



## Introduction to The Revised Vision of Contemplative Outreach



Thomas Keating

Last year as our leadership team began work on its manner of functioning as servant leaders of Contemplative Outreach, it seemed like a good time to update the Theological and Administrative Principles that have been in place since 2008. A few of the points were a little out of date or needed clarification. As I reflected on changes that might be useful, I realized that a new spirit was moving in our Contemplative Outreach community that needed a more thorough re-visioning and expression.

I have felt for several years that a brief commentary following each statement of our existing principles could add greater clarity. After consulting with a broad range of those in leadership roles, I propose the following revision of the Theological and Administrative Principles, the latter to be called "Guidelines for Contemplative Outreach Service." I include with each list a set of commentaries designed for the present state of our evolving organism.

These new principles and guidelines are not fixed in stone and further points may be added by the leadership as time goes on and new situations arise. It might be good to revisit our Vision every few years or so, because of the rapidly changing culture in various parts of the world.

In this particular format, the commentaries printed in italics follow each theological principle and guideline. Both are part of the Vision of Contemplative Outreach and will be presented for evaluation and comment at the Contemplative Outreach Conference in September 2017. ☸

# THE VISION OF CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH

by Thomas Keating

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,  
and with all your strength, and with all your mind;  
and your neighbor as yourself.*

Luke 10: 27

**We embrace the process of transformation in Christ, both in ourselves  
and in others, through the practice of Centering Prayer.**

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## Theological Principles with Commentary

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- 1. Contemplative Outreach is a network of communities and individuals seeking the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit and to make a contribution to the renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition through the practice of Centering Prayer.**

*The fundamental purpose of Centering Prayer and of Contemplative Outreach is to further the knowledge and experience of God's love in the consciousness of the human family. Contemplative Outreach provides basic instruction in Centering Prayer and additional programs to sustain the development of contemplation and the process of transformation.*

- 2. A commitment to the practice of Centering Prayer is the primary expression of belonging.**

*The daily practice of Centering Prayer is the essence of belonging to the community.*

- 3. The theological foundation of Centering Prayer is the Divine Presence in every human person.**

*The presence of the Divine in us is the permanent self-giving of God to every human person. The Word of God and Source of all creation sustains everything that exists and relates to each human being in a personal way. The primary call of the Spirit is to consent to this intimate relationship.*

- 4. Consenting to the Divine Presence and action within us is the heart and soul of Centering Prayer.**

*To respond to the call of the Spirit is to consent to God's presence and action within us and to the transformative process initiated by the Spirit, which enables us to participate in the divine nature and to become one family in Christ.*

- 5. The indwelling Divine Presence affirms our innate core of goodness and is expressed fully in the theology of the Most Holy Trinity.**

*The Divine Indwelling communicates with us in two ways. First, it reminds us of our creation out of nothing in the image and likeness of God. This belief affirms our basic core of goodness that flows from the gift of life. Second, it heals the wounds of our human nature springing from primitive stages of consciousness. Our instinctual needs have not yet been fully integrated into our evolving state of rational consciousness with its capacity for abstract thinking, free choice, and compassion for others. Spiritual evolution is the healing process of divine transformation through the intimacy established in prayer and in following the example and teaching of Jesus in our daily life.*

- 6. The Divine action is the healing process of transformation in Christ, enabling us to experience an ever-deepening intimacy with God and the practical caring for others that flows from this relationship.**

*The healing process of transformation involves the purification of our false-self and egoic motivation based on the*

instinctual needs of early childhood and the influence of cultural conditioning. Purification is the progressive liberation from the dominance of the conscious and unconscious motives of the ego and the false self. It takes place through the infusion of divine love, which is essential to the healing process. Purification leads to the interior freedom to love, through genuine self-knowledge and the activation of the Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit.

