

with that part of reality which we may have been neglecting, the spiritual dimension of our own being.

(FQ) So, we have gone through the guidelines outlining the method for centering prayer. Let us review them:

- 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, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.*
- 3. When engaged with your 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.*

(FQ) Returning gently to the sacred word, when we find ourselves engaged with our thoughts is the third guideline. What constitutes a thought? It can be anything that the mind lights upon. It can be a stray idea, an inspirational idea, a memory, an insight, a feeling, a sensation, a solution to a problem, awareness of sounds nearby or in the distance - anything really that occupies the mind. Whatever it is, our response is always the same, we return gently to the sacred word. Even if we have a beautiful vision, we do not engage with it, we return gently to the sacred word. In fact, returning gently to the sacred word is the only action we undertake during centering prayer.

The fourth and last guideline encourages us to remain in silence with our eyes closed for a couple of minutes at the end of the prayer session. This allows us to make the transition back to our surroundings without doing any violence to ourselves. There is no stress, strain or anxiety in centering prayer. We will, unfortunately, find plenty of that in life itself. It has, however, no part to play in our prayer - or in our spiritual practice, for that matter.

So, centering prayer is a prayer of openness and a prayer of silent listening. Is it a receptive prayer, rather than a concentrative prayer. The key to centering prayer is the sacred word which renews our intention to be open to God, to accept God as God is, and to allow God to transform us within. Centering prayer does not prevent us from using other forms of prayer at other times. For example, Thomas Keating reminds us that centering prayer is not the time to pray for those we love although by embracing God in the silence, we embrace everybody past, present and future and implicitly pray for them. Centering prayer, he says is an embrace of the whole of creation and of the whole of reality beginning

wrong. There is no word that is better than any other word. It is the fact that we use the word at prayer that makes it a sacred word for us. We ourselves imbue it with meaning and make it sacred.

Now, in centering prayer, there is a difference between the sacred word and a mantra. When we use a mantra in praying, we repeat the mantra all the time. This is not necessarily the case with the sacred word in centering prayer. In centering prayer, there may come a point when the sacred word fades away and our thoughts also fade away. If this happens we allow it to happen. We only return to the sacred word when we become aware that we are, again, engaging with our thoughts. And when we do return to using the sacred word, we do so gently.

(DG) This brings us to the second guideline. It suggests that we sit comfortably, close our eyes, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word which, as we have seen, is the symbol of our consent to God's presence and God's action within us.

But let us take nothing for granted here. How do we sit comfortably? The usual advice is to select a chair that has good back support. This allows us to sit with our spine and neck straight, and our feet flat on the ground. Rumor has it, that if we sit in this manner, we will not fall asleep. However, I can tell you from experience that this is just a rumor.

In any event, what we are trying to do is to adopt a seated position that we can hold comfortably for 20 minutes. If we can relax the body and keep it quiet, it helps to relax the mind and keep it quiet also. Closing the eyes is a further help to minimise the amount of stimulus we are subjected to during our prayer session. And if, despite our best efforts, we do fall asleep, then no harm done. When we awake, we simply return to the sacred word.

God's presence and action within us. Its use signals that we do not wish to engage with any our thoughts for this period of 20 minutes.

Our intention to pray is all important. Once that is there, our prayer has been worthwhile no matter what transpires during it. Of this we need never be in doubt. Our desire has been to be present to the God who is present to us. God's life within us, the divine life, affirms our core of goodness and God's absolutely unconditional love for us. Our core goodness can never be compromised and nothing we can do can make God love us more and nothing we can do can make God love us less. All we have to do, is to allow God to love us. We have to consent to God's love.

But, as has been said, the sacred word signals not only our consent to God's loving presence, it also signals our consent to God's action. God's presence is never passive presence, it is a dynamic presence. Things happen because God is present. So our use of the sacred word symbolizes our acceptance of God's action within us. And God's action within us means change, it means transformation. Centering prayer, therefore, is a dangerous prayer. Our lives will change because of it and we will notice this change, as will those around us. Life teaches us that we cannot really change ourselves. But God can change us, again, given we are willing to allow that to happen. Centering prayer is one means of allowing God to do change us.

Any word can be used as our sacred word in centering prayer. A short word of one or two syllables is what is recommended. It can be a name like Jesus, Abba, or Mary. It can be a quality like peace, joy, justice, love or mercy. It can be an exclamation like yes, come, or now. It does not really matter. There is no word that is right. There is no word that is

Track 3: The Method of Centering Prayer

(DG) Let us look now at the method of centering prayer. Thomas Keating jokes that all you have to do is to turn up, sit down and be quiet. And in truth, it is as easy as that. However, the standard way of introducing people to centering prayer is to outline four guidelines and the four guidelines are as follows:

- 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, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.*
- 3. When engaged with your 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.*

So, let us look at each of these guidelines in turn. Then, when we have done that, we will repeat them by way of summary.

(FQ) The first guideline is to choose a sacred word. During the prayer, this sacred word is repeated silently. If we find ourselves in a quiet place and the sacred word fades, or becomes vague, as it were, we allow that to happen. But as soon as we become aware of our thoughts again, we return to the sacred word to gently turn away from them. So, as our thoughts ebb and flow, our use of the sacred word ebbs and flows. The repetition of the sacred word is proof and symbol of our intention to consent to