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How to Do Centering Prayer

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[Centering Prayer](#) is a method of prayer, which prepares us to receive the gift of God's presence, traditionally called contemplative prayer. It consists of responding to the [Spirit of Christ](#) by consenting to God's presence and action within. It furthers the development of contemplative prayer by quieting our faculties to cooperate with the gift of God's presence.

Centering Prayer facilitates the movement from more active modes of prayer — verbal, mental or affective prayer — into a receptive prayer of resting in God. It emphasizes prayer as a [personal relationship with God](#). At the same time, it is a discipline to foster and serve this relationship by a regular, daily practice of prayer. It is Trinitarian in its source, Christ-centered in its focus, and ecclesial in its effects; that is, it builds communities of faith.

Centering Prayer is drawn from ancient prayer practices of the Christian contemplative heritage, notably the Fathers and Mothers of the Desert, Lectio Divina, (praying the scriptures), The Cloud of Unknowing, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila.. It was distilled into a simple method of prayer in the 1970's by three Trappist monks, Fr. William Meninger, Fr. Basil Pennington and Abbot Thomas Keating at the Trappist Abbey, St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts.

Steps

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*, 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.**
 - Thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections

Unpacking the Steps

1. **Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.** (cf. Open Mind, Open Heart, chap. 5)
 - The sacred word expresses our intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
 - The sacred word is chosen during a brief period of prayer asking the Holy Spirit to inspire us with one that is especially suitable for us.
 - Examples: [God](#), [Jesus](#), Abba, Father, Mother, [Mary](#), Amen.
 - Other possibilities: Love, [Peace](#), Mercy, [Listen](#), Let Go, Silence, Stillness, [Faith](#), [Trust](#), Yes.
 - Instead of a sacred word a simple inward glance toward the Divine Presence or noticing one's breath may be more suitable for some persons. The same guidelines apply to these symbols as to the sacred word.
 - The sacred word is sacred not because of its inherent meaning but because of the meaning we give it as the expression of our intention and consent.

- Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period because that would be to start thinking again.
 - 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.
2. **Sitting comfortably” means relatively comfortably so as not to encourage sleep during the time of prayer.**
- Whatever sitting position we choose, we keep the back straight.
 - We close our eyes as a symbol of letting go of what is going on around and within us.
 - We introduce the sacred word inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.
 - Should we fall asleep upon awakening we continue the prayer.
3. **When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.**
- “Thoughts” is an umbrella term for every perception, including sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, plans, reflections, concepts, commentaries, and spiritual experiences.
 - Thoughts are an inevitable, integral and normal part of Centering Prayer.
 - By “returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word” a minimum of effort is indicated. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of Centering Prayer.
 - During the course of Centering Prayer, the sacred word may become vague or disappear.
4. **At the end of the [prayer](#) period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.**
- The additional 2 minutes enables us to bring the atmosphere of silence into everyday life.
 - If this prayer is done in a group, the leader may slowly recite a [prayer](#) such as the Lord's Prayer while the others listen.

Tips

- The minimum time for this prayer is 20 minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning and the other in the afternoon or early evening. With practice the time may be extended to 30 minutes or longer.
- The end of the prayer period can be indicated by a timer which does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.
- Possible physical symptoms during the prayer:
 - We may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in various parts of the body or a generalized sense of restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body.
 - We may notice heaviness or lightness in our extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness.
- In all cases we pay no attention and ever- so-gently return to the sacred word.
- The principal fruits of the prayer are experienced in daily life and not during the prayer period.
- Centering Prayer familiarizes us with God's first language which is silence.
- Points for Further Development
 - During the prayer period, various kinds of thoughts may arise.
- Ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memory.
 - Thoughts and feelings that give rise to attractions or aversions.
- Insights and psychological breakthroughs.
 - Self-reflections such as, "How am I doing?" or, "This peace is just great!"
 - Thoughts and feelings that arise from the unloading of the unconscious.
- When engaged with any of these thoughts return ever-so-gently to your sacred word.
- During this prayer we avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations, or aiming at some specific goal such as:

- Repeating the sacred word continuously.
 - Having no thoughts.
 - Making the mind a blank.
 - Feeling peaceful or consoled.
 - Achieving a spiritual experience. (cf. Open Mind, Open Heart, chap. 6-10)
 - Ways to Deepen Our Relationship with God
 - Practice two 20-30 minute periods of Centering Prayer daily.
 - Listen to the Word of God in Scripture and study Open Mind, Open Heart.
- Select one or two of the specific practices for everyday life as suggested in Open Mind, Open Heart, chap. 12.
 - Join a weekly Centering Prayer Group.
 - It encourages the members of the group to persevere in their individual practices.
 - It provides an opportunity for further input on a regular basis through tapes, readings, and discussion.
 - It offers an opportunity to support and share the spiritual journey.
 - What Centering Prayer Is and Is Not
 - It is not a technique but a way of cultivating a relationship with God.
 - It is not a [relaxation](#) exercise but it may be refreshing.
 - It is not a form of self-hypnosis but a way to quiet the mind while maintaining its alertness.
 - It is not a charismatic gift but a path of transformation.
 - It is not a para-psychological experience but an exercise of faith, hope and selfless [love](#).
 - It is not limited to the “felt” presence of God but is rather a deepening of faith in God’s abiding presence.
 - It is not reflective or spontaneous prayer, but simply resting in God.