First Steps in Centering Prayer

Since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has been encouraging Catholics to live the fullness of the Christian life without expecting priests, religious or anyone else to do it for them. That implies creativity as well as responsibility on the part of lay people to come up with structures that will enable them to live the contemplative dimensions of the Gospel without a cloister. A cloister does not resolve all the problems of life. There are pitfalls and traps for monks and nuns as well as for other people.

The monastic journey is a special kind of life with its own set of difficulties. For one thing, it puts human relationships under a microscope. Although the trials are not as big as those outside the monastery, they may be more humiliating. Monastics get upset by trifles and can’t even claim a good reason for feeling that way.

Divine union is the goal for all Christians. We have been baptised; we receive the Eucharist; we have all the necessary means of growing as human beings and as children of God. It is a mistake to think that a special state of life is the only way of doing it. The persons I know who are most advanced in prayer are married or engaged in active ministries, running around all day to fulfill their duties.

A couple of years ago, I gave a conference to an assembly of lay organizations. These included marriage-encounter and social action groups, secular institutes, and new communities. My talk was based on monastic spirituality,
but instead of saying "monastic", I said "Christian". I was amazed to see how most people identified with this traditional teaching. It corresponded to their own experience. This reinforced my conviction that the spiritual journey is for every Christian who takes the Gospel seriously.

Spiritual disciplines, both East and West, are based on the hypothesis that there is something that we can do to enter upon the journey to divine union once we have been touched by the realization that such a state exists. Centering prayer is a discipline designed to reduce the obstacles to contemplative prayer. Its modest packaging appeals to the contemporary attraction for how-to methods. It is a way of bringing the procedures to be found in the contemplative teachings of the spiritual masters of the Christian tradition out of the dusty pages of the past into the broad daylight of the present. The popularity of meditative disciplines from the East is proof enough that some such method is essential today. But centering prayer is not just a method. It is true prayer at the same time. If you are willing to expand the meaning of contemplative prayer to include methods that prepare for it or lead into it, centering prayer can be identified as the first rung on the ladder of contemplative prayer, which rises step by step to union with God.

Centering prayer is a method of refining one's intuitive faculties so that one can enter more easily into contemplative prayer. It is not the only path to contemplation, but it is a good one. As a method, it is a kind of extract of monastic spirituality. It concentrates the essence of monastic practice into two periods of prayer each day. When taking an antibiotic, you have to maintain the right dosage in order to benefit from the medication. You have to keep up the required number of antibodies in the blood stream to overcome the disease. So, too, you have to keep up a certain level of interior silence in the psyche and nervous system if you want to obtain the benefits of contemplative prayer.

Centering prayer as a discipline is designed to withdraw our attention from the ordinary flow of our thoughts. We tend to identify ourselves with that flow. But there is a deeper part of ourselves. This prayer opens our awareness to the spiritual level of our being. This level might be compared to a great river on which our memories, images, feelings, inner experiences, and the awareness of outward things are resting. Many people are so identified with the ordinary flow of their thoughts and feelings that they are not aware of the source from which these mental objects are emerging. Like boats or debris floating along the surface of a river, our thoughts and feel-

ings must be resting on something. They are resting on the inner stream of consciousness, which is our participation in God's being. That level is not immediately evident to ordinary consciousness. Since we are not in immediate contact with that level, we have to do something to develop our awareness of it. It is the level of our being that makes us most human. The values that we find there are more delightful than the values that float along the surface of the psyche. We need to refresh ourselves at this deep level every day. Just as we need exercise, food, rest, and sleep, so also we need moments of interior silence because they bring the deepest kind of refreshment.

Faith is opening and surrendering to God. The spiritual journey does not require going anywhere because God is already with us and in us. It is a question of allowing our ordinary thoughts to recede into the background and to float along the river of consciousness without our noticing them, while we direct our attention toward the river on which they are floating. We are like someone sitting on the bank of a river and watching the boats go by. If we stay on the bank, with our attention on the river rather than on the boats, the capacity to disregard thoughts as they go by will develop, and a deeper kind of attention will emerge.

