

Beyond Centering Prayer: Introduction

Harry Plantinga, draft of 2025-01-09

You've tried centering prayer, but you don't have a current practice. It didn't seem to be for you. It was too dry, or too painful. Or maybe you have a current practice, and you wonder how to deepen it. Where is the life, light, and love? Or maybe you haven't tried it, but you have a strong desire to know God more deeply. You have heard of centering prayer as a deeper kind of spirituality. You wonder whether you should give it a try.

The modern centering prayer movement began in the 1970s. Three Trappist monks, Fathers Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington, saw the attraction that Eastern meditation had for young spiritual seekers, and they proposed centering prayer as a system of meditative prayer rooted in their own Christian contemplative tradition. They based it on the prayer exercise described in the anonymous 14th-century book on contemplative prayer, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and other sources. One of the key books introducing centering prayer is Keating's book, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (Continuum, 2000). These three formed the Contemplative Outreach organization that is still very active today in promoting contemplative prayer.

In centering prayer, practitioners choose a sacred word, usually *God* or *love*, as a symbol of their intention to consent to God's presence and action within. When practitioners sitting in prayer become aware of thoughts, feelings, or sensations, they use this word to draw their loving attention back to God, not as a means of blocking them out but as a way of letting them go. Typically practiced for two 20-minute or one 30-minute session per day, centering prayer is not about achieving a blank mind, but rather about consenting to and making way for God's presence within.

But centering prayer is not the same as the prayer exercise of *The Cloud*, let alone contemplative prayer. I recently participated in a group that studied and practiced the prayer exercise of *The Cloud*, and it seemed to me that there were several fundamental differences. In centering prayer, the essence of the exercise is giving God your attention and consent, but in *The Cloud*, the essence of the exercise is *aspiration*, lifting up your heart, seeking God in love. The author calls it a "sharp dart of longing love." In centering prayer, there is one prayer word, while in the *Cloud* exercise, there are two. In centering prayer, the exercise lasts 20 or 30 minutes, but the *Cloud* exercise is both shorter and longer. The aspiration takes only an instant, but you never stop seeking God. It's a life commitment.

And while centering prayer and the exercise of *The Cloud* are somewhat different, they are both very different from infused contemplative prayer. Both are exercises by which you may offer yourself or your consent to God's work within, but (infused) contemplative prayer is purely God's work, not something you can do by yourself.

Keating is fully aware of these differences. He calls centering prayer "a method leading to contemplative prayer, . . . the first rung on the ladder of contemplative prayer" (*Open Mind*,

Open Heart, p. 5) and “a method of reducing obstacles to the gift of contemplative prayer and of developing habits conducive to responding to the inspirations of the Spirit” (*Invitation to Love*, p. 144). But in my experience many people who are not deeply involved are not aware of the difference. “Centering prayer” and “contemplative prayer” are often seen as more or less synonymous terms. To address this lack of awareness, we are going to explore several of the ways in which the prayer exercise of *The Cloud*, or contemplative prayer more broadly, goes beyond centering prayer, through a series of prayer exercises.

The Exercises

The *Beyond Centering Prayer* exercises explore three different *movements* or *ways* in which contemplative prayer goes beyond Centering Prayer. These are symbolized by *Life*, *Light*, and *Love*. *Life* is the way of letting go, of surrender. In it, we learn that it is only by giving up our ego-centered lives that we gain true life. In the way of *Light*, we see ourselves, what we truly seek and desire, and we see God. Each one inevitably leads to the other. In the way of *Love*, we give ourselves entirely to God and he gives himself to us. We are united. There will be five meetings, with a different exercise to be practiced after each meeting.

Week	Exercise
Introduction	Centering prayer
The way of Life	Surrender
The way of Light	Watch and pray
The way of Love	Union with God
Bringing contemplative prayer into life	Pray without ceasing

Daily Routine

The daily routine starts with a primary time of prayer first thing in the morning. An hour is ideal. Brief daily readings will be provided. Each day, ponder one of these readings, *lectio divina* style, to bring yourself into God’s presence. Then, pray for God’s assistance and attempt the prayer exercise for the week. For most people, at least 20 to 30 minutes will be needed just to get beyond all the concerns and duties and desires running through their mind and to turn their attention to God and to the exercise.

After the exercise, take ten minutes or so to reflect on how it went, on any questions that arose, and to set intentions for the next day. You can write your thoughts in a journal, or you can use the online interactive journal through the link provided in the handout for the week. The interactive journal will prompt you for reflections, answer your questions, and give you suggestions for furthering your practice. Note that you are not to use the interactive journal, not to use your computer or device at all, until your prayer exercise for the day is complete.