

## Contemplative Outreach

### Spiritual Journey with Thomas Keating

#### Part 5 Tape 24(a)



#### The Most Excellent Path (1 Cor: 12.30)

Having completed an overview of the Christian life, we now look at the heart of the Christian tradition which is the mystery of Divine love. In chapter 12 of the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes the charismatic gifts. In chapter 13, he observes that these gifts are worthless unless they are accompanied by **love**. He then goes on to describe love which he has introduced as the “more excellent way.” Our basic goodness human beings is a given. Our dignity is rooted in the image of the Divine within us, so, **only openness to love of the Divine can transform us.**

Trinitarian love is unconditional love. It is “agape”. It is not sentimentality. It is not just feeling. It is not possessive as human love is. It is the experience that Jesus had of his Father who is described in John’s gospel as love. God’s love is the secret of secrets and exploration of it is the **purpose of our Centering Prayer.**

The English word love is so diverse in meaning that it does not really catch it the meaning of “agape”. Such is the intensity of God’s love that he has to veil it from us and work through secondary causes. God’s love, therefore, is “**hidden**”, in this sense and also because it is so different to our love.

The eucharist is not just ritual but is the symbol of God’s “erotic” love – of our desire for God. The metaphor is that we love God so much we can “eat” God. God becomes utterly vulnerable in the eucharist. The food we eat enlivens us and is transformed into part of us. **The eucharist is the mystical peak of our communion with God and with each other.** We embrace God and God embraces us. We become cells of a mystical body and each cell, each “holon” of our DNA breathes of God.

The **kingdom of God is a state of consciousness** where we are transformed by the reality of God. This was Jesus’ message, his good news and his experience of the reality of creation and of human life in God and with God. Our relationship with “Abba” is an extremely intimate relationship. Abba guides us from within. The relationship is one of love, gift and friendship and through a life of prayer it grows to commitment.

When Jesus meets **the rich young man**, he tells him to sell all he has but the young man goes away sad (cf Lk: 18.18ff). Jesus then uses the exaggerated image of a camel going through the eye of a needle to illustrate how difficult it is to give up wealth, or any other baggage, for the sake of the kingdom. Sin is our **unwillingness to let go** of our emotional programmes for happiness, our group identification etc so that we can grow in love. Divine love may be totally gratuitous but it is also realistic so it goes after our selfishness and our investment in the ego.

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#### Part 5 Tape 24(b)



#### **Wonders and Wisdom (1 Cor: 1.22-25)**

Spiritual growth is letting go of the ego and being prepared to allow our traditional spiritual supports be challenged. In this passage, Paul points to the cross as our only support for faith. Using Jews and Greeks as a metaphor for contrasting approaches, he then questions those who look for signs and wonders, or for wisdom, as their faith support.

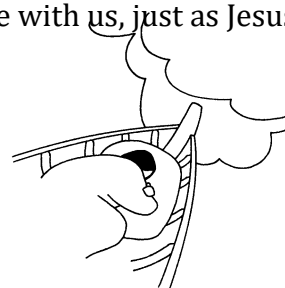
**The Jews, he says, want signs, or miracles, or spiritual visions, or charismatic gifts etc as proof for their faith.** However, these things are not needed for a mature and strong faith such as that of the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21ff) or the Roman Centurion (Mt. 8:5-13) whose own faith, in each case, wrought the miracle according to Jesus.

**The Greeks, on the other hand, says Paul, look for wisdom, or enlightenment, or clarifying insight, or moral perfection.**

For Jesus, nothing is secular. God is in all. God is existence (Aquinas). Faith, which we can usually read as “trust” makes signs unnecessary. God is a God of unconditional love and our relationship with such a God necessitates change from our relationship to a God who carried our projections. We need a more sophisticated relationship with a greater God than that we have envisaged.

