



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

"Centering Prayer" Excerpted from *Invitation from God*

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Keating: Centering Prayer has gone really by other names. It's an apophatic kind of prayer, which means it moves beyond the support of concepts, images, words, and rituals. Not that it denies them or rejects them, but that it adds to their contribution a new dimension – intimacy with God – that is cultivated in interior silence.

We introduce ever-so-gently the sacred symbol we've chosen which usually we teach it as a word, either for God or for Jesus, but it can be another word such as peace or listen or calm or something that feels comfortable for us by way of an expression of our intention to consent to God's presence and action. That's the heart and soul of the prayer, consenting to the Divine Presence within us. Don't have to go into any details about its presence there. But that it's a Presence that is close, loving, supportive, caring, tender. We don't think about God during the time of the prayer, but we simply maintain our intention to consent to God, just as he is, without demanding to know what that is.

When thoughts come down the stream of consciousness during the prayer, which is inevitable and an integral part of the prayer, we don't resist them, don't hang on to them, don't react emotionally to them. When we notice we're thinking about them or, to put it in another way, are engaged with a particular memory, plan, thought, image, we renew our original intention that we made in the beginning by repeating the sacred symbol, or in the case I'm following here, the word that we chose as the gesture of our intention to spend this time in the presence of God and to consent to it.

We always say it silently. It doesn't have to be articulated carefully. It can be only a beginning of a movement to saying it is our mental process. We don't say it unless we need to in order to renew our intention. That's not so much a judgment as a kind of intuition; you do what you feel comfortable with. Like in the beginning when one has so many thoughts, one needs to return again and again to that sacred symbol of consent.

Later on, there are periods somewhat long where you know you're not interested in thoughts; they're just like clouds going by, and so you just pay no attention to them.

That usually brings an experience of deeper rest or being in a deep place or being quiet or being still. We allow ourselves to follow that attraction which is the attraction of the Spirit from our inmost center inviting us to join the Spirit beyond thoughts and words in just a being-to-being encounter.

In the Book of Exodus, God calls this a mouth-to-mouth exchange, which is obviously something like a kiss. So that Centering Prayer is really similar to making love. You don't do it all day long. But it adds a dimension of one's relationship with God that is incomparable and then affects all the details of life and all the other ways in which one may wish to pray in a positive manner. It gradually brings the presence of God into daily life as a kind of fourth dimension that is present along with our three-dimensional world – without effort. It happens spontaneously.

Lefèvre: What does it mean to say the word gently?

Keating: We suggest saying it ever-so-gently, meaning as effortlessly as possible. That is meant to suggest not to use the word as a vehicle to go to a deeper level of consciousness, or to use it as a bulldozer to push away other thoughts, or as a baseball bat to knock them out of the ballpark, or out of your head, as the case may be. Ever-so-gently means you just say it or refer to it. You don't have to say it, just start to say it would be enough under most circumstances. No pushing. No trying. No effort.

Admittedly there is a little effort involved just to return to the word that you've chosen as the symbol of your consent. But, you're not trying to impress it on your memory or on your mind or to push other thoughts away. You just lay it in your consciousness like a feather on a piece of absorbing cotton, or as a drop of dew descending on the grass. You scarcely notice that it's happening. As you keep doing this every day for a few years, then it begins to become habitual. So, there's a movement of the spiritual will that begins to occur without any word at all.