

APPENDICES

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The Active Prayer

The sacred word is designed to lead into silence. Hence, it should be short—one or two syllables. The active prayer—an aspiration drawn from scripture for use in daily life—should be longer—five to nine syllables. The saying of the syllables is synchronized with one's heartbeat. While some people like to use a variety of aspirations for this purpose, it is easier to work a single aspiration into the subconscious. The great advantage of this practice is that it eventually becomes a "tape" similar to the "tapes" that accompany one's upsetting emotions. When this occurs, the aspiration has the remarkable effect of erasing the old tapes, thus providing a neutral zone in which common sense or the Spirit of God can suggest what should be done.

The active prayer has to be repeated again and again at free moments in order to work it into the subconscious. The old tapes were built up through repeated acts. A new tape can be established in the same way. It may take a year to establish one's active prayer in the subconscious. It will then arise spontaneously. One may wake up saying it or it may accompany one's dreams.

Go about this practice without anxiety, haste, or excessive effort. Do not blame yourself for forgetting to say it on some days; just start up again. It should not be repeated when your mind is occupied with other things such as conversation, study, or work requiring concentration.

Following are examples of active prayer.

O Lord, come to my assistance.

O God, make haste to help me.

Holy Mary, Mother of God.

Abide in my love.

My God and My All.

My Jesus, mercy.

Veni Sancte Spiritus.

I belong to you, O Lord.
Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Take, Lord, and receive all I have.
Bless the Lord, my soul.
Open my heart to your love.
Lord, I give myself to you.
My Lord and my God.
Body of Christ, save me.
Lord increase my faith.
Not my will but thine be done.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.
Open my heart to your love.
May my being praise you, Lord.
Through Him, with Him, in Him.
Jesus, my light and my love.
Our help is in the name of the Lord.
Holy Spirit, pray in me.
Lord, do with me what You will.
Speak Lord, Your servant is listening.

The Weekly Support Group

While Centering Prayer is done privately most of the time, a weekly sharing of the experience in a small group (up to fifteen) has proven to be very supportive, as well as a means of continuing education. The weekly meeting also serves as a means of accountability. Just knowing that one's support group is meeting together each week is an enormous encouragement to keep going, or an invitation to return to the daily practice of Centering Prayer if circumstances such as illness, business, family problems, or urgent duties have prevented one from carrying out one's commitment to daily practice for a time.

By sharing the experience of Centering Prayer with others, one's own discernment of the ups and downs of the practice is sharpened. The group serves as a source of encouragement and can normally solve problems that might arise regarding the method. The collective discernment of the group tends to be well balanced.

Following is the format suggested for the weekly meeting.

Setting: Chairs placed in a circle.

Format:

1. A brief scripture reading or chanting (one or two minutes).
2. Centering Prayer period. Choose one of the following:

- a. Twenty-minute sit.
- b. Two twenty-minute sits with contemplative walk in between. In both cases end with the slow recitation of "Our Father" by the leader or two minutes of silence to return to ordinary thinking.

3. *Lectio divina*: In the beginning, the "Guidelines for Christian Life, Growth, and Transformation" (Chapter Thirteen) may be used as a means of developing a conceptual background for the practice of Centering Prayer. Discuss in the group how each guideline may relate to each one's own life experience. Or use scriptural texts or readings from books on contemplative prayer. Allow half an hour or forty-five minutes for this period of sharing. Avoid theological, philosophical, or scriptural debates.

The purpose of the meeting is spiritual refreshment and mutual encouragement in the practice.

A Meditation

We begin our prayer by disposing our body. Let it be relaxed and calm, but inwardly alert.

The root of prayer is interior silence. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. Deep prayer is the laying aside of thoughts. It is the opening of mind and heart, body and feelings—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts, and emotions. We do not resist them or suppress them. We accept them as they are and go beyond them, not by effort, but by letting them all go by. We open our awareness to the Ultimate Mystery whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing—closer than consciousness itself. The Ultimate Mystery is the ground in which our being is rooted, the Source from whom our life emerges at every moment.

We are totally present now, with the whole of our being, in complete openness, in deep prayer. The past and future—time itself—are forgotten. We are here in the presence of the Ultimate Mystery. Like the air we breathe, this divine Presence is all around us and within us, distinct from us, but never separate from us. We may sense this Presence drawing us from within, as if touching our spirit and embracing it, or carrying us beyond ourselves into pure awareness.

We surrender to the attraction of interior silence, tranquility, and peace. We do not try to feel anything, reflect about anything. Without effort, without trying, we sink into this Presence, letting everything else go. Let love alone speak: the simple desire to be one with the Presence, to forget self, and to rest in the Ultimate Mystery.

This Presence is immense, yet so humble; awe-inspiring, yet so gentle; limitless, yet so intimate, tender and personal. I *know* that I am *known*. Everything in my life is transparent in this Presence. It knows everything about me—all my weaknesses, brokenness, sinfulness—and still loves me infinitely. This Presence is healing, strengthening, refreshing—just by its Presence. It is nonjudgmental, self-giving, seeking no reward, boundless in compassion. It is like coming home to a place I should never have left, to an awareness that was somehow always there, but which I did not recognize. I cannot force this awareness, or bring it about. A door opens within me; but from the other side. I seem to have tasted before the mysterious sweetness of this enveloping, permeating Presence. It is both emptiness and fullness at once.

We wait patiently; in silence, openness, and quiet attentiveness; motionless within and without. We surrender to the attraction to be still, to be loved, just to *be*.

How shallow are all the things that upset and discourage me! I resolve to give up the desires that trigger my tormenting emotions. Having tasted true peace, I can let them all go by. Of course, I shall stumble and fall, for I know my weakness. But I will rise at once, for I know my goal. I know where my home is.

The Essentials of the Centering Prayer Method

Theological Background

The grace of Pentecost affirms that the risen Jesus is among us as the glorified Christ. Christ lives in each of us as the Enlightened One, present everywhere and at all times. He is the living Master who continuously sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and to bear witness to his resurrection by empowering us to experience and manifest the fruits of the Spirit and the Beatitudes both in prayer and action.

Lectio Divina

Lectio divina is the most traditional way of cultivating friendship with Christ. It is a way of listening to the texts of scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and he were suggesting the topics of conversation. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on his word leads beyond mere acquaintanceship to an attitude of friendship, trust, and love. Conversation simplifies and gives way to communing, or as Gregory the Great (sixth century), summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition, put it, "resting in God." This was the classical meaning of contemplative prayer for the first sixteen centuries.

Contemplative Prayer

Contemplative prayer is the normal development of the grace of baptism and the regular practice of *lectio divina*. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings

expressed in words. But this is only one expression. Contemplative prayer is the opening of mind and heart—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions. We open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing—closer than consciousness itself. Contemplative prayer is a process of interior purification leading, if we consent, to divine union.

The Method of Centering Prayer

Centering prayer is a method designed to deepen the relationship with Christ begun in *lectio divina* and to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times (e.g., *The Cloud of Unknowing*) in an updated form and to put a certain order and regularity into it. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. During the time of prayer, we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere else.

The Guidelines

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 you become aware of 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.

Explanation of the Guidelines

1. "Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within" (see Chapter Five).
 - a. The sacred word expresses our intention to be in God's presence and to yield to the divine action.
 - b. The sacred word should be chosen during a brief period of prayer asking the Holy Spirit to inspire us with one that is especially suitable for us.
 1. Examples: Lord, Jesus, Abba, Father, Mother.
 2. Other possibilities: Love, Peace, Shalom, Silence.
 - c. Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period, for that would be to start thinking again.
 - d. A simple inward gaze upon God may be more suitable for some persons than the sacred word. In this case, one consents to God's presence and

action by turning inwardly toward God as if gazing upon him. The same guidelines apply to the sacred gaze as to the sacred word.

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."

- a. By "sitting comfortably" is meant relatively comfortably; not so comfortably that we encourage sleep, but sitting comfortably enough to avoid thinking about the discomfort of our bodies during this time of prayer.
- b. Whatever sitting position we choose, we keep the back straight.
- c. If we fall asleep, we continue the prayer for a few minutes upon awakening if we can spare the time.
- d. Praying in this way after a main meal encourages drowsiness. Better to wait an hour at least before Centering Prayer. Praying in this way just before retiring may disturb one's sleep pattern.
- e. We close our eyes to let go of what is going on around and within us.
- f. We introduce the sacred word inwardly and as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.

3. "When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."

- a. "Thoughts" is an umbrella term for every perception including sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, reflections, and commentaries.
- b. Thoughts are a normal part of Centering Prayer.
- c. By "returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word," a minimum of effort is indicated. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of Centering Prayer.
- d. During the course of our prayer, the sacred word may become vague or even disappear.

4. "At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for two or three minutes."