In the parable of the yeast, yeast is a symbol of corruption (Mt. 13:33). Elsewhere, (cf Mt. 16: 5-12), we are advised by Jesus to avoid the yeast of the Pharisees, for example, so how is the kingdom of heaven like yeast? What Jesus appears to be saying is that even the nasty things in life, the storms, struggles and disasters can be a vehicle for the kingdom. The Pharisees put their faith in observance, feast days, sacrifice and the sacredness of the temple. Jesus’ alternative and truly revolutionary view is that God is in the everyday and its mess, just where we usually least expect him to be.

**So, the crucified Christ that Paul preaches as an alternative to signs, wonders and wisdom is testimony to the same truth.** God is in the unexpected and the unacceptable, as well as within us, and there is no need to go beyond our everyday circumstances to find him. When we are lost and confused and persecuted, God does not rescue us but he is there with us, just as Jesus maintains and as Jesus experiences on the cross.



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#### Part 5 Tape 25(a)



#### **The Divine Banquet and Dance**

As we progress on the spiritual journey, we can find that the supports and props we are used to become tired and no longer give us life. This is normal and is even called for as we work more closely with God's presence. We have now to let go of our own expectations of relationship with God and recognise that our very weakness is the leaven that will help us to grow.

As God's monumental intelligence and love reach out to us, we discover that the life of faith is being able to trust our relationship with God and depend on his love. We can even find that we become instruments of God in whatever ministry our life demands because there is a divine way to do anything. The kingdom of God is present in all circumstances. Life becomes a dance – a ballet between ourselves, life's circumstances and divine love and God always takes the lead in this dance.

#### **The Parable of the Banquet (Lk. 14:15-24)**

There was a Jewish view of the Kingdom of God which saw Israel finally and fully vindicated and honoured as a nation at the great banquet of nations. Jesus takes this image and turns it around.

A house owner, he says, prepares a banquet and invites his peers. They reject his invitation totally – symbolised by the three excuses in the story. So the house owner, undaunted, sends out his servants, not once but twice, to gather in the afflicted and the marginalised and serve them the banquet instead.

Jesus is saying the God does not stand upon his dignity and status to get people to attend his banquet. He identifies with every human being just as they are. God is only interested in love – in a non-possessive love. The trinity is an outpouring of love between the persons and the incarnation is God's loving identification with humanity. It is a humble and complete emptying of being into which all are invited. God's divine status is no obstacle.



## Contemplative Outreach Spiritual Journey with Thomas Keating Part 5 Tape 25(b)



### Continuing the Divine Banquet and Dance The Theological Principles of Centering Prayer

The Indwelling of the Trinity, the Paschal Mystery, Community, Transformation.

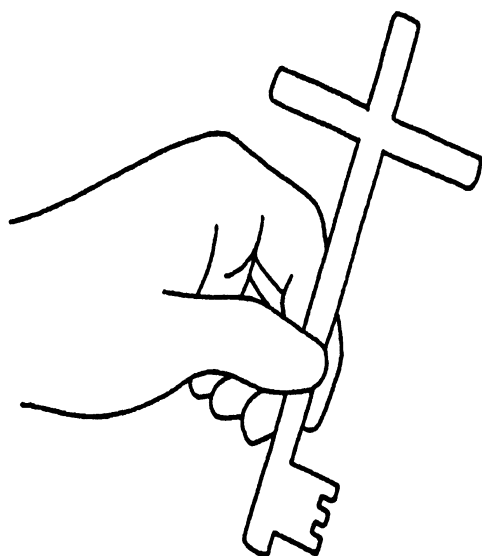
#### The Indwelling of the Trinity

The Trinity's dance of love is picked up in our Centering Prayer which is an effective way of accessing contemplative prayer. Our Centering Prayer is rooted in our baptism and the indwelling of the Trinity. God is present in us and in everything and everybody else. This is the basis of contemplation. God is always awaiting us. This is reality as it truly is rather than as we usually perceive it. All we have to do is to reduce the obstacles to God's presence in so far as we can, listen in silence to God's presence and adopt a receptive attitude.

