

# The Nine Ways of Prayer of St Dominic

## Fra Angelico

There are two main Dominican houses in Florence, Santa Maria Novella and San Marco. Both contain many different works of art and are visited by flocks of tourists each year. The convent at San Marco houses many frescoes by Fra Angelico and his followers, restored in the latter half of the twentieth century by Dino Dini. Apart from the first cell, which has a fresco entitled *Noli Me Tangere*, each of the first ten cells contains a representation of someone from church history. The gestures illustrated in the frescoes are believed to be based on a manual for Dominican prayer, *De modo orandi*. The manual, of unknown authorship, describes nine ways of prayer used by St Dominic, each using different body positions. It is these images and this manual that are used to support these prayer guides focussing on each of the nine positions.

## Mind, body, spirit

Mark 12:30 commands that we love God with heart, soul, mind and strength. Romans 12:1 asks that we present our bodies as living sacrifices. *De modo orandi* is based on the notion that different body postures impact on spiritual experience. For the Jesuit Paul Coutinho, body posture makes a spiritual and mental difference. Bowing, for example:

“has three important aspects: physical, mental and spiritual... This physical gesture of bowing the head or lowering oneself brings the mind to surrender all that it holds... Mentally, a person bows and puts on the beginner’s mind leaving behind any sense of being an expert and opening up to many new possibilities. Spiritually, when a person bows – lowering the face as well as the head – he or she relinquishes the ego-self”.

Many today might agree with the view that what is done with the body can impact on mental and spiritual health, for example exercise is seen as a way of helping manage depression. This interaction between mind, body and spirit can also be seen in the underpinning rationale of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). One just needs to look at the use of body posture in different Churches to see how Christians in worship and prayer use their bodies in different ways today, be that genuflection in front of the communion table in a high Anglican Church or raising hands in the air in a worship celebration in a more charismatic church. Prostration can be seen in the ordination of deacons in the Catholic Church, and kneeling for intercession finds its place in a variety of church traditions. Therefore it is not impossible to believe that the different positions of the body in prayer may well impact mentally and spiritually. Maybe try each of these ways of praying with your body out and see where God leads you.

