was soon to become the Day of the Resurrection. On this very day, our Lord took Peter, John and James up **THE** mountain (not 'a' mountain) to pray. We do not know which mountain, but it was known to them. What is more important is why they went up the mountain — to pray! We will frequently, in our Gospel meditation, come across references about Jesus going to a solitary place to pray. This is a very clear link with the ancient Hebrew tradition of prayer and meditation.

Our Lord is the example "par excellence" of Jewish prayer and the Gospel writers go to great lengths to emphasise the regular pattern and use of particular places in His prayer.

Verse 29

"As he was praying (i.e. when he began to pray), the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightening." Three great scholars help us understand the grandeur of this moment.

- St. Maximus of the 7th Century, taught that the senses of the Apostles were transfigured to enable them to see the true glory of Christ.
- Let it be noted that we are specially told that it was when our Lord was 'praying' at His baptism the Holy Ghost descended and the Father's voice was heard. So also prayer ushers in the great vision of glory in this place. (Ryle 1830)
- "The Transfiguration was not a miracle of **superadded glory, but the removal of a veil which hid His state of natural glory** from the eyes of His fellows — the real miracle was in the humiliation — the emptying of Himself, the shrouding and restraining of what was ever ready to shine forth." (Sadler 1896)

St. Luke, clearly, is reflecting in his account, (which he wrote between AD 60 and 70), the infant Church's attitude towards the event. Our forebears treasured the **unique revelation of the Lord as he really is, in eternity**. The miracle was not so much that he was revealed in great magnificence — but rather that such a One chose to spend his time among them as 'one of them', and that normally, his real appearance was masked.

Verses 30 and 31

The account continues with Luke writing, 'And behold' (sometimes omitted in modern versions) an expression which focuses the attention strongly on what follows. Two men, **Moses** and **Elijah** appeared in glorious splendour, and they were talking to Jesus. They spoke about his death (or more precisely) 'departure' for which Luke chooses the Greek word 'exodos'. A new Moses and a new Exodus are coming into vision.

It is interesting to note that these two men appeared, likewise as no one had previously seen them. Writers offer various interpretations of what the two represent. St. Luke, (who among the Gospel writers recording this event whether a Jew or not: we are unsure — nevertheless shows profound sensitivity concerning things most sacred in Judaism,) knew that they represent the Torah and Haftorah: the Law and the Prophets. They represent the whole stream of God's revelation to mankind, and are seen in total harmony with our Lord. This unity among them manifests powerfully, beyond any doubt, that the mission of Jesus is to fulfil the Law and the Prophets (i.e. the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures). **"It is not a mission of creating a new religion. Clearly God could not have demonstrated more positively that the Church's beginnings are to be found in the calling of Abraham. (St. Peter reminds us that we, in our turn, are also 'chosen' — 1 Peter 2: 9 — 'the younger sons of Abraham'.)"**

(Pickford)

The document "Nostra Aetate" from the Second Vatican Council reflects this in its beautiful statement, that the Church cannot "forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles.

(Romans 11: 17 — 24). Indeed the Church believes that by His Cross, Christ, our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself. (Eph. 2: 14 — 16)"

"The faith witnessed in the Bible of the Jews, is for us not a different religion but the foundation of our own faith."

Pope Benedict XVI

Verse 32

Despite the incredible event occurring before their eyes, Peter, John and James "were very sleepy".

Sadler has a helpful comment on what at first may seem untimely sleepiness.

This was the effect of the vision, or rather of its beginning. There are several other instances of this sleep, or absence of distinct consciousness in the presence of some super-natural manifestation. Thus, it is said of Abraham when he received the remarkable revelation of God immediately after his justification, that "a deep sleep fell upon Abraham, and lo, a horror of great darkness fell upon him". (Gen 15: 12.) And of Daniel, "When I heard the voice of his words, then was I in a deep sleep on my face, **and my face toward the ground**". (Dan.10: 9.)

There are commentators who cannot accept this appearance of Moses and Elijah as 'real'. To them it can only be a supernatural vision. This approach arises from an over-intensified linguistic analysis — somewhat alienated from the unbroken traditional Christian culture in which the New Testament was assembled. Knowing what we know about Jesus and His three comparisons, the event was no symbolic subjective vision. — It was real!

