

GOD	LOVES	THE	
AUTISTIC	MIND		
		PRAYER GUIDE	
			FOR THOSE ON THE SPECTRUM
FATHER			AND THOSE WHO LOVE US
MATTHEW	P. SCHNEIDER, LC		

Praise for *God Loves the Autistic Mind*

“I was high-fiving the angels the whole time I read this brilliant insider view of autistic sanctity and prayer life. Fr. Matthew has given us an enchiridion on autistic prayer, with insightful, relatable devotions. Not only are our autistic ways of praying not barriers to God’s presence and mercy, but Fr. Matthew shows the robust possibilities of autistic prayer, sanctity, and mission. He has applied *lex credendi*, *lex orandi* to autism perfectly. I’m going to buy copies for everyone I know.”

—Summer Kinard, MDiv, ThM, author of
Of Such is the Kingdom: A Practical Theology of Disability

“What a blessing this is! With wisdom, compassion, and clear-eyed faith, Fr. Schneider—himself a priest on the autism spectrum—has given the world something wonderful: a book that will bring consolation and hope to countless people with autism and all those who love them. Both practical and prayerful, Fr. Schneider’s work will open minds, shatter myths, and touch hearts.”

—Deacon Greg Kandra, journalist and author of
The Busy Person’s Guide to Prayer

“As an autistic priest and missionary to the autism community, Fr. Matthew Schneider shares insights on communicating with God in a way comfortable for the autistic mind. Through the spiritual disciplines, we on the spectrum can unite with

God in heart and mind. *God Loves the Autistic Mind* is filled with inspiring accounts of autistics' journeys of faith. Fr. Matthew provides fifty-two devotions to enrich our faith and communion with God. As a theologian and minister with autism, I highly recommend *God Loves the Autistic Mind* to those who desire an intimate relationship with the Father and have a passion for inclusion."

—Ron Sandison, author of *Views from the Spectrum*
and founder of Spectrum Inclusion

"Fr. Matthew Schneider, LC, has brought together a cornucopia of autistic experiences of prayer, not only drawing on his personal experience but also citing a rich array of historical and contemporary Christians. No two autistic people will pray alike, but many will find something to identify with here. His introduction to autism, Christian faith, and prayer will not disappoint those who rejoice in footnotes or references, but should prove equally accessible to anyone approaching this subject for the first time. Thoroughly recommended."

—AspiePriest, autistic diocesan priest and blogger

"Fr. Matthew P. Schneider does a great job laying out a prayer method aimed at those with autism who are independent or nearly so. Fr. Schneider explains in a clear and convincing manner how certain features of autism can be helpful in developing a strong prayer life, and he also addresses those features that can make prayer difficult. He adapts the traditional method of *Lectio Divina* and makes it concrete with prayers that speak not only to the heart but also to the mind."

—David Rizzo, author of *Faith, Family, and Children with Special Needs*
and *Praying for Your Special Needs Child*

“*God Loves the Autistic Mind* is the first of its kind: a book that focuses on authentically helping autistic people (who are often overlooked in churches) in their prayer lives—from the autistic perspective. I believe any autistic Christian can benefit from giving this book a read and engaging in the meditations that speak to them.”

—Stephanie Bethany, autistic YouTuber

“As a cleric who works clinically with individuals with autism, I search for meaningful and effective tools that individuals on the autism spectrum can access. I am especially interested in prayer, because when I work with men studying to become priests and deacons, there seem to be so few resources. And there are often so many hurdles for these individuals to wade through. The forms of prayer offered through Fr. Schneider’s book offer not only additional tangible methods, but hope from one who is there.

“We need more of this type of work and I am grateful to Fr. Matthew for the courage to write it.”

—Deacon Lawrence R. Sutton, Ph.D., author of *How to Welcome, Include, and Catechize Children with Autism and Other Special Needs: A Parish-Based Approach* and *Teaching Students with Autism in a Catholic Setting*

GOD LOVES THE AUTISTIC MIND

PRAYER GUIDE FOR THOSE
ON THE SPECTRUM
AND THOSE WHO LOVE US

FR. MATTHEW P. SCHNEIDER, LC



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Introduction

“JESUS LOVES YOU just the way you are” is a common refrain in CCD or religious education classes. However, those of us living with an autistic brain don’t often feel it. We feel more like an outsider in social groups, including in church. In fact, we are nearly twice as likely as anyone else (1.84 times) to never attend church, and not attending church is more likely for us than for persons with any other condition.¹ Also, autistics are significantly more likely to be atheists and agnostics, or to make their own religious system.²

¹ See Andrew L. Whitehead, “Religion and Disability: Variation in Religious Service Attendance Rates for Children with Chronic Health Conditions,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 2 (2018): 377–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12521>. As compared in this study, those with the following conditions were more likely to attend church at least occasionally: ADD/ADHD, developmental delay, learning disability, oppositional defiant disorder, depression, anxiety, speech problems, hearing problems and a brain injury.