A thought in the context of this method is any perception that appears on the inner screen of consciousness. This could be an emotion, an image, a memory, a plan, a noise from outside, a feeling of peace, or even a spiritual communication. In other words, anything whatsoever that registers on the inner screen of consciousness is a "thought". The method consists of letting go of every thought during the time of prayer, even the most devout thoughts.

To facilitate letting go, take a relatively comfortable position so that you won't be thinking about your body. Avoid positions that might cut off the circulation because then you will think of your discomfort. Choose a place that is relatively quiet in order not to be disturbed by excessive or unexpected noise. If there is no such place in your household, try to find a quiet time when you are least likely to be disturbed. It is a good idea to close your eyes because you tend to think of what you see. By withdrawing the senses from their ordinary activity, you may reach deep rest. A sudden sound or interruption, like the phone ringing, will shake you up. An alarm clock or timer, which is one way to notify yourself when the time is up, should be a quiet one. If the clock is noisy, stuff it under a pillow. Try to avoid outside noises as much as you can. If noises happen anyway, do not
be upset. Getting upset is an emotionally charged thought that is likely to shatter whatever interior silence you may have reached. Choose a time for prayer when you are most awake and alert. Early in the morning before the ordinary business of the day begins is a good time.

Once you have picked a suitable time and place and a chair or a posture that is relatively comfortable, and closed your eyes, choose a sacred word that expresses your intention of opening and surrendering to God and introduce it on the level of your imagination. Do not form it with your lips or vocal chords. Let it be a single word of one or two syllables with which you feel at ease. Gently place it in your awareness each time you recognize you are thinking about some other thought.

The sacred word is not a means of going where you want to go. It only directs your intention toward God and thus fosters a favorable atmosphere for the development of the deeper awareness to which your spiritual nature is attracted. Your purpose is not to suppress all thoughts because that is impossible. You will normally have a thought after half a minute of inner silence unless the action of grace is so powerful that you are absorbed in God. Centering prayer is not a way of turning on the presence of God. Rather, it is a way of saying, "Here I am." The next step is up to God. It is a way of putting yourself at God's disposal; it is He who determines the consequences.

You may be familiar with the gesture of folding your hands together with the fingers pointing upward. This is a symbol of gathering all the faculties together and directing them toward God. The sacred word has exactly the same purpose. It is a pointer, but a mental rather than a material one. The word should be introduced without any force; think it the way you would any thought that might arise spontaneously.

The sacred word, once it is well established, is a way of reducing the ordinary number of casual thoughts and of warding off the more interesting ones that come down the stream of consciousness. It does this not by attacking the thoughts directly but by reaffirming your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. This renewal of the will's consent, as it becomes habitual, creates an atmosphere in which you can more easily disregard the inevitable flow of thoughts.

If you are nervous about doing what may seem like "nothing" for a set period of time, let me remind you that nobody hesitates to go to sleep for six or seven hours every night. But practicing this prayer is not doing nothing. It is a very gentle kind of activity. The will keeps consenting to God by returning to the sacred word, and this is normally enough activity to stay awake and alert.

Twenty to thirty minutes is the minimum amount of time necessary for most people to establish interior silence and to get beyond their superficial thoughts. You may be inclined to remain longer. Experience will teach you what the right time is. At the end of your chosen time span, begin to think your ordinary thoughts again. This may be a good time to converse with God. You may also wish to say some vocal prayer quietly to yourself or to begin planning your day. Give yourself at least two minutes before opening your eyes. Withdrawal from the ordinary use of the exterior and interior senses brings you to a deep spiritual attentiveness, and opening your eyes right away can be jarring.

As your sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of your being develops through the daily practice of this prayer, you may begin to find the awareness of God's presence arising at times in ordinary activity. You may feel called to turn interiorly to God without knowing why. The quality of your spiritual life is developing and enabling you to pick up vibrations from a world you did not previously perceive. Without deliberately thinking of God, you may find that He is often present in the midst of your daily occupations. It is like color added to a black-and-white television screen. The picture remains the same, but it is greatly enhanced by the new dimension of the picture that was not previously perceived. It was present but not transmitted because the proper receptive apparatus was missing.

