

Readings for Week 1: Centering Prayer

From *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating

1. All true prayer is based on the conviction of the presence of the Spirit in us and of his unfailing and continual inspiration. Every prayer in this sense is prayer in the Spirit. Still, it seems more accurate to reserve the term prayer in the Spirit, for that prayer in which the inspiration of the Spirit is given directly to our spirit without the intermediary of our own reflections or acts of will. In other words, the Spirit prays in us and we consent. The traditional term for this kind of prayer is contemplation. (p. 13)

2. The root of prayer is interior silence. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words, but this is only one of its forms. "Prayer," according to Evagrius, "is the laying aside of thoughts." This definition presupposes that there are thoughts. Contemplative prayer is not so much the absence of thoughts as detachment from them. It is the opening of our mind and heart, body and emotions—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts, and emotions—beyond, in other words, the psychological content of the present moment. We do not deny or repress what is in our consciousness. We simply accept the fact of whatever is there and go beyond it, not by effort, but by letting go of whatever is there. (p. 14)

3. "Prayer is the raising of the heart to God." In using this ancient formula it is important to keep in mind that it is not we who do the lifting. In every kind of prayer the raising of the heart and mind to God can only be the work of the Spirit. In prayer inspired by the Spirit we let ourselves flow with the lifting movement and drop all reflection. Reflection is an important preliminary to prayer, but it is not prayer. Prayer is not only the offering of interior acts to God: it is the offering of ourselves, of who and what we are. (p. 14)

4. Jesus said, "Unless you deny your inmost self and take up the cross, you cannot be my disciple." (Mark 8:34) Denial of our inmost selves includes detachment from the habitual functioning of our intellect and will, which are our inmost faculties. This may require letting go not only of ordinary thoughts during prayer, but also of our most devout reflections and aspirations insofar as we treat them as indispensable means of going to God.

The nature of the human mind is to simplify what it thinks about. Thus a single thought can sum up an immense wealth of reflection. The thought itself becomes a presence, an act of attention rather than understanding. . . . Our attention is simply given to the presence of Jesus, the divine-human being, without adverting to any particular detail of his person. (p. 15)

5. One of the first effects of contemplative prayer is the release of the energies of the unconscious. This process gives rise to two different psychological states: the experience of spiritual development in the form of spiritual consolation, charismatic gifts, or psychic powers; and the experience of human weakness through humiliating self-knowledge. Self-

knowledge is the traditional term for the coming to of the dark side of one's personality. The release of these two kinds of unconscious energies needs to be safeguarded by well-established habits of dedication to God and concern for others. Otherwise, if one experiences some form of spiritual consolation or development one may inflate with pride; or if one feels so crushed by the realization of one's spiritual impoverishment, one may collapse into discouragement or even despair. The cultivation of habits of dedication to God and of service to others is the indispensable means of stabilizing the mind in the face of emotionally charged thoughts, whether of self-exaltation or of self-deprecation. (p. 15)

6. Dedication to God is developed by commitment to one's spiritual practices for God's sake. Service to others is the outgoing movement of the heart prompted by compassion. It neutralizes the deep-rooted tendency to become preoccupied with our own spiritual journey and how we are doing. The habit of service to others is developed by trying to please God in what we do and by exercising compassion for others, beginning with those with whom we live. To accept everyone unconditionally is to fulfill the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31) It is a practical way of bearing one another's burdens. (Galatians 6:2) Refusing to judge even in the face of persecution is to fulfill the commandment to love one another "as I have loved you" (John 13:34) and to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)

Habits of dedication to God and service to others form the two sides of a channel through which the energies of the unconscious can be released without submerging the psyche in the floodwaters of chaotic emotions. On the contrary, when these energies flow in orderly fashion between the banks of dedication and service, they will raise us to higher levels of spiritual perception, understanding, and selfless love. (pp. 15-16)

7. Detachment is the goal of self-denial. It is the non-possessive attitude toward all of reality, the disposition that strikes at the root of the false self system. The false self is a monumental illusion, a load of habitual thinking patterns and emotions and routines that are stored in the brain and nervous system. Like programs in a computer, they tend to reactivate every time a particular life situation pushes the appropriate button. The false self even insinuates that its subtle purposes are religiously motivated. Genuine religious attitudes come from God, not from the false self. By means of contemplative prayer the Spirit heals the roots of self-centeredness and becomes the source of our conscious activity. To act spontaneously under the Spirit's influence rather than under the influence of the false self, the emotional programming of the past has to be erased and replaced. The practice of virtue is the traditional term for erasing the old programs and writing new programs based on the values of the Gospel. (p. 16)