Signs that the obstacles to God's presence are being reduced in us and that the risen Christ is present in us are the **infused moral virtues** (justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude), the **theological virtues** (faith, hope, charity), the **seven gifts of the Spirit** (cf Isaiah 11:2-3) and the **fruits of the Spirit** (cf Gal. 5:22-23). These are signs, therefore, of our deepening relationship with God and are the effects of Centering Prayer.

#### The Paschal Mystery

Centering is a sharing in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. We can only receive the love of God. We do not earn it. Though we can reduce some obstacles, basically, God does not ask us to earn anything. Centering educates us in underserved mercy. In Centering, we sit with Christ who "sat" on the cross.



In a sense, stripped of divinity, God "dies" on the cross having taken the full cup of human misery and evil upon Himself, along with the consequences of going against conscience – humanity's feelings of guilt, humiliation, shame, discouragement, despair, helplessness, desolation, loneliness. When we too accept such things they can become part of our transformation.

The three stages of Christ's assimilation of the human condition are: the agony in the garden; the crucifixion and death on the cross and his descent into the state of consciousness of people who are in the "hell" of feeling rejected by God.

## Contemplative Outreach Spiritual Journey with Thomas Keating Part 5 Tape 26(a)



### Prayer in Secret

How do we begin the wonderful process of coming to experience union with God and with other people? Science itself talks about the inter-connectedness and union of all things and uses vaguely religious language to do so. Within Christianity, however, the presence of the creative Word of God from the very beginning is a familiar concept. So, how do we access the deep knowledge of God that St. Paul so often talks about in his epistles?

Jesus assists us in this with his wisdom saying from the **Sermon on the Mount** when he says that if we want to pray, we should go into our inner room, close the door and pray to our Abba in secret and our Abba who sees in secret will reward us. (cf Matthew 6:6)



By using the intimate term “**Abba**”, Jesus is addressing the suffocating spirituality of the time which put the emphasis on the transcendence of God and the justice of God. God, in other words, was distant and hazardous. Jesus is encouraging us to let go of any old ideas of God that we have and any negative catechesis. He wants us to realise the closeness of God. This is the God of contemplative prayer and other misunderstandings can be discarded.

“**If you want to pray...**” we must want to develop our relationship with God. Prayer must come from a place of love. For God’s part, the biblical term “fear of the Lord” is a technical one and equates to alertness to God’s presence and readiness to take refuge in that presence.

“**Inner room**” We leave aside ordinary awareness and move to the inmost centre of our being where we are inclined to silence. Over-identification with goes on around us can be tyrannical

“**Close the door**” Remember, we must Resist no thought, Retain no thought, React to no thought and Return to the sacred word. Our thoughts are the problem so we have to learn to disregard them and our will at least can give up on these thoughts and attitudes. We need a vacation from the childish programmes for happiness.

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### Spiritual Journey with Thomas Keating

#### Part 5 Tape 26(b)

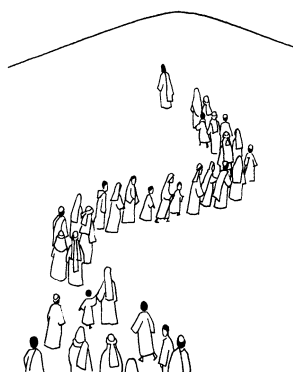


**“Will reward you”** With deep knowledge of God leading to Divine Union.

**“Close the door”** Signals intent to spend time with God. We have no expectations and are ready to meet God as God is. Like Aquinas says, we know more about God by what we cannot say than by what we can say. Closing the door also means discontinuing the endless 24 hour (dreams included) endless commentary and interior dialogue which is just as disruptive as any external noise. We discontinue by using the sacred word. God’s language is silence.