**7. The conceptual background of Centering Prayer grounds and supports the growing silence and stillness of contemplation.**

*In order to be well grounded in the conceptual background of Centering Prayer, we urge beginners to view the Spiritual Journey videos and to study Open Mind, Open Heart, Invitation to Love, and Intimacy with God. These are a summary of the Christian contemplative tradition in dialogue with contemporary psychology and the wisdom teachings of other religions. The method of Centering Prayer is drawn from The Cloud of Unknowing by an anonymous fourteenth century English writer.*

**8. Listening to the word of God through the practice of Lectio Divina is encouraged, particularly its movement into contemplation which the daily practice of Centering Prayer facilitates.**

*The classical term for reflection on scripture and other sacred texts is Lectio Divina. Practicing Lectio Divina through the exercise of the faculties - reading, reflecting, and responding that leads to resting in God - serves to balance the letting go of deliberate thinking during the periods of Centering Prayer.*

**9. We believe that the Christian contemplative tradition and its expression in service is the common ground for Christian unity.**

*Christian contemplation is rooted in scripture and the principal mystics of the Christian tradition. Our contemplative heritage unites the members of the Christian denominations who share the same Baptism, faith in the living Christ, and trust in God.*

**10. While formed by our respective denominations, we are bonded through the experience of Christ in Centering Prayer and in daily life.**

*Centering Prayer transcends denominational differences, bonding us in silence through our growing experience of union with Christ.*

**11. We affirm our solidarity with the contemplative dimension of other religions and sacred traditions.**

*United in our common search for God, we respect and honor other religions and sacred traditions and those committed to them. We engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and work together in areas of social justice, ecological concerns, and contemplative initiatives.*

**12. The practice of Centering Prayer deepens our awareness of the oneness of all creation and our compassion for the whole human family.**

*Centering Prayer inspires ever-increasing regard for others, especially for the poor and those abandoned or exploited in the various throw-away cultures of our time. We are invited to make available the gift of Centering Prayer to everyone, particularly to the needy and the marginalized. Centering Prayer also enables us to respond to the Divine presence in the whole human family, and in all of creation.*

**13. Following the teaching of Jesus, we endeavor to exercise leadership in a spirit of service, utmost charity, and unity.**

*Leadership is a necessary function of the human condition and of society. Following Jesus' example and teaching, we aspire to exercise leadership as a way of serving, of taking the lowest place, and of living ordinary life with extraordinary love. Utmost charity is more than ordinary charity. It is to love one another as Jesus has loved us, that is, with all our faults, limitations, and at times outrageous behavior. It is to forgive completely and from the heart everything and everyone. This is the path to unity.*

**14. The good accomplished through Contemplative Outreach is the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

*To cooperate with grace is to co-create and co-redeem the world with Christ from its beginning to its consummation. At the same time, divine transformation is the gratuitous gift of the Holy Spirit and the Source of all the good that God may accomplish through us.*

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## Guidelines for Contemplative Outreach Service

### with Commentary

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*There are different kinds of spiritual gifts  
but the same Spirit;  
there are different forms of service, but the same Lord;  
there are different workings but the same God  
who produces all of them in everyone.*

1 Corinthians 12:4-6

- 1. Contemplative Outreach is an evolving community with an expanding vision and deepening practice of Centering Prayer, that serves the changing needs of Christian contemplatives.**

*Contemplative Outreach as a community, is a living organism that is interactive, interconnected, interdependent, and dynamic. It aspires to function without a hierarchical structure and is designed to share Centering Prayer and its contemplative vision as widely as possible.*

- 2. The integrity of the teaching of the method of Centering Prayer is contained in the Four Guidelines and their conceptual background as described in the Method of Centering Prayer brochure.**