When the Lord caused the sleepiness to lift, they quickly became fully awake and saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus.

Verse 33

But by this time the two great leaders are about to leave. In a flash Peter speaks up implying: "Lord this is a great blessing to be present in such distinguished company. In keeping with our customs of respect, why don't we erect a booth for each of you?"

It is commonplace to hear people today judge Peter's remark as that of someone who blurts out before they think. One scholar challenges us:

"And should we have said anything more to the point, if we were fainting with fear at the immediate presence of these glorified denizens of the eternal world? we cannot but admire the outburst of Peter's delight when he saw his Master surrounded with such glory, and with such glorified companions. It was the outburst of a truly burning heart." (Ryle)

In fact, we do not need to be puzzled by Peter's comment. It is clear, he, more than the other two (yet again) is very profoundly stirred by the awe of the occasion. So profoundly stirred was he by the significance of this unprecedented manifestation, he could only utter a weak hint of the spiritual meaning of it all. But he was on the right track. The mention of booths or tabernacles in a context where 'exodus' is mentioned and Moses is present, quite apart from other factors, indicates a spiritually perceptive disciple. With the Feast of Tabernacles only weeks away, our Lord may well have been preparing them with a deeper understanding of its future significance for the Church. Those who ridicule Peter's response have yet to experience anything remotely similar in their lives.

Verse 34

While Peter was making his response from the depths of his being, a dense cloud surrounds them. This alarms them, but they do not panic. There could be no doubt in their minds, this was the Shekinah, the cloud of God's presence, recorded in the Holy Books of the Torah — the first five books of the Old Testament. Peter had felt moved to provide a tabernacle for each of the three. God blesses super-abundantly his spiritual perception, and provides it before Peter had finished speaking.

There is much written about the beautiful meaning of the Shekinah. In Rabbinic teaching the Shekinah refers to a dwelling or settling in a special sense, a dwelling or settling of divine presence. It was a special gift of God after the Exodus as He dwelt in their midst and led them to the Promised Land. This was given to increase their awareness of God's presence and His pleasure in sharing that with those who are of His 'household'.

Verse 35

At a chosen moment a voice came from the cloud proclaiming; "This is my beloved Son: **Listen to him**".

It is the spiritual climax of the Gospel according to St. Luke. This was a moment of **supreme fulfilment** for the three disciples.

The words of Moses were well known to them: as recorded in Deuteronomy 18: 15, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among them — your own brothers. You must **Listen to Him.**"

So here we have a moment of the greatest importance. The God of all proclaims the only Commandment He spoke in the New Testament, "**Listen to Him**". All that the Torah, the Prophets and writings teach — all point to Jesus: Jeshua as He was called in His time. Some, in error, have deduced that God was saying, in effect, from now on you listen to Jeshua, not the Law and the Prophets. But this, of course, ignores our Lord's own statements at various times that He came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets and that until His Return at the end of time, He would require us to continue His work.

In St. Matthew's account of this momentous occasion, he records that the three men who were present with Jesus, "fell on their faces". If one is frightened, one runs away, or hides under something. In Hebrew tradition (from the earliest Patriarchs) one prostrates in God's presence. All through the Bible (Hebrew and Christian Scriptures) prostration refers to dropping to one's knees and bowing down till the face (forehead and nose) touch the ground. This is a very Hebrew-Christian acknowledgement of God and His kingship. It continues to be practised on a regular basis by some groups of Jews as well as some Catholics and other Christians.

This moment in the Transfiguration is one of the great affirmations of Jesus by his Father. It is one of the cornerstones of our understanding of Jesus as the WORD of God, as our Torah. It is the basis of our approach to meditation — to which we constantly refer in Gospel Reflections — for that is how we come to know our Lord, and through Him, God, our Father.

Verse 36

"When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone". We can imagine the transition from being immersed in a timeless yet momentary vision of God's presence, to suddenly realising all is silent, and there are only the four gathered, just as they were before Jesus began to pray. It is suddenly all over. But the lesson has been learnt; the new Moses and new Prophet would lead them, if they are faithful, to the fullness of God's eternal presence. Interestingly, the three disciples kept the experience to themselves — at least till after the Resurrection.

