

thoughts and distractions, as it does the process of centering prayer itself. Centering prayer is a resting in God and a trusting in God's presence and action. What we are called to do is, in fact, to rest in trust.

(FQ) Finally, Thomas Keating makes a very interesting point about our sense of consciousness or awareness during prayer. He says that if we are aware of not having any thoughts, then, of course, we are aware of something and that is a thought. But, if we lose track of time even in that level of awareness we can move into a place of total stillness. This is pure consciousness, there is no awareness of self. When it passes, we may wonder where the time went. We may know that we were not asleep, but our sense of time was different, we were unaware of time passing and we are left only with a sense of peaceful delight. We should accept such moments as gift.

(DG) Retain no thought – when we retain a thought and hold onto it, it has become a distraction and has intruded upon our prayer time. This is exactly what we are trying to avoid. Even if the thought is a good thought, a holy thought, an inspirational thought, we do not hold onto it. We can rely on the Holy Spirit to remind us after our prayer of anything that is really worthwhile paying attention to. Our prayer time is God’s time. We can only be enriched by it, never impoverished. So we need never cling to thoughts that occurred during prayer for fear of missing out on a good idea.

(FQ) React emotionally to no thought – sometimes, it is not the thought itself but the emotional reaction to it that catches us. Anxiety is sparked, or a sense of hurt is awoken, or we feel a sense of satisfaction at an achievement. The temptation is to entertain the feeling, or to allow the feeling to take us off in pursuit of a whole series of thoughts and ideas and plans. The end result is the same—the disruption and invasion of our prayer time.

(DG) The fourth “R” is - return ever so gently to the sacred word. This is our response to all thoughts and distractions no matter what they are. It is the only action undertaken during centering prayer. We return gently to the sacred word, whenever we notice that our mind has strayed and is engaged in thinking. It is important to note the word “gently” here. It is not included by accident. In returning to the sacred word, we are not meant to do ourselves violence, or to grit our teeth with determination. There is no need for worry, anxiety or forceful action. Our prayer is a tender turning to God in love.

We are tempted here to add a fifth “R” phrase of our own. It is: **“Rest in trust.”** This phrase however, does not so much describe our response to

a bad session of prayer. We are not really in a position to make a judgment. We do not know what has truly transpired during our time of silence, so any analysis on our part is meaningless. It is not for us to try to take the measure of God's silent workings in our soul. One fleeting moment, at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of our prayer, may have been sufficient for God's purpose in what, for us, may have seemed a disturbed and distracted 20 minutes. Prayer, as Thomas Merton says, has less to do with time than with eternity.

Trust in the workings of God within us, a trust that equates to a deepening of faith in God's presence, is our experience in centering prayer. We may, of course, experience peace and consolation and, in fact, this is common, but having an expectation of such peace or of a "felt" presence of God during our prayer is another thing entirely. Above all, says Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, trust in the slow work of God.

(FQ) Sometimes, the best approach to take with thoughts and so-called distractions that occur during centering prayer is summed up with four little phrases beginning with "R". They are:

1. Resist no thought.
2. Retain no thought.
3. React emotionally to no thought.
4. Return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

Resist no thought – we should not try to fight with our thoughts. To fight with them is to pay attention to them and to be hooked by them. So, we just let them pass by and try not to engage with them in any way at all. In a manner of speaking, our approach is a kind of passive resistance. We know the thoughts are there but we refuse to let them intrude upon us.

come up, may be an indication that healing is taking place. This is something that we can reflect upon after the prayer period itself.

So, the sacred word gives the mind just enough work to do, to keep it occupied and to calm it down. It is a way of letting go of our thoughts and moving in the direction of silence. It is not a matter of effort, it is more a matter of being willing to allow such movement to take place.

Remember, no stress, no strain, no violence to oneself is required.

Once we resign ourselves to the fact that the stream of thoughts and sensations will always flow, we can relax and we will find that the rush of thoughts begins to still. Again, the term thoughts includes any idea, emotion, sensation, image, memory, plan or insight that enters the mind. Our objective is to avoid getting caught up, to avoid being hooked and to turn gently back to God in silence. We may also find that as thoughts diminish, our breath becomes more shallow. This is normal. Our whole system begins to quieten down.

(DG) As well as thoughts that are outright distractions, there are some more subtle pitfalls to avoid. We should avoid, for example, trying to make the mind a blank. This is actually a thought and requires strain and effort. Another version is trying to have no thoughts. Again strain and effort are required rather than a simple, receptive stance. We are not trying to achieve a spiritual experience. We are not trying to achieve peace or consolation. We bring no expectations whatsoever to our prayer. We are trying to disengage the ego and allow God to speak to us in the very depths of our heart. Any attempt, on our part, to control, manipulate, or to take possession of this period of silence, is misplaced.

This, of course, also means that analysis of the prayer session afterwards is also inappropriate. There is no such thing as a good session of prayer or

Track 4: Thoughts and the Use of the Sacred Word

(FQ) In prayer generally, and certainly in centering prayer, people sometimes worry about the number of distractions or thoughts that intrude upon their prayer. So, let's give some further consideration to guideline three: When engaged with your thoughts return ever so gently to the sacred word.

As has been said, the sacred word is used when we notice that we have engaged with our thoughts. Thoughts are natural and to some extent irrepressible – even during prayer. Our mind is always at work— during the day and when we are asleep at night. It is not realistic to think that we can turn off our thoughts simply because we have decided to pray. We can, however, calm our thoughts. We can reduce the flow, so that we have an opportunity, however fleeting, to listen for God in the silence.

Remember, once we have formed our intention to pray, it does not matter what happens during the prayer. Thomas Keating says that even if we have 1000 thoughts, or distractions, during a prayer session, it means only that we have had a 1000 opportunities to use our sacred word and turn again in love towards God. We have consented a 1000 times to God's presence. We have consented a 1000 times to God's transformative action. What a prayer that is! We need never worry about such a prayer.

In fact, there is a subtle dance that takes place between thoughts and silence during centering prayer. Both have an important role to play. Sometimes our thoughts will contain material that needs to be healed and the silence creates a space for that healing to take place. Whatever happens during centering prayer, we return gently to the sacred word. However, the fact that a particularly hurtful episode from the past has