

The Theological Basis of Centering Prayer

WHERE DOES CENTERING PRAYER COME FROM? Its source is the Trinity dwelling within us. It is rooted in God's life within us. I don't think that we reflect about this truth nearly enough. With baptism comes the entire uncreated presence of the most holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We participate as human beings in God's life just by being alive, but much more through grace. We participate in the movement between the Father giving himself totally to the Son, and the Son giving himself totally to the Father. They empty themselves into each other. The Spirit of Love reconstitutes them, so to speak, so that they can keep surrendering forever. This stream of divine love that is constantly renewed in the life of the Trinity is infused into us through grace. We know this by our desire for God. That desire, however it may be battered by the forces of daily life, manifests itself in the effort that we make to develop a life of prayer and a life of action that is penetrated by prayer.

The Trinitarian life is manifested in us primarily by our hunger for God. Centering Prayer comes out of the life of God moving within us. Hence it is Trinitarian in its source. Its focus is Christological. It establishes us in a deepening relationship with Christ. Begun in *Lectio Divina* (the prayerful reading of Scripture) and other devotions and especially in the sacraments, our relationship with Christ moves to new depths and to new levels of intimacy as we grow in the practice of Centering Prayer.

Finally, Centering Prayer is ecclesial in its effects; that

is, it bonds us with everyone else in the Mystical Body of Christ and indeed with the whole human family. There is really no such thing as private prayer. We cannot pray at this deep level without including everyone in the human family, especially those in great need. We also feel the need to express this sense of bonding and unity with others in some form of community.

Let us look at each one of these points in detail. Centering Prayer comes from an existential relationship with Christ as our way into the depths of the Trinitarian relationships. As we sit in Centering Prayer, we are connecting with the divine life within us. The sacred word is a gesture of consent to the divine presence and action within. It is as if our spiritual will turned on the switch, and the current (the divine life) that is present in our organism, so to speak, goes on and the divine energy flows. It is already there waiting to be activated. Then as we sit in the presence of the Trinity within us, our prayer unfolds in relationship with Christ.

We know that *Lectio Divina* and our other devotional practices prepare us to relate to Christ. We go through a certain evolutionary process of acquaintanceship, friendliness, and friendship. The last implies a commitment to the relationship. Everyone knows very well the experience where we relate to an acquaintance whom we cultivate and get to know and gradually reach a place of commitment to him or her. Commitment is what characterizes friendship. We can walk away from casual acquaintances, but we cannot walk away from friendship once it has been established without breaking somebody's heart, including our own. Friendship with Christ has reached commitment when we decide to establish a life of prayer and a program for daily life tailored to getting closer to Christ and deeper into the Trinitarian life of love.

This is an important point. As we sit in prayer, we are not just juxtaposed to Christ. The movement inward to the Divine Indwelling suggests that our relationship with

Christ is an interior one, especially through his Holy Spirit who dwells in us and pours the love of God into our hearts.

We are really identifying with the Paschal mystery. Without going through a theological reflection each time, it becomes a kind of context for our prayer, so that when we sit down in our chair or on the floor, we are relating to the mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, not as something outside of us but as something inside of us. That is why we experience fairly soon an identification with Christ in his temptations in the desert. Later we experience our identification with Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, and finally our identification with Christ on the cross. In our Christian perspective, Jesus has taken upon himself all the consequences of our sins and sinfulness, in other words, the false self with the accumulation of wounds that we bring with us from early childhood and our childish ways of trying to survive.

As we sit, we may receive the consolation of the Spirit. But after several years of this prayer, we always find ourselves in the desert, because that is the way to divine union.

3. There is no way of getting well from the wounds of our early childhood except through the cross. The cross that God asks us to accept is primarily our own pain that we bring with us from early childhood. Our own wounds, our own limitations, our own personality defects, all the damage that people have done to us from the beginning of life until now, and our personal experience of the pain of the human condition as we individually have experienced it—that is our true cross! That is what Christ asks us to accept and to allow him to share. Actually in his passion he has already experienced our pain and made it his own. In other words, we simply enter into something that has already happened, namely, our union with Christ and all that it implies, his taking into himself all of our pain, anxiety, fears, self-hatred, and discouragement.