**“In secret”** The cascade quiets external stimuli, then internal stimuli but even after that we are not quiet enough apparently for reward. God is present in secret beyond signs and wonders because God is so close that we have no faculty to interpret that presence. God is too big to be received but that does not mean He is not there. We discontinue self-reflection as the ego’s false self activity does not allow us to get to the present moment. The ego acts as a bridge between the past and the future. It passes over the now, but, God is present in the now

**“Inner room”** Two things go on: the affirmation of our basic goodness and the purification of a lifetime’s unconscious repressed emotional material that is stored in the body. Unless we take the spiritual journey seriously the stagnated energy of this material will continue to influence our life and decisions. So, the Divine action affirms and challenges, but, to heal our wounds, those wounds must first come to consciousness. The deeper the secrecy, the deeper the silence, the deeper the rest, the more the trust based on affirmation of our basic goodness increases. This is the Divine Therapy and the purification of the soul (and in psychological terms the healing of the unconscious). As we are immersed in this dark material, we allow ourselves to sink into it and allow Christ the Divine Healer take it away and substitute instead the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Jesus called himself the physician of the sick not the well.



**Why are thoughts so attractive?** When we think we are normally just distracting ourselves from what causes us pain. We need to remember that though we have feelings (energy), we are not our feelings and do not have to act them out. Feelings can change.

**Prayer in secret is precisely the acceptance of the mystery of God’s presence in silence. It is a triumph of faith which allows us to find God in the only place He exists which is totally beyond our comprehension. Our goodness is our capacity to see God in everything.**

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#### Part 5 Tape 27(a)



**Matthew 10:32-40:** Jesus asking us to “hate” our father and mother is a way of asking us to change what we are used to and not to over-identify with our upbringing or with our role in life or social status. All Jesus’ parables challenge social structures in this way and call us to union with our fellow human beings.

What we call the **mid-life crisis** is another form of this challenge not to over-identify. If mid-life does not work, the onset of old age and incapacity certainly will. But, why not let go and anticipate all this and accept the divine therapy?

**Taking the Divine Therapy:** The purpose of entering the inner room is to become who we really are. It is to allow the false self to die in order to give life to the true self and its limitless capacity. It means no over identification with anything. It means redemption by healing rather than by atonement.

First step in healing is the **affirmation of our basic goodness**. This gives us the courage to drop the internal dialogue and commentary. What actually disturbs us is, in fact, our immersion in this chatter. What the inner room usually bestows is a sense of peace first of all, therefore.

Our **relationships are healed** and we begin to **question the unchallenged beliefs** about life that drive us. In prayer we move from conversation to communion, from activity to receptivity. Freedom from our thoughts is the beginning of contemplative prayer.

## Contemplative Outreach

### Spiritual Journey with Thomas Keating

#### Part 5 Tape 27(b)



**When we lose interest in thoughts** we begin to enter contemplation and total receptivity. We enter into the secrecy and silence of God. We are attracted, as it is put, by the perfume of God.

Next comes the **prayer of quiet** when the will is aware of being united to God in a deep way even when the barrage of thoughts still persists. We could sit in this delight a long time if we could. Then the Spirit may temporarily suspend the imagination and the memory as we sit in God's presence. It may only be for a few seconds but nothing compares with this. This is the **prayer of union**. If the prayer of **full union** is granted our sense of self, of an individual self is suspended.

All of these are affirmations of our goodness but healing is also taking place, loosening up and drawing us out of the trauma of a lifetime. Sometimes we have to visit at a deeper level material that we may have thought we had left behind.

The **Night of Sense** is a realisation that we desperately want happiness and that it can only be found in God. All else becomes relative for us and we develop a great inner freedom towards what used to be important. A period of grieving for what we have left behind, however, may result and our hearts may sink. We may even project our grief onto God and feel we are rejected. The ultimate goal of the Night of Sense is the death of the false self. However, that really only takes place during the **Night of the Spirit** which is a growth of faith that comes through an experience of God's absence and the diminishment of our long established support systems. The essence of contemplative prayer, so, is not in wonderful experiences but in the purification of the unconscious.

