

THE USE OF INNER RESERVES OF STRENGTH IS A POWERFUL TOOL FOR THE RESTORATION OF HEALTH



Modest Urgell: The Bell for Prayer (c. 1876).

The possibility of healing through communication with the divine is approached mainly through two paths: faith and prayer within the religious tradition, as well as alternative methods that use secular meditation with the aim of promoting well-being. In this exercise, we will focus on the power of faith in God.

In the Orthodox Christian tradition, healing is directly connected with Divine Providence, prayer, the sacraments (e.g. Holy Unction), and the intercession of the Saints. It is not regarded merely as a biological restoration, but as a profound spiritual and holistic process that reunites the human being with God. Communication with the divine offers inner peace and spiritual strengthening, while in many cases faith is considered catalytic for human health, without, of course, replacing medical science.



Gebhard Fugel: Christ and the Lepers (1920).

The Theological Approach to Illness and Healing

- **Connection of Soul and Body:** Orthodox Christian theology views the human being as an integrated psychosomatic entity. Illness of the body is often associated with one's spiritual condition, without this meaning that every illness is a personal punishment.
- **Christ as Physician:** Christ is often called in prayers the “physician of souls and bodies.” The miraculous healings in the Gospels show that health is a gift of Divine Grace.
- **The Importance of Faith:** Faith is the “channel” of communication. As stated characteristically in Scripture, the phrase “your faith has saved you” emphasizes that inner trust in God activates Divine Grace.

Relationship between Faith and Medical Science

The Orthodox Christian tradition does not reject medical science. On the contrary, it regards physicians and medicines as means given by God to human beings for the relief and treatment of suffering. Prayer functions complementarily, strengthening the patient psychologically, giving them patience, and guiding physicians toward the right decisions.

Modern psychology and neuroscience approach prayer not through its metaphysical content, but as a powerful cognitive and biological process that directly affects the brain and the body as a whole. When a person prays, specific psychological and

neurobiological mechanisms are activated that promote healing and well-being. Overall, modern psychology does not view prayer as a substitute for medical treatment, but as an exceptionally effective complementary strategy for managing stress, pain, and chronic illness.

The comparison between Christian prayer and secular meditation (mindfulness) is of great interest to neuroscience. Although both practices produce similar biological benefits—such as stress reduction—brain-imaging studies show that they activate different neural networks because of their different mental orientations.

1. Common Effects on the Brain

Both practices produce what medicine calls the “relaxation response”:

- **Reduction of Amygdala Activity:** Both prayer and mindfulness reduce activity in the amygdala, the brain center that processes fear, panic, and anxiety.
- **Activation of the Prefrontal Cortex:** Activity increases in regions that control attention, emotional regulation, and decision-making.
- **Cortical Thickening:** Long-term practice of both approaches increases gray-matter density in areas associated with learning, memory, and emotional regulation.

2. Important Differences in Neural Activation

The fundamental difference lies in what each practice focuses on: mindfulness focuses on the inner present, whereas Christian prayer focuses on an external relationship.

A. Secular Meditation (mindfulness)

- **Focus:** On breathing, bodily sensations, and observing thoughts without judgment.
- **Brain Activity:** Strongly activates the right prefrontal cortex and the insula, which is responsible for awareness of the body (proprioception).
- **Neural Network:** Deactivates the Default Mode Network (DMN), which is responsible for ruminative thoughts (“replaying” the past or worrying about the future).



Jean-François Millet: The Angelus (Prayer “The Angelus”) (1857–59).

B. Christian Prayer (Especially Contemplative Prayer or Prayer as Conversation)

- Focus: On the Person of God or Christ, on communication, gratitude, and love.
- Brain Activity: Strongly activates the left prefrontal cortex (associated with positive emotions and approach) and areas related to language and social cognition (such as the temporal lobe).
- The Neural Network of Relationship: The brain processes personal prayer in much the same way that it processes a conversation with a close friend or partner. It is not a withdrawal from the self, but social connection.

In summary, mindfulness trains the brain to be a “neutral observer.” It helps create distance from pain and negative thoughts. Christian Prayer trains the brain in “relational security.” It provides the feeling that one is loved, protected, and actively supported by a Higher Power, thereby deeply activating the brain's attachment and reward systems (release of oxytocin and dopamine).



<https://tinyurl.com/2fhfn2h4><https://tinyurl.com/39vbkxap><https://tinyurl.com/7y9znfzz><https://tinyurl.com/34xm64za>The Late String Quartets (Opp. 127, 130, 131, 132, 135 & 133) represent the spiritual culmination of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827; see also <https://tinyurl.com/2fhfn2h4>, <https://tinyurl.com/39vbkxap>, <https://tinyurl.com/7y9znfzz> & <https://tinyurl.com/34xm64za>). Written between 1824 and 1826, they transcend the traditional formal boundaries of four-movement works, combining extraordinary contrapuntal complexity as a means of emotional expression with inner, mystical depth, alternating between moments of absolute silence and explosive outbursts, and recording a painful human

journey toward transcendence, peace, and acceptance, thus becoming a landmark in the history of music.

