



CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH®

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Q&A with Fr. Carl J. Arico Archive

On or related to the Spiritual Journey

Q: I saw a notation by Fr. Keating about Heaven right here on earth. Does this take away the hope of a better place to go when I die?

A: Not at all. Heaven is being in the presence of the almighty and loving God for eternity - a living and ongoing presence. Here on earth we are also in the presence of God, and if we live a loving and responsible life we have a little taste of heaven. But that taste comes and goes, not because the presence of God changes, but our receptivity fluctuates. Enjoy - Fr. Carl.

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Q: I was wondering how to go about getting a Spiritual Director, who knows about this spiritual journey done through Centering Prayer. Where do I begin to look, short of a monastery, which I am no where near?

A: There are a number of approaches to finding a Spiritual Director. First I would recommend looking at our [newsletter](#) or [website](#) to see what Centering Prayer groups are in your area. By connecting with them they may have some leads for you. The best approach is getting recommendations from friends or your minister or pastor. Local retreat houses may have someone who is available or have connections. During one of our Sounds True online Centering Prayer courses, a number of participants were assisted by mentors – soul friends. The mentoring was done over the phone – we could put you in touch with them. Be clear with the director what your expectations are and that they are open to the contemplative dimension of prayer – especially Centering Prayer. Don't give up – spiritual direction is an important part of the journey. - Fr. Carl.

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Q: I am sometimes discouraged with the ups and downs of the spiritual journey. Does this ever go away?

A: It is not unusual on the spiritual journey to go through periods of consolation and desolation. There will always be an ongoing experience of both as time goes on. When we are in a period of consolation, it is important to celebrate the joy and peace but be prepared for these feelings to change. When we are in desolation, with feelings of sadness or disappointment, for example, it is important to remain faithful to our spiritual practices and not let them go. In fact the wisdom is to increase times of prayer and meditation - to be strong with God's help knowing that this too will pass. Remember that God is always present no matter what you are experiencing - there is nothing that can separate us from the Love of God. Feelings come and go but our intention and fidelity to our prayer disciplines should remain constant. - Fr. Carl.

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Q: I've been a Centering Prayer practitioner for several years and I've just finished reading *The Better Part - Stages of Contemplative Living* by Fr. Keating. I think that I've been going through the Night of Sense for the past few months. My question is whether the suffering (if that's the correct word) that I've felt by not having the desires of my false self met, can be considered "suffering", and considered as "redemptive suffering"?

A: Well put. You are right; within the right context, suffering is not an end in itself and does lead to redemptive suffering. When you enter into Centering Prayer, you are consenting not only to God's Presence - but also to God's action in your life. In the process of consenting you are allowing the Holy Spirit to do whatever needs to be done in your life. By your intention, you are joining Christ in his work. In joining Christ in his work you are dying to your false self and allowing your true self to blossom. What does this mean? It means you are letting go of those aspects of your life that have blocked the flow of God's grace within you. This usually does not feel very good; it is uncomfortable, for sure. In this dying, you are participating in the power of the cross ... leading to resurrection. This is not just self-improvement, but an entering into the transforming process. Therefore the pain that you experience, the struggle that appears, the grieving that is taking place is a birthing of a new life. Why?

Because of your intention to consent. Simple consent, but huge implications - and huge payoffs! - Fr. Carl.

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Q: What did Teilhard de Chardin mean when he said, "We are not human beings struggling to be spiritual. We are spiritual beings struggling to be human."?

A: Although there are many different approaches to answering this question, here is one to consider. From my readings, de Chardin was always stressing that in the beginning was God and that God exists in and enlivens all creation. All creation has a spiritual element. When human beings came on the scene, this continued to be true. What is the eternal element in each of us? Our souls. When we were conceived, this life principle became flesh and we were born into the world. Before we could even think and react we were already spiritual beings, made in the image and likeness of God. Then our journey of growing as a human being began. So, from the beginning, there was this connection with the divine and the real challenge on the journey was not to become spiritual - we already are - but to become human beings in the full sense of reflecting God within us. As Thomas Keating often says, we are called to be fully human and fully divine. Parents naturally feel this divine nature - the spiritual essence - of newborns and young children. They may not call it that, but it's that spiritual essence which everybody appreciates in young children. - Fr. Carl

