

THE PRACTICE OF CENTERING PRAYER

For most people prayer means words. But, from the earliest Christian tradition, a form of prayer has been practiced that does not depend on words.

The practice of silent prayer is rooted in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Habakkuk counseled his congregation that, they should recognize that “the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Habakkuk 2:20) Isaiah said simply, “Sit in silence.” (Isaiah 47:5)

In one of the few places where Jesus gives instruction about how to pray he utters a stern warning saying, “When you are praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words.” (Matthew 6:7) Instead Jesus says, “whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” (Matthew 6:6)

In the 4th century the Christian monk John Cassian traveled to the deserts of Egypt where he uncovered a deep tradition of Christian spirituality and practice. Cassian found desert fathers and mothers who understood Jesus’ instruction to “go into your room and shut the door” to mean we should “withdraw our hearts completely from the clatter of every thought and concern.”¹ This led to a way of “wordless prayer,” that “transcends all human understanding and is distinguished not, I would say, by a sound of the voice or a movement of the tongue or a pronunciation of words.”²

This discipline of “wordless prayer” has carried on as a deep, sometimes hidden stream in Christian practice to the present day. In the over-stimulated culture of the 21st century, the practice of “wordless prayer” is more essential than at any other time.

This prayer of silence offers the opportunity to step aside from the demands, pressures and tensions of daily life. It enables us to rest in the presence of God who, through the prophet Jeremiah, called all people to “Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

One way of following “the ancient path” of silent trusting prayer is through a practice known as Centering Prayer, pioneered by the Trappist monks of St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. In the 1970’s Thomas Keating, at that time abbot of St. Joseph’s, became concerned that silent prayer had been lost to the church. He challenged his monks to study Christian tradition to see if they could recover a method of silent prayer.

In the anonymous 14th century Christian classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the monks of Spencer came across a spirituality and a practice they believed might enable

¹ John Cassian *The Conferences* trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P (New York: Newman Press, 1997), p. 353.

² Ibid., p. 345.

contemporary Christians to recover a discipline of silent prayer. The author of *The Cloud* defined prayer as “nothing else than a devout intention directed toward God.”³ This “intention” he suggested was expressed through the use of “but a little word of one syllable.” This word is used to “beat upon the cloud and the darkness, which are above you” and to “strike down thoughts of every kind and drive them beneath the cloud of forgetting,” until we simply “rest ourselves with full pleasure and consent ultimately in God.”⁴

Paul in I Thessalonians, instructed his readers to “pray without ceasing.” (I Thessalonians 5:16) If we understand prayer only in verbal terms, it is difficult to understand how Paul intended this direction to be followed. If, however, we view prayer as the author of *The Cloud* implies, as resting in God’s presence, the counsel to “pray without ceasing,” means simply to be always aware of and trust in God’s presence. The 11th or 12th century monk St. Peter of Damaskos, says, “‘Pray without ceasing,’ that is, to be mindful of God at all times, in all places, and in every circumstance.”⁵

A never failing awareness of God’s presence is the deepest longing of the human heart. This consciousness begins to emerge in the practitioner’s life as we follow the discipline of Centering Prayer. As we rest daily in God’s presence in silent prayer, we begin to discover that an awareness of God’s presence permeates more and more of our lives. We find ourselves trusting in God’s faithfulness in circumstances where we might previously have been tempted to panic, struggle for control, or fight back.

Centering Prayer patterns into our lives the central gesture of Christian faith summed up by Jesus when he prayed saying, “not what I want but what you want.” (Matthew 26:39) This gesture of surrender is the ground upon which all relationship with God is built. It is the tone set at the beginning of the Gospels by Mary who, when visited by a messenger of God, replied to his strange announcement saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) As we practice, letting go again and again of the thoughts and distractions that fill our lives, we repeat the great *fiat*, “let it be” of Christian life, until this becomes our instinctive response.

Centering Prayer is Christian prayer. It is not a copy of popularized Eastern meditation forms such as Transcendental Meditation. We are not emptying ourselves in silent prayer. We are not abandoning ourselves to nothing. We are opening ourselves to an awareness of God at the heart of all existence and surrendering to God. We stand with the prophet knowing that “the Lord is in his holy temple.” We are that temple and therefore, we can “keep silence” before him. Our hearts are content, fed with the presence of the Divine who dwells at the centre of our being, fed by the eternal nourishment of God’s indwelling Spirit.

³ Anonymous *The Cloud of Unknowing* trans. Ira Progoff (New York: Delta Books, 1957), p. 151.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵ St. Peter of Damaskos in *The Philokalia* vol. III trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 173

There is nothing to fear for those who intend to rest in Christ. There are no forces stronger than God or more powerful than the presence of God's Spirit in our lives. When we express our intention to rest in Christ, we are surrounded by and filled with the living power of Christ's presence. There is nothing that can move us from this place as long as we intend to trust in Christ.

In fact, according to earliest Christian tradition, it is more often our thoughts that lead us astray. A desert father was approached by his student who said, "My thoughts wander and I am troubled by this." The old man replied, "Remain sitting in your cell and your thoughts will come to rest."⁶ The anxiety of the young student is not fear about silence, but fear about noise. The noise and clutter of our lives is much more likely to lead us astray than the spaciousness, trust and rest that lie at the heart of Centering Prayer practice.

Paul is confident that there is nothing that "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39) Jesus calls us to rest and trust in this reality – "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

For the Psalmist, this place of rest is a silent, still and peaceful place, accessed by the sovereign work of God in lives that are surrendered to the Spirit - "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven." (Psalm 107:28-30)

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⁶ Benedicta Ward *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford: Fairacres, 1975), p. 22.