St. Luke recorded that it was the next day that they came down from the mountain. No one in creation had ever seen anything like this. The disciples needed time to adjust.

Conclusion

We are left, rather like the three disciples of the Lord: somewhat overwhelmed at the awesome splendour of the occasion. In the presence of His own companions our Lord is revealed as the embodiment of all the Torah (Law, or Teaching) and the Prophets represent. He is the Living Word of God who commands them: "Listen to Him!" As if to emphasise the presence of the Divine in what Jesus teaches, the Holy Shekinah descends and envelops them all.

One of the chief ways the Church has always encouraged and helped us obey God's command is to call us to read or listen to Sacred Scripture reverently and reflect on it often, allowing the Divine Word to feed our soul and form in us the mind of Christ. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in us as we listen to the Word within the words — the Word behind the words. And we listen to obey. This is what we call meditation — learning to listen as well as learning to obey.

This is very much in the Hebrew-Christian tradition. St Maximus (7th Century) explained that the senses of the Apostles were transfigured to enable them to perceive the true glory of Christ. That is a privilege we too can look forward to at the Lord's Return!

There is a sense in which we can (and should) prepare for that day. St. Paul wrote (in 1 Corinthians 3: 18) —

1 Corinthians 3: 18

18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool so as to become wise.

We are a people who are united in preparing ourselves, and our world for the Return of Jesus the Messiah — Jeshua haMashiach. Everything in our daily prayer and our liturgical worship is oriented towards this great event. This is our Hebrew-Catholic calling and we invite all who would join us to work together, in harmony, for His Return.

In closing we recall St. Gregory Palamas who taught that to grow in the "true knowledge of God" we must be open, even in this life to transfiguration by the Holy Spirit. Indeed the Church calls us to persevere in this pursuit unto the Return of the Messiah at the end of time. Our constant feeding on the Divine Word, Christ our Torah and trying to put it into action — will undoubtedly prepare us for His Return. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

"Proclaim the Gospel to Every Creature"

(Mark 16: 15)

The **real Jesus** is the **real answer** to the **real needs** of the world.

Let us remember God's Teaching, contained in His Word and in doing so, remain close to Him. The following are only examples illustrating how you can note the gems the Holy Spirit highlights for your on-going reflection.

The Transfiguration of Jesus

Lent 2 Year C St. Luke 9: 28 — 36

1. We are very privileged to be able to witness, in a way, through the Gospel account, the unique event of our Lord's Transfiguration, during a time of intense prayer. Moses and Elijah represent the living Word of God revealed to His people in ancient times. Our Lord is affirmed by God the Father to be the living Word now revealed to His people to help them be a "light to the Gentiles (or nations)".

+ "I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49: 6)

+ ".....a light to the Gentiles, and the glory for your people Israel." (St. Luke 2: 32)

2. We are also privileged to hear, through the Gospel account, the only Commandment given by God in the New Testament: "**Listen to Him!**" When we read everything the infant Church heard Him say (and which they wrote down) we see how faithful He was to the Torah, the Prophets and all the Scriptures. When we listen to Him, we hear and experience the whole of God's message of love for mankind.
3. As we meditate on our Lord and His Teaching — on Christ our Torah — the Living Word — the Holy Spirit prepares us to be a people of God who await the Lord's Return at the end of time. To this everything in our life must be oriented.

Let us pray for one another that we will "listen to Him" as we have been commanded by our Father in Heaven, and earnestly try to help others to see the importance of this command.

Shalom!

Appendix 4

Facing East

There is very considerable renewed interest in the ancient Christian tradition of facing East for prayer. To some of us, in our era, this may sound unusual, a bit "faddish", even non-Christian. Thankfully we can confirm that nothing would be further from the truth. It is a time-honoured and truly ancient and venerable Christian custom.

For those who are interested, we have selected a little reading from two sources which give very specific background to the custom. They refer particularly to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist facing east, ("ad Orientem, in Latin") but make a clear reference also to a similar alignment for lay people and members of religious orders when at prayer.

