

CENTERING PRAYER

DMIN512 • SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE MINISTER

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DECEMBER 2, 2012

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“Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything.”<sup>1</sup> So paraphrases Eugene Peterson in *The Message*. In so doing, we begin our journey into the practice of centering prayer, by looking at where it leads us - to a pure faith, loving union with God. This modern retake on contemplative prayer, leads us to become whole again, by connecting our minds, hearts and hands to a loving union with God.

## HISTORY

The term centering prayer was coined in the 1970's by prayer retreatants who were experiencing a renewed expression of contemplative prayer.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Keating describes centering prayer with the analogy of a good herb tea.<sup>3</sup> The best of traditions of East and West, desert Fathers and Early Church are blended and drawn from as the source of this prayer experience.<sup>4</sup> The term, centering prayer, might have first been used in the twentieth-century, but the theological and historical lineage of this rich, spiritual practice can be traced back to the Old Testament, as reflected in Psalm 139, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”<sup>5</sup>

Flowing into the New Testament, this anticipated intimate union between God and us, which is the ultimate hope of centering prayer, is evidenced in Jesus' prayer in John 17, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004. Accessed November 13, 2012. <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm%2046:10&version=MSG>.

<sup>2</sup> Gustave Reininger, "Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Tradition." *Sewanee Theological Review* 40, no. 1 (1996): 29-45.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Keating, "A Traditional Blend: The Contemplative Sources of Centering Prayer." *Sewanee Theological Review* 48, no. 2 (2005): 145-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-9.

<sup>5</sup> *New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Biblica, 2011. Accessed November 13, 2012. <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans%208:26-27&version=NIV>.

us...” (John 17:21)<sup>6</sup> “But this love and unity is not a moral effort powered by human energy; it is an outgrowth of the union Christians will enjoy with Jesus himself (17:21b), a union modeled on the oneness of the Father and the Son . . . Jesus here envisages a profound spiritual intimacy that changes human life.”<sup>7</sup>

The Apostle Paul expresses how this intimate possibility is worked out in our lives through the Holy Spirit, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans.”<sup>8</sup> This is the home of centering prayer - the place beyond words where the Spirit personally does the transforming work, in the way only God can.

For the first fifteen centuries of the Church, contemplative prayer was practiced, taught and seen as the ultimate goal of one’s prayer life.<sup>9</sup> This began to shift in the twelfth century as the schools of theology were being created, bringing along with them their propensity for strict analysis and classifications. The long held stages of contemplative prayer, shared by all of Christianity, were no longer seen as a unifying whole, but were separated out to be identified and labeled.<sup>10</sup> This continued until the sixteenth century where, as a result of the Reformation’s exclusivist views, “mental prayer came to be divided into discursive meditation if thoughts predominated; affective prayer if the emphasis was on acts of the will; and contemplation if

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<sup>6</sup> *New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Biblica, 2011. Accessed November 13, 2012. <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john%2017:21&version=NIV>.

<sup>7</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John: The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2000), 468.

<sup>8</sup> *New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Biblica, 2011. Accessed November 13, 2012. <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans%208:26-27&version=NIV>.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: Amity House, 1986), 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

graces infused by God were predominant.”<sup>11</sup> Thereby, if a prayer practice didn’t fit neatly into one of these categories it was discouraged.<sup>12</sup>

## METHOD

In recent times, we are indebted to the monastic-trio of William Meninger, Basil Pennington, and Thomas Keating. They have refined and popularized centering prayer, through a modern day gleaning of classic contemplative teachings from Abba Isaac, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *Conferences* by St. John Cassian, along with the writings of St. John of the Cross.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Keating is attributed to working out the very approachable four step model for centering prayer that has characterized this growing movement.

Steps one and two, as given by Keating, instruct us to choose a sacred word, and as we are settled and sitting comfortably, to close our eyes and “silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.”<sup>14</sup> This sacred word isn’t a mantra, in the style of Eastern meditation, that one simply repeats and is entranced by - rather it is a symbol. Keating is very precise in describing this sacred word as a symbol of our intention. Willful attention, is the usual path of meditation and enacts the will. “Centering prayer is founded entirely on the gesture of surrender or letting go.”<sup>15</sup> Our intention, in centering prayer, is to express a willingness to simply place ourselves before God. The importance of this is summarized well by James Wilhoit,

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Gustave Reininger, "Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Tradition." *Sewanee Theological Review* 40, no. 1 (1996): 29-45.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer and Attention of the Heart." *Cross Currents* 59, no. 1 (2009): 17.

The emphasis on intentionality by Keating is a remarkable gift. A perusal of the current literature on forms of meditation and contemplative prayer, unless informed by centering prayer, shows that by and large meditation is portrayed as a human achievement obtained through increasing one's powers of focus and concentration. Keating's emphasis on intention allows for a gracious tenor to pervade this prayer practice. It is not of human achievement, but one of intentionality and receptivity.<sup>16</sup>

It's not long after we present our intentions before God that we are well aware of our many thoughts. Keating helps us by offering step three, "When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."<sup>17</sup> Once again, Keating's intentionality in wording is helpful. The thoughts we have while praying are not designated as distractions, but simply signs of our attachments, and as such, the pray-er does not block the thoughts or subdue the thoughts but generously releases the thoughts as they come. Keating uses the metaphor of a stream. Our thoughts are like boats and as they come along we welcome them but don't entertain them.<sup>18</sup> In on-going centering prayer practice one is taught the "four R's . . . resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought and return ever-so-gently to the sacred word,"<sup>19</sup> thereby allowing the thoughts to continue down the stream.

