



CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH®

SILENCE
SOLITUDE
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Q&A with Fr. Carl J. Arico Archive

On or related to Centering Prayer

Q: I started doing Centering Prayer about a year and a half ago. I was quite strict about two 20 minute periods a day at the start. Then, circumstances plus lack of discipline prevented me from going at it exactly like that. Sometimes when I knew my day was going to be long and tough, I'd do 40 minutes at a stretch and leave it at that. Now for a while, I've been trying two 20 minutes a day again. Sometimes, I over-reach. Tonight, I set down to do 20 minutes and wound up doing 40. I personally don't take it too seriously... I never overshoot too much [and] not being so very exacting is somewhat of a release. I also feel the Spirit takes me where and for as long as I need to go. What can you tell me?

A: The Spirit led you to a good decision when you decided to do the prayer in the morning for 40 minutes. It not only showed your willingness to be faithful but also your desire to continue to deepen the relationship with the Lord. Now that you are returning to your ordinary routine (two 20 minute periods), I have a word of 'wisdom.' I always alert people not to fall into the trap that 'more is better,' but if one's intention is just to be faithful and the Spirit moves you at times to lengthen the time, you are responding to that inspiration. Don't judge your prayer – the fidelity to your daily practice says it all. Thank you for consenting to God's presence and action in your life. - Fr. Carl.

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Q: What is the difference between Buddhist insight meditation and Centering Prayer? I am really confused as to which path.

A: I am not qualified to speak about Insight Meditation. Concerning Centering Prayer, it is both a relationship and a discipline - a relationship which has as its

source the indwelling Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit. The focus of Centering Prayer is the deepening of our relationship with the living Christ. It builds communities of faith and bonds the members together in mutual friendship and love. The heart and soul of Centering Prayer is consenting to the presence and action of God in our lives. The discipline is the four guidelines. The intention is relational on all levels. There are of course external similarities with other meditations but the intention is key. When I present retreats I sometimes say to people concerning the variety of meditations - they are like dancers on the dance floor - they may look the same but it is your intention and who is in your arms that make all the difference. – Fr. Carl.

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Q: Can you provide a connection for me between Centering Prayer and *The Cloud of Unknowing*?

A: I would recommend you study [the pamphlet on Centering Prayer](#) by Fr. Thomas Keating, which contains the four guidelines for the prayer with the explanation of each. Then read from the Cloud chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, 40 using the translation of William Johnston (Doubleday). Compare the two and you will see the connection. If you want more, Fr. William Meninger is an expert on this topic; you can then consult his book *The Loving Search for God*, or [his website](#) for further resources.

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Q: Around 13 years ago, I rededicated my life back to God. I attend a protestant church, having done so all my life. During those early years, I lived with the daily excitement of having a relationship with God. After a few months, I remember praying and telling God to "do anything he wants in me, so that his will may be done." Shortly after, he started to bring guilt concerning an addictive behavior that I have struggled with for many years. Convinced that God wanted me to deal with this issue, I sought help to recover. I believe that God opened the door, and supplied me with a 12 step recovery group as a place to get honest and heal. Over the last 10 years, I have been trying to imperfectly seek God in the 11th step tradition. As the years have gone by, much of the excitement and fervor of my early religious experiences have waned. Two years ago, one of the persons who I sponsor in my recovery group introduced me to Centering Prayer. I purchased several of Father Keating's books, and attempted to pray twice a day. To my dismay, I found it difficult to continue for more than three or four days. It seemed that it was

just too difficult. Something within me wars against it. ... As a way of seeking help, I decided to attend an [extended] Centering prayer retreat ... After the retreat ended, I experienced a level of internal peace that I had formally never knew. ... Days after the retreat, I continued to struggle with daily Centering Prayer time. The spiritual dryness continues to plague me as well. I feel as though in some way God has abandoned me. The most difficult problem of all concerns the fact that I am having thoughts about God not being real, and all the religious experiences of the past were all made up. Can you advise me what has happened spiritually in my life? I have always felt as though I tried to follow the Holy Spirit. Getting into recovery, as well as seeing a Christian counselor for my addiction and anxiety issues, I believed, were God's will for me. ... I really would like to engage in Centering Prayer full time, but how can I if I am doubting that it works?