² See Catherine Caldwell-Harris et al., “Religious Belief Systems of Persons with High Functioning Autism” (CogSci 2011, Online: Cognitive Science Journal Archive, 2011), 3362–66, <http://csjarchive.cogsci.rpi.edu/proceedings/2011/papers/0782/paper0782.pdf>.

At the same time evidence seems to show that religion helps families with autistic members have a better life. A 2015 study on families with teenage autistic children noted, “We found strength of religious faith to be a significant predictor of FQOL [Family Quality of Life].”³

In fact, summarizing all the previous research on this topic, a researcher in 2019 concluded, “For many parents of children diagnosed with ASD, religion is a means of coping that endures. The importance of religion appears to continue throughout the lifespan, while other sources of support may wane in significance.”⁴ A 1999 study in Ireland quoted many parents of autistic children: “I always prayed, it helped me cope”; “I prayed all the time, my faith kept me going”; “Prayer was the only thing that helped”; “Prayer helps, I would have gone crackers if I didn’t pray”; “Even though I was mad with God I still kept praying”; and “Prayer is all we have at the end of the day.”⁵

³ Thomas L. Boehm, Erik W. Carter, and Julie Lounds Taylor, “Family Quality of Life During the Transition to Adulthood for Individuals With Intellectual Disability and/or Autism Spectrum Disorders,” *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 120, no. 5 (September 1, 2015): 395–411, <https://doi.org/10.1352/1944-7558-120.5.395>.

⁴ Susan L. Moerschbacher, “An Exploration of Parental Perceptions of Inclusive Services and Supports Provided by Faith Communities for Children Diagnosed with Autism and Their Families” (Doctor of Education, Lakeland, FL, Southeastern University, 2019), 18–19, <https://firescholars.seu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1042&context=coe>.

⁵ Patricia Coulthard and Michael Fitzgerald, “In God We Trust? Organised Religion and Personal Beliefs as Resources and Coping Strategies, and Their Implications for Health in Parents with a Child on the Autistic Spectrum,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 1999): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674679908406329>.

Prayer should be a practice that unites Christians, but unfortunately how it is presented is not always the most helpful for those of us with differently structured brains. Some things we struggle with and some things we just process differently. There is even an autistic tendency to be better at some things. Thus, autistic Christians will tend to pray differently from non-autistic Christians. This is not a critique of either way. It's not unlike the way men and women tend to pray differently. Both are good and there is overlap, but tendencies arise in both that are worth exploring.

The goal of this book is to help my fellow autistic Christians and their families pray better. I think this is the first book that explains autistic prayer and offers devotions to autistics from the inside. Other books I have seen on the topic were written from the outside, whether by a parent or by a researcher.

Prayer is always an adventure. Autistic prayer is no different: it is just a different type of adventure. It's as if everyone else is watching Star Wars while we're watching Star Trek. Both are space adventures with interstellar travel, warp speed, and laser weapons, but the rules for how things work are a little different. Each person must go on his or her own adventure seeking out God in prayer. This book provides something of a roadmap or interstellar guide for the autistic seeking Jesus, but it cannot replace your own effort.

One of the difficulties with autism is that autistic brains are quite diverse. Neurotypical individuals have a standard system of connectivity. Scientists can see this in an MRI. However, when they looked at autistic brains in the same scans, they were all different from the neurotypical brains, but also from each other, such that researchers couldn't even figure out a good way to group

them.⁶ This reminds us of the adage, “If you’ve seen one autistic, you’ve seen one autistic.” For the purposes of this book, I will have to admit that this means most autistics will not identify with every point. I don’t even experience every point I mention. I have studied numerous testimonies from autistic teens, men, and women to try to understand some of the diversity we have experienced with different realities or aspects of prayer. Thus, don’t worry if one section of the book does not correspond to your experience of prayer: just use the parts that help you.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One is an autistic guide to prayer in a more systematic way, and will cover types of prayer, how prayer deepens, and a few prayer myths. Part Two consists of individual devotions for prayer or meditation. Before going on, I want to make two notes in this introduction that will give a bit of perspective to what follows: a brief autobiography, and a note about language. If you are not familiar with autism, I’d also suggest reading Appendix A: What Is Autism.