Our purpose in raising this matter with regard to prayer in one's oratory is to encourage the holistic aspects of being united in mind and body, as well as within the whole Body of Christ, united to Christ, our Head, as we give all honour and glory to God.

The notes are offered purely for consideration by those interested in taking this tradition into account.

Reading One

The sacred direction in Judaism is towards Jerusalem or, more precisely, towards the presence of the transcendent God — "shekinah" — in the Holy of Holies of the Temple, as seen in Daniel 6: 10.

Even after the destruction of the Temple, the custom of turning towards Jerusalem was kept in the liturgy of the synagogue. This is how the Jews have expressed their eschatological * hope for the coming of the Messiah, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the gathering of God's people from the diaspora #.

* eschatological — from the Greek 'eschaton' meaning last, and 'logy' meaning the study of: thus the study of the end time.

diaspora — from the Greek, referring to the dispersion and settlement of people far from their homeland.

The early Christians no longer turned towards the earthly Jerusalem, but towards the new, heavenly Jerusalem. It was their firm belief that when the Risen Christ would come again in glory, He would gather His faithful to make up this heavenly city.

They saw in the rising sun a symbol of the Resurrection and of the Second Coming and it was a matter of course for them to pray facing this direction. There is strong evidence of eastward prayer in most parts of the Christian world from the second Century onwards.

Among Christians, it became a general custom to mark the direction of prayer with a cross on the east wall in the apses* of basilicas as well as in private rooms, for example, of monks and solitaries.

* apses — from the Greek and Latin referring to the arched semicircular vault at the east end of many ancient churches.

Towards the end of the first millennium, we find theologians of different traditions noting that prayer facing the east is one of the practices distinguishing Christianity from the other religions of the Near East: Jews pray towards Jerusalem, Muslims pray towards Mecca, but Christians pray towards the east.

Comments by Fr. Lang. London 21.9.2007. [ZENIT, Rome. (www.zenit.org)]

Reading Two

There is a logic of Ascension in the Eucharist: 'This Jesus that you have seen ascend into heaven, will return !'

In the Eucharist the Lord returns; He anticipates sacramentally His glorious Return, transforming the profound reality of the elements, and He leaves them in the condition of signs of His presence and mediation, of communion with His own person..... (Editorial in "Notitiae" 332, May 1993.)

The following is a prayer you may like to recite on entering your oratory each morning. Its fulfillment will be reached in our beholding the Return of the Lord, and the Holy of Holies of the new Temple, for which we earnestly prepare.

You may be interested to know that the words in bold are a kind of verbal formula indicating the traditional Jewish bow, which was always on bended knee, from which the forehead was lowered to the ground. The first Christians, naturally treasuring their ancient Jewish heritage as well as its fulfillment in Christ continued this tradition.

Christian men and boys in or from Middle Eastern countries still kneel in this way, facing East (Matt. 24: 27). In the case of women and girls, this can translate as an appropriate bow.

Either of these is a beautiful and powerful act of homage to God.

We encourage you to experience the joy of kneeling down, bowing, face to the floor, worshipping God in response to His call (Psalm 95: 6) over the past three thousand years.

Entering the Place of Prayer

A Traditional Jewish Prayer

As for me, in the abundance of your lovingkindness will I come into your house. I will worship toward your Holy Temple in the fear of you.

Into the house of God we will walk with the throng.

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!

As for me, in the abundance of your lovingkindness will I come into your house: I will worship toward your Holy Temple in the fear of you. Lord, I love the habitation of your house, and the place where your glory dwells. As for me, I will **worship** and **bow down**: I will **bend the knee** before the Lord, my Maker. As for me, may my prayer unto you, O Lord, be in an acceptable time: O God, in the abundance of your lovingkindness, answer me in the truth of your salvation.