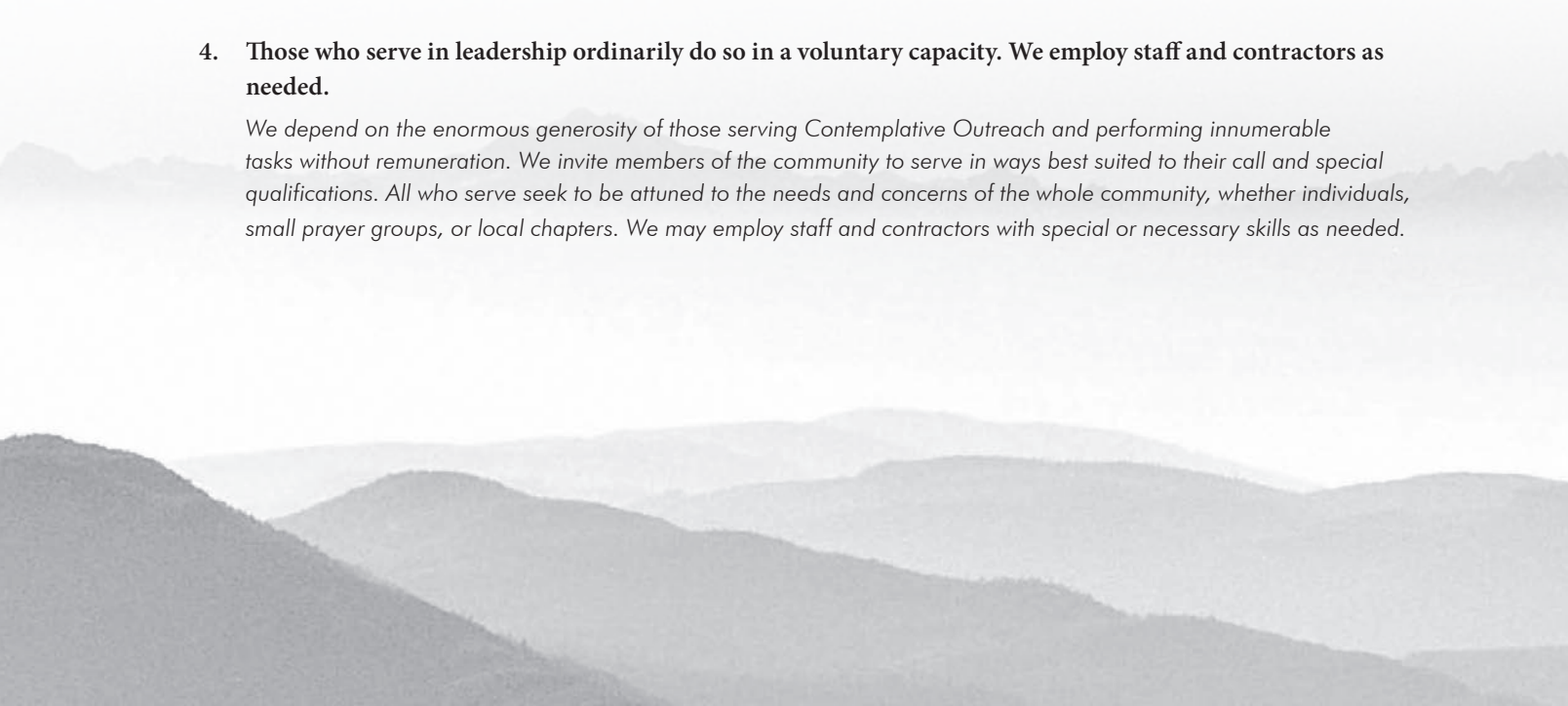
*Additional practices offered by Contemplative Outreach are skillful means to bring the fruits of Centering Prayer into daily life, but are not part of the integrity of the teaching of the method. Similarly, resources such as books, videos, and articles are not part of the integrity of the teaching of the method, but provide vital support for the ongoing practice of Centering Prayer.*

- 3. We share Centering Prayer by appealing to interior attraction rather than proselytizing.**

