



Centering Prayer

[From Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM's Daily Meditation for January 2, 2016]

This is what you are to do. Lift your heart up to the Lord with a gentle stirring of love, desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts.

—Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Chapter 3

In the 1970s, drawing from *The Cloud of Unknowing* and other Christian mystical writings, three Trappist monks—William Meninger, Basil Pennington, and Thomas Keating—developed a simple method of silent prayer. This method came to be known as Centering Prayer, referencing Thomas Merton's definition of contemplation as prayer "centered entirely on the presence of God." (You can [learn more about Centering Prayer through Contemplative Outreach](#).)

Centering Prayer is simply sitting in silence, open to God's love and your love for God. This prayer is beyond thoughts, emotions, or sensations. Like being with a very close friend or lover, where words are not required, Centering Prayer brings your relationship with God to a level deeper than conversation, to pure communion.

Because our minds are so attached to thinking, Father Thomas Keating sometimes suggests choosing a sacred word, with one or two syllables, "as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. [Then,] sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce your sacred word. . . . When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to your sacred word. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes."¹

Two sessions of 20-30 minutes of Centering Prayer are recommended each day, but if that is too much for you, begin with five or ten minutes. Let go of all expectations or goals during this time. It is not about achieving anything, whether emptying your mind or finding peace or achieving a spiritual experience. There is no way to succeed at Centering Prayer, except to return again and again to love. Allow thoughts to come and go without latching onto them, without judgment. "Ever-so-gently" bring your sacred word, the symbol of your intention, back to mind and return to resting in Presence.

Some further thoughts on Centering Prayer from Cheryl Austin, MAT:

If you haven't done Centering Prayer before there are typically three barriers you leave behind by doing the practice of centering prayer.

- Hyperactivity - I'd better be doing something. Don't believe being still, is work!
- Over-conceptualizing - making everything fit

¹ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (Amity House: 1986), 109-115.

- ☑ Over-dependence on self - Pray only when in a mess, forget it's relationship

When these barriers are overcome, little by little, we quieten our own thoughts and can more fully experience the presence of God. The good news: it's OK for it to be messy as God honors our desire and intention to consent to the Presence of the Divine.

From the Centering Prayer retreats I have attended over the years, I have been really interested in the conversations around what are some of the possible fruits of this contemplative practice. This is a key point - The fruits of our prayer are not experienced during the prayer - instead the fruit is taking place in our daily lives.

Here are some of the comments I have heard about the changes over time of the regular practice of Centering Prayer.

- a. Emotional stability, through detachment: More present, more observant, and less forgetful
- b. We first become the observer of our thoughts, as a way to detach from them. We then become the observer of our own behaviors and reactions. This is powerful. We become more self-aware. That self-awareness helps us to identify our habitual thinking patterns and behavior patterns. The choice of making a different response becomes possible.
- c. We can realize that our thoughts are separate from who we are. And, we can change those thoughts. Thoughts and emotions come and go, like the weather!
- d. We can create a Teflon, let things slide by
- e. We gain the wisdom to know how to raise children. Good health and energy.
- f. People have a little bit more patience. They really want to do the Lord's work more.
- g. Well of peace inside that just gets deeper. See God everywhere with this practice.
- h. Relationship with teenage son (story, I can expand on)
- i. Knowing things before they happen, marvels at what God is doing in his life
- j. People live in the moment, let go of the past, plan for, but not get stuck in the future. (God speaks to us in the present.)
- k. Greater comfort level with silence
- l. Do service without looking for the lollypop
- m. Opening up to a deeper level of awareness

Finally, a quote to give us perspective:

*We try to fit the God of the ocean, into the swimming pool of our intellect.
Centering prayer allows us to enter into the ocean of God's love. - Fr. Carl Arico*