

Centering Prayer

An introduction for the parishioners of
St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore, 2021

Centering Prayer, along with its sister discipline *Christian Meditation*, made its appearance in the modern Christian world in the mid-1970s. As early as the 1960s, Thomas Merton was writing books calling for a recovery of Christian contemplative prayer not only within the monastery but *beyond* it.

Thomas Keating and John Main responded to Merton's prophetic call, developing simple meditation methods solidly rooted in the Christian spiritual tradition and suitable for use not only within the monastery, but in a world hungry for the recovery of its spiritual roots. All three of these men recognized meditation not as a newfangled innovation, let alone the grafting onto Christianity of an Eastern practice, but rather, as *something that had originally been at the very center of Christian practice and had become lost*.

In the case of Centering Prayer, Thomas Keating noticed the number of young people in the 1960s who had been raised Christian and were flocking to Eastern traditions in order to find a "path"—*a meditation-based practice that actually changes the way you perceive reality and live your life*. Frustrated, Keating issued a challenge to his Cistercian monastic community: "Is it not possible to put the essence of the Christian contemplative path into a meditation method accessible to modern people living in the world?"

One of the monks, Father William Meninger (the official "founder" of the method of Centering Prayer), took Keating up on the challenge. In his well-thumbed copy of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th-century spiritual classic by an anonymous English monk, Meninger found the following instructions:

[Lift] up your heart toward God with a meek stirring of love... For a naked intent direct to God is sufficient without anything else. And if you desire to have this aim concentrated and expressed in one word in order that you might be better able to grasp it, take but one short word of a single syllable . . . and clasp this word tightly in your heart so that it never leaves no matter what may happen.

This became the cornerstone of “Centering Prayer,” originally coined by Thomas Merton. The practice caught on, particularly among lay retreatants, and has grown steadily ever since.

Centering Prayer Is Uniquely Christian

In Centering Prayer, the letting go of thoughts is seen as “consenting to the presence and action of God.” It carries that core sense of “Not my will but thine be done, O Lord,” the words uttered by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. Recent neuroscience suggests that learning to let go of what we’re clinging to, mentally as well as emotionally, actually catalyzes some revolutionary—and evolutionary—changes in our neural wiring.

The usual explanations given for why we let go of all thoughts in Centering Prayer have to do with “making yourself empty so that you can be filled with God” or reminders that a cluttered, preoccupied mind is hardly likely to be fully present—true enough. In my own teaching, I prefer to come at it from a slightly different angle, gently but firmly insisting that one does not release a thought in order to achieve some desired result; the releasing itself is the full meaning of the prayer.

This can be explained theologically on the basis of kenosis, or “letting go,” which Saint Paul specifies in Philippians 2:5-11, as the very essence of “putting on the mind of Christ.” Each time you manage to disengage from a thought, you are doing so in solidarity with Jesus’ own kenotic stance and in the process patterning that stance more and more deeply into your being until it eventually becomes your default response to all life’s situations.

Have you ever watched really closely what happens when you release a thought? Yes, in most cases more thoughts come rushing back in. But notice how there is a slight gap between them; if only for a nanosecond, there occurs a moment when you are present and alert, but in which your attention is focused on no particular thing. You are briefly in a state of *objectless awareness*.

This fleeting taste, in the gap between thoughts, of a whole different bandwidth of consciousness is commented on extensively in the Eastern meditation traditions and in some small pockets of inner work in the Western esoteric tradition. If you stay with these moments of objectless spaciousness, they will open up a whole new approach not only to your own spiritual evolution, but also to understanding some of those more formidable masterpieces of our own Western spiritual tradition, such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

The Method of Centering Prayer

For nearly thirty years now, the following four guidelines have successfully introduced tens of thousands of people worldwide to Centering Prayer

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 engaged with your thoughts [including body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections], 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.

So are we really saying that in Centering Prayer you meditate by simply letting go of one thought after another? That can certainly be our subjective experience of the practice, and this is exactly the frustration expressed by an early practitioner. In one of the very earliest training workshops led by Keating himself, a nun tried out her first twenty-minute taste of Centering Prayer and then lamented, "Oh, Father Thomas, I'm such a failure at this prayer. In twenty minutes I've had ten thousand thoughts!" "How lovely," responded Keating, without missing a beat. "Ten thousand opportunities to return to God."

This simple story captures the essence of Centering Prayer. It is quintessentially *a pathway of return* in which every time the mind is released from engagement with a specific idea or impression, we move from a smaller and more constricted consciousness into that open, diffuse awareness in which our presence to divine reality makes itself known along a whole different pathway of perception. "Centering Prayer is not done with attention but with *intention*," Thomas Keating repeatedly reminds us.

Unlike other methods of meditation, Centering Prayer does not furnish an object for your attention — whether it be repeating a mantra, following your breath, or watching your thoughts as they arise. Rather, you simply withdraw your attention from anything that brings it to a focal point and return again and again to your underlying intention — what *The Cloud of Unknowing* calls your "naked intent direct to God."

In Centering Prayer, then, everything begins with and keeps returning to intention. What am I really up to in this prayer? What is my aim?

It is difficult, admittedly, to put words around an experience that is deeply personal and intuitive. But in general, you're in the right ballpark if your intention is "to be totally open to God": totally available, all the way down to that innermost point of your being; deeper than your thinking, deeper than your feelings, deeper than your memories and desires, deeper than your usual psychological sense of yourself. Ultimately, what will go on in this prayer is "in secret" (the words that Jesus used in his instructions on prayer in Mathew 6:6): hidden even from yourself, in that inmost sanctuary of your being—where your life is "hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3).

The *sacred word* in Centering Prayer serves as a placeholder for your intention. It's the spiritual equivalent of a little piece of red string tied around your finger to remind yourself of your willingness to "do the deal." Unlike a mantra, you don't repeat it constantly; you only use it when you realize you've gotten tangled up in a thought. Then it helps gently and quickly to clear the mental debris and return you to that bare, open awareness.

References

[1] *The Cloud of Unknowing*, introductory commentary and translation by Ira Progoff (New York: Delta Books, 1957), 76.

[2] Contemplative Outreach, an international network founded by Fathers Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington, provides opportunities for the teaching and practice of Centering Prayer. Learn more at contemplativeoutreach.org.

Adapted from Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cowley Publications: 2004), 55-58.