*The practice of Centering Prayer enables us to bring dispositions of humility and attentive listening into our service. We offer the method of Centering Prayer and its conceptual background in a pastoral way and avoid emphasizing strict policies, rigid rules or proselytizing.*

- 4. Those who serve in leadership ordinarily do so in a voluntary capacity. We employ staff and contractors as needed.**

*We depend on the enormous generosity of those serving Contemplative Outreach and performing innumerable tasks without remuneration. We invite members of the community to serve in ways best suited to their call and special qualifications. All who serve seek to be attuned to the needs and concerns of the whole community, whether individuals, small prayer groups, or local chapters. We may employ staff and contractors with special or necessary skills as needed.*





5. **All who provide Contemplative Outreach services do so in consideration of their personal, family, and professional responsibilities, which come first.**

*Those in leadership carry out their service by first taking into consideration their own personal, family, and professional responsibilities.*

6. **Contemplative Outreach avoids indebtedness and owning real estate in order to be free to devote all its resources to sharing the gift of Centering Prayer.**

*Contemplative Outreach avoids indebtedness and owning real estate, which can burden persons in leadership who want to devote as much of their time and energy as possible to the spiritual welfare and changing needs of the community.*

7. **We reach decisions through prayerful discernment, aiming toward consensus especially in matters of major importance.**

*In view of the prayerful discernment process, consensus for us does not require unanimity, but all members in the group need to have a voice in the discussion. If consensus cannot be reached after adequate consultation in the group as well as with those who will be directly affected, a simple majority can decide. When time is of the essence a person or small team may be entrusted to resolve the impasse. Once decided, all honor the decision in the spirit of unity. For ordinary matters, those to whom a particular responsibility has been delegated do what is necessary to fulfill their appointed task.*

8. **We collaborate with our respective church authorities, but do not seek to become a religious or lay institute.**

*Contemplative Outreach is designed to make available to Christian communities the method of Centering Prayer as a means of furthering the renewal of our common contemplative tradition.*

9. **To remain accessible to everyone, Contemplative Outreach does not endorse particular causes or take part in public controversies, whether religious, political, or social. As private individuals, we act according to our conscience.**

*We avoid taking part in particular causes or engaging in public controversies because these might alienate from Contemplative Outreach persons committed to one side or the other. Our purpose is to make Centering Prayer available to everyone without taking sides. As private individuals, we act according to our conscience.*

10. **We maintain a spiritual relationship with St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, CO.**

*Saint Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado is our spiritual home and a place of retreat and renewal where new insights for our spiritual journey may be revealed.*



PATRICIA JOHNSON, INTERIM ADMINISTRATOR

## Footsteps in the Dance

I have had the honor and pleasure of serving as an Interim Administrator for Contemplative Outreach Ltd since September 15th of 2016. The first three months were spent learning and listening to what has been, to what the Spirit is attempting to bring about, and how to skillfully and prayerfully collaborate with the Spirit's desire.

A lot has happened rapidly, as it seems the Spirit feels our planet needs a more peaceful and unified world sooner rather than later. Here are just a few brief highlights:

Fr. Thomas Keating and others have worked very hard on the new vision, principles and commentaries. The new language reveals a new consciousness for the organism of Contemplative Outreach Ltd as we evolve into a more contemplative servant governance.

Secondly, after 30 years, we are recognizing the impact that the human condition teachings from the Spiritual Journey series have had, both on those privileged with serving retreats year after year like myself, as well as on thousands of transformed retreatants. The contemplative dimension of learning recognizes the importance of repetition, because each time we hear the teachings, we are at a different level of being and formation. If such an impact consistently occurs in a 10-day retreat setting, we are musing about what potential a yearlong program could have. Is there a call at this time to emphasize the basics? Many of us can affirm that the human condition teachings are a foundational and core understanding of the spiritual journey.

