
THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER

by Thomas Keating

Theological Background

The grace of Pentecost affirms that the risen Jesus is among us as the glorified Christ. Christ lives in each of us as the Enlightened One, present everywhere and at all times. He is the living Master who continuously sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and to bear witness to his resurrection by empowering us to experience and manifest the fruits of the Spirit and the Beatitudes both in prayer and action.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is the most 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, or as Gregory the Great (6th century), summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition, put it, "resting in God." This was the classical meaning of contemplative prayer for the first sixteen centuries.

Contemplative Prayer

Contemplative Prayer is the normal development of the grace of baptism and the regular practice of Lectio Divina. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. Contemplative Prayer is the opening of mind and heart – our whole being – to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions. 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.

The Method of Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier time (e.g., The Cloud of Unknowing) in an updated form and to put a certain order and regularity into it. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. During the time of prayer we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere.

Explanation of the Guidelines

I. **"Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within."**

A. The sacred word expresses our intention to be in God's presence and to yield to the divine action.

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 AND 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 OF THOUGHTS, RETURN EVER-SO-GENTLY TO THE SACRED WORD.*

4. *AT THE END OF THE PRAYER PERIOD, REMAIN IN SILENCE WITH EYES CLOSED FOR A COUPLE OF MINUTES.*

B. The sacred word should be chosen during a brief period of prayer asking the Holy Spirit to inspire us with one that is especially suitable to us.

1. Examples: Lord, Jesus, Father, Mother, Mary; or in other languages: Kyrie, Jesu, Jeshua, Abba, Mater, Maria.

2. Other possibilities: Love, Peace, Mercy, Silence, Stillness, Calm, Faith, Trust, Yes; or in other languages: Amor, Shalom, Amen.

C. Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period, for that would be to start thinking again.

D. A simple inward gaze upon God may be more suitable for some persons than the sacred word. In this case, one consents to God's presence and action by turning inwardly to God as if gazing upon God. The same guidelines apply to the sacred gaze as to the sacred word.

II. **"Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within."**

A. By "sitting comfortably" is meant relatively comfortably; not so comfortably that we encourage sleep, but sitting comfortably enough to avoid thinking about the discomfort of our bodies during the time of prayer.

- B. Whatever sitting position we choose, we keep the back straight.
- C. If we fall asleep, we continue the prayer for a few minutes upon awakening if we can spare the time.
- D. Praying in this way after a main meal encourages drowsiness. Better to wait an hour at least before Centering Prayer. Praying in this way just before retiring may disturb one's sleep pattern.
- E. We close our eyes to let go of what is going on around and within us.
- F. We introduce the sacred word inwardly and as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.

III. "When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."

- A. "Thoughts" is an umbrella term for every perception including sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, reflections, and commentaries.
- B. Thoughts are a normal part of Centering Prayer.
- C. By "returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word," a minimum effort is indicated. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of Centering Prayer.
- D. During the course of our prayer, the sacred word may become vague or even disappear.

IV. "At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes."

- A. If this prayer is done in a group, the leader may slowly recite the Our Father during the additional 2 or 3 minutes, while the others listen.
- B. The additional 2 or 3 minutes give the psyche time to readjust to the external senses and enable us to bring the atmosphere of silence into daily life.

Some Practical Points

1. The minimum time for this prayer is 20 minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning, and one in the afternoon or early evening.
2. The end of the prayer period can be indicated by a timer, provided it does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.
3. The principal effects of Centering Prayer are experienced in daily life, not in the period of Centering Prayer itself.
4. Physical Symptoms:
 - a. We may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in various parts of the body or a generalized restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body.
 - b. We may also notice heaviness or lightness in the extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness.
 - c. In either case, we pay no attention, or we allow the mind to rest briefly in the sensation, and then return to the sacred word.
5. Lectio Divina provides the conceptual background for the development of Centering Prayer.
6. A support group praying and sharing together once a week helps maintain one's commitment to the prayer.

Extending the Effects of Centering Prayer into Daily Life

1. Practice 2 periods of Centering Prayer daily...
2. Read Scriptures regularly and study *Open Mind, Open Heart*.
3. Practice one or two of the specific methods for everyday, suggested in *Open Mind, Open Heart*, chap. 12.
4. Join a Centering Prayer Support Group or Follow-up Program (if available in your area.)
 - a. It encourages the members of the group to persevere in private.
 - b. It provides an opportunity for further input on a regular basis through tapes, readings and discussion.

Points for Further Development

1. During the prayer period various kinds of thoughts may be distinguished.
 - a. Ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memory.
 - b. Thoughts that give rise to attractions or aversions.
 - c. Insights and psychological breakthroughs.
 - d. Self-reflections such as, "How am I doing?" or, "This peace is just great!"
 - e. Thoughts that arise from the unloading of the unconsciousness.
2. During this prayer we avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations or aiming at some specific goal such as:
 - a. Repeating the sacred word continuously.
 - b. Having no thoughts.
 - c. Making the mind a blank.
 - d. Feeling peaceful or consoled.
 - e. Achieving a spiritual experience.
3. What Centering Prayer is not:
 - a. It is not a technique.
 - b. It is not a relaxation exercise.
 - c. It is not a form of self-hypnosis.
 - d. It is not a charismatic gift.
 - e. It is not a para-psychological experience.
 - f. It is not limited to the "felt" presence of God.
 - g. It is not discursive meditation or affective prayer.
4. What Centering Prayer is:
 - a. It is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.
 - b. It is an exercise of faith, hope, and love.
 - c. It is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion.
 - d. It habituates us to the language of God which is silence.

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