There is a noted subtleness in step three, that Basil Pennington brings out of the shadows for us, "What we are trying to do in Centering Prayer is obey the first commandment: to love our God with our whole mind, our whole soul and our whole heart and all our strength. In other words to be all there."<sup>20</sup> But as already noted, in order "to be all there" for God, we have to

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 192.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, 139.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Gustave Reininger, *The Diversity of Centering Prayer* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 42.

<sup>20</sup> E. Glenn Hinson, *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 136.

empty ourselves of our attachments. This emptying isn't a complete blanking of the mind familiar in Eastern meditation, as some misunderstand centering prayer to be mimicking; rather this emptying is to be understood from the perspective of the Christian theological richness of *kenosis* - Christ's, self-emptying love.<sup>21</sup>

This practice of letting go, of emptying oneself of thoughts, desires, tensions - weaves its way into the fiber of everyday living. One begins to realize they are more than their thoughts and fears that pass through their mind. Likewise, just as one gives consent to God to work in a time of prayer, this same consent can take place in the every day moments of one's life. Cynthia Bourgeault summarizes the holistic outworking of this type of letting go.

There is a connection made between letting go of thoughts as the touchstone of meditation, letting go of immature and selfish emotional programs as the touchstone for practical work on self, and letting go of self as the touchstone of the gospel path. In all of this a clear pattern of sympathetic vibration is established, a "letting go" at each level that reinforces all levels . . .

meditational mode: consent, willingness  
psychological mode: letting go  
gospel emphasis: surrender, self-giving  
worship mode: adoration  
prayer mode: trust  
destination: true self<sup>22</sup>

Here, in what Cynthia Bourgeault describes as the destination of centering prayer, we discover another key idea that Keating expresses as the outcome of centering prayer - release of the true self. Basil Pennington helps us to understand the true self by contrasting it with the false self. "The false self is made up of what we do, what we have, and what others think of us. This is the self that Jesus said must die. By insisting that, at the time of prayer, we deliberately lay aside all thoughts concerning our doings and worries, we engage in a process of dying to the false self

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<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer and Attention of the Heart," 15-27.

<sup>22</sup> Gustave Reininger, *The Diversity of Centering Prayer*, 48-49.

so that the true self can emerge in God.”<sup>23</sup> It’s through this expressing of intention and emptying of self that one begins to be transformed, beyond our consciousness, by the gracious work of the Spirit progressing our transformation from our heart, to our mind, to our hands.

The dynamic results among regular practitioners of centering prayer became so evident that Thomas Keating termed it “divine therapy.”<sup>24</sup> This divine therapy is none other than God personally making us whole from the inside out, as the Spirit gives us the mind of Christ freeing our heart from our attachments, as we rest in God’s presence by pure faith. “Only when the mind is “in the heart,” grounded and tethered in that deeper wellspring of spiritual awareness is it possible to live the teachings of Jesus without hypocrisy or burnout. The gospel requires a radical openness and compassion that is beyond the capacity of the anxious, fear-ridden ego.”<sup>25</sup>

Keating encourages centering prayer to be practiced for twenty minutes twice a day. “At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.”<sup>26</sup> At this point we rest before we enter back into the world, where the real out working of centering prayer takes place. “Centering Prayer is not an end in itself, but a beginning. It is not done for the sake of having an experience, but for the sake of positive fruits in one’s life.”<sup>27</sup>

Through our intention, a rhythm is established in the psyche: welcoming any and all thoughts that surface, noticing them one by one, and then returning to the sacred word. This allows the Spirit to remove obstacles to God’s presence which is active

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<sup>23</sup> E. Glenn. Hinson, *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 136.

<sup>24</sup> Gustave Reininger, "Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Tradition," 41.

<sup>25</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer and Attention of the Heart," 23.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

within us, through our consent. This rhythm continues as the individual leaves the prayer period and moves into the ordinariness of every day.<sup>28</sup>

Ward's observation of how a rhythm is established in centering prayer and continues into the everyday moments of life, is important to comprehend to appreciate the full breadth and reach of this contemplative practice. Centering prayer is concerned with a holistic embodiment, not just a mystical experience. It leads to shape the pray-er's life into the image of Christ, to take Christ's mind, heart, attitudes of compassion and generosity and have them freely flow into the pray-er's own everyday moments.<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Through centering prayer, one is able to experience afresh a contemplative practice that has shaped followers of Christ through the ages. As one practices centering prayer and is enabled to present their intentions before God, letting go of their attachments, God transforms and heals from the inside out, aligning one's heart, mind and hands to the way of Jesus.

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas R. Ward, Jr. "Centering Prayer: An Overview." *Sewanee Theological Review* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 1996): 24.

<sup>29</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer and Attention of the Heart," 15-27.

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