Contemplative prayer is a way of tuning in to a fuller level of reality that is always present and in which we are invited to participate. Some suitable discipline is required to reduce the obstacles to this expanded awareness. One way is to slow down the speed at which our ordinary thoughts come down the stream of consciousness. If this can be done, space begins to appear between the thoughts, enabling an awareness of the reality upon which they are resting.

In this discussion of centering prayer, I am not exploring methods that help to calm the body, mind and nervous system, such as breathing, yoga, and jogging. Such methods are fine for relaxation, but what we are concerned with is the faith relationship. This relationship is expressed by taking the time to open oneself to God every day, by taking God seriously enough to make a heavy date with Him, so to speak—a date that one would not think of breaking. Since this kind of prayer doesn't require thinking, we can keep our engagement even when we are sick.

The fundamental disposition in centering prayer is opening to God. Christian practice can be summed up by the word patience. In the New Testament patience means waiting for God for any length of time, not go-
ing away, and not giving in to boredom or discouragement. It is the disposition of the servant in the Gospel who waited even though the master of the house delayed his return till well after midnight. When the master finally came home, he put the servant in charge of his whole household. If you wait, God will manifest Himself. Of course, you may have a long wait.

I find this practice gets me nowhere. Is it good to try to make the faculties a blank?

Please don't try to make your faculties a blank. There should always be a gentle, spiritual activity present, expressed either by thinking the sacred word or by the simple awareness that you are present to God. The experience of emptiness is the presence of your intention in a very subtle way. You cannot maintain that experience of emptiness unless your intention is at work. It may seem like no work because it is so simple. At the same time, this method of prayer takes time to learn and you need not worry about experiencing what you may interpret as a blank once in a while. This prayer is a way of resting in God. If you notice that you have a blank, that's a thought; merely return to the sacred word.

What do you do when you realize you have been dozing?

If you doze off, don't give it a second thought. A child in the arms of a parent drops off to sleep occasionally, but the parent isn't disturbed by that so long as the child is happily resting there and opens its eyes once in a while.

I was surprised by how fast the time went. Was it really twenty minutes?

Yes. When the time goes fast, it is a sign that you were not doing much thinking. I'm not saying it is a sign of good prayer. It is unwise to judge a prayer period on the basis of your psychological experience. Sometimes you may be bombarded with thoughts all during the time of prayer; yet it could be a very useful period of prayer. Your attention might have been much deeper than it seemed. In any case, you cannot make a valid judgment about how things are going on the basis of a single period of prayer. Instead, you must look for the fruit in your ordinary daily life, after a month or two. If you are becoming more patient with others, more at ease with yourself, if you shout less often or less loudly at the children, feel less hurt if the family complains about your cooking—all these are signs that another set of values is beginning to operate in you.

If you have no thoughts at all during centering prayer, you then have no awareness of time. Such an experience reveals the relativity of our sense of time. Our period of prayer, however, will not always seem short. Sometimes it will seem very long. The alternation between tranquility and the struggle with thoughts is part of a process, a refining of the intuitive faculties so that they can be attentive to this deeper level in a more and more stable fashion.

If you're drowsy or very tired, do you have fewer thoughts?

In general, yes, so long as you don't start dreaming! In the monastery we get up at 3:00 A.M., and one is often a little groggy at that hour of the morning. This seems to be part of our particular method, to be so tired that we just can't think. After working hard all day, one may have the same experience in the evening. That can be a help as long as you are alert enough to stay awake and not succumb to the pleasure of drowsing. But don't feel bad if you do fall asleep. You may need a little extra rest.

On the other hand, try to pick a time when you are most likely to be alert so you have a fuller experience of centering prayer rather than nodding your way through it. If you fall asleep, when you awake continue to center for a few minutes so that you don't feel that your prayer was a complete washout for the day. The kind of activity in which you are engaged in this prayer is so simple that it is easy to fall asleep unless you do the modest action that is required, which is to stay alert. Thinking the sacred word is one way of doing this. Jesus said, "Watch and pray." This is what we are doing in centering prayer. Watching is just enough activity to stay alert. Praying is opening to God.