Thirdly, in August 2017, the old are being joined by the young in an exciting workshop retreat at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, with the founders of four Christian contemplative groups and 20 persons under the age of 40. Each of the founders — Laurence Freeman (World Community for Christian Meditation), Tilden Edwards (Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation), Richard Rohr (Center for Action and Contemplation) and Thomas Keating (Contemplative Outreach Ltd) — picked the young persons to come and connect with each other, dialogue in small groups, investigate what young persons from all over the planet are passionate about, and see what happens. Excitement, awe and wonder are in the air.

All of the above are glimmers of hope at a time when we all need more hope and trust. ☸



FIONNUALA QUINN, O.P., INTERNATIONAL COORDINATOR

## Vision, Principles and Commentaries for a Worldwide Audience that are Fresh, Current and Challenging

Contemplative Outreach has had strong vision, theological and administrative principles since inception. These founding principles have directed our course and served us well; they have united us as a worldwide contemplative community. In the updated version published in this issue, Fr. Thomas has looked backward and forward, grounding his insights in the originals in tandem with the evolving wisdom of the past 30 years or so.

Recently I introduced these updated vision, principles and commentaries at the Servant Leader Trainings in Dublin and London. We were awestruck and silent as different voices read paragraph after paragraph, each one seeming to get deeper and richer. One of my favourite sections is in the commentaries for the theological principles.


Number 6: “The Divine action is the healing process of transformation in Christ, enabling us to experience an ever-deepening intimacy with God and the practical caring for others that flows from this relationship.” This encapsulates what it is for us to be contemplative and active.

Number 11: “United in our common search for God, we respect and honour other religions and sacred traditions and those committed to them. We engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and work together in areas of social justice, ecological concerns and contemplative initiatives.” These are among the critical worldwide issues of our day.

Number 12: “Centering Prayer inspires ever-increasing regard for others, especially for the poor and those abandoned or exploited in the various throw-away cultures of our time.”

As we prayed with the new materials in the manner of *Lectio Divina*, there were various interpretations according to each one’s experience. One participant in Dublin was especially moved to read of the inclusion of the poor and those abandoned or exploited. Her ministry is as a tutor for troubled youth. She saw the possibility of adapting the Introduction to Centering Prayer for such groups. These commentaries give us all permission to step out of our normal cultural ways of being in the world, to use our imagination in finding ways to share the gift of Centering Prayer in places it has never been before. When a group gathers for Centering Prayer, we could ask ourselves, “Who else could be included here? Who is missing?”

There are many ways to introduce the new vision, principles and commentaries. I invite you to spend time in *Lectio Divina* — reading, reflecting, responding and resting with this rich material, a summation of our Christian contemplative tradition. Then whatever group you find yourself in, introduce this wisdom with *Lectio Divina* and listen for the richness that will emerge from the life experience of all.

Under the Guidelines for Contemplative Outreach Service we read, “Contemplative Outreach as a community, is a living organism that is interactive, interconnected, interdependent and dynamic. It aspires to function without a hierarchical structure and is designed to share Centering Prayer and its contemplative vision as widely as possible.” 



FR. CARL J. ARICO

## We are the Dwelling Place of the Lord

In the theology of Christian spirituality, there are two levels of contemplative prayer — acquired and infused contemplation. Acquired contemplation is how we dispose ourselves to open to God's presence and action within — what we do with the help of the Holy Spirit to prepare ourselves for contemplation. Centering Prayer is such a method. Infused or higher contemplation is a mystical manifestation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in our awareness and our lives as a response to our desire to consent.

The catechism of the Roman Catholic Church speaks of contemplative prayer:

“Entering into contemplative prayer is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we 'gather up' the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us. We let our masks fall and turn our hearts back to the Lord who loves us, so as to hand ourselves over to him as an offering to be purified and transformed.”

- #2711, from Part Four: Christian Prayer, Chapter Three: The Life of Prayer, Section III Contemplative Prayer

The first time I read this passage I could not believe my eyes. It spoke to my heart as a powerful, dramatic portrait of the ritual we experience when we enter Centering Prayer.