Appendix 5

Setting Up An Oratory

The Location and Setting

1. If you have a choice, you may like to include a particular view which for you is meaningful and helpful. This could be one of houses, gardens, sea views or even none at all.
2. Again, if you have a choice, you may be able to arrange it that you have morning or afternoon sun — or both — or none at all. Recall the value of your oratory facing East, if this is practical. If it is impractical, we encourage you to look upon your oratory as a symbolic "liturgical East" to help keep your focus on preparing for and awaiting the Return of Jesus Messiah. This is a major Hebrew Catholic perspective of immense spiritual importance.
3. The above two aspects may have some influence on a third consideration as to lighting, heating and fresh air. Usually, most people prefer subdued lighting but adequate for reading without strain. Attention to our bodily needs is legitimate when the motive is to improve one's concentration in prayer or even in just restful reflection.
4. Noise, movement, traffic, telephone and other possible distractions also need to be thought about in advance. Prayer-time is not a license to escape to an impregnable fortress where we can forget the world and its needs. However, provided one has taken reasonable steps to provide for the needs of others, then one can quite justifiably retreat to a quiet place without feeling selfish, and give focused attention to the Lord. It is not going too far to utilise a telephone answering message system so that you are not out of reach for very long in the case of those who depend on close contact with you.

Furnishings and Equipment

1. If your oratory is just a corner or small space in a lounge which is used for other activities, then it is really only a matter of adapting things at hand to meet your needs.
2. If you are designing an area for specific use as an oratory there are various possibilities depending on your own custom and practice. For instance:
 - a) using a suitable chair, with no other necessary furniture;
 - b) using a chair and table;
 - c) using a "prie dieu" — a kneeler desk;
 - d) using a floor cushion or pad to sit and / or kneel on.
3. Everyone needs to make their own decision about whether to have a clock of some sort visible, (preferably a silent one). An excellent alternative is to have a timer (preferably with a subdued or dignified bell) which allows you to allocate yourself a time slot and then relax and forget the time.
4. Some people like to play appropriate music as part of their prayer time. So a player of some sort could be at hand. There is no reason to avoid electronic equipment if this genuinely supports our devotional practices, or even just helps us sing better.

5. We recommend as a very helpful item in every private oratory, a calendar indicating the seasons and feast-days of the Jewish and Church year. One can get by with information available on the Internet. However, to have one's own source at hand really is a great help.

Devotional Articles

We have noted elsewhere that from the very beginning of the Church, Christians have decorated their places of worship with beautiful imagery. The oldest extant image of our Lord is a representation of him as the Good Shepherd painted on one of the catacomb walls where Christians gathered to offer the Eucharist. We have also noted elsewhere that this was not by accident, nor without a strong theological foundation. Thus, buildings used for traditional Christian worship have always been decorated with Biblical imagery via paintings, frescoes, statues, icons and later, stained glass windows. Similarly, Christian books have also reflected a sense of order and beauty. All of this imagery reflects in some small way the beauty of the spiritual realms which God has revealed to us — and of which we are part.

It is perfectly natural, therefore, for us to draw on this tradition and incorporate these principles of devotion in our household oratories. The following lists are **suggestions only** to help you plan your preparation.

1. Books

The selection of art in one's oratory will naturally vary according to personal taste and background. The same is likely to apply with the selection of books one wants to have at hand. We can therefore, give only a guide and leave it to individuals to consult their own advisors if they are uncertain.

We would anticipate the following as being helpful:—

- a) a daily Missal (which comprises mainly Bible passages and related prayers — but check the translation);
- b) a Bible, Scrolls, or book of readings:
Note: It is strongly recommended to have at hand a full Bible as authorised formally by the Church. There are many modern English translations available and some of these are very unsuitable. They are often poorly translated and can be quite misleading.
- c) prayer books;
- d) approved commentaries on Scripture;
- e) spiritual reading on various topics;
 - lives of the Patriarchs, Prophets and Saints.

Note: We recommend a priest be consulted as to which items (e.g. a Missal) should be blessed. These can be used as "sacramentals" which means ~ they can be channels of grace for the user.

2. Sacramentals are objects we use in our devotions. The use of blessed images, statues, icons and other such objects can help restore our spiritual equilibrium in a world which is increasingly antagonistic towards traditional Christianity.

We strongly recommend some or all of the following:—

- a) a Holy Water stoup (font), either made for the purpose — otherwise a small dish or nice shell to hold Holy Water;
Note: This can be placed at doorways (especially back and front doors) as well as at the entrance to the oratory, or sitting close at hand.
- b) a mezuzah (or several throughout the house)
- c) a Rosary;
- d) single candles, and a seven candle menorah;
- e) votive lamps (coloured or plain).