Centering prayer is not so much an exercise of attention as intention. It may take a while to grasp this distinction. You do not attend to any particular thought content. Rather, you intend to go to your inmost being, where you believe God dwells. You are opening to Him by pure faith, not by means of concepts or feelings. It is like knocking gently on a door. You are not pounding on the door with your faculties as if to say, "Open in the name of the law! I demand that you let me in!" You can't force this door. It opens
from the other side. What you are saying by means of the sacred word is, "Here I am, waiting." It's a waiting game to the nth degree. Nothing flashy is going to happen, or, if it does, you should gently return to the sacred word as if nothing had happened. Even if you have a vision or hear infused words, you should return to the sacred word. This is the essence of the method.

The mood I was in was one of expectation. Then I found myself thinking about the fact that I was expecting something to happen.

Have no expectation in this prayer. It's an exercise of effortlessness, of letting go. To try is a thought. That's why I say: "Return to the sacred word as easily as possible"; or, "gently place the sacred word in your awareness." To struggle is to want to achieve something. That is to aim at the future, whereas this method of prayer is designed to bring you into the present. Expectations also refer to the future; hence they, too, are thoughts.

Emptying the mind of its customary routines of thinking is a process that we can only initiate, like taking the stopper out of a bath tub. The water goes down by itself. You don't have to push the water out of the tub. You simply allow it to run out. You are doing something similar in this prayer. Allow your ordinary train of thoughts to flow out of you. Waiting without expectation is sufficient activity.

What about feelings? Are you supposed to let them go too?

Yes. They are thoughts in the context of this prayer. A perception of any kind whatsoever is a thought. Even the reflection that one isn't having a thought is a thought. Centering prayer is an exercise of letting all perceptions pass by, not by giving them a shove or by getting angry at them, but by letting them go. This enables you gradually to develop a spiritual attentiveness that is peaceful, quiet, and absorbing.

Is the deeper attention a function of less thought?

Yes. You may even have no thoughts. Then you are at the deepest point that you can go. At that moment there is no sense of time. Time is the measure of things going by. When nothing is going by, there is an experience of timelessness. And it is delightful.
My way of focusing on God has usually been through an image. If I remove that image, I have trouble understanding what it is that I should focus on. Is my attention simply on the word that I am repeating?

Your attention should not be directed to any particular thought, including the sacred word. The sacred word is only a means of re-establishing your intention of opening to the true Self and to God, who is at the center of it. It is not necessary to keep repeating the sacred word. Interior silence is something that one naturally likes to experience. You don’t have to force anything. By forcing, you introduce another thought, and any thought is enough to prevent you from going where you want to go.

Some people find it easier to transcend with a visual image rather than with a word. If you prefer some kind of visual image, choose one that is general and not detailed; for example, turn your inward gaze toward God as if you are looking at someone you love.

As you were speaking, it occurred to me that I use images to stop myself from a free fall.

Some people, when they are quiet, feel themselves on the edge of a cliff. But don’t worry. There is no danger of falling. The imagination is perplexed by the unknown. It is so used to images, so plugged into them, that to disengage it from its habitual way of thinking is quite a job. It will take practice to feel comfortable with this prayer.

The Sacred Word as Symbol

The sacred word, whatever one you may choose, is sacred not because of its meaning, but because of its intent. It expresses your intention to open yourself to God, the Ultimate Mystery, who dwells within you. It is a focal point to return to when you notice you are becoming interested in the thoughts that are going by.

Stick to the same word once you feel comfortable with it.1 If you are moved to choose another word, go ahead and try it, but do not shop around during the same period of prayer. The sacred word is a sign or arrow pointing in the direction you want to take. It is a way of renewing your intention to open yourself to God and to accept Him as He is. While this does not prevent anyone from praying in other forms at other times, the period of centering prayer is not the time to pray specifically for others. By opening yourself to God, you are implicitly praying for everyone past, present, and future. You are embracing the whole of creation. You are accepting all reality, beginning with God and with that part of your own reality of which you may not be generally aware, namely, the spiritual level of your being.

The sacred word enables you to sink into your Source. Human beings were made for boundless happiness and peace, and when we see that we

1. Examples of what the sacred word might be: God, Jesus, Spirit, Abba, amen, peace, silence, open, glory, love, presence, trust, etc.