It is all included implicitly in his cry on the cross, "My God, why have you abandoned me?" That is the big ques-

Security / Survival

Esteem / Affection

Power / Control

Rebellion

Triumph

Mythic

Enslavement

Group

False Self

tion. Here is God's son, the beloved to whom we are to listen — Christ who has based his whole mission and ministry on his relationship with the Father — and it has all disappeared. His disciples have fled. His message is torn to shreds. He stands condemned by the religious and Roman authorities. There is nothing left of his message, humanly speaking. Yet this is the moment of our redemption. Why? Because his cry on the cross is our cry of a desperate alienation from God, taken up into his, and transformed into resurrection. As we sit there and sweat it out and allow the pain to come up, we realize that it is Christ suffering in us and redeeming us.

Centering Prayer is focused on the heart of the Christian mystery, which is Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. Each time we consent to a new light on our weakness and powerlessness, we are in a deeper place with Christ. To have the lowest place is to be in the highest place in God's view. I cannot tell you why this is so. Perhaps it is just the way God is. Christ in his passion is the greatest teacher of who God is. Sheer humility. Total selflessness. Absolute service. Unconditional love. The essential meaning of the Incarnation is that this love is totally available. Centering Prayer is simply a humble method of trying to access that infinite goodness by letting go of ourselves. Consent to God's presence and action symbolized by the sacred word is nothing else than self-surrender and trust.

Notice how the theological virtues correspond to each one of the sacred contexts. We place our faith in the Divine Indwelling of the Trinity. We place our hope in Christ's passion, death, and resurrection and entrust our lives completely to him. By enduring the gradual awakening of self-knowledge, we express through patience our love of God in an eminent degree.

There is another aspect to the context in which we pray. As we sit at the foot of the cross, identifying with the man on the cross who endured all the consequences of our personal alienation from God, we are being healed

of our emotional wounds and the wounds we may have inflicted on our conscience. Through moments of interior resurrection there may come a breakthrough into permanent resurrection as the false self finally falls away, giving us the habitual freedom of the children of God.

4. Bonding with others takes place as the love of the Spirit is poured forth in our hearts. We feel that we belong to our community, to the human family, to the cosmos. We feel at home in the universe. We feel that our prayer is not just a privatized journey but is having a significant effect in the world. We can pour into the world the love that the Spirit gives us in prayer. We can plead for the divine mercy for those parts of the world that are being torn to pieces by war and violence. We sympathize with God who is suffering wherever any suffering is going on. What is so terrible about war and violence is that God is being torn to pieces. God has so identified with our lives and with our deaths that Jesus could say, "What you do to the least of these little ones, you do to me." This violence has to be repaired. This is an imbalance that needs the kind of love that is born in interior silence as we let go of ourselves and allow God to be God in us.

The great privilege of contemplatives is that we are invited to share first in our own redemption by accepting our personal alienation from God and its consequences throughout our lives, and then to identify with the divine compassion in healing the world through the groanings of the Spirit within us. "The unspeakable groanings of the Spirit," as Paul calls them, are our desires to bring the peace and knowledge of God's love into the world. The love that is the source of those desires is in fact being projected into the world and is secretly healing its wounds. We will not know the results of our participation in Christ's redemptive work in this life. One thing is certain: by bonding with the crucified One we bond with everyone else, past, present, and to come.

In Centering Prayer, then, the humanity of Christ is not

ignored, as some critics claim, but affirmed in the most positive and profound manner. Centering Prayer presupposes a living faith that the sacred humanity of Jesus contains the fullness of the Godhead. Christ leads us to the Father, but to the Father as *he* knows him. In virtue of Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection, we participate by grace in Christ's divinity. We are invited to worship the Father in spirit and truth. This is to follow Christ into the bosom of the Father where, as the Eternal Son of God, he surrenders to the divine source from whom he eternally emerges — and returns — in the love of the Holy Spirit.