My Life as an Autistic Priest

I always knew something was different with me. I did well in school and was near the top of my class in engineering, but I struggled in other areas. Before being diagnosed, I’d sometimes said, “I left engineering, but engineering never left me.” Then, in late 2015, I did about a dozen hours of extensive testing and, in January 2016,

⁶ See Avital Hahamy, Marlene Behrmann, and Rafael Malach, “The Idiosyncratic Brain: Distortion of Spontaneous Connectivity Patterns in Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *Nature Neuroscience* 18, no. 2 (February 2015): 302–9, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.3919>.

received a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, noting that the diagnosis would have been Asperger's in prior diagnostic manuals that distinguished them. I was initially devastated. However, within a short while, that changed, and I realized I was better off now knowing, and I should be open about this to live in peace and to help others like me.

I never fit in. I was always the exception in school where I got above average grades and rarely got in trouble. However, I'd come right home after school and read the same books over and over. I could always see patterns. Even today when driving, I will notice things like patterns of license plate numbers: I constantly do math with their digits.

In elementary school, I had wretched handwriting. My coordination was always bad. As a kid, I rarely won *Street Fighter II* against my friends. In computer engineering, I was the slowest typist in the class. Even in the seminary, my handwriting was so bad that my formators told me that I needed to improve. Back in elementary school, a specialist was hired to come in and investigate what could be causing my bad handwriting. All I remember is that at the end she wasn't able to help me because I had above average IQ and my reaction times on tests were about average. In hindsight, it's obvious to me that if the current diagnostic standards were in place, I would have been referred for an autism diagnosis after that meeting.

Instead, I went through high school with low-level honors, studied two years of computer engineering, entered a seminary, went through three psychological examinations at different times, and was ordained a priest, all without ever knowing I was autistic. When occasionally I would hear brief descriptions of Asperger's in the media, I thought it a slight personality trait, not a radically

different way to see the world. A few times I'd thought, "Oh, maybe I'm like that."

When I was first ordained a priest, I was assigned as a chaplain at a school for three years. However, after a year, I was surprised that they didn't want me back. I knew I hadn't been perfect, but I thought the small mistakes were well within the normal learning curve of a new job. Someone suggested Asperger's and my superiors sent me back to study part time the next fall while working behind the scenes for the national office. In hindsight, it is very clear that misreading social cues—as an autistic is apt to do—was the primary issue.

The intervening summer, I did some tests, mentioning beforehand that I might have "Asperger's" to the psychologist, but he just did general tests such as the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory). In hindsight, none of these tests would be any good for discovering autism. The MMPI is not designed for diagnosing autism and the research seems to say we are slightly different from neurotypical controls but not that distinct. This psychologist did diagnose me with depression, which, after feeling stretched as a school chaplain then getting kicked out for reasons I didn't then understand, is not surprising. Later on, in reading and hindsight I think I was also depressed for part of middle school from all the teasing and bullying. I'm guessing that might sound familiar to other autistics.

A year later, someone suggested I try another psychologist to see about autism or Asperger's. I was rather hesitant at first as I thought that had been dismissed, but I figured I could go through with it. As noted above, in January 2016, I received a formal diagnosis.

Along with the evident issues of coordination related to my handwriting and reading social signals that nixed my time as a

school chaplain, I am autistic in other ways too. Some are ways that others consider negative, such as my irregular sensory input, certain executive functioning issues, stress and anxiety. As far as senses, I am hyposensitive and hypersensitive in different ways. I am hyposensitive such that my room is super-bright and regarding food flavor where I often load on garlic or tabasco. On the other hand, I am hypersensitive about food texture—I joke about hating kale but, honestly, it's the plasticky texture, not the taste. As far as sound goes, I can't regulate it very much, so I need something moderate (neither too much nor too little). As far as executive functioning, I can only accomplish things because of whiteboards, Google Calendar and my "to do" app. If I don't write out everything I need to do for the week in a plan at the beginning of the week, I will get almost zilch done. In such a case, every responsibility will weigh down on me and I'll be anxiously stuck at my desk for hours getting basically nothing done. Because of all the above reasons, I easily tend to get over-stressed and anxious. I often use stim toys and appreciate the weighted blanket on my bed.