We must **let the false self die** and with it our exaggerated sense of separation from God and from others. They are an illusion. It is a great gift when we come to a place where our role and even our identity are no longer a source of importance to use, rather, ***"it's to be what God wants us to be in the present moment and to be able to manifest God's goodness and tenderness in whatever the 'now moment' seems to require, suggest or inspire."***

Ironically, transformation often leads us into the ordinary in life, which masks the enormous work of grace that is going on, as it were, "in secret". The evidence that this is happening is in the fruits of the Spirit which are joy, peace, love, gentleness etc. The life we have is the **life of the true self** rather than the life of the false self. The Night of the Spirit completes what was not completed in the Night of Sense which means that the Night of Spirit is a participation in the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ.



## Contemplative Outreach

### Spiritual Journey with Thomas Keating

#### Part 5 Tape 28 (a)



#### **The Wedding Feast at Cana (John 2:1-11)**

Notice that Mary makes not request of Jesus, she simply presents to him the situation as it is. Any request is only implied. Initially, Jesus' response is quite off-hand and amounts to a statement that any problem is not really his problem. He seems to be trying to work out why Mary has a concern at all.

Mary's next move clarifies things for him. She tells the waiters to do whatever it is that Jesus tells them to do. This shows her detachment from any outcome and Jesus senses that the Spirit is working through her and it is not just her natural goodness that is the source of her concern. He senses that the Spirit is using her human concern to express a movement of Divine love.

So, Jesus decides to act and the water is mysteriously changed into wine and not just ordinary wine but the very best wine. The water symbolises human nature and the revelation of God in created things and the good wine symbolises a changed and new perspective about to be introduced as the Good News. And this new perspective will be generously introduced – six big jugs of it – an unlimited supply. Mary's concern has triggered a cosmic event. The ordinary is about to become extraordinary. Little things when inspired by the Spirit carry enormous power. That still is the case today and can be illustrated by the story of Centering Prayer.

#### **Centering Prayers' Story**

For centuries monks have used *Lection Divina* as their fundamental practice of attentiveness to God and listening to God. It moved them towards the contemplative dimension of life – a process of listening with the ears, then the mind, then the heart and then in silence.

In the latter part of the twentieth century meditation teachers began to move into the Western world and soon Christians became curious about their own rich contemplative and mystical inheritance.

There was, however, no immediate method available of introducing people to this long tradition. Centering Prayer provided such a method eventually. Through retreats in monasteries it began to resonate with people, clerical, religious and lay. So, as with Mary at Cana, a concern shared by Thomas Keating (as Abbot of the monastery of Spencer) and other monks soon began to blossom into good news.



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### Part 5 Tape 28 (b)



#### Four Goals of Contemplative Outreach

1. To renew the Roman Catholic and the Christian contemplative tradition.
2. To make the Christian contemplative heritage as available as possible to all Christian denominations, sects and divisions as their common property for Centering is not the time to think and it is not the time for doctrinal and theological differences.
3. To enable people to talk with one another about what helped them most in their own tradition to advance in the Spiritual Journey and so share some of the hidden depths of the Christian contemplative tradition and gain insight from that conversation. If, as Rahner suggests, nature is graced then all of us, even through sources other than religion can taste the presence of God – for example, through service, art, music, conjugal love, nature, etc.
4. To make Centering Prayer available to everyone as a method, even those beyond the reach of religion, whatever their circumstances. All that is required is belief in a higher power and that higher power can be anything higher than we experience ourselves to be.



#### Vision

***Contemplative Outreach is a spiritual network of individuals and small faith communities committed to living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel in everyday life through the practice of Centering Prayer, The contemplative dimension of the Gospel manifest itself in an ever-deepening union with the living Christ and the practical caring for others that flows from that relationship.***

***Our purpose is to share the method of Centering Prayer and its immediate conceptual background. We also encourage the practice of Lectio Divina, particularly its movement into contemplative prayer, which a regular and established practice of Centering Prayer facilitates.***

***We identify with the Christian contemplative heritage while we are formed by our respective denominations, we are united in our common search for God and the experience of the living Christ through Centering Prayer. We affirm our solidarity with the contemplative dimensions of other religions and sacred traditions, with the needs and rights of the whole human family, and with all creation.***