

Experimenting With Home Altars and Gazing Prayers

Home Altars

In ancient times, it was common for the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith to build home altars as a way of welcoming God into their homes and constantly reminding themselves of God's presence (e.g., Genesis 28, 33, and 35). To this day, many Christians in Latin America maintain this tradition. A home altar is a powerful way to:

- Put out a welcome mat for God. It's a dramatic and tangible way of inviting God into our everyday lives.
- Remind ourselves that God is present, even when we're at our worst.
- Clarify what is really important in our lives. As we select items for our altar, that which is most important quickly becomes apparent.
- Share our faith (in a non-threatening way) with all who visit our home.

Here are some ideas for creating a home altar:

1. Select a location, perhaps a shelf or table in a key spot.
2. Decide what symbol of faith will be the focal point of your altar—perhaps a cross, or a picture or statue of Jesus.
3. Often people put pictures of loved ones on their altar.
4. You might have a section of your altar dedicated to the "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1), loved ones who have died and now look down from above.
5. You might place other symbols or keepsakes on your altar, such as a family Bible or something that represents a key aspect of your life. For example, if you're an avid gardener, you might place a trowel on your altar.
6. You can also put symbols on your altar representing things you're praying or giving thanks for. Someone who wants a child might place a baby rattle on the altar. A single person might frame a blank picture, symbolizing the one in their future they are praying for.
7. Often people put one or more small candles on their altar. As you're praying, you can light the candle and move it to the picture or symbol you're praying for. If the altar is within sight of your dinner table, you might light a candle during dinner as a symbol of whom or what you're praying for.
8. From time to time, you may type out a key Bible verse and place it on your altar, until you thoroughly internalize the verse.
9. Your altar might prove to be a nice place to sit, kneel, or stand when you do your daily devotions.
10. Be creative. Let God's Spirit guide you.

Gazing Prayers

For centuries, many Christians have used visual aids (traditionally called icons) to support their prayer. These visual aids are meant to serve as a window into God's presence (I Corinthians 13:12). These are not objects to be worshiped; they have no special supernatural power. They simply help us visualize God's presence in our lives more vividly. For some people, this kind of meditative prayer is powerful! Here are some exercises that can help you experiment with Gazing Prayers.

Exercise 1: The Face Of Jesus.

No one knows what Jesus actually looked like. Nevertheless, gazing at a likeness of Jesus can powerfully remind us that God came to us in human form. Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen God" (John 14:9). Pick one or two pictures of Jesus that resonate with your soul.

1. Quiet yourself, ask God to speak to you.
2. Spend five or ten minutes silently pondering the picture. As you gaze, you may be surprised at the feelings, thoughts, and insights you gain.
3. After you've gazed for a while, ask Jesus what he wants to say to you, then listen for the Spirit of Christ speaking back to your heart.
4. Once you're done gazing and listening, spend a few minutes talking to God about your feelings, thoughts, and insights.

Exercise 2: The Face Of A Saint

Repeat the same steps outlined above, but this time use the picture of a spiritual mentor in your life. The Bible says people are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). That means we can see glimpses of God in everyone. See what God wants to say to you through a picture of a saint.

Exercise 3: God's Creation

Repeat the same steps outlined above, but use an object from nature as the focus of your meditation – perhaps a flower or a rock or a leaf or a bird or sleeping cat or a picture of a mountain. The Bible says that God cries out to us through nature (Psalm 19:1-6). See what God wants to say to you through nature.

Exercise 4: An Enemy Or Stranger

Repeat the same steps outlined above, but use a picture of someone you dislike or don't know. See what God wants to say to you through them.