At the same time, being autistic gives me some advantages: long-term memory of facts, pattern recognition, and concentration are the most evident. My long-term memory is so good that my nickname in seminary was Schneider-pedia, or they would joke that Wikipedia checks with me first. I can honestly say that even though I finished formal study of philosophy fifteen years ago, I could still probably pass the exams—it took me a while even to realize that was unusual. I just thought people remembered. I often remember with such precision that I've had to learn to round numbers off to not sound weird to neurotypicals: in most cases neurotypicals prefer I say, "about 60" rather than "63." I don't really understand why this is, but I adapt out of charity. Likewise, I am very good at pattern recognition. I often see patterns in things

that others miss and this has helped me become one of the most followed Catholic priests on social media (I have over 50,000 Twitter followers). A lot of this pattern recognition is automatic in a way that I find difficult to explain to others—I figure this is a large part of why I haven’t been super successful at helping others grow big online followings when they asked for tips. In the same vein, I think I use that part of my brain rather than the neurotypical face-recognition circuit to recognize faces, but I am still not the best at that. Finally, if I’m into something, I concentrate very deeply. People don’t believe me when I say I’ve never fallen asleep studying, but that’s the honest truth.

Overall, I am very happy as a priest, with both the positive traits of autism and some extra autistic challenges. I’m also happy that I do an intellectual ministry where I can focus more on the strengths and am held down less by the challenges.

Language and Perspective

This book is intended for us autistics and our family, friends, teachers, or allies. As such, you may have noted my consistent use of “autistic” over “person with autism.”

Saying “autistic” is called identity-first language. This is how most of us with such brains prefer to be called, by margins of between 2:1 and 4:1 depending on the survey.⁷ It is primarily

⁷ I cite several surveys in this post: Matthew Schneider, “Christians, Please Call Us Autistic, Blind, and Deaf,” *Through Catholic Lenses* (blog), October 17, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/throughcatholiclenses/2019/10/christians-please-call-us-autistic-blind-and-deaf/>.

about a different brain. It is like I am 6-foot-3-inch male and Caucasian—I can't change any of these three without ceasing to be me. Something one “has” sounds external and changeable as in I have an ASUS laptop I'm writing this on, but in a few years, I'll likely buy a different brand. Some things we have may be closer to our person than that, but still somewhat external, and not changing who we are: once I had black hair, as I dyed it, even though I now have light brown hair, and in a few years will have gray hair. Autism is part of who I am, not something external.

You will note, nonetheless, that I respect authors I quote and leave “person with autism” or person-first language if the author uses it. I also respect the minority of individuals on the spectrum who prefer it.

I use the word “autistic” as I would use a national or language signifier. I might say I am a Canadian living in the U.S.A. or an autistic living in a neurotypical world. In most communities with disabilities, person-first language—“person with disabilities”—is preferred. However, all three groups that have strong preferences for identity first—the blind, the Deaf and the autistic—are groups that due to their disability communicate in a different manner akin to a different language. The difference in autistic language is not as evident as it is for the blind or the Deaf, but our reading of body language and often of connotative meanings of phrases (like using irony to say the opposite of what you mean) are very different for us. In a sense my native language is autistic English: it has the same vocabulary as standard English, and words mean the same things denotatively; but some connotations and non-verbal communication are different. For example, we tend to take words more literally when people mean them analogously, and we tend not to look people in the eye even when being deep and honest.

Throughout the book I simply use “Autistics,” but this includes those with various other diagnoses, including Asperger’s, PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified), and CDD (Childhood Disintegrative Disorder). Currently in the DSM-5 (the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which sets diagnostic standards for psychological conditions in the USA and Canada) there is one diagnosis, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), while previous manuals split this into several. As such, by the current psychological diagnosis we are all Autistics. (In other countries, the standard is not the DSM-5, but rather the ICD-10 [the tenth revision of the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* from the World Health Organization]. The ICD-10 still distinguishes Asperger’s from autism, although it notes that they are related, and that the differences are not in the most fundamental aspects.) Nonetheless, I understand those who were diagnosed with Asperger’s and want to keep that identity. In such a case, just mentally replace “autistics” with “Aspies.”

