

Summer Term 2026

Strong Roots: Contemplative Prayer & Practice

Course Syllabus

Course Code: A03EY1

Canterbury College Land Acknowledgment

We respectfully acknowledge that Canterbury College resides on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, which includes the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomie.

Course Dates: July 13, 20, 27, Aug 3, 10, 17

Time: Mondays from 6-9pm EST

Delivery: In person / Hybrid (location: Canterbury College campus)

Instructor: Jennifer Boyes-Garbin, BA, MDiv, DMin

Contact: jboygar@uwindsor.ca

Phone: 226-340-3018

Course Description

This course examines the practice of contemplative prayer from the Early Church through to modern times, with the intent of reflecting on, strengthening and growing our relationships with God, self, and the world around us. Grounding our study in theological and scriptural understandings of prayer, we will explore the idea that the act of contemplation leads to greater daily embodiment of the Gospel imperatives of peace, justice and wholeness, and experiences of the Divine that we encounter in private moments of prayer. Through practicum, lecture, reflection, discussion, and readings taken from a wide sampling of authors and practitioners of contemplative prayer, we will consider how this practice encourages us to be more fully engaged as anti-racist, embodied, and self-reflective Christ followers, open to continual spiritual growth, social action, and deepening relationship with the Divine.

Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, students will:

- Be familiar with the theological and scriptural foundations of prayer in general, and contemplative prayer specifically, in the Christian tradition.
- Be familiar with and have experience in the following contemplative prayer practices:
 - The Ignatian Exercises
 - The Awareness Examen (Ignatius)
 - Centering Prayer
 - *Lectio Divina*
 - Praying with Icons
 - Walking Prayer and Labyrinth Prayer
 - Nature Mysticism
- Understand how these practices of contemplative prayer create opportunity for deeper

relationship with both God/the Divine and the world in which we find ourselves.

- Understand how the experience of the desert fathers and mothers (monastic tradition) influence and provide the groundwork for modern contemplative prayer.
- Be familiar with the varying experience, reflections and impact of global voices including but not limited to Black, Queer, South American, and Asian writers and practitioners (with a special emphasis on the decolonization of the contemplative practice). Understand the beauty in diversity of global contemplative practice – silence to song, stillness to dancing.
- Reflect on and create a sustainable personal contemplative prayer practice which incorporates and builds on the work covered in this course.

Required Texts / Study Documents

The principal Texts/Documents/Resources for this course will be (this list is subject to slight changes and will be made available to all students in advance of the course date):

The Bible

Cheng, Patrick S., “Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience” (*Spiritus*)**

Farley, Wendy, various videos

Haight, Roger, “Ignatian Spirituality and Racism” (*Spiritus*)**

Holmes, Barbara A., *Joy Unspeakable*

McGee, Jocelyn Shealy, et al, “A sense of connectedness, transcendent experiences, and insights for compassionate action emerge through an international collective labyrinth walk with a shared intention during the COVID-19 pandemic” (*Frontiers in Psychology*)**

Nouwen, Henri J.M., *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*

Swan, Laura, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

Robinson, Timothy, “He Talked to Trees! “Thinking Differently” About Nature with Howard Thurman” (*Spiritus*)**

Rohr, Richard, various videos

On the Ignatian Exercises and Awareness Examen: www.ignatianspirituality.com (various)

Optional Readings:

Bondi, Roberta C., *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church (selected chapters)***

Bourgault, Cynthia, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening (selected chapters)***

Ford, Natalie Mera, “Labyrinthine Routes to Meditation: Contemplative Pedagogy and Instructor Self-Care” (*Journal of Contemplative and Holistic Education*)**

McIntosh, Ian S. and Harman, Lesley D., eds, *The Many Voices of Pilgrimage and Reconciliation (selected chapters)***

Morello, Sam Anthony, *Lectio Divina and the Practice of Teresian Prayer*

Silf, Margaret, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality*

Wood, Funlayo E, *Cyber Spirits, Digital Ghosts: African and Diasporic Religions in the Age of Collaborative Consumptions (CrossCurrents)***

**These documents will be made available in electronic (pdf) format, free of cost, for all students in the course.

Full bibliography will be available one week prior to beginning of course.

Course Outline/Plan

Week 1

1. Required Reading:
 - a. Chapters 1-3 *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* (Swan – course reader);
 - b. Ignatian Exercises/Awareness Examen materials available on www.ignatianspirituality.com (click Ignatian Prayer in the menu and review The Spiritual Exercises and The Daily Examen; and
 - c. *Joy Unspeakable* (Holmes) as this will be a companion text for all of our sessions (Reading the introduction/forward this week will be helpful to set the stage)
1. Optional Reading: Roberta Bondi, “To Pray and to Love” provided in the Course Reader.
2. Introduction to theological and biblical understanding of the practice of prayer and images of God in the Christian tradition
3. The challenge to embody contemplation as a way of life that leads us into deeper community and towards social action
4. Learning from the desert mothers and fathers
5. Learning from the Africana historical and current contemplative tradition
6. Practicum: Awareness Examen (daily prayer in the Ignatian tradition)