3 Other helpful items can include:—

- a) a crucifix (or image of the crucifixion);
- b) a statue of our Lord — especially a Sacred Heart statue; (There are many to choose from.
We highly recommend this particular devotion which can also be found in icon form.)
- c) a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, either alone or holding the infant Jesus;
- d) a statue of St. Joseph — again, alone, or together with the child Jesus;
- e) a statue, (or image) of any favourite Saint;
- f) items of art and craft work produced by the family, including the children are especially appropriate;
- g) framed Biblical texts or passages;
- h) Some like to have a photograph or two of loved ones who have gone to their eternal rest. In fact, selected photographs of significant people and places in our life, are a very legitimate reminder of the need for prayer: thanksgiving and intercession.

Appendix 6

Asking God's Blessing

We recommend that an area specifically set up as a private household oratory receive a formal blessing by a priest. The attached format offers an informal dedication whilst formal blessing is awaited.

In particular, we strongly commend the formal blessing referred to as the "**Enthronement of the Sacred Heart**". This establishes a very special tie between one's home and the sanctuary (parish church) where one worships. The Sacred Heart shrine is, in a manner, a centre of our Lord's presence in the home corresponding to the Tabernacle of Christ's Real Presence in their Church or religious community. Consultation with a priest will guide the preparation for this ceremony. We give the strongest possible commendation in support of this unique gracious privilege which the Church extends to those who request it.

Asking God's Blessing On a Home (Private) Oratory

(Entirely unofficial but tasteful, we hope.)

Asking God's Blessing On a Home (Private) Oratory



In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction

For reading aloud or quiet reflection.

From earliest times God desired that altars should be set up to Him and places of prayer established where people could assemble to pay the divine majesty the worship which He is due. And the Church has always been at pains, from the time of her liberation by the Emperor Constantine, to bring all her genius to bear in raising up for God sanctuaries worthy of Him. There the Christian community gather together to pray to God, hear His Word, offer the holy sacrifice of the Mass, receive the sacraments such as baptism, confirmation, and holy matrimony, and finally, upon death, to be committed to God's care. There, also, the community takes part during the year in the celebration of the events in our Lord's life, death and resurrection, whilst drawing from this source of regeneration those graces of redemption which transform the lives of each one.

In her care and concern for each individual as they live their Christian lives, the Church also encourages its members to assign a space in their home for God, as well as time for reverent worship there. May God bless the place set aside here for worship and spiritual offerings to His greater honour and glory. Amen.

Old Testament Canticle

1 Chronicles 29: 10 — 13

David had gathered treasures for the building of the temple; at the end of his life he entrusted them to his son Solomon. This canticle, in which he consecrates the gifts to the Lord, has a meaning for us too: All for the glory of God!

Blessed are you, O Lord, God of Israel our Father, from eternity to eternity.

Yours, O Lord, are grandeur and power, majesty, splendour and glory.

For all in heaven and on earth is yours; yours, O Lord, is the kingdom, yours the prince supreme over all.

Riches and honour are from you; you govern all things.

In your hand are power and might; yours it is to give everything grandeur and strength,

And now, our God, we give you thanks and we praise the majesty of your name.

A Call To Praise God

Psalm 116 [117]

Mankind's hymn of thanks: Today, too, God will be merciful and true to us.

Praise the Lord, all you nations; glorify him, all you peoples!

For steadfast in his kindness toward us, and the fidelity of the Lord endures forever.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,

As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen

- He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide under the protection of the God of Heaven. Psalm 90 [91]: 1
- "My house shall be called a house of prayer", says the Lord. "In it, everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks it shall be opened." St. Matthew 21: 13 and St. Luke 11: 9

Prayer

Lord, you are the invisible support of all things; but for the salvation of mankind, you have given visible signs of Your power.

Show forth the power of your presence in this place; to all those who gather here to pray, whatever the trial afflicting them when they come to cry out to you, grant the favour of your consolation

This we ask of you through our Lord Jesus Christ your son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Final Blessing



May the all-powerful and merciful Lord, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bless and keep us. Amen.