

Clarifications Regarding Centering Prayer*

By Fr. Thomas Keating

Cardinal Ratzinger's Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation was not directed to Centering Prayer, which is the traditional form of Christian prayer, but rather at those forms of meditative practices that actually incorporate the methods of Eastern meditations such as Zen and the use of the Hindu mantras. The letter is chiefly concerned with the integration of such techniques into the Christian faith. It does not forbid their use and indeed, states, "that does not mean that genuine practices of meditation which come from the Christian East and from the great non-Christian religions... cannot constitute a suitable means of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace even in the midst of external pressures" (#28).

Having noted this affirmation of the value of the Eastern practices when rightly integrated into Christian faith, may I point out that Centering Prayer is the one contemporary form of contemplative practice that does not make use of any of these techniques. The quotation from the Letter that the gift of contemplative prayer can only be granted through the Holy Spirit is precisely what we teach. Nor does Centering Prayer encourage a privatized spiritual journey or the seeking of spiritual experiences, but rather fosters the complete surrender of self in faith and love that leads to divine union. There is much greater danger in concentrating on oneself in discursive meditation and in intercessory and affective prayer, especially if one is preoccupied with one's self feeling and reflections. In Centering Prayer one is not reflecting on one's self or one's psychological states at all.

It is important to situate Centering Prayer in the context of the monastic tradition of LectioDivina. LectioDivina is the most traditional way of cultivating contemplative prayer. It consists in listening to the text of the Bible as if one were in conversation with God and God were suggesting topics for discussion. Those who follow the method of LectioDivina are cultivating the capacity to listen to the word of God at ever deepening levels of attention. Spontaneous prayer is the normal response to their growing relationship with Christ, and the gift of contemplation is God's normal response to them.

The reflective part, the pondering upon the words of the sacred text in LectioDivina, is called meditation, discursive meditation. The spontaneous movement of the will in response to these reflections is called oratio, affective prayer. As these reflections and particular acts of will simplify, one tends to resting in God or contemplatio, contemplation.

These three acts –discursive meditation, affective prayer, and contemplation – might all take place during the same period of prayer. They are interwoven one into the other. One may listen to the Lord as if sharing a privileged interview and respond with one's reflections, with acts of will, or with silence – with the rapt attention of contemplation. The practice of contemplative prayer is not an effort to make the mind blank, but to move beyond discursive thinking and the multiplication of particular acts to the level of communing with God, which is a more intimate kind of exchange, a matter of the heart.

In human relationships, as mutual love deepens there comes a time when the two friends convey their sentiments without words. They can sit in silence sharing an experience or simply enjoying each other's

presence without saying anything. Holding hands or a single word from time to time can maintain this deep communication.

This loving relationship points to the kind of interior silence that is being developed in contemplative prayer. The goal of contemplative prayer is not so much the emptiness of the thoughts or the conversations as the emptiness of self. In contemplative prayer, one ceases to multiply reflections and acts of the will. A different kind of knowledge rooted in love emerges in which the awareness of God's presence supplants the awareness of one's own presence and the inveterate tendency to reflect on oneself. The experience of God's presence frees one from making oneself or one's relationship with God the center of the universe. The language of mystics must not be taken literally when they speak of emptiness or the void. Jesus practiced emptiness in becoming a human being, emptying himself of his prerogatives and the natural consequences of his divine dignity (cf. Phil. 2:5-8). The void does not mean void in the sense of nothing at all, but void in the sense of attachment to one's activity. One's own reflections and acts of will are necessary preliminaries to getting acquainted with Christ, but have to be transcended if Christ is to share his most personal prayer with the Father which is characterized by total self surrender.

Centering Prayer is only one method of developing contemplation and preparing oneself for this great gift of the Spirit. I would think it would have strong appeal for the people in the charismatic renewal movement, especially for those who enjoy the gift of tongues. The gift of tongues is already a form of contemplative prayer since one is fully aware of the presence and action of the Spirit without thinking about what one is saying.

The practice of Centering Prayer is basically a waiting upon God with loving attentiveness, fulfilling the Gospel injunction, "Watch and Pray". If one can accept the notion of prayer as primarily relationship with God, it becomes obvious that one's relationship with God can be expressed without words, simply by a gesture or even by one's silent intention to consent to God's presence. This is not to deny the value of other forms of prayer which are normally necessary to prepare one for this level of relating to God. It simply moves one to a deeper dimension of intimacy with God. Thus, it is a more personal kind of prayer than discursive meditation and affective prayer. As a result, it enables one to penetrate to a greater degree the meaning of scripture and liturgical texts and symbols.

The term "pantheistic", often used in connection with Eastern practices, is ambiguous and misleading. A distinction needs to be made between "pantheism" and "panentheism", as is done in inter-religious dialogue. Eastern practices are not necessarily pantheistic. Many forms of Buddhism and Hinduism are just as devotional as similar practices in the Christian faith, though directed, of course to their particular deities. Pantheism is usually defined as the identification of God with creation in such a way that the two are indistinguishable. Panentheism means that God is present in all creation by virtue of his omnipresence and omnipotence, sustaining every creature in being without being identified with any creature. The latter understanding is what Jesus seems to have been describing when he prays "that all might be one, Father, as we are one" and "that they may be one in us". Again and again, in the Last Supper discourse, he speaks of this oneness and his intentions to send his Spirit to dwell within us. If we understand the writings of the great mystics rightly, they experience God living within them all the time.

Thus the affirmation of God's transcendence must always be balanced by the affirmation of his imminence both on the natural plane and on the plane of grace.

The practice of Centering Prayer is simply offered to those who feel called to a deeper life of prayer and who are looking for a method that will help them to do so in the context of a very active life in the world. These people should not be deprived of such an opportunity on the basis of false fears raised by superficial understanding of Centering Prayer and a failure to recognize the significant distinction between traditional methods of preparing for the gift of contemplation, such as Centering Prayer, and the techniques of the Eastern spiritual traditions.

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