



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

"The Method of Centering Prayer, Part 1"

Excerpted from
The Spiritual Journey Prologue

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Centering Prayer as a method, is two things at the same time. It's a relationship with God, resting in God, the movement beyond thoughts and concepts, to simply be in the presence of God and engulfed in that divine sense, whether felt or unfelt. Unless you firmly emphasize the relationship as prayer, then the discipline doesn't make too much sense. Because it's not a mental discipline. It's not designed to fix your mind, or your blood pressure, or help you to grow hair, or other things.

It's a relationship, first and foremost, and the method is totally in the service of that relationship. Let's look at the guidelines then, from that perspective. In this talk, we are emphasizing the method. You could easily get stuck on, "Well, I've got to do the method just right," but it's always a relationship. And that means that, unlike certain other disciplines, if you don't do it correctly, it doesn't matter. It's a help if you do it correctly, but it doesn't matter because it's your intention that counts, and the relationship is with God. He's not going to hold your mistakes against you. He's looking at your love, and through another person or a book, or eventually, or through the aspirations of the Holy Spirit you will correct whatever mistakes you're doing. The main thing to do is to do it. The principal method of Centering Prayer really is to sit down.

There's ways of doing it that could facilitate this sitting there. Let's look at the guidelines. Now, the first guideline is, choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within you. Notice, please, God's presence and action. So, we're working with a dynamic relationship. A back-and-forth, an exchange. A conversation, which has moved towards communion, or is moving in that direction. The second little guideline is that sitting comfortably, and with eyes closed, we settle briefly, like I'm settling in this nice chair, breathing easily, and so on.

And then, after a few moments of not doing anything, just sort of settling, pausing, maybe 10 or 15 seconds of quiet, you introduce very gently, very casually, almost informally, the sacred word that you had chosen in the first guideline, that symbolizes the consent of your will to God's presence, and action within. They always go together. God is not a statue. He is not a static force within us. It's a loving relationship in faith, and hence, God's spirit can do all kinds of things, and suggest all kinds of things, and he does.

The third guideline is, when engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

Well this is just to say, or acknowledge the fact, that there are going to be various thoughts, feelings, sense perceptions, noise in the room, people coughing, memories, imaginations, visualizations, sort of dreaming. All of this psychological material, you might say, is going to be flowing down the stream of consciousness as you sit there. And we say that it's inevitable, integral, and normal. This is a terribly important point to get through our heads if we've been trained in the doctrine of distractions. That distractions somehow are harmful, or interfere with your prayer.

If you're doing discursive meditation, and you're supposed to be thinking about something in particular, then other thoughts or distractions do interrupt your reflection in your prayer. Centering Prayer moves beyond that level of awareness, and it's designed to disregard the ordinary thoughts or activities of our psychological day-to-day awareness. You're not on the level that you're usually on in discursive meditation, and hence, we just disregard this thought or these thoughts, which are more like noise in the street or background music at the supermarket that you put up with, but pay no attention to.

It's important not to resist these thoughts. In other words, it's important to have a joyful attitude towards the thoughts. A friendly attitude towards the most dreadful thoughts. Not that you linger over them or act them out, but it's important that we expect them, and they're normal, and they're integral.

Now, the term "thoughts" is a technical term in our Centering Prayer practice, and it's an umbrella term – we could've used another term, but this one kind of got stuck – in which any perception whatsoever is referred to. That is, inner and outer sense sensations, memories, feelings, emotions, plans, commentaries. Any perception at all is a thought in the context of the Centering Prayer practice.

That means that every time you are engaged with any perception whatsoever, according to this third guideline, you ever-so-gently return to the sacred word. Not because the sacred word has some inherent, miraculous power of stopping the thoughts; it doesn't. And it's a mistake to use it as a bulldozer, or a baseball bat to knock the various thoughts out of the ballpark. This prayer is totally nonviolent. And in fact, it's as effortless as possible, so that the very term "ever-so-gently" means you return to the sacred word with a minimum of activity. Not only that, but this return is the only activity you initiate in Centering Prayer. In other words, you do nothing except to return to the sacred word when it's challenged by some attractive or repulsive thought, that begins to take you out of the disregard of thoughts. And out of the developing peace or interior silence that is gradually being insinuated through the Holy Spirit into the spiritual level of your being.

The final guideline is very simple. At the end of the prayer period, we remain in silence for a couple of minutes.

So, there are the four guidelines. Let's take just a minute to look at them a little more in particular. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. The sacred word expresses our intention to be in God's presence, and to surrender to this dynamic divine action. We yield to it so that it's an opening, first of all, to the action of God.

Well, now we're going to take a minute or two, perhaps two minutes of silence. I invite you to close your eyes, and I invite you to look inwardly, and to ask the Holy Spirit to suggest a sacred word of one or two syllables that you feel comfortable with, and that would express as a symbol or gesture of

your intention to be with God during this time, and totally open to the divine action.

In choosing a word, it is the meaning that we invest in the word that is more important, rather than the inherent meaning of the word itself. If you choose a word like peace, or its Hebrew form, shalom, as the expression of your intent to be with God, that is what makes it a sacred word. The word, then, is not sacred because of its inherent meaning, or its hallowed place in Christian tradition, but it's the meaning that you give it that makes it sacred. And, that is to say, your will has made it sacred, or your intention has sacralized this particular sound as the appropriate expression of your intention.

