

Introducing Centering Prayer *(Published in “Reality” magazine 2015)*

Have you ever been lost for words? Have you ever been in a situation where you knew that even the finest words would be inadequate? I think all of us have. This happens in prayer also. Sometimes we just cannot find the words that we need. Sometimes we know that there are not any words that can express what we feel in the depths of our heart. These are times when nothing is more eloquent than silence. Centering prayer is a prayer for such a time and, indeed, it is a prayer for every time. It is a prayer of silence. It is a prayer in which ideas and words are not necessary. It is a prayer where our silence allows us to listen to God within and where God is allowed to introduce Himself, or Herself to us, in His, or Her, own terms.

Centering prayer, therefore, is all about relationship, so it is as an opening of oneself to God and a listening to the divine presence within. Along with contemplation, which is a prayer of deep union with God and which is always given to us as pure gift, centering prayer becomes a “resting in God”. This is a phrase coined by Pope St. Gregory the Great. Such “resting” is a deep knowledge of God. It is a “taste” of God’s love and a consenting to God’s presence and action within oneself. Centering Prayer is a method of prayer which facilitates the development of contemplation and prepares the will, the memory and the imagination for contemplation. The source of Centering prayer is the indwelling of the Trinity within each person and, as a method, it stands in the long, rich and, it has to be said, somewhat neglected Christian mystical tradition.

This tradition is rooted in the wisdom saying of Jesus which we find in St. Matthew’s gospel: “.....*When you pray, go into your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*” (Mt. 6:6)

Now, ordinary people, in the time of Jesus, were unlikely to have an inner room in their house. They were lucky to have one room where the family lived, ate and slept. In the summer perhaps, they could also have used the flat roof of the house

as a living space. So, the inner room that Jesus refers to is not a physical room, it is one's heart, one's deepest inner space. To find God, Jesus is saying, we are to retreat within ourselves. We are also to close the door to this inner room, blocking out distractions and concerns and the cares of the day. Then, in this silent place, we can pray to the Father, as is were, in secret. And the Father, the only other person who can see into our inner depths, will reward us and will respond to us.

Centering prayer, is based upon this saying of Jesus and upon a fourteenth century anonymous text called *"The Cloud of Unknowing"* and today it has been made popular by the writings of Fr. Thomas Keating among others. The actual method used for centering prayer is simple. You symbolise your intention to pray and the intention to consent to the presence and action of God within by choosing a short word that is sacred to oneself. The word could be a word such as, "Jesus", "Abba", "Mary", "joy", "peace", or "mercy" etc. The choice is yours. Then, you adopt a comfortable seated position which can be maintained throughout the twenty minute period of prayer. You close your eyes and begin a gentle repetition of your sacred word. The word is not repeated as a mantra and, so, is allowed recede as your thoughts quieten and the centering deepens. The word is returned to, however, as thoughts, or sensations, or feelings intrude. Finally, when the prayer period ends, a few additional minutes of grace, as it were, are allowed so that the gift of centering can be carried from the prayer period into the preoccupations of daily living.

Summary:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, silently introduce the word, as a symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. Whenever you become engaged with your thoughts return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period remain in silence for a couple of minutes.

So, the method is simple and all that is really required is the discipline to do the two sessions a day. Discipline, however, has a bad reputation and is always a thorny topic in consideration of any spirituality. So, a few words of explanation here might not be out of place. Commitment to practice is needed if there is to be spiritual development at all - that much is obvious. But, how does that commitment avoid the entanglements of the ego? How do we avoid commitment becoming, “my” commitment. How do we avoid centering prayer becoming, “my” prayer? I think the answer is to situate discipline within the context of a loving relationship. We will happily “discipline” ourselves to attend to the needs of a loved one who is ill and we will not find this “discipline” a burden at all. So too, within the context of a loving relationship, it is possible to attend to prayer and commit the necessary time to it without any articulated, or even vague, sense of forcing ourselves, or doing violence to ourselves. Centering prayer changes our lives and once we begin to experience that, we will give it the time necessary.

Where any prayer is concerned, many of us often worry about thoughts and distractions. In centering prayer though, to speak of thoughts or distractions at all is a misleading, as they are an integral and normal part of the prayer itself. Thoughts are quite simply an opportunity, through use of the sacred word, to turn back to God again and to signal consent to God’s presence and action within us. Thoughts during centering may, of course, be indicative of areas of life in need of healing, but we do not engage with those thoughts during the actual prayer period. The silence we have entered into, in fact, provides the space for the Spirit to initiate healing. So, there can be a subtle and unconscious interplay between our thoughts, our need for healing, our silence and the Spirit. This subtlety, is not for analysing, it is for experiencing. Trust in God’s presence and in God’s work deep within us is what is needed. All we need to do, is to remain alert, to remain receptive and to return gently to the sacred word if we find we have engaged with our thoughts.

The core goodness of each and every human person is affirmed as central to a Christian faith that has at its centre the mystery of the Incarnation. It actually makes sense, then, to find that the fruits of centering prayer are to be found occurring in our daily lives rather than during the prayer period itself. The Spirit gifts us with a capacity to listen that can only come from silence, a growth in self-knowledge, a

crucial ability to begin to exert control over the ego and to let go of some of our baggage. We also develop a non-judgmental, caring and just attitude towards ourselves, others and creation. A committed daily routine of centering prayer, is therefore, a contribution towards the raising of our own consciousness and, by way of consequence, even that of humankind itself. Personal change is, as we know, very difficult. A practice of centering prayer is one way of allowing a loving God to slowly undertake personal change within us. Now, can there be a better recommendation?

Denis Gleeson cfc

Summer 2015.

Note: To find out more about centering prayer, or locate a centering prayer group in your area, please go to the following website www.contemplativeoutreach.ie Contact details for the author can be found at www.denisgleeson.com