

Contemplative Prayer

1. Prayer, as most understand it, is when we talk to a God “out there” who hears and responds. It’s upwards toward someone on a throne who enjoys adoration and sometimes grants requests. Christian contemplative prayer is an active conversation between two beloveds who sit with each other for no reason other than to enjoy each other’s company.
2. All prayer is a relationship. Prayer is contemplative when we’re deliberately aware of God’s presence and have no intent other than to rest in the presence of God. It’s a relationship that first of all is about love and trust.
3. To be human is to be contemplative. Recall the depth of feeling and exclusion of thoughts of all else when you can’t take your eyes away from a sunset, or when you fall in love and can spend hours with your beloved unaware of time. Contemplative prayer is Christian when the beloved of whom we are aware is God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and we diminish our attention to all else.
4. God is always with us. Contemplatives call this presence the Divine Indwelling. Contemplative prayer involves moving away from our thoughts to feel the Divine Indwelling. In *kataphatic* prayer (the “positive,” content-focused form) we use icons or other aids to focus our thoughts on God. In *apophatic* prayer (the “negative,” letting-go form) we decide to pay no attention to our thoughts, with no attempt to suppress them. Centering prayer is apophatic contemplative prayer.
5. The language of contemplative prayer is silent, in the sense of no words or sound, but it’s not silence, in the sense of no content. It’s on a spiritual level and flows from allowing ourselves to acknowledge and be aware of the Holy Spirit within us. God knows our thoughts, needs, and pains without our speaking. He speaks to us through the still small voice within us. This still small voice isn’t in a language we can articulate in words or describe with in logical terms.
6. Centering prayer has two critical pieces – letting go of thoughts and intending to be aware of the Divine Indwelling. Our thoughts are critical to who we are. Thoughts (conscious and subconscious) stimulate feelings and emotions which in turn stimulate words and actions. Contemplatives throughout the ages have described this sequence as arising from two parts of who we are – a False self (focused inappropriately on ensuring our security, seeking affection/pleasure, and establishing control over other. Thomas Keating, the Trappist monk whose writings are at the core of the Contemplative Outreach movement, explained these concepts in terms of contemporary understanding. More on this in the next forum.

Centering Prayer at a Glance

1. Select a short word of significance to you, such as Abba, father, peace, or love, then:

- Set a gently sounding timer such as a chime or soft alarm to your intended prayer time. Sit upright in a comfortable chair with your eyes closed. Gently, quietly say your Sacred Word to yourself as a sign of your intent to disengage from your thoughts (any sensation -mental, emotional or physical) and to be open to God's presence.
- When you engage with your thoughts consent to be solely aware of the Divine Indwelling by gently, silently saying your Sacred Word and letting your Sacred Word trigger an image of the thought floating away, as a bird in flight or boat in a river. As the image fades into the distance, feel the silence. Your Sacred Word is not a mantra said repeatedly. Each time you say it, "open your hand" and let the thought float away. It's effortless. Your "hand" is open to let it go away, not clenched to push it away or back into the subconscious. Feel the interior silence in the thought's wake, and surrender to the silence.
- Don't push away your thoughts, just turn your back on them as you would traffic outside your window while you're intimately "just being" with someone you love.
- Letting your thoughts float away creates interior silence, allowing the Divine Indwelling to talk with you in ways beyond words.
- If you open your eyes just shut them and continue. "Why is that thought floating by", "Am I getting this right?" and "How much time is left?" are just thoughts to let float away.
- After you've reached your time, sit quietly for a few minutes before opening your eyes. It's often useful to very slowly and quietly say the Lord's Prayer or the Saint Francis Prayer (" Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is ...)

3. Centering prayer is an act we choose to do. The contemplative state to which it leads is a gift of God's grace. Our choice takes us there; once there God's grace takes over.

4. A flood of thoughts that just won't stop doesn't mean we're doing anything wrong. It just means that our subconscious is overflowing with thoughts. Each is an opportunity to reaffirm our intention to let go of all else other than the awareness of the Divine Indwelling.

5. Acting on a sincere intention to create interior silence is all that's necessary. If you're acting out a desire to create that interior silence, you aren't doing it "wrong".

6. The experience of many has shown 20 minutes, twice daily, to be a useful centering prayer practice. If 20 minutes twice a day is a bit much, start with something shorter just once a day. Stay with it and let God's grace work out how to go from there.

Faith Sharing Guidelines

We come together to encourage and sustain each of us in our spiritual journey in mutual respect. We live out that respect by following these guidelines.

1. As a member of this community, I listen to others from my heart. Within each person is a core of goodness, strength, and love. I try to understand the heart of what others are sharing.
2. I listen to others with a non-judgmental attitude. I may not agree, but I can affirm that person's right to a different point of view.
3. I listen to others with love. With the grace of God, we all have within us all we need to discover truth.
4. I listen to others with respect for their freedom. This group does not exist to give advice, but to encourage growth and insight. We do not have to be of one voice or of one mind.
5. I listen to others with shared trust. A basic level of trust encourages sharing beyond the superficial. All sharing must be kept confidential.
6. I speak from my own unique experience. I will use the pronoun "I" when I share my point of view.

The Essence of Faith Sharing. Personal faith sharing involves one's own personal experiences, not abstract ideas, given in one's own words, generally using the pronouns "I" or "me" instead of "you" or "we."

1. Faith sharing is not a theological discussion; no speeches, homilies, or dissertations are required.
2. Faith sharing is not an answer to anyone's problems; not a place to ventilate frustration or obsession.

Centering Prayer Resources (Ecclesiastes 12:12)

The free centering prayer app on Google Play or the Apple App Store is an excellent tool. Explore the menus and choices. It's a great way to stop and start your prayer with a chime.

Learning the experiences of others deepens our experience but is not essential. Dig as deeply as you want but never feel you need to read books to practice centering prayer.

Start with the websites of Contemplative Outreach of Maryland and Virginia (<https://www.comw-cp.org/>), the Contemplative Outreach of Colorado (<https://www.centeringprayer.net>) and the national organization (<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org>). All three offer newsletters, books, videos, online classes, online and in-person groups similar to ours, and in-person and online retreats.

For online study try Contemplative Outreach of Colorado's Spiritual Journey classes.

For self-study on Centering Prayer, start with *Open Heart, Open Mind, Intimacy With God, Invitation to Love, and Manifesting God*, all by Thomas Keating. You could follow these with *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* and *The Heart of Centering Prayer – Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice*, both by Cynthia Bourgeault.

Works on contemporary contemplative prayer include *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Martin Laird) and *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (Gerald G. May, M.D.) "Darkness" in this context is moving in trust through the unknown.

For a broader perspective check out *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Thomas Merton) and *The Universal Christ* (Richard Rohr), and other works by these two authors. *The Imitation of Christ* (Thomas A Kempis) has short chapters that make great daily devotional readings.

The original works such as *A Cloud or Unknowing* or the works of Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and Athanasius' biography of Saint Anthony the Great are widely available in English translations.

You Tube has 30+ hours of Thomas Keating's Spiritual Journey workshops. (Go to You Tube and search on "Thomas Keating spiritual journey"). Each presentation is in two captioned videos of about 30 minutes each. Transcripts of the videos in printed or pdf form are available on the national website and can help following the videos.

The national organization's online store offers The Contemplative Life Program, a two-year program of short daily readings you can use in conjunction with your daily centering prayer practice. Each year involves about 6 booklets (available in print or pdf) and you get a discount if you buy a year at a time.

Taking the Spiritual Journey online classes with guide you through most of the books and videos over a little less than a year. The facilitators are very skilled and experienced and class discussions are insightful.