- a. If this prayer is done in a group, the leader may slowly recite the Our Father during the additional two or three minutes while the others listen.
- b. The additional two or three minutes give the psyche time to readjust to the external senses and enable us to bring the atmosphere of silence into daily life.

Some Practical Points

1. The minimum time for this prayer is twenty minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning, and one in the afternoon or early evening.

2. The end of the prayer period can be indicated by a timer, provided it does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.
3. The principal effects of Centering Prayer are experienced in daily life, not in the period of Centering Prayer itself
4. Physical symptoms:
 - a. We may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in various parts of the body, or a generalized restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body.
 - b. We may also notice heaviness or lightness in the extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness.
 - c. In either case, we pay no attention, or we allow the mind to rest briefly in the sensation and then return to the sacred word.
5. *Lectio divina* provides the conceptual background for the development of Centering Prayer.
6. A support group praying and sharing together once a week helps maintain one's commitment to the prayer.

Extending the Effects of Centering Prayer into Daily Life

1. Practice two periods of Centering Prayer daily.
2. Read scriptures regularly and study the parts of this book that deal with the method.
3. Practice one or two of the specific practices for everyday life suggested in Chapter Twelve.
4. Join a Centering Prayer Support Group or Follow-up Program (if available in your area).
 - a. The group meeting encourages the members of the group to persevere in private.
 - b. It also provides an opportunity for further input on a regular basis through tapes, readings, and discussion.

Points for Further Development

1. During the prayer period, various kinds of thoughts may be distinguished (see Chapters Six through Ten):
 - a. Ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memory.
 - b. Thoughts that give rise to attractions or aversions.
 - c. Insights and psychological breakthroughs.
 - d. Self-reflections such as, "How am I doing?" or "This peace is just great!"
 - e. Thoughts that arise from the unloading of the unconscious.
2. During this prayer, we avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations, or aiming at some specific goal such as the following:

- a. Repeating the sacred word continuously.
 - b. Having no thoughts.
 - c. Making the mind a blank.
 - d. Feeling peaceful or consoled.
 - e. Achieving a spiritual experience.
3. What Centering Prayer is not:
- a. It is not a technique.
 - b. It is not a relaxation exercise.
 - c. It is not a form of self-hypnosis.
 - d. It is not a charismatic gift.
 - e. It is not a parapsychological phenomenon.
 - f. It is not limited to the "felt" presence of God.
 - g. It is not discursive meditation or affective prayer.
4. What Centering Prayer is:
- a. It is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.
 - b. It is an exercise of faith, hope, and love.
 - c. It is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion.
 - d. It habituates us to the language of God which is silence.

A Brief History of Contemplative Outreach

Centering Prayer

During the first sixteen centuries of Church history, contemplative prayer was the acknowledged goal of Christian spirituality for clergy and laity alike. In the course of recent centuries, this heritage, at least as a living tradition, was virtually lost. Now in the twentieth century with the advent of cross-cultural dialogue and historical research, the recovery of the Christian contemplative tradition has begun. The method of Centering Prayer, in the context of the tradition of *lectio divina*, is contributing to this renewal.

Throughout the 1970s, a group of Trappist monks continued this search at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. In 1975 the contemplative practice called Centering Prayer, based on the fourteenth century classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, was developed by Frs. William Menninger and Basil Pennington. This method of prayer was offered at the guest house in Spencer first to priests and later to lay people. The response was so positive that an increasing number of workshops was offered and an advanced workshop was developed by Fr. Thomas Keating to train teachers of the method.

Contemplative Outreach

In 1981, Fr. Keating resigned as abbot of St. Joseph's and moved to St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. Requests to share Centering Prayer in various parts of the country as well as requests for a more intensive Centering Prayer experience began to surface. In 1983 the first Intensive Centering Prayer Retreat was held at the Lama Foundation in San Cristobal, New Mexico. Since then, Intensives have been given at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass and in several other locations. Two Polf-Intensive Retreats are held each year and Formation Weeks are given.

Organization

Because of the growing interest in Centering Prayer in certain areas of the country, a number of local Centering Prayer support groups grew up and soon the need to organize became evident.

In 1984, Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. was established to coordinate efforts to introduce the Centering Prayer method to persons seeking a deeper life of prayer and to provide a support system capable of sustaining their commitment. In 1986, a national office of Contemplative Outreach was established.

Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.

10 Park Place, Suite 2B

PO Box 737

Butler, NJ 07405

Telephone: (973) 838-3384

Fax: (973) 492-5795

Email: office@coutreach.org

Website: www.contemplativeoutreach.org