

SPIRITUAL LIFE DEVELOPMENT



AN INTRODUCTION  
TO A  
CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER METHOD



# CENTERING PRAYER

“too fidgety the mind’s compass.” - R.S. Thomas

*“You have my soul for your peace and your silence, but it is lacerated by the noise of my activity and my desires. My mind is crucified all day by its own hunger for experience, for ideas, for satisfaction. And I do not possess my house in silence. I am content that these pages show me to be what I am – noisy, full of the racket of my imperfections and passions, and the wide open wounds left by my sins. Full of my own emptiness. Yet, Ruined as my house is, you live there!”*

-Thomas Merton

## INTRODUCTION

If we’re honest, our inner world can be chaotic and noisy. Our minds are on the go constantly and we need to find ways to truly, *“Be still and know...,”* (Ps 46:10) to quiet our inner world enough to hear a *“still small voice.”* (1 Kings 19:12)

Centering Prayer is a Christian method of meditation that places a strong emphasis on interior silence. The modern Centering Prayer movement in Christianity can be traced to several books published by three Trappist monks of St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts in the 1970s: Fr. William Meninger, Fr. M. Basil Pennington and Abbot Thomas Keating. The name of the practice was taken from Thomas Merton’s description of contemplative prayer as prayer that is *“centered entirely on the presence of God”*. In his book *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton writes *“Monastic prayer begins not so much with ‘considerations’ as with a ‘return to the heart,’ finding one’s deepest center, awakening the profound depths of our being.”*

## INTENTION

In Centering Prayer, we look to get out of the way, reduce the inner noise and just be with God. This makes intention the key to Centering Prayer. Thomas Keating writes, *“Centering Prayer is not a concentrative practice, nor an exercise of attention. It is an exercise of intention. It is our will, our faculty of choice, that we are cultivating... The will is developing the habit of surrender to God’s increasing presence and action.”*

The intention of Centering Prayer is always the same, which is to **“consent to the presence and action of God within.”**

*“...your intention is ‘to be totally open to God’: totally available, all the way down to the innermost point of your being; deeper than your thinking, deeper than your memories and desires, deeper than your usual psychological sense of yourself.”* Cynthia Bourgeault

## HOW TO

If we are trying to get our inner noise out of the way and to consent to the presence and action of God within, the question then, is how. It is simply by gently letting thoughts, sensations, etc., go, so that you can return to your intention: consenting to the presence and action of God within. We do this with the use of a sacred word

## CHOOSING A SACRED WORD

- a. It is not a mantra (a word or phrase you focus on throughout your meditation)
- b. The sacred word is just a placeholder for your intention: consenting to the presence and action of God within
- c. So whenever you recognize that you’re having a thought, you simply return to your sacred word.

d. **Guidelines to choosing a sacred word:**

1. Some people like traditional religious word – like “God” or “Abba” or “Jesus” or even a short phrase like “Come Lord.” Others like words of their availability – like “open” or “available” or “yes.”
2. Your word should be emotionally neutral. You don’t want to start thinking about why that word makes you feel the way you feel...that would defeat the purpose.
3. Most people “shop around” for a sacred word. It may take a few practices before you find “your word.”
4. Don’t “shop around” during the prayer period
5. Once you’ve found your word, it’s good to hold on to it.

Father Keating tells a story of teaching a group of nuns Centering Prayer. After explaining the practice, Keating sends the nuns out to practice for 20 minutes and then come back. Upon return, one of the nuns said, *“Oh father, I’m such a failure...I must have said my sacred word 1,000 times during those 20 minutes.”* Keating replied, *“Isn’t that wonderful! 1,000 opportunities to return to God.”*

## **POSTURE DURING PRAYER**

*“My Dear Wormwood,...At the very least, they [humans] can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must constantly remember, that they are animals and whatever their bodies do affects their soul.”* C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

1. back straight
2. feet on the floor
3. place hands, palms up, on your lap, if you choose. This hand placement symbolizes your availability

## WHAT DOES A TYPICAL TIME OF CENTERING PRAYER LOOK LIKE?

1. 10-20 minutes (set a timer)
2. Sit comfortably
3. Close your eyes
4. Take deep breaths
5. Introduce your sacred word = which is the placeholder for your intention (*to consent to the presence and action of God within*)
6. Every time you find yourself having a thought, in your mind, “say” your sacred word to return to God.





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THE SALVATION ARMY – USA EAST  
440 WEST NYACK RD,  
WEST NYACK , NY 10994