

# The Centering Prayer Method

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The following clarifications are in order concerning the Centering Prayer Method.

1. Centering Prayer is a traditional form of Christian prayer rooted in Scripture and based on the monastic heritage of "LectioDivina". It is not to be confused with Transcendental Meditation or Hindu or Buddhist methods of meditation. It is not a New Age technique.

Centering Prayer is rooted in the word of God, both in scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ. It is an effort to renew the Christian contemplative tradition handed down to us in an uninterrupted manner from St. Paul, who writes of the intimate knowledge of Christ that comes through love.

Centering Prayer is designed to prepare sincere followers of Christ for contemplative prayer in the traditional sense in which spiritual writers understood that term for the first sixteen centuries of the Christian era. This tradition is summed up by St. Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century. He describes contemplation as the knowledge of God impregnated with love. For Gregory, contemplation was the fruit of reflection on the word of God in Scripture as well as the precious gift of God. He calls it, "resting in God". In this "resting", the mind and heart are not so much seeking God as beginning to experience, "to taste", what they have been seeking. This state is not the suspension of all activity, but the reduction of many acts and reflections into a single act or thought to sustain one's consent to God's presence and action.

2. Centering Prayer does not "empty the mind" or "exclude other forms of prayer." It is not a "technique" that automatically creates "mysticism" or a means "to reach an altered state of consciousness".

It is important not to confuse Centering Prayer with certain Eastern techniques of meditation such as Transcendental Meditation. The use of the Sacred Word in Centering Prayer does not have the particular calming effect attributed to the TM mantra. Nor is the Sacred Word a vehicle leading to the spiritual level of one's being as it is in TM. There is no cause-and-effect relationship between using the Sacred Word and arriving at some altered state of consciousness. The Sacred Word is merely the symbol of the consent of one's will to God's presence and action within based on faith in the doctrine of the Divine Indwelling. The Sacred Word is simply a means of reaffirming our original intention at the beginning of our period of prayer to be in God's presence and to surrender to the divine action when we are attracted to some other thought, feeling or impression.

Throughout the period of Centering Prayer, our intention predominates: the movement of our will to consent to God's intention, which according to our faith, is to communicate the divine life to us. Hence, unlike TM, Centering Prayer is a personal relationship with God, not a technique.

3. Centering prayer is designed to deepen the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity and to develop the most ancient of all Christian methods, the practice of LectioDivina leading to contemplation.

Centering Prayer is fundamentally two things at the same time: first, the deepening of our personal relationship with Christ developed through reflection on scripture; and second, a method of freeing ourselves from attachments that prevent the development of this relationship and the unfolding of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. It reduces the tendency to over activity in prayer and to depending excessively on concepts in order to go to God. In short it reduces the obstacles in us, especially selfishness, so that we become sensitive to the delicate inspirations of the Holy Spirit that lead to divine union.

This form of prayer was first practiced and taught by the Desert Fathers of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, including Evagrius, John Cassian and St. John Climacus. It has representatives in every age, e.g. in the Patristic age, St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great in the West, and Pseudo-Dionysius and the Hesychasts in the East; in the Middle Ages, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, and Guido the Carthusian; the Rhineland mystics including St. Hildegard, St. Mechtilde, Meister Eckhart, Ruysbroek, and Tauler; later the author of the Imitation of

Christ and the English mystics of the 14th Century such as the author of the Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, and Julian of Norwich; after the Reformation, the Carmelites St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and St. Therese of Lisieux; among the French school of spiritual writers, St. Francis de Sales, St. Jane de Chantal and Cardinal Berulle; among the Jesuits, Fathers De Caussade, Lallemont and Surin; among the Benedictines, Dom Augustine Baker and Dom John Chapman; among modern Cistercians, Dom Vital Lehodey and Thomas Merton.

Over the centuries ways of cultivating contemplative prayer have been called by various names corresponding to the different forms they have taken. Thus we have Prayer of Faith, Prayer of the Heart, Pure Prayer, Prayer of Simplicity, Prayer of Simple Regard, Active Recollection, Active Quiet, and Acquired Contemplation. In our time a number of initiatives have been taken by various religious orders, notably by the Jesuits and Discalced Carmelites, to renew the contemplative orientation of their founders and to share their spirituality with lay persons. The method of Centering Prayer is a further attempt to present the teaching of earlier times in an updated format and to make it available to ordinary people who are experiencing a hunger for a deeper life of prayer and for a support system to sustain it.