

BCP 1: Centering Prayer

Perhaps for some years now you have been reading the Bible, reading good books, thinking about God's works and ways, thinking about Jesus' death on the cross for you. Through this exercise of reason, of thinking about God and his ways, your faith in God, your love for God have grown. In medieval spirituality, this is called "meditation." It was embodied in the ancient practice of meditation on scripture called *lectio divina*. I've also seen it called "pondering," to differentiate it from the modern meaning of "meditation."

With enough practice, it becomes less necessary to use your reason in this way, to ponder, in order to love God. Eventually, it may not be necessary at all. You love God even without prior reasoning and thinking. You can abide in that love without all that mental activity. And in fact, you realize that the reasoning was occupying your attention. Without it, you can attend directly to God. Maybe there are moments when God seems immediately present, or you are suddenly filled with devotion, or you have a sudden intuition about God's ways, or you experience utter dryness. God is working in you more immediately and less hiddenly. In the language of medieval spirituality, this is the start of "contemplative prayer." It is the next phase on the road to union with God.

In chapter 5 of the *Revelations*, just after the hazelnut vision, Julian of Norwich puts it this way:

"Until I am of one substance with him I can never have complete rest nor true happiness; that is to say, until I am so joined to him that there is no created thing between my God and me. . . . God wishes to be known, and is pleased that we should rest in him; for all that is beneath him is not enough for us; and this is the reason why no soul is at rest until it counts as nothing all that is created."
(Ch. 5)

In medieval times it was thought that contemplative prayer was reserved for monks and nuns, or maybe even for hermits and anchoresses, but over the centuries experience has proved that it is available to Christians in every form of life and all are called to it. There may even be advantages of the common life.

The Contemplative Outreach organization seeks to make known and promote this kind of prayer to everyone. The entryway that they promote is called *centering prayer*. Centering prayer focuses on consent to God's presence and action within, without the noise of meditations. It focuses on resting in God's presence and love. It focuses on giving God permission to transform us. The exercise for this week is centering prayer.

Exercise for Week 1: Centering Prayer

This week's exercise will involve *lectio divina*, centering prayer, and reflection. First thing in the morning, find a quiet, solitary place for prayer. Pray for God's presence. Take 15 minutes or so to read the reading for the day and reflect on it. Then practice centering prayer for 30 minutes. Then take the remaining time to reflect on your prayer time through journaling.

The method of centering prayer¹

Centering prayer is a method designed to deepen the relationship in Christ begun in *lectio divina* and to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times (e.g. *The Cloud of Unknowing*) in an updated form and to put a certain order and regularity into it. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. During the time of prayer, we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence and action everywhere else.

1. Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of 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.

Practical points.

1. The minimum time for this prayer is 20 minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning, and one in the afternoon or early evening.
2. The end of the prayer period can be indicated by a timer, provided it does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.
3. The principal effects of centering prayer are experienced in daily life, not in the period of centering prayer itself.
4. Physical symptoms [e.g. pains, itches, twitches, lights, emotions]: pay no attention, or allow the mind to rest briefly in the sensation and then return to the sacred word.
5. *Lectio divina* is the conceptual background for the development of centering prayer.
6. A support group praying and sharing together once a week helps maintain one's commitment to the prayer.

Journaling and Journee

Reflect on your centering prayer time. How did it go? What kinds of thoughts or desires distracted you? What kind of internal consent or resistance did you experience? Where did you find yourself seeking God through intermediaries rather than directly? You can reflect on these questions by writing about them in a paper journal, or you can use the online interactive journal, *Journee*, at

life.ccel.org/agents/bcp-1-centering-prayer



¹ Centering prayer guidelines from *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating, New York: Continuum, 1986-2000