A: You have followed the Holy Spirit; it has, as you said, led you into recovery (no longer kidding yourself) and seeing a Christian counselor (keeping your feet to the fire). Yes, they are the will of God for you. What is the struggle concerning your relationship with God? Is it doubt about His existence, because you do not feel anything. Mother Teresa, the apostle to the poor, reveals in her journals that in her 40 years of relationship with God she only had 6-8 weeks of the felt presence of God and was filled with doubts. However, she let that go because she saw the overwhelming good she was doing in spite of this absence of feeling.

There will always be some aspect of our relationship with God that is questioned. Remember it is a relationship. That is how relationships work - questioning, doubting, wondering etc., but through it all being faithful to the relationship.

I shared your question with a person in the recovery program and he said, "Tell him he is thinking too much." Centering Prayer is like the program. You keep going to the meetings, and even though all the meetings are not earth shaking, you keep going. You don't know how it works but you know it is working. Where would you be without them? The same is true with Centering Prayer: stop thinking in the prayer, let those thoughts go and be in the practice. Learn to celebrate all that the Lord has given to you. You are blessed by the 11th step.
– Fr. Carl.

Q: I am interested in knowing the history and significance of the bowl chime for the Centering Prayer practice. Our group rings it three times to begin (I'm not sure why), and uses a stop watch to end the time, which can jolt one out of the sweet time of silence. Yet we still then ring the bowl. Where did this practice start? What is the significance of ringing a bowl? Is there a better way to end the 20 minutes than a stop watch?

A: In the monastery the ringing of the bell has always been a call to prayer, an end of prayer, or the call to some activity. I remember in the seminary we would have spiritual reading during our meals and when the rector decided that it was time to end the reading, he would ring the bell and the meal would continue in silence.

The bowl is an extension of that tradition. It is a gentle way of entering into and ending the Centering Prayer period. It is rung three times to allow the group to gently enter into the prayer and then three times to gently end the prayer. I agree with you that it does not make sense that the timer goes off and then the bell is rung. It has always annoyed me but I let it go. It seems that the one leading could just look at a watch or have a quiet vibrating timer and then end the prayer session. This is a little refinement that could be encouraged.
- Fr. Carl.

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Q: Many years ago Basil Pennington came to the Diocese of Corpus Christi to introduce Centering Prayer. As I recall, Fr Basil commenced with remarks that the Pope had told or encouraged the Trappists to take this prayer life from the monasteries out into the life of the faithful. How did the Pope come to ask the Trappists to introduce the faithful laity to Centering Prayer?

A: In 1971 when the leaders of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappist) were meeting at Rome in General Chapter, Pope Paul VI welcomed them to the Vatican (as I understand it, Thomas Keating was there as an Abbott and Basil Pennington was there as his canon lawyer expert). In speaking to the Abbots and Abbesses, he asserted that there could never be a true renewal if there was not a renewal in depth of the members of the church themselves in their prayer life, their union and their communion with God. He urged them to do whatever they could to help their fellow Catholics in the west to recover the contemplative dimension of their Christian lives. Abbot Thomas Keating took this invitation seriously at St. Joseph's Monastery in Spencer, MA. As the fruit of the prayer, study and research, and life experiences as praying monks, they developed the method of Centering Prayer

as a response to the Pope's request and began to explore ways of sharing the Christian contemplative tradition. -Fr. Carl

[Reference: *Spirituality – an Ecumenical Perspective*, Basil Pennington O.C.S.O, editor Glenn E Hinson. See chapter 9 - Centering Prayer and The Friends.]

[For a history of Centering Prayer, [go here](#). For a history of the Christian contemplative tradition, [go here](#).]

