



## Centering Prayer as a Way of Life

(Based on talks by Fr. Carl Arico)

**Guideline Four:**     *At the end of the prayer period remain in silence for a couple of minutes.*

At the end of our prayer we can sit quietly for a few moments. This will allow the silence to overflow into our day. So, we should try to ease back gently into our daily routine.

It is good to cultivate a contemplative awareness in the course of our day. Conscious of God's presence all around us, we can try to go about our tasks attentively and at a measured pace. We can reassure ourselves that all will be well and that all that needs to be done will be done in time.

When we take such an approach, we are attempting to live in the present moment. Living in the past usually involves living in guilt, or anger, or nostalgia. As for living in the future, that is a way of wishing our life away.

Centering prayer is, in fact, a great preparation for dying because it is all about letting go. It is about a gradual death of the false self and the slow embrace of the true self. It is about finding our deepest self in Christ – that human person that we were born to become. Taking a few quiet moments at the end of prayer can be an acknowledgement of all of this.

Then, in the course of the day itself, outside of our prayer periods, we can develop the habit of praying using aspirations. These are short sentences, phrases, or single words that we compose ourselves, or take from the scriptures or other spiritual sources. We repeat the aspiration gently over and over in our minds until the demands of daily tasks interrupt us. Later, when we can remember to do so, we return to our aspiration and begin the process again.

Another way of allowing the silence of centering prayer to overflow into our day is to practice the welcoming prayer. The welcoming prayer is a distinct contemplative discipline and practice. However, it involves constantly and consciously welcoming God at various moments during our day. This is an ideal way to span the time between our morning and evening sessions of centering. Grounded in the mystery of the incarnation, the welcoming prayer acknowledges God's presence in all of created reality and in every moment of life.

The prayer we repeat is:

*"I let go of the desire for security, affection and control.*

*I let go of the desire to change these feelings and sensations. Welcome!"*

Soon, however, the word "Welcome" is enough on its own to remind us of the Divine Presence which surrounds us and is within us.

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**Guideline Three:** *Whenever you become engaged with your thoughts return ever so gently to the secret word.*

According to Father Thomas Keating, there are really no distractions in centering prayer. Every thought and feeling we experience during the prayer is really just an opportunity to repeat our sacred word and so renew our intention to pray.

Different personalities, however, can have different compulsions when it comes to prayer. Here are some examples below. Consider the feelings and the mind-set that give rise to each approach:

1. My prayer must always be perfect.
2. When I pray, I have to think of everyone and be there for everyone.
3. My prayer must improve, progress and be successful.
4. My prayer must always include very special feelings and experience.
5. My prayer must be a very personal and private affair.
6. I fear that I am not praying correctly.
7. I must always enjoy my prayer.
8. I must stay in control when I pray.
9. My prayer is a way of just being at peace.

None of these is true but they can upset and distort my sessions of prayer and my whole prayer life and indicate generally a compulsive mind-set.

What of my thoughts and feelings outside of the prayer? Remember every feeling I have has a thought process behind it. The real fruits of my prayer are actually experienced outside of the prayer period itself. They can be seen in the way we think about ourselves and about life. When we change our thoughts, we change our desires, we face up to our passions and we change our actions and behaviour. What particular compulsions are I prone to? What assumptions do I live out my life with?

Where our everyday thoughts are concerned, we also need to let go of identification with the roles we have taken on in life. These roles do not define who we are. Our true self is to be found in Christ and in the indwelling of the Trinity within us. The more my thoughts focus on myself, the less they focus on the Divine.

Finally, outside of our prayer period, when we are making decisions and discerning and thinking about what is the right thing to do, we need to examine our motivation. We can ask what approach we ourselves would take with someone who brought the very same situation to us. We can also ask what we would wish to have done, were we to look back at the moment of death and at the moment of judgement. Can I face these issues now without doing violence to myself?

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**Guideline Two:**     *Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, silently introduce the sacred word as a symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.*

We pray with our whole person and that includes, of course, our bodies. Our prayer therefore is incarnational. We are open to the Word of God and we are also open to God's transformative action which will lead us towards the fullness of our humanity.

We need our body to pray and in prayer our body is brought to healing. There is a physical empowerment. There is a freeing up of all our body issues at every level. After the raising of Lazarus, Jesus told his disciples to unbind Lazarus and to free him. Setting Lazarus physically free was a symbol of the way in which Lazarus needed to be freed at an interior level. This is true for all of us. We need to be unbound and set free in all kinds of ways.

**Social Aspect:**     There is also a social aspect to our prayer when we come together to pray in a group. Somehow, this physical togetherness, is the experience of a different type of prayer to that which we experience when we pray alone.

**Sacred Space:**     In addition, it is always good to have a particular place for our prayer. There we can have a special chair or cushion to sit on and we can devise our own personal ritual to help us. We can light a candle, open the scriptures, have an icon or a sculpture on display, or sit by a window with a view.

**Self Care:**         Recognising that we pray with our bodies we should also be careful to attend to our feelings. At a conscious level this is done outside of the centering prayer period, however.

We should pay special attention to strong, disproportionate feelings and reactions. These are messages from the Spirit that there is an issue here that needs to be attended to.

Interior healing also takes place during our prayer at the unconscious level. We are freed from the hurts and wounds of a lifetime. We are enabled to leave aside baggage that we have carried for far too long a time.

Finally, we must learn to monitor our level of energy when we come to pray. We must be patient with ourselves if we are feeling exhausted, or ill at ease, or anxious, or disillusioned. If all we can do is just sit there, we must learn to be content with that knowing that we are no less loved.

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**Guideline One:**     *Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.*

**Consent:**       We consent to our basic goodness with our sacred word.  
We consent to the fact that with God's help all is possible.  
We consent to the action of God in our lives.  
We consent to God's love.  
We consent to let it all go.  
We consent to the dimishment of our ego.  
We ask ourselves what do we most need to consent to right now in our lives?

**Awareness:** We have different levels of awareness in life. There is our ordinary everyday awareness. There is physical, relational, intellectual and psychological awareness. Finally, there is spiritual awareness. So, would it not be a help - at the end of the day - to examine the level of consciousness, or awareness, that I have had over the course of the day in each area? Have I been aware of myself and of my body today? What were my feelings and thoughts today? Have I really been aware of other people and how they were? Have I been aware of nature? Have I been aware of the Divine?

**Words:**       We are sometimes too free and easy with our words. Words have great power and we can underestimate that power. Words can wound or heal. Words can forgive, absolve or condemn. Words can praise or curse. Words can even bring life or death. So, what is my level of awareness around the power of my words? In a society where the word - both spoken and written - is often very violent, what level of violence is there in my own choice of words?

As St John of the Cross suggests, we need to diminish and we need to grow. We need to create powerful words and images of our own. We can borrow words and phrases from scripture. What, for example, does the phrase "earthen vessels" say to me at this moment in life.

The sacred word that we use in our centring prayer needs to get under our skin. It needs to become a part of us. It needs to be as natural as our breath. This is what the pilgrim allowed to happen with the "Jesus Prayer". After all each one of us is a unique word of God and our life's journey is to be, and to proclaim, the word that we were always meant to be. How wonderful it would be, if every word we spoke in the course of a day was positive and creative and in some way praised God: "Oh Lord open my lips that my mouth may always declare only your praise this day."