It is an entering into the banquet of the Eucharist – the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine — a reminder of the promise: “I will be with you until the end of time,” an eternal covenant. And so we gather the intentions of our heart, bringing our whole being to the Lord through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, celebrate that we are temples of Holy Spirit, made in the image and likeness of God. This is a powerful affirmation: “abide in the dwelling place of the Lord, WHICH WE ARE.”

Faith is itself a gift from God. We awaken our faith in God, who is always present and waiting for us to come to prayer. We let our masks fall – the false self, the homemade self we have acquired throughout the years by our disproportionate need for security, affection and control. We turn not only our minds but our heart, our desire and passion, back to the Lord for 20 minutes, to a Lord that loves us and will always love us, just as we are. I am reminded of the theological principles #4 and #5 of Contemplative Outreach on page two of this newsletter.

In Centering Prayer, we let go of our thoughts, feelings, commentaries, body sensations — we let everything come and we let everything go during the prayer. No resistance, no clinging. We hand everything over to God to receive the gift of a “two-armed embrace” — the arm of purification from our attachments and attitudes and the arm of transformation which calls forth a new creation rising from our depth — Christ in us.

You may wish to re-read the excerpt above in the spirit of Lectio Divina and allow the words to wash over you and penetrate each cell of your being and perhaps spend some time resting in the Word. May blessings be upon you. ☪

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If you are interested, I have compiled a document of excerpts from the catechism which relate to the four conferences on Centering Prayer taught in the introductory workshop, as well as other passages relating to Lectio Divina. This document is posted on the Contemplative Outreach website>FAQs> “How does Centering Prayer relate to the Catholic Catechism teachings on prayer?” You may download the complete document there.





# Post-Traumatic Prayer

by The Reverend Dave Scheider

Director for the Loise Henderson Wessendorff Center for Christian Ministry and Vocation at Seminary of the Southwest, Austin Texas

“Chappy how are you doing?”

I looked up to see Sergeant Omesbury (not his real name), an older combat veteran with a patch from Viet Nam, lean physique, silver hair, and the air of confidence that comes from a person who has suffered much and survived. Sergeant O attended every event we held in our chapel tent in our forward location near the line of demarcation between our coalition forces and the forces of Saddam Hussein who occupied Kuwait. We were in the midst of Desert Storm’s air campaign but we had yet to begin the ground operations. At night we went to sleep to the sounds of aircraft screaming toward targets and artillery firing over our heads into enemy positions.

As I looked at this senior NCO I weighed whether or not to be transparent. If I shared with him that his chaplain was losing faith, would that get around to all of the unit and lower morale? But the truth was that I was furious with everything including God. I had joined the Army to minister to young men and women who would not be sent to war unless the action was justified by some greater moral demand. But here we were fighting to protect wealthy oil families who were on vacation in Europe. Our lives were at extreme risk in order to keep the powerful in power. Strangely, I blamed God for this. I decided not to share all of that – only some of it.

“Sergeant, I’m not OK. I miss my wife and kids and worry that I may not make it home to them. You ever worry about dying?”

“Oh, Chappy, don’t worry about dying. When your time is up, it is up. You could be asleep on your couch or waiting for a bus. When your time to die comes it doesn’t matter whether you’re in combat or at home.”

I’m not sure why I found such comfort in this man’s fatalistic views. All I know is that it worked for me then and there, and I adopted it as my new perspective on death and dying. I chose not to worry and threw myself into my work. The chaplain’s task in his or her unit is to honor the dead, comfort the wounded, and nurture the living. I knew how to do that and gave it all I had for the rest of the war and the long wait to return home.