At times I use “neurotypicals” to describe people whose brains function like those of the majority of human beings. Differently functioning brains have different advantages and disadvantages, so I avoid saying “better” or “normal” in this regard. If I use neurodiverse, I mean not only autistics but others with unusual brains that can be advantageous at times but disadvantageous at other times, such as bipolar, OCD, or ADHD individuals.

I use a lot of Catholic vocabulary, but I try to explain terms I suspect some might not understand. People come to this at different levels of such knowledge, and I have tried to accommodate most. If some Catholic term still seems hard to grasp, I

recommend the dictionary Father John Hardon composed, which is searchable online;⁸ this tends to have clear, brief definitions, while most other resources read more like encyclopedia entries.

⁸ www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary.

PART ONE

What Makes Autistic Prayer Different?

WE AUTISTICS OFTEN struggle in certain aspects of prayer but can be very good at other aspects. Autism relates to prayer life in many ways. We also pray about our life's triumphs and difficulties, which likely vary a bit for us. The soul is the core of prayer and every human has a soul of the same type with equal dignity. However, our emotions and brain processes are also involved in prayer since we exist as a union of body and soul. Autistic brains and emotions are structured differently than those of neuro-typicals.

I want to present a way for those of us on the spectrum to learn to pray, and to pray about the things we deal with. I don't think the method needs to be so radically different from that of traditional prayer guides, but it needs some adaptation to be applicable to our neurology. I don't think this book will answer every question or deal with every diversity on the spectrum, but I hope it can help us to pray and help others to pray with us.

The first two chapters in this part will cover prayer systematically. Chapter One covers some types of prayer and how autistics might be involved in each type. Chapter Two covers autistics going deeper into mental prayer and contemplation.

CHAPTER ONE

Types of Autistic Prayer

THERE ARE DIFFERENT ways to categorize prayer. The *Catechism* (2644) notes one division: “blessing, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise.” This is a helpful way of dividing prayer by the goal (or proximate end) of that prayer. This subdivision is discussed in many books on prayer. However, this division will be demonstrated in the devotions later rather than systematically here.

Instead of dividing by goals, I want to examine the division by forms of prayer. A form is more about how someone prays: each form here can match any of the five goals above. This chapter will discuss vocal prayer (including liturgical prayer), stimming and prayer, location or objects in prayer, and mental prayer.

Vocal Prayer and Liturgy

If asked to name a prayer, most Catholics would give answers like the Our Father, the Rosary, the Hail Mary, the Saint Michael

prayer, or the Mass. All of these are vocal prayers, as they follow a set formula of words that is repeated. Vocal prayer refers to a prayer where a specific predetermined set of words is said aloud or in silence.⁹

Vocal prayers, however, are not magical incantations. We need our spiritual mind and heart to accompany these words: they give the prayer meaning for us and set our desires towards them. When praying the Rosary, you may think on each word, let your spiritual mind and heart focus on the mystery, such as the visitation, or focus on the intention for which you are praying, such as hoping grandma's surgery goes well. All of these are prayer. However, simply saying prayers to get them done—for example, so mom will take you out for ice cream—is not praying well. Vocal prayer for any Christian should help the interior dialogue with God. In fact, the *Catechism* says the following about vocal prayer: “It is most important that the heart should be present to him to whom we are speaking in prayer.”¹⁰

In this section, I will speak of the comfort of continuity, verbal stim prayers, and liturgical prayers.

Many autistics find that repetition and continuity are satisfying. Since I entered religious life in 2001, every single morning I've said the same five-minute morning prayer with only one significant change in two decades. This gives me a continuity of the first thing I do every morning beyond personal hygiene and dressing. As a priest, I also pray the Mass and Liturgy of the Hours each day: although many parts vary, they maintain the same structure. For

⁹ For a selection of prayers, see Appendix B, page 197.

¹⁰ CCC 2700.

example, each hour of the Liturgy of the Hours begins with a hymn, followed by psalms, a reading, and a closing prayer.

This comfort can help us realize that God is asking us to respond to him in an autistic manner. If repeating a certain prayer helps unite me with God in mind and heart, it is a good prayer. The fact that simultaneously the repetition and familiarity calm my neurology is a bonus. It gives me comfort that God wants me to communicate with him in a way I am more comfortable with.

