

Ways to Deepen Our Relationship with God

Practice two 20 – 30 minute periods of Centering Prayer daily.

Listen to the Word of God in Scripture and study *Open Mind, Open Heart*.

Select one or two of the practices for daily life as suggested in *Open Mind, Open Heart*.

Join a weekly Centering Prayer Support and Study Group:

- It encourages the members of the group to persevere in their individual practices.
- It provides an opportunity for further input on a regular basis through the tapes, readings and discussion.
- It offers an opportunity to support and share the spiritual journey.

What Centering Prayer Is and Is Not

It is not a technique but a way of cultivating a deeper relationship with God.

It is not a relaxation exercise but it may be quite refreshing.

It is not a form of self-hypnosis but a way to quiet the mind while maintaining its alertness.

It is not a charismatic gift but a path of transformation.

It is not a para-psychological experience but an exercise in faith, hope and selfless love.

It is not limited to the “felt” presence of God but is rather a deepening of faith in God’s abiding presence.

It is not reflective or spontaneous prayer, but simply resting in God beyond thoughts, words and emotions.

CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH

Contemplative Outreach is a community of individuals and Centering Prayer Groups committed to living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel in everyday life.



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THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER



THE PRAYER OF CONSENT

BY THOMAS KEATING

“Be still and know that I am God” Psalm 46: 10

Contemplative Prayer

We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words, but this is only one expression. In the Christian tradition Contemplative Prayer is considered to be the pure gift of God. It is the opening of mind and heart – our whole being – to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions. Through grace we open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing, closer than consciousness itself. Contemplative Prayer is a process of interior purification leading, if we consent, to divine union.

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate the development of Contemplative Prayer by preparing our faculties to receive this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times in an updated form. Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; rather it casts a new light and depth of meaning on them. It is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship. This method of prayer is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him.

Theological Background

The source of Centering Prayer, as in all methods leading to Contemplative Prayer, is the indwelling Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The focus of Centering Prayer is the deepening of our relationship with the living Christ. It tends to build communities of faith and bond members together in mutual friendship and love.

The Root of Centering Prayer

Listening to the Word of God in Scripture (*Lectio Divina*) is a traditional way of cultivating friendship with Christ. It is a way of listening to the texts of Scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and He were suggesting the topics of conversation. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on his Word leads beyond mere acquaintanceship to an attitude of friendship, trust and love. Conversation simplifies and gives way to communing. Gregory the Great (6th century), in summarising the Christian contemplative tradition, expressed it as “resting in God”. This was the classical meaning of Contemplative Prayer in the Christian tradition for the first sixteen centuries.

Wisdom Saying of Jesus

Centering Prayer is based on the wisdom saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “... *But when you pray go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you ...*” (Mt 6: 6). It is also inspired by the writings of major contributors to the Christian contemplative heritage including John Cassian, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Francis de Sales, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux and Thomas Merton.

Centering Prayer Guidelines

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within (*Open Mind, Open Heart*, Thomas Keating).
 - The sacred word expresses our intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
 - The sacred word is chosen during a brief period of prayer to the Holy Spirit. Use a word of one or two syllables, such as God, Jesus, Abba, Father, Mother, Mary, Amen. Other possibilities include Love, Listen, Peace, Mercy, Let Go, Silence, Stillness, Faith, Trust.
 - Instead of a sacred word, a sacred gaze or noticing one's breath may be more suitable. The same guidelines apply to these symbols as to the sacred word.
 - The sacred word is not sacred because of its inherent meaning, but because of the meaning we give it as the expression of our intention and consent.
 - Having chosen a sacred word we do not change it during the time of prayer as that would be to start reflecting.
2. Sitting comfortably with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.

The Guidelines

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware that you are engaged with your thoughts*, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer time, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

*Thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images and reflections.

- “Sitting comfortably” means relatively comfortable so as not to encourage sleep during the prayer time.
 - Whatever sitting position we choose, we keep the back straight.
 - We close our eyes as a symbol of letting go of what is going on around and within us.
 - We introduce the sacred word inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of cotton wool.
 - Should we fall asleep, upon waking we continue the prayer.
3. When you become aware that you are engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
 - “Thoughts” is an umbrella term for every perception, including bodily sensations, sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, plans, reflections, concepts, commentaries and spiritual experiences.
 - Thoughts are an inevitable, integral and normal part of Centering Prayer.
 - By “returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word” a minimum of effort is indicated. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of Centering Prayer.
 - During the course of Centering Prayer the sacred word may disappear or become vague.
 4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.
 - The additional 2 minutes enables us to bring the atmosphere of silence into everyday life.
 - If this prayer is done in a group, the leader may slowly recite a prayer e.g. The Lord's Prayer, while the others listen.

Some Practical Points

The minimum time for this prayer is 20 minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning and the other in the afternoon or early evening. With practice the time may be extended to 30 minutes or longer.

The end of the prayer time can be indicated by a timer which does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.

Possible physical symptoms during the prayer time:

- We may notice slight pains, itches or twitches in various parts of the body or a generalized sense of restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body.
- We may notice heaviness or lightness in our extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness.
- In all cases we pay no attention and ever so gently return to the sacred word.

The principal fruits of Centering Prayer are experienced in daily life and not during the prayer.

Points for Further Development

During the prayer period, various kinds of thoughts may arise: Ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memory Thoughts and feelings that give rise to attractions or aversions. Insights and psychological breakthroughs. Self-reflections such as, "How am I doing?" or This peace is just great!"

Thoughts and feelings that arise from the unloading of the unconscious.

When you become aware that you are engaged with any of these thoughts return ever so gently to the sacred word.

During this prayer we avoid analyzing our experience, harbouring expectations, or aiming at some specific goal such as:

- Repeating the sacred word continuously
- Having no thoughts
- Making the mind a blank
- Feeling peaceful or consoled
- Achieving a spiritual experience

(*Open Mind, Open Heart*)