The 15th of these late quartets, in A minor, Op. 132, began as part of a trilogy of quartets (Opp. 127, 132, 130) commissioned by the Russian Prince Nikolai Galitzine and includes the celebrated “Heiliger Dankgesang,” written as an expression of gratitude to God for the composer's recovery from a serious illness. It constitutes a deeply religious experience in musical form. Beethoven's illness in 1825 did not merely give birth to the third movement in its final form—the “Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an der Gottheit, in der Lydischen Tonart,” offered by a recovering person to the Divine, in the Lydian mode, initially very slow and then moderate / *Molto adagio* (Lydian) – *Andante*—but completely overturned the original architectural structure of the 15th Quartet. It transformed a conventional commissioned work into a deeply personal, existential monument. The commission acquired an autobiographical character. Music ceased to be an abstract artistic creation for a nobleman and became the personal testimony of a man who had looked death in the eyes. Illness, as a driving force, gave the work the rawness, sincerity, and spiritual weight that characterize it. Beethoven transformed the work into an autobiographical journey from darkness to light, with the ultimate triumph of life over death—a triumph won through the ordeal of the composer's illness.

In the spring of 1825, the 54-year-old Beethoven—by then completely deaf—suffered from a severe, life-threatening bout of gastroenteritis with acute abdominal pain and probably early signs of liver cirrhosis, which contributed to his death two years later. His personal physician, Dr. Anton Braunhofer, imposed an extremely strict diet (no wine, coffee, or spices) and sent him for months of isolation to the resort of Baden to recover. Beethoven was so terrified that he wrote to a friend: “Perhaps I shall never see you again; remember me.” When the composer's health finally improved in the summer, he returned to the quartet with entirely renewed creative energy. Before falling ill, Beethoven had planned a conventional four-movement classical quartet. His recovery, however, prompted him to break the rules, adding an extra movement, the *Heiliger Dankgesang*, as the center of gravity of the quartet and transforming the work into a symmetrical, arch-like structure around it.

The new five-movement structure reflects the psychological journey of the ill composer and his recovery. The *Heiliger Dankgesang* is placed exactly in the middle of the quartet (as the third movement) and functions as the spiritual core of the entire work. It is the moment of pure prayer and physical revitalization (*Neue Kraft*).

Beethoven used his biological experience to introduce a new form of musical narrative: cyclical psychological development. In his earlier works (such as the Fifth Symphony), the trajectory was linear: from struggle to triumph (*per aspera ad astra*). In Op. 132, because of his experience of illness, the structure becomes cyclical. The alternation between the Lydian section (physical weakness and prayer) and D major (new strength) captures the actual experience of recovery: a recovering person does not get well immediately. There

are moments of strength, moments of relapse, and periods of stillness and rest. Illness, in other words, imposed a realistic psychological mapping onto the musical form.

During his recovery, confined to bed, Beethoven was unable to experiment with large orchestral ideas. He turned to the study of strict counterpoint [specifically that of Palestrina (16th century)]. Illness limited his physical strength, forcing him to focus on an absolute economy of means. Each instrument in Op. 132 acquired a completely autonomous, “linear” voice. Composition, as a spiritual exercise in discipline and inner organization, helped the artist-creator overcome the physical pain and depression of that period. Without his health crisis of 1825, the 15th Quartet would undoubtedly have been a masterpiece of the Classical period of music. Because of the composer's illness, however, it became a transcendent, almost religious experience that surpassed the boundaries of its era.



Ludwig van Beethoven, The German Composer in a Field and Landscape with Churchgoers.

Beethoven's musical analysis of the Heiliger Dankgesang is based on the alternation of two different worlds: prayer and the recovery of health. The timbre is “pure” and stripped of Romantic passions. The absence of accidentals (sharps or flats) creates the impression of a white, unblemished canvas, capturing spiritual purification after illness. This third movement of the 15th Quartet alternates slow, devotional hymns (in the ancient Lydian liturgical scale) with bright, dance-like sections marked “Feeling New Strength—Neue Kraft fühlend.”

The movement opens with a religious chorale, using the medieval Lydian church mode. The Lydian mode is one of the most distinctive seven-note musical modes. Beethoven deliberately turned to early church music to find a musical language capable of expressing the divine element, moving beyond the rules of the Classical harmony of his time. This choice gives the work an ethereal, otherworldly, and spiritual character, imposing a religious, almost meditative detachment. It creates a cool, white, “nebulous” light, detached from reality, a sound that is luminous yet simultaneously unstable and “suspended,” as if the music were floating in the air. The music loses its sense of time and direction. There is no “drama” or “struggle,” only a state of absolute, static serenity and eternal prayer. The opening tempo is extremely slow, almost imperceptible, as though time has stopped (*Molto adagio*), with dense chords that convey a feeling of profound devotion and tranquility. The instrumentation and writing for the four strings of the quartet in the *Heiliger Dankgesang* are equally radical in their use of the Lydian scale. Beethoven handles the instruments in a way that defies traditional balances in order to achieve an otherworldly, almost immaterial sound. The ethereal quality is reinforced by the following orchestral techniques: Beethoven marks the score *sotto voce* (softly, like a whisper). In performance, this is often translated into a completely “white” quality of sound, without traditional Romantic vibrato. The structure of the piece is based, as noted, on a recurring Lydian chorale.