Some prayers are so short they can almost become a stim. Stimming is behavior consisting of repetitive movements, actions, words, sounds, etc., that we autistics often use for various ends like sensory or emotional regulation, or for expressing emotions. The following, although short, are complete prayers:

1. "My Jesus, mercy."
2. "Jesus, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
3. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
4. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death."
5. "My hope is the Father, my refuge is the Son, my shelter is the Holy Ghost, O Holy Trinity, glory unto you."
6. "O Lady [Mary], by the love which you bear to Jesus, help me to love him."
7. "For the sake of his sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world."

These prayers go back in Christian history. The first four have such an ancient origin that the author is unknown. The last three are attributed to: (5) Saint Ioannikios the Great (an Eastern-rite saint living in modern-day Turkey from 752–846), (6) Saint

Bridget of Sweden (1303–1375), and (7) Saint Faustina Kowalska (1905–1938).

Each of these seven prayers can be said in the time of a single breath, even if prayed slowly or in a meditative manner. In fact, in Eastern Christian practice, it is suggested that the Jesus Prayer (number 2 above) be said in two parts, first as we breathe in and then as we breathe out, such that one is able to fulfil the biblical command to “pray constantly” (1 Thess 5:17).

The names of Jesus or Mary said with reverence can be an even shorter prayer than those listed above. Such quick prayers can be said repeatedly and keep uniting us to Our Lord and Savior. This kind of verbal stim praying will not work for all autistics, but I think it works for enough to be mentioned here.

Then we move on to liturgical prayer. The liturgy is a special form of vocal prayer where we encounter God’s presence in the sacraments. The regularity and schedule of Catholic Mass often helps those of us with executive functioning difficulties where we like sameness. A few strategies exist for parishes to accommodate or include us. Here I want to mention ideas for us to live it better. The liturgy, especially Mass or events like eucharistic processions, require us to participate together with others and often require exposing ourselves to sensory irritants. This can be a challenge.

First, we should distinguish what is part of the liturgy—and thus essential—from what is good for accompanying the liturgy but can be skipped if need be. The liturgy we are obliged to attend lasts from when the priest and other ministers process into the sanctuary to when they process out. Oftentimes parishes might warm up with a song before Mass and have a social after Mass. If the social and sensory situation is difficult for you, you can either prepare for and deal with these, or skip them by arriving right on

time and then leaving right away. You can prepare for and deal with a social hour in various ways: having a role like carrying around the coffee to offer refills, making scripts, or setting a limit on your interaction with new people while focusing on those you already know. Neither going to nor skipping social hour is immoral, so don't feel guilty either way.

Second, it is valuable to prepare yourself and give yourself an easy sensory time before Mass if you might be overwhelmed. For many of us, Sunday Mass is going to be one of the more difficult things we do every week regarding social interaction and sensory issues.

Third, we need to keep ourselves focused on Jesus. We need to do it out of love for him and offer our sacrifices for his sake. When we love someone, we can do some acts beyond the ordinary to be with them, to please them. If participating at Mass is tough on us socially or sensorially, we can consider it the cross that Jesus gives us to take up.

Hopefully these ideas can help you live vocal prayer well. I think some of the individual devotions farther on will also help with these prayers.

Stimming and Prayer

We stim, yes, we do; stimming is what we do. Although I will critique William Stillman later, he makes an interesting note about stimming based on the research of Dr. Andrew Newberg. Stillman notes that people who are calm and focused in a meditative manner have a different blood flow to the brain. He also notes that repetitive movements similar to the stimming of autistics also tend to create similar patterns of blood flow in the

brain.¹¹ This is not the depths of prayer, but I'm just noting that stimming and the like can help us with the initial stages of focusing ourselves for prayer.

I think we can integrate stimming and praying. God gave us our neurology with the need to stim, but he also allows that same stimming to help us come to him. Spiritual writers encourage us to involve the whole body in prayer. When we kneel we put ourselves in a position of respect to God, or when we raise our eyes we also often raise our spiritual hearts to God.