So that when it's challenged by thoughts going by, you can easily and gently return to it, and it reestablishes your original intention just to be with God. That's all the sacred word does. It has no surprise meanings, no trick effects on your psyche, no profound stirring of the subconscious, or the unconscious. It simply means what you want it to mean. You must stay with that word during the whole time of this prayer, because otherwise you'll start thinking again, 'Shall I turn to Amen instead of Amour?'"

The whole thrust of the prayer is to stop thinking. This doesn't mean you're not going to have thoughts, but notice this delicate distinction. We're not going to think about the thought. You can have all the thoughts in the world go by, and they won't interfere with the prayer. It's only when you start thinking about the thoughts, feeling, that you interrupt your original intention of just being totally open to God, and that calls for some response to reaffirm your original intention, and to get back to where you started.

You can see that this practice is constantly cultivating your spiritual awareness, the spiritual level of your being, the spiritual level of the intellect, which is intuitive, and the spiritual level of the will, which is the will to God, the will to open to infinite truth, infinite love, infinite happiness. Perhaps that's a good word to sum up this first stage of learning Centering Prayer, is opening, opening, opening. Now, after a while, this opening is going to be transformed into a letting go of oneself into God.

Just a few words about the second guideline, which is sitting comfortably and with eyes closed. We sit comfortably so that we won't have to think about how uncomfortable the body is. Secondly, we close our eyes to let go of our external environment, and also of our interior world that may be thinking about this or that when we sit down. Closing the eyes is also closing the inner eyes to whatever is going on in our interior world

Our prayer is an implicit prayer for everything God wills, an implicit prayer for everybody without mentioning any names. There's another time when we may be called to pray specifically for certain events, but since we only ask for half an hour or so twice a day, you have the whole 23 hours of the rest of the day to pray as much as you like for other people, or do whatever you like. Or do other forms of prayer. Centering Prayer does not bring other forms of prayer to an end, but it does put them into a new perspective, a deeper meaning, and one sees them from a kind of unified perspective, in which they're all moving, each in their own way towards this deeper awareness of the Divine Presence both in ourselves, and everyone else, and throughout the cosmos.

Having chosen the sacred word, we don't change it. Now, it's true the first few days you might try one other word, but it's important to settle on one and to stick to it, because eventually it gets sewn into the psyche ever deeper, and deeper, and deeper.

Now let's look at the third one [guideline], which is perhaps the most crucial one for most of us. When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. We said that thoughts are inevitable. We said they were integral. In other words, they're a part of the prayer. And as far as we can tell from our present level of experience, they're integral because your thoughts may be coming from the unconscious, and may be part of the process of healing that I'll come to later in my next lecture. The Spirit works as a kind of Divine Therapist. And one of the ways that he heals the unconscious, is by allowing its feelings and its thoughts to surface, especially during prayer, and then later, sometimes outside the time of prayer.

You can see right away that Centering Prayer involves the whole of life, and the activity by which we bring its fruits into daily life, is almost as important a factor in the project as the actual time that we faithfully spend each day in the prayer itself.

Thoughts are a normal part of Centering Prayer. It's when you are lifted out of your basic intention, and start watching thoughts that you're attached to or have an aversion to, that you need to do something to return to the sacred word. But if the thoughts are just going by like noise in the supermarket, and you're not paying any attention to it, you're just dimly aware that it's happening, then there isn't a necessity to go back to the sacred word because you're already at the place that the sacred word is meant to facilitate your reaching, which is the abiding, turning, and resting in the presence of God within you at the deepest level.

Let me just sum up very briefly in this modest diagram here what I'm trying to say. Suppose that this is our ordinary awareness, the stream of consciousness that we are experiencing during the time of prayer. And here are a few boats that are going by; boats representing thoughts, feelings, images, and so on. And there's usually a fleet of them. Sometimes the whole United States Navy seems to be going down, with all the guns banging. Whatever your experience, you're having thoughts going by at this level. At a deeper level – let's call this the ordinary level of our awareness, and let's call this the spiritual level of our awareness, which you're really not aware of most of the time except at the peak experience, or when life, or tragedy, or something brings you to that place. We're mostly unaware of what might be called the river itself, on which all our thoughts and faculties are resting. We're kind of absorbed, or dominated, in our ordinary psychological life, by the objects of events and people, and our emotional reactions to them.

The purpose then, of Centering Prayer, is to move from this level to this level. And indeed, not to stop there – because the human being has greater depths than that – but to move even deeper, to the level of the true Self, which is our participation in the divine life, and the Divine Presence itself as the Source of our being at every level.

And it's accessing or awakening our awareness to this Presence that is the ultimate goal of contemplative prayer or Centering Prayer. But to reach it, we have to pass through the spiritual level, and to awaken the true Self, and whatever of God's ultimate Divine Presence he may want to share with us, which is a whole new life, which is a transformed life. And which it seems to be is what the Gospel invites us to, especially in St. John, where Jesus speaks of inviting us into the same union and unity that he experiences with the Father in the Holy Spirit. Hence, this is so important, again, from the perspective of prayer as a relationship.