

So, as already intimated, centering prayer is a particular method of preparing for the gift of contemplation. And what of contemplation itself? Thomas Keating speaks about it is a process. What kind of process? It is a process of interior change and transformation that is initiated by God but to which we consent. It is an extended conversation that relates to conversion. We are repeatedly called upon to engage with the process and can disengage at any time. The process, however, holds the potential to completely restructure our consciousness. We begin to see the world differently and respond to the world differently. Our lives are profoundly changed as we begin to respond to reality out of an entirely new sensitivity to the divine presence. A contemplative does not need to be told that they are contemplative. Their direct experience of God leading to their contemplative stance in life, leaves them no room for doubt.

(DG) For Keating, in his book “Open Mind, Open Heart,” the main thing that separates us from God is the thought that we have that we are separated from God. Is it this thought, this misunderstanding, that causes us problems. We would be so much better off if we could get rid of this thought. The fact is, that God is always present to us. God is all around us. God is present in every reality. God holds us in being. We fail, however, to grasp this fact, and it is difficult to grasp it, until my own personal experience of God allows me to do so. This is why my prayer is about my relationship with God and why without prayer I cannot convincingly claim that I have any relationship with God. Until I really experience God within the depths of my own being, I cannot fully begin to explore the experience of God around me - in the people I meet, in the events of my life and in the wonders of the creative world.

In recent times, there are people like Basil Pennington, William Menninger, Thomas Merton and the man upon whose writing these talks are based, Thomas Keating. This is to mention but a few.

(FQ) But what do we mean when we talk about prayer as relationship? Well, think of it. All relationships go through phases of development. Initially we make a person's acquaintance. Naturally, with a new acquaintance, there is a certain reticence. Communication tends to be formal and there is just an exchange of basic information. After giving my name, I may or may not, go on to reveal information about my family, my work and where I live. Then, if we happen to meet again at some stage, the conversation will probably be more relaxed and informal. We already know each other. Given time, we may even become friends. As the friendship grows, we may even get to the stage where we share intimate details about ourselves. Ultimately, we may be content to be in one another's presence and sometimes it may not be necessary to say very much at all.

Our relationship with God and our relationship with Jesus unfold in much the same way. Initially, there is reticence and communication tends to be formal. At this stage of prayer, it is a matter of saying prayers, of using a formula. Then, our prayer may become more reflective. We may begin to use the Scriptures and nature and life events cause us to ponder upon God's presence. With time we learn to express our feelings in prayer, we become more spontaneous and our prayer expresses a commitment to relationship. Eventually, if our prayer develops a contemplative dimension, we can rest in God's presence and words become unnecessary. We are content to be with God in silence. It is at this point that we need a practice like centering prayer.

Jesus is talking about what we used to call contemplative prayer. It is non-conceptual, nonvocal prayer. It is uninterrupted silence. Strictly speaking, contemplative prayer is pure gift. But, let me be clear, centering prayer, which is our topic here, is not contemplative prayer. However, it can lead to the gift of contemplation. It can predispose us for that gift of God. It is a wonderful prayer, that can be learned very easily, and can lead us to a deep place within.

(DG) At this point, it is worthwhile referring to a verse in the gospel of St. John. In chapter 14, John records Jesus as saying: “When that day comes you know that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.” Here Jesus locates for us the source of our inner prayer. It is the Trinity indwelling within us. So, Paul can write to the Romans: “For when we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express.” (Rom: 8.26) We never really have to worry, therefore, about the quality of our prayer, the Holy Spirit supplies that, we merely supply the moment and the intention.

Contemplative prayer, of course, is not something new. There is a long and rich Christian contemplative tradition. Gregory the Great for example, in the sixth century, spoke of contemplative prayer as a deep knowledge of God marked by love. For him contemplation was a resting in God. It was an experience of God, the taste of God. It was consenting to God’s divine presence and action within.

But there are other great writers in the Christian contemplative heritage. People like John Cassian in the 4th century and the anonymous 14th century author who penned the “Cloud of Unknowing”, the great English spiritual classic upon which centering prayer is based. Then, there is Francis de Sales, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux.

Track 2: Prayer as Relationship

(FQ) So, let us look at prayer as a relationship with God. The language that Jesus spoke was Aramaic. The word that he would have used for prayer was “shela”. The word “shela” was a complex word. It can be understood in terms of opening oneself to the divine presence and listening to that presence. So, “shela” is an attitude, or a mindset. It implies openness, the setting aside of preconceptions and a willingness to listen in silence. It is an interactive word. It is an entering into a free, open-ended relationship with God.

Jesus, in fact, describes the process in Mt: 6.6 where he says: “When you pray go enter your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your father who sees in secret will reward you.” Let us consider what Jesus is saying here. 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 the distractions and the 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. This is what I think Jesus means by his wisdom saying in the gospel of Matthew: “When you pray enter your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”