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Q: Before I began Centering Prayer (three months ago), my faith life was simple. My love for Jesus was similar but sincere and comforting. Perhaps childlike. Now that I am inexplicably drawn in to twice daily practice (only 20 min/sit for now) I often feel overwhelmed. Sometimes, I feel farther from God and a bit lonely. I long for some consolation, some comfort for what so many describe as resting in love. I want to be patient and trust but need some reassurance as I wait. I have taken Cynthia Bourgeault's recent online course on Centering Prayer and read and reread Fr. Keating's book *Open Mind, Open Heart*. I think I understand what to do but I find only glimpses of awareness and waves of thoughts after thoughts. Sometimes, I feel a special new awareness of God's presence during worship time. I don't know if there is "fruit" in my ordinary life yet. Is this just the normal time it takes to settle oneself? Is this a kind of night of sense? Is there anything I should do? There is no group or person I feel comfortable talking with right now. I miss the online course I took this past November because at least I could express some of my thoughts and feelings to a virtual community.

A: Thank you for opening to the invitation from the Lord. It sounds like you are experiencing the normal awareness and reactions that come with practicing the prayer for three months. These are the graces given as you look more deeply into your relationship with Christ. Here are some practical observations to keep in your mind and heart.

1. To acknowledge that being drawn to the prayer is the work of the Holy Spirit.
2. To be clear that your intention for praying Centering Prayer is to consent to God's presence and action in your life.
3. To know that the fruits of your prayer are not experienced during the prayer but, for the most part, outside the prayer time, such as new awareness of God's presence during worship time.

4. At this time I would suggest that you prayerfully review Cynthia Bourgeault's online course. Take your time, read slowly, reflect deeply and respond heartfully to the materials.

Please stay faithful to the daily practice and allow the journey to unfold. Trust the process the Spirit of God is guiding you through. Please keep in touch - patience is the most difficult virtue to practice. Allow the Lord to lead the Dance. In Prayer, - Fr. Carl

p.s. There is an [online group](#) you might want to join to stay connected and feel supported. They publish a daily email, which is an excerpt of Fr. Thomas Keating's teachings. People often share or comment on the day's reading. [This group](#) is for beginners.

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Q: When I practice contemplative prayer, I fall asleep. How can I remedy this?

A: Your question prompted me to go to the New Oxford American Dictionary: Sleep: "A condition of the body and mind such as that which typically recurs for several hours every night in which the nervous system is relatively inactive, the eyes closed, the postural muscles relax and consciousness practically suspended." Rest: "Ceasing work or movement in order to relax, refresh oneself or recover strength."

The usual suggestions for avoiding sleep during prayer are finding a time when you are more awake; be comfortable but not so comfortable that you are prone to fall asleep; and surrender to God's redeeming work as you rest in the Lord, and not be concerned about how you are doing.

I would also suggest that you begin your prayer time with a definite and clear intention of restating the purpose of Centering Prayer - to consent to God's presence and action within and outside of you. If you fall asleep, then when you awaken, just renew your intention and continue with whatever time remains for that particular prayer period.

Concerning sleep and rest - allow the Lord to choose what you are blessed with at that time. Your gift to the Lord is consenting and noticing the fruits of the prayer outside the prayer time. – Fr. Carl.

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Q: I am very introverted and heard Fr Keating on a tape say that contemplative prayer may not be a good fit for introverts. I would like to know what other forms of Centering Prayer might be a better fit? His point was that introverts already are inward looking and may need to look more outward.

A: I am an extravert and was told in the 1970's that Centering Prayer was not a good fit for me. So ... we make the categories and then God does what God needs to do - as long as we consent.

What I believe that Fr. Thomas meant is that introverts *may* become more detached and withdrawn. To guard against this temptation, I always encourage practitioners to couple the practice of Lectio Divina with Centering Prayer. Lectio Divina keeps one grounded in the Lord and challenged by the words of Scripture to faithfully live out the Gospel. One of the fruits of prayer is that one becomes more aware of what is going on around them so that it is not always all about them. Two of the theological principles of Contemplative Outreach say this in a different way:

#7 The contemplative dimension of the Gospel manifests as an ever-deepening union with Christ and the practical caring for others that flows from this relationship. It reveals the deeper meaning of Christ's life and teaching.

#8 Our relationship with the living Christ is the bond uniting us together in mutual love.

([Go here](#) for a full list of the principles)

Be faithful in your practice of Centering Prayer. Allow the gift of Lectio Divina to enter into your prayer time and see with new eyes what the Lord has in store for you. - Fr. Carl