Week 2

1. Required Reading:
 - a. “Ignatian Spirituality and Racism”(Haight) in Course Reader;
 - b. “Contemplative Prayer and Centering Prayer” (Bourgeault) in Course Reader;
 - c. Ignatian exercises: “What are the Spiritual Exercises?”
<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/what-are-the-spiritual-exercises>
2. Optional Reading: To use the Exercises for yourself this coming week, consider using this site: [An Ignatian Prayer Adventure - Spiritual Exercises Online Retreat](#) . It is an updated more modern version of the exercises adapted for a 31-day self directed retreat.
 - a. Watch Bourgeault on Centering Prayer in this video <https://youtu.be/1aQmQu4lufo> .
 - b. “The Method of Centering Prayer” (Keating)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FWvxwfN_CE
 - c. Watch Rohr “What is Contemplative Prayer and Why is it So Needed?”
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0o5J0-80AO&pp=ygUdcmljaGFyZCByb2h5lGNlbnRlcmluZyBwcmF5ZXI%3D>)
3. Beginning the journey of the Ignatian Exercises: Week 1 of Exercises
4. Ignatian Exercises: self reflection and awareness of sin/sinfulness (personal/systemic)
5. Understanding the Exercises as an act of anti-racism
6. Introduction to Centering Prayer
7. Practicum: Centering Prayer

Week 3 – (Reflection paper due)

1. Required Reading:
 - a. *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* (Nouwen);

- b. Continue with the spiritual exercises site noted in Week 2 (focus is Week 2 of the exercises)
 - c. *Joy Unspeakable* (Holmes) chapters 1-3);
 - d. “What is Lectio Divina” (info sheet sent via email).
2. Ignatian Exercises Week 2: Jesus’ mission of healing the world
 3. Introduction to *Lectio Divina*
 4. Praying with Icons
 5. Connecting the experiences of global voices
 6. Practicum: *Lectio Divina*

Week 4

1. Required Reading:
 - a. “Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces” (Cheng) in Reader); Video – “Beauty, Contemplative Practices, Queer Theology...” Farley https://youtu.be/N2p8YjbB2yc?si=fiP_M8rU-e8-k4jw ;
 - b. Continue with Week 3 of Exercises (link in Week 2);
 - c. *Joy Unspeakable* (Holmes) chapters 4-6;
 - d. McGee, “A sense of connectedness, transcendent experiences, and insights for compassionate action emerge through an international collective labyrinth walk with a shared intention during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Course Reader)
2. Optional Reading:
 - a. “Cyber Spirits, Digital Ghosts” (Funlayo) in Course Reader;
 - b. “What is a Labyrinth?” (Artress) <https://youtu.be/Yy1GG91HqwU> ;
 - c. “Labyrinthine Routes to Meditation: Contemplative Pedagogy & Instructor Self-Care” (Ford)
3. Travelling the way of the cross: Week 3 of the Exercises
4. Understanding the physical embodiment of the Divine through movement (Labyrinth use)
5. Connecting the experiences of global voices
6. Practicum: Labyrinth walk

Week 5

1. Required Reading:
 - a. “He Talked to Trees!” (Robinson) in Reader;
 - b. *Joy Unspeakable* (Holmes) Chapters 7-Afterward;
 - c. Continue with Week 4 of Exercises (link in Week 2);
2. Week 4 of the Exercises: Resurrection and new life
3. Understanding the physical embodiment of the Divine through movement (Labyrinth use)
4. Exploring Howard Thurman’s nature mysticism
5. Connecting the experiences of global voices
6. Practicum: Nature walk

Week 6 (Class presentations)

1. Closing reflections
2. Bringing together all of the voices we have encountered into conversation with one another

3. Practicum: Class presentations on draft papers (see below)

One week after final class: Final Paper due.

Method of Evaluation and Criteria for Grading

(only for students choosing to be evaluated for full course credit)

Non-credit students are encouraged to write the course reflections as a learning and self-development tool. All of the below exercises will be completed by each student seeking evaluation for full certificate credit.

1. Self Evaluation - 20% (evaluated by student and instructor)

Each student will sign a learning covenant which includes self-evaluation as a significant part of the course grade. Students should feel comfortable with and committed to a form of evaluation in which the student honestly evaluates those course components that cannot be measured directly by the instructor (private prayer, reading, and journaling). The learning covenant will include commitments by the student for:

- Daily personal prayer, 45 minutes per day, 5 days per week,
- Keeping of a personal prayer journal, 5 days per week, and
- Reading required texts, watching required videos, and preparing for class discussion.

2. Class Engagement/Participation - 10% (evaluated by student and instructor)

Students are expected to attend all classes prepared to participate in discussion with fellow classmates and instructor. Discussion topics will range from our weekly readings to subjects raised in class.

3. 1st Reflection Paper - 20% (evaluated by instructor)

A short paper (3-5 pages) reflecting on your reading and experience of prayer.

4. Final Presentation and Paper – 50% (evaluated by instructor)

A final paper of 6-10 pages in length developing one (or more) of the contemplative prayer practices covered in the course specifically for the student’s own personal prayer life. The opportunity is to explore how to “plant a new seed” in one’s own practice. A short presentation on this paper is to be given at the last class for conversation, support, and discussion. Students should have ready their general outline and at least one new source to present. (Grade is divided: 10% for class presentation, 40% for final paper) (further details will be shared in class)

Essays are to double-spaced, 12 font size or equivalent. Please use Turabian style (for help with Turabian style writing please visit the “Citations Guide” section of your university library website, or for a quick guide visit: http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html).

Grade Descriptors

A+	90-100	One could scarcely expect better from a student at this level
A	80-89	Superior work which is clearly above average

B	70-79	Good work, meeting all requirements, and eminently satisfactory
C	60-69	Competent work, meeting requirements
D	50-59	Fair work, minimally acceptable
F	below 50	Fail

Note of Gratitude: *This course is inspired by and owes a debt of gratitude to Rev. Canon Dr. Constance Joanna Gefvert, SSJD who is the architect of the course “Rooted in God: Personal Prayer as the Soil for Ministry.” Methodology utilized in “Strong Roots” is loosely based on Sr Joanna’s work and is used with her knowledge and permission.*