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Q: Dear Contemplative Outreach: I am so appreciative of your programs. I am a convert to Catholicism by way of my missionary time in Ethiopia and an experience at Lalibela, the hidden holy land. I returned home (because my doctor husband died in Ethiopia) and joined the Catholic Church. I am feeling now after 15 years a sense of LACK OF JOY in the Church, I found it more in the Protestant Church. However, now once again listening to your programs, I am thinking that perhaps I am entering into a new realm of the church, that I am leaving the rotteness of spiritual practices that have become somewhat empty and entering into a way to still be in the church but at a different level of practice. Or....does one really have to leave the church to find JOY in another place? I am just interested in your evaluation of this conclusion.

A: In every relationship there comes a point when joy wanes. It is a shock to our system. We reach crossroads which suggest that we move ahead, go backwards or just leave and wash our hands of the relationship. These crossroads are wakeup calls and I am sure you have experienced them. These experiences can also be applied to our relationship with the Church, which I see as the mystical body of Christ.

I sense that you cannot go back to where you were and you do not have a desire to wash your hands, so let's talk about "moving ahead." Let's describe it this way: "I have come to a point where I cannot continue as I am - there must be something more to this Church that I have not experienced. I cannot continue in this routine." Along comes Contemplative Outreach and you begin to hear and enter into the contemplative dimension of the Church. You begin to meet spiritual masters - John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton and Thomas Keating - who speak a language that is deeply rooted in the Church tradition, but they speak it in such a way that you are beginning to hear it with new ears. They begin to speak about contemplative prayer, and a practice that you can bring into your daily life.

In hearing with new ears, you begin to look back at the practices that supported you through the years and see/experience them in a new way - the Sacraments, the Creed, the Commandments, the devotions, etc. You have heard "the rest of the story" and it has changed the way you hear with your head and with your heart. It is not only about doing, pondering and responding, but it is also about resting, intimacy, surrender, transformation, oneness etc, etc. You get in touch with the awesome intimate mystery of it all.

Yes, you need to leave the Church in the way you have perceived her. Now with new eyes, see her for the first time once again. Just like a relationship where you are able to see the person with new eyes and the relationship begins to grow again.

As the Scriptures tell us, "I do not want your burnt offerings, I want your heart." Therein comes the joy which has been described as an abiding sense of well-being, based on the experience of a conscious relationship with God.

- Fr. Carl

Q: I have been re-reading Fr. Thomas again, and as always, am awed, inspired and motivated to continue the Centering Prayer practice. I have one question, though. Fr. Thomas says that "human nature is pathological." As a sociologist, I must confess that such a statement strikes me as overarching and possibly wrong. From a reclusive monk's point of view, the world may look chaotic, indeed. But it's a world we've created, not out of pathology, but efforts to adapt to our human condition. Could we amend that "pathological" state to something like: human nature is malleable, turbulent, unpredictable or another term. I am troubled by the "pathology" label.

A: Good question and thank you for your observations. Because Thomas Keating is taking his wisdom and putting it into contemporary terms, there are times when a term can be understood in a specific or informal sense. Here the word 'pathological' is being used in its informal sense - according to the New Oxford American Dictionary 'pathological' can mean 'compulsive or obsessive'.

For clarity however it may be better not to use 'pathological' and stay with the more commonly used word in theological and religious circles: the 'false self', meaning a set of protective behaviors formed around the instinctual needs for survival/security, affection/esteem and power/control. The essence of the false self is this tremendous emotional investment in compensatory programs for happiness to fill these needs which manifest human nature as 'malleable, turbulent and unpredictable'.

I would recommend reading Thomas Keating's little booklet, *The Human Condition*. By the way I am sure he would chuckle with your statement, 'From a reclusive monk's point of view', as Fr. Thomas was anything but that for 20+ years as he traveled around the world teaching and speaking. Thank you for your fidelity to the prayer. - Fr. Carl

