

THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER

THE PRAYER OF CONSENT



Jesus said, “Whenever you pray, go into your inner room, shut your door, pray to your Father who is unseen, and your Father, who sees the unseen, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:6). This verse is the basis on which contemplatives and mystics throughout the centuries have built their prayer practices. Centering Prayer is an ancient practice. But throughout the reformation and enlightenment era, it was really pushed aside in favor of more academic and rational approaches to doctrines and beliefs.

During the reformation era, the church was more concerned with information and not transformation. Many later protestant movements have tried to correct this (i.e. the charismatic movements), but without deep roots firmly planted in The Ground of all Being, the protestant churches have continued to splinter - even to this day.

It was not until the early to mid 1960s, that the Roman Catholic church called the faithful back to our roots. Fr. Thomas Keating, a monk from Massachusetts, and some of his brothers were a pivotal force in reviving this spiritual tradition, and making it accessible to those who seek a deeper, contemplative spirituality. Keating’s book, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (originally published in 1986) has become a textbook of sorts for students of Centering Prayer. It is Keating’s teachings that will provide the ground work for our practice here.

The first step is to choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within. You might choose a religious word such as God, Jesus, Spirit, or Father. Or you might choose a word like, Love, Truth, Presence, Yes, or Amen. The sacred word is not sacred because of its inherent meaning. It is sacred because it represents the ultimate yes that you are giving to God.

Take a moment now to choose and settle into your sacred word. Prayerful consider your sacred word, and when you find it, use only this word for the duration of this prayer sit.

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Now that you have your sacred word, sit comfortably but alert, up-right with both feet on the floor. Avoid any position that might put strain on any part of your body. Close your eyes as a symbol of letting go of all that is around you and within you. Then gently and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within. Do not force the sacred word onto your attention. Simply introduce it inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of cotton.

During the prayer, when you are engaged with your thoughts, body sensations, memories, plans, or even any spiritual experience just return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

These thoughts are to be expected and they are perfectly normal. But Keating reminds us that Centering Prayer is designed to withdraw our attention from the ordinary flow of our thoughts. We tend to identify ourselves with those thoughts that sit on the surface of that flow. But there is something deeper.

This prayer opens our awareness to the spiritual level of our being. This level might be compared to a great river. Like boats or debris flowing along the surface of a river, our thoughts and feelings must be resting on something. They are resting on the inner stream of consciousness, which is our participation in God's being. Our ordinary thoughts, like boats on the river, are so closely packed together that we cannot see the river that is holding them up. By recognizing a thought for what it is, and returning ever so gently to your sacred word you create space between the boats. At ever deepening levels, you see the reality on which everything is floating.

Your sacred word is not a mantra that is to be repeated without end. Only use it when you need it. If you catch yourself becoming interested or invested in a thought, simply return to your sacred word as the expression of the movement of your whole being toward God's presence and action within.

You may want to set a timer on your phone to keep track of the minutes. There are many meditations apps that have timers built in. But whatever you use you'll want to use a gentle tone to mark the end of the time. It can be very jarring to your body and spirit to be startled out of a time of silence. I encourage you to start with 10 minutes. As you feel more comfortable you will notice a marked increase in benefit with a 20 minute sit. And as you become more practiced, and as life allows, you may feel the need for a 30 or 40 minute sit. (most practitioners say 20 minutes is the sweet spot.)

Now, breathe deeply, sit comfortably but attentive. Ever so gently introduce your sacred word to your imagination as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.

SIMPLE 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 engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

For more information or for further reading go to:

contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-method/

Or read *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating