

## CENTERING PRAYER

MONDAYS AT 7 P.M.

ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, 15 ROY ST., SEATTLE, WA 98109

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### A MINIATURE INTRODUCTION TO CENTERING PRAYER

Like silence and God, Centering Prayer contains all things and nothing. As a method of prayer, it is paradoxically simple and powerful. Centered in the heart and in the body, Centering Prayer has been described as quietly "resting in God," a rest that begins and ends in our hearts and which is held together by a simple word, image, or breath. God is central, not the word, image, or breath. Our aim in Centering Prayer is to open to God's presence and action within us through the silence of our own being, to simply let all else pass by (harder than it sounds!), so that our entire attention is turned toward union with the Divine in a most holy, negative space of silence.

Is Centering Prayer meditation? Yes and no. Its effects are like those of meditation, but unlike meditation, whose goal is often to quiet the mind and observe one's thoughts (brain-centered), Centering Prayer is, quite simply, an opening of the heart (body) to God in prayer. Their intentions are wholly different, though on the surface their methods appear similar.

Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, writes about Centering Prayer on his website, [www.centeringprayer.com](http://www.centeringprayer.com):

We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. In the Christian tradition, Contemplative Prayer [of which Centering Prayer is a contemporary form] is considered to be the pure gift of God. It is the opening of mind and heart—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions. Through grace we open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing—closer than consciousness itself.

Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate the development of Contemplative Prayer [from the first 16 centuries of the Christian church] by preparing our faculties to receive this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times in an updated form [created in the 1970s by three Trappist monks, Frs. William Meninger, Basil Pennington, and Thomas Keating]. Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer: rather, it casts a new light and depth of meaning on them. It is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship. This method of prayer is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him.

## THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER

From: *Centered Living: The Way of Centering Prayer*, M. Basil Pennington (Doubleday, 1986)

Sit comfortably in a chair that will give your back good support, and gently close your eyes. It is well to choose a place where you will not be disturbed by any sudden intrusion. A quiet place is helpful, though not essential.

### THREE RULES, OR GUIDES

Sit relaxed and quiet.

1. Be in faith and love to God who dwells in the center of your being.
2. Take up a love word (see *lectio divina*, below) and let it be gently present, supporting your being to God in faith-filled love.
3. Whenever you become aware of anything, simply, gently return to the Lord with the use of your prayer word. [Fr. Keating suggests you return to the word "as gently as you would lay a feather on a bed of cotton." Also the three Rs: Resist no thought. React to no thought. Retain no thought.]

### LECTIO DIVINA

1. Take the Sacred Text with reverence, acknowledging God's presence, and call upon the Holy Spirit.
2. For ~ ten minutes each reading, listen to the Lord and respond to him. The Sacred Text is read three times by three people. [The three readings are prompted thusly:
  - First Reading: "Hear God's word."
  - Second Reading: "Hear and see Christ."
  - Third Reading: "Experience Christ."]
3. Each time we practice the four stages of *lectio divina*: *lectio* (reading); *meditatio* (meditation); *oratio* (praying); *contemplatio* (contemplation). It is in *contemplatio* that we often call out the word or words that speak to us from each reading. Only one or two words are necessary.
4. Thank the Lord and take a "word" with you from the reading. [This might also be an image, a phrase, or even a gesture taken from the reading.]

## CENTERING PRAYER FORMAT AT ST. PAUL'S

1. Invocation as the spirit moves, or:  
"Dear heavenly Father, we thank you for your presence and ask for the gift of your Holy Spirit, now and always. Amen."
2. Opening: A non-scriptural reading is offered, say, from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, or what may be appropriate for the time, season, or group. (~10 minutes)
3. Warm-up: Heart-centering alphabet. Find your heart beat. Intone a letter for each heart beat. Between letters count 2 or 3 heart beats. (~3-5 minutes)
4. Chime 3 x
5. *Lectio divina* Reading I: Hear the word of God. (~10 minutes)
6. *Lectio divina* Reading II: Hear and see Christ. (~10 minutes)
7. *Lectio divina* Reading III: Experience Christ. (~10 minutes)
8. Chime 1 x
9. Interlude (~5 minutes)
10. Chime 1 x
11. Centering Prayer (30 minutes)
12. Chime 3 x
13. Closing: A very brief reading. Perhaps a repetition of part of the Opening reading.
14. Lord's Prayer (silent with the heart beat or aloud)
15. Closing

## QUOTES TO INSPIRE

My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothingness and Silence. If I am still present "myself" this I recognize as an obstacle. If He wills he can then make the Nothingness into total clarity. If He does not will, then the Nothingness actually seems to itself be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer, or meditation. It is not "thinking about" anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible. Which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible.

—Thomas Merton, in a letter to Sufi scholar, Aziz Ch. Abdul

Lift up your heart to God with a humble impulse of love and have himself as your aim, not any of his goods. ... Set yourself to rest in this darkness, always crying out after him whom you love. For if you are to experience him or to see him at all, insofar as it is possible here, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness.

—Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*  
(HarperSanFrancisco, after the 1981 edition from Paulist Press)

## LOGION 97

Yeshua said:  
The Kingdom of the Father

is like the woman who carried a jar of flour.  
After she walked a long way,  
the handle of the jar broke  
and the flour began to spill behind her along the road.  
Heedless, she noticed nothing.  
When she arrived, she set down the jar  
and found it empty.  
— *The Gospel of St. Thomas* (Jean-Yves Leloup, trans.)

MATTHEW 6: 6

"But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

From: *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. I (GEH Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, trans.):

CONTEMPLATION (*theoria*): the perception or vision of the intellect (q.v.) through which one attains spiritual knowledge (q.v.). It may be contrasted with the practice of the virtues (*praktiki*) which designates the more external aspect of the ascetic life—purification and the keeping of the commandments—but which is an indispensable prerequisite of contemplation. Depending on the level of personal spiritual growth, contemplation has two main stages: it may be either of the inner essences or principles of created beings or, at a higher stage, of God Himself.

FAITH (*pistis*): not only an individual or theoretical belief in the dogmatic truths of Christianity, but an all-embracing relationship, an attitude of love and total trust in God. As such it involves a transformation of man's entire life. Faith is a gift from God, the means whereby we are taken up into the whole theanthropic activity of God in Christ and of man in Christ through which man attains salvation.

HEART (*kardia*): not simply the physical organ but the spiritual centre of man's being, man as made in the image of God, his deepest and truest self, or the inner shrine, to be entered only through sacrifice and death, in which the mystery of the union between the divine and the human is consummated. ' "I called with my whole heart", says the psalmist—that is, with body, soul and spirit' (John Klimakos, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 28, trans. by Archimandrite Lazarus [London, 1959], pp. 257-8). 'Heart' has thus an all-embracing significance: 'prayer of the heart' means prayer not just of the emotions and affections, but of the whole person, including the body.