Beethoven divides the hymn into alternating sections. As the music progresses, the serenity of the Lydian chorale is suddenly interrupted by a dramatic change of tempo (*Moderate tempo—Andante*), and then returns to the “Very slow—*Molto adagio*” of the Lydian chorale. Between each appearance of the chorale, therefore, there is a comparatively faster section entitled “Feeling New Strength—*Neue Kraft fühlend*,” in which the music becomes more rhythmic, optimistic, and kinetic, as though recording the restored rhythm of breathing and the return of physical energy and strength. It is the pulse of the heart returning to its normal, vital rhythms. The instruments begin to play with lively trills, ornaments, and large dynamic fluctuations [*crescendo* and *decrescendo* (*diminuendo*)]. These “ornaments” sound like the singing of birds or the rustling of leaves—a clear celebration of nature and sensory experience. The instruments now play with energy, using the full range of the bow. The cello regains its traditional role, providing a strong, rhythmic bass that confidently supports the structure. In these relatively faster sections, Beethoven changes the tonality to D major and the tempo becomes moderate, relatively faster, and dance-like. Each such section functions as a counterpoint (the simultaneous sounding of two or more independent melodic lines). It expresses the joy of life, the excitement of recovery, and gratitude for the return to life. The transition from the Lydian chorale section to the D-major section (“Feeling New Strength”) is one of the most astonishing and dramatic moments in the entire history of chamber music. The entrance of D major functions like a sudden explosion of colors on a canvas, offering the listener an immediate sense of warmth, security, and physical well-being. Beethoven uses this dramatic contrast and alternation to musically portray the passage from the threshold of death to the return of life. He uses complex contrapuntal techniques, in which the four instruments of the quartet intertwine in a complex and lively polyphony, suggesting the realization of victory over death. The greatness of the hymn lies in the union of the

alternating contrasts of the two tempos. Beethoven returns twice to the original Lydian chorale, which, as emphasized, becomes harmonically intertwined with the faster, dance-like theme. This alternation occurs twice within the hymn, creating a cyclical structure (Lydian – D major – Lydian – D major – Lydian). Each time Beethoven returns to the Lydian section, it sounds even deeper, because the experience of vital strength has intervened. Dance and prayer become united in a moment of absolute reconciliation between human being and God, body and spirit.

The conclusion—the coda—of the Heiliger Dankgesang constitutes the spiritual culmination of the work. Beethoven does not simply repeat the preceding musical themes, but transforms them into a deeper synthesis that leads to a sense of inner peace and acceptance. A decisive element is the marking “With the most intimate feeling—Mit innigster Empfindung,” indicating that the music acquires the character of personal prayer and an inner dialogue with the divine. The expression is no longer addressed to the audience, but records the composer's most sincere spiritual experience. At the same time, the four voices of the quartet are connected through continuous counterpoint and canonic imitation. The instruments succeed one another, repeating the same motif, creating a unified, ethereal sonic fabric that gives the impression that the music is rising toward heaven. At the end of the coda, Beethoven gradually dismantles the musical discourse. The notes become sparser, the dynamics fade into pianissimo, and the work concludes with quiet chords in the Lydian scale of F. The music does not end triumphantly, but disappears into silence, leaving the impression that it continues to exist beyond sound, as a symbol of spiritual peace and fulfillment. In this way, Beethoven transformed his personal experience of illness into a universal monument to human spirituality.



We will hear the Heiliger Dankgesang through its recorded performance by the Hollywood String Quartet, from the spring of 1957. This historic reference recording is musically characterized by flawless technique and impeccable ensemble homogeneity; some critics have pointed out—I disagree—that the tempo is slightly faster than the deeply contemplative ideal of the piece, potentially depriving it of some of the devotional atmosphere and profound, slow inwardness that perfectly suits the mystical character of this hymn. The group of four musicians (Felix Slatkin, violin; Paul Shure, violin; Alvin Dinkin, viola; and Eleanor Aller, cello) offers an extraordinarily smooth, polished, and at certain points intensely “symphonic” sound, with admirable technical mastery. The ensemble's technical virtuosity is always placed at the service of the deeper musical meaning. It is a performance of authority, restraint, and clarity that has stood the test of time.

BEETHOVEN, 3rd movement of the 15th Quartet – Heiliger Dankgesang – Hollywood Quartet.mp3