Most people think of being very still when they pray. Most images indicate a still posture, sitting or kneeling. One may even quote the psalmist: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). However, I think it is valuable to take one step deeper to see that the purpose for this is to calm oneself. So, if we are calmer and more focused when stimming, we are more fully living Christian prayer as an autistic than if we were just still but less calm and focused.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius speaks of prayer posture. He notes, "To enter on the contemplation now on my knees, now prostrate on the earth, now lying face upwards, now seated, now standing, always intent on seeking what I want."¹² This means that one should keep the posture that helps one rest in the Lord. In fact, a Vatican letter on prayer summarized this paragraph of

¹¹ See William Stillman, *Autism and the God Connection: Redefining the Autistic Experience Through Extraordinary Accounts of Spiritual Giftedness*, Kindle (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2006), chap. two: Surrendering to Serendipity.

¹² St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elder Mullan (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1914), 48 (par. 76), <https://archive.org/details/spiritualexercis00ignauoft>.

Ignatius as, “His body [the body of the one praying] should also take up the position most suited to recollection.”¹³

Origen offers a lengthy description on preparing oneself for prayer and letting go of distractions. He notes that “one who is about to enter upon prayer ought first to have paused awhile and prepared himself to engage in prayer throughout more earnestly and intently, to have cast aside every distraction and confusion of thought.”¹⁴

For Origen, the purpose of posture and stillness is clearly to remove distractions and focus the mind. In describing postures, he makes exceptions if one is injured, but notes that even the injured person should have the same disposition, reminding us that the purpose of any posture is to dispose the mind and heart toward prayer.

Thus, what we should do in prayer is position our bodies to best be focused and calm. Although most often neurotypicals do this by being still, this may not be the case for us. Instead, stimming focuses and calms us. This can apply to any kind of stimming. I find most often vestibular stimming (a system that gives us balance and spatial orientation) like rocking in a chair or pacing, is most helpful to me. However, many others on the spectrum might find flapping or spinning a fidget spinner to be more helpful.

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation—*Orationis Formas*,” October 15, 1989, para. 26, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html.

¹⁴ Origen, *On Prayer*, trans. William A. Curtis (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001), chap. XX, <https://ccel.org/ccel/origen/prayer/prayer>.

We should feel completely comfortable stimming while praying. Stimming can often help us pray better. As autistic Christians, we can fully embrace the habit of stimming, making it part of our prayer routine. In fact, our stimming can even be a way to pray. Saint Charles de Foucauld defines prayer thus: “To pray is to be with God.”¹⁵ Being with God means being with him in our full autistic self. Our full autistic self includes being a person who stims.

The *Catechism* (2562) speaks about how our gestures and actions can become prayer: “Whether prayer is expressed in words or gestures, it is the whole man who prays.” Many autistics feel like we can’t stim except in more socially acceptable ways, except with those closest to us. Stimming before the Lord indicates that we trust him as a close confidant, not as a distant God.

Obviously, in more public prayer such as at Mass or in adoration with several others, less distracting stims would be preferred out of charity. If you are in the back row and silently stim with a stress ball or fidget spinner, that should not distract others, but verbal or noisy stims would be a distraction to the others in their prayer.

The Vatican letter on prayer does give one warning about certain postures that I think applies also to stimming. It says, “Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such

¹⁵ Charles de Foucauld, *Spiritual Autobiography of Charles de Foucauld*, ed. Jean-François Six, trans. J. Holland Smith (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1964), 85.

feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life.”¹⁶ In a similar way, although stimming in prayer calms and focuses us, this calmness and focus is not in itself the goal of Christian prayer. Christian prayer is meant to be a relationship. Stimming prepares us to talk with God and demonstrates our closeness to God. Although God can grant a deeper peace when we are in prayer and stimming, it would be a mistake to take the calmness coming from our stimming directly as God’s action or peace.

Prayer of Location or Object

Along with stimming, I think two related aspects of prayer play a larger role in our prayer than in neurotypical prayer: location and objects. Such aids as a prayer corner, a pilgrimage, a rosary, or an image are obviously part of neurotypical prayer, but I think they can have an extra importance for us.

In my religious community we do a half-day morning retreat once a month. When I’ve had to do this on my own, I’ve found that visiting a nearby shrine helps me pray far more than simply grabbing some books or meditations at home. I would get up, eat breakfast, and drive somewhere to pray. When I lived just outside D.C., I drove up at least twice to Emmitsburg, where there are the shrines of Lourdes and Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Even while I’ve been writing this book, we had a morning retreat where the last two hours were left for praying on our own. To get another

¹⁶ Ratzinger, *Orationis Formas*, para. 28.