

# Centering Prayer: A Closer Walk with Our God

By Fr. Matthew J. Flatley  
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Well, just what is Centering Prayer? Is it OK for a Catholic to engage in this practice? I often hear these, or similar questions asked. Now that I am an ordained Catholic priest, I feel compelled to provide an answer. Drawing on my own personal experience of Centering Prayer from these past 20+ years, as well as drawing on what I have learned from Fr. Thomas Keating and Fr. William Meninger, both of whom have been my mentors, I wish to provide some clarity and dispel some of the misconceptions about this extraordinary method of prayer.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2709) borrows from the writings of St. Teresa of Avila, one of the Doctors of the Church, in an effort to define contemplative prayer. St. Teresa says,

*“Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”*

The Catechism (2713) goes on to say that contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty. Contemplative prayer is a covenant relationship established by God within our hearts. Contemplative prayer is a communion in which the Holy Trinity conforms man, the image of God, “to his likeness.” And so with help from our catechism we strive to have some understanding of the tremendous mystery that is contemplative prayer; *this presence to presence communion, which takes place within our hearts.* We have learned that contemplative prayer is a grace. It is sheer, gratuitous gift. A gift that we can only receive and never initiate.

And so if we now have some comprehension of what contemplative prayer is, just what is Centering Prayer? Fr. Thomas Keating teaches that Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to receive this divine gift. It is an attempt to present the Christian teachings about prayer, lessons drawn from the earliest centuries and throughout all the ages, in a more contemporary context and language. It is important to note that Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer, but rather, it cast a new light and depth of meaning on all prayer and devotion.

Abbot Keating defines prayer as both a relationship with God, and at the same time, a discipline in which to foster the relationship along. This word *discipline* is very important. Discipline is taken from the Latin *discipulus*, which is of course the same root word for our modern word *disciple*. To be a disciple means to be a learner. The disciples of Christ were students of Christ, disciplined students.

Fr. William Meninger says that contemplative prayer is really the logical outcome of a regular, normal prayer life. In the beginning our prayers are usually thoughts

expressed in words. When we get to the point of contemplation, the thoughts subside, the words disappear and there is simply loving rather than speaking. Abbot Keating teaches that a disciplined commitment to Centering Prayer initiates a movement beyond conversation with Christ, to communion with Christ.

The method of Centering Prayer is drawn from centuries of Christian contemplative tradition, and in particular, the splendid treasures of the Christian monastic heritage. It is based on the wisdom teaching 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 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.

Fr. Meninger teaches that *The Cloud of Unknowing* says in many different ways that God, whom the mind cannot grasp, the heart can embrace. Since God is infinite and we are finite, we cannot put an infinite God into our finite minds. But our hearts are capable of loving this infinite God. On a personal note, I would also add that our wills are capable of surrendering to this same infinite God.

Centering Prayer has been the most precious gift of all in my own life and it has surely been a key component in the awakening of my priestly vocation. I first learned of this prayer because of a personal desire to learn more about the *Eleventh Step*. The Eleventh Step of any 12-Step Program suggests that a person seek through *prayer and meditation* to learn and understand the will of God in their lives. While working in Colorado, a friend invited me to accompany her to St. Benedict's Monastery to learn about Centering Prayer as a potential Eleventh Step practice. From the moment I first visited St. Benedict's and learned about Centering Prayer, I knew that I had found a most precious gift. Learning this simple, modern method of prayer changed the entire course of my life. I have come to understand that it is another person that most often touches us or deeply inspires us to aspire to something greater, much more so than a reading of theology ever could. This was precisely the experience I had when I first met Trappist monks. As I began to get to know them I knew that I wanted to have some of what they had.

From the very start, I was filled with hope as I began to learn the teachings of Fr. Thomas Keating. I realize now that an enormous part of my attraction was how he presents the entire Christian spiritual paradigm within the vernacular of modern psychological language, a language which I readily related to. In addition, I was even more motivated to delve into a contemplative experience when Keating taught that, while there is so much teaching and literature about the state of our wounded, human condition, as well as many accounts of the saints who had achieved great holiness,

there is not, however, too much instruction as to how the average person can make this trek.

And so I began the journey in earnest. The more I prayed this way, the more I wanted to pray. I love a reflection attributed to *The Little Flower*, Thérèse of Lisieux, who observes, “Jesus teaches me in my heart without the noise of words.” This was my experience. As Catherine of Siena instructs, “Build yourself a cell in your heart and retire there to pray.” I did just this, as a twice daily practice, and I soon went from *believing to knowing*. I have since learned that modern biblical scholars are certain that Christ actually spoke a particular phrase quite often, which I paraphrase here, “Those with ears ought to listen, those with eyes ought to see.” The daily encounter in the cave of my heart taught me to listen, it taught me to see. As a priest, I can’t imagine a more precious gift to share with others than the simple method of Centering Prayer. I would not only encourage any priest or minister to support and encourage the practice of Centering Prayer, but I would also encourage them to learn it for themselves. I cannot imagine trying to meet the endless demands of full-time ministry without the nourishment of silent, contemplative prayer. As Bernard of Clairvaux said, “If you want to be a channel, you must first be a reservoir.”

As we teach in Contemplative Outreach, Centering Prayer bonds members of a community together in a most profound way. Time and time again, I have experienced people who take to Centering Prayer in the same way that I did, and they too find extraordinary connections, both interiorly and exteriorly, connections they may not have even known they were hungering for. This Divine Therapy sparks to flame a fire that is already burning.

It both saddens and surprises me that there are so many misconceptions about Centering Prayer, especially on the Internet, where folks can write whatever they want, regardless of whether it is true or not. Centering Prayer is not New Age, and it is not taken from Hinduism or Buddhism, nor is it a form of Transcendental Meditation. It is a precious gift from God, drawn from the very roots of the incomparable and rich soil that is the Christian contemplative heritage. As we embrace this discipline, we move into deeper and deeper relationship with God. The fruits of this growing intimacy with the Divine fosters a growing awareness of greater friendship, trust and love with Him. Our conversation with God simplifies and gives way to communing. Pope Gregory the Great (6th century) in summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition expressed it as “resting in God.”