But something did die in me during Desert Storm. The image I had of God before I deployed was now gone. My old faith in a just universe presided over by a benign and faithful monarchical deity did not return with me to my home station in Germany. My hope that America would avoid unjust wars also stayed in the sands of that desert. I returned from war to preach, teach, and provide pastoral counseling at a time when I no longer knew what I believed. All I knew was that I didn’t believe in that God or that world.

Several years after Desert Storm I attended the Chaplain Officer Advanced Course. I shared six months with about 50 of my peers reflecting on our ministry as unit chaplains and preparing to become supervisors of other chaplains. I listened to my peers and felt alone. They seemed to have love for ministry and zeal for advancing in their careers. The more I heard them share their successes and enthusiasms, the more I felt the absence of meaning in my own ministry. The only thing that motivated me was a fear I had in an unstable world presided over by an uncaring God. As miserable as I felt, I was also afraid of losing my job. My family depended on me.

I have since learned that grace comes in unexpected invitations. During the announcement time at the beginning of a duty day, our course leader said that there were books for free for anyone who would write a review

for the *Chaplains' Journal*. I loved books, especially if they were free. During the first break I examined the selections. Passing over all the military titles, my eyes stopped when I read *Intimacy with God* on the spine of a book by Thomas Keating. The very idea that I could have intimacy with God challenged me since the two of us weren't on great terms. I began reading the book hopefully, wrote a glowing review, and started practicing Centering Prayer as best I could from the instructions provided in the book.

After several weeks of experimenting with this new type of prayer, I realized that something was stirring in me. I did sense a wooing from somewhere and a longing to be with this source of love. The back of the book contained contact information for the Contemplative Outreach organization at the Chrysalis House. I called them, shared my experience and asked if they knew of any groups nearby. To my shock they gave me the name of an Episcopal Church just beyond the fence from the post to which I was stationed. From then on I met with this small group every Tuesday evening for the rest of my time at the Advanced Course.

I have practiced Centering Prayer since 1994. During those decades, the picture of God that I grieved has been replaced with a much more expansive image and worldview. No longer fearing a God that is "up there," I now experience a loving inner dwelling that is with me in the highs and lows. This God isn't responsible for the foibles of humanity, but is my faithful companion on the journey.

In my last decade on active duty, America entered another war. This Global War on Terrorism was not one I would experience directly. Instead, I served in a supportive role, teaching pastoral counseling to other chaplains and supervising their marriage therapy with families and service members who had directly engaged in combat. I learned that safety is the crucial factor we all must have in order to flourish. Without the belief that we are safe, our minds expend vast amounts of emotional energy trying to gain control

of our environments – the very energy needed to sustain love relationships with spouses, children, and friends. I also learned that after listening empathetically to stories of deep suffering time and time again, caregivers (including me) lose their subjective belief that they are safe and secure. Within the caring professions, this is known as compassion fatigue and burnout.

Centering Prayer has helped me cope with the anxiety of not feeling safe. This simple prayer encourages us to neither resist thoughts nor to retain them. When a thought emerges, we are to simply return to our sacred word. I can only imagine how I might have drifted back into burnout during the Global War on Terror as I had in Desert Storm if not for one important belief and one crucial practice I had learned from Centering Prayer and Thomas Keating. Keating teaches that the image of God is not up there, far removed, critical and capricious. Instead, God is the source of intimate love that is within each one of us. Though God does not save us from our circumstances, this Lover accompanies us through each of our life events. And Centering Prayer taught me not to resist anything that came into my life, but to let it go and allow it to flow through me.

I retired from the Army at the end of 2012. Since then I have had the privilege of working for Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. In this new context I administer graduate degree programs for chaplains, counselors, and spiritual directors. I encourage these future caring professionals to learn Centering Prayer, knowing they will need a method of meditation that allows them to welcome all thoughts and persons while also letting all those encounters go. We also hold a weekly Centering Prayer group and we host the United in Prayer Day for all of the Centering Prayer practitioners in the Central Texas area. When we gather each year and I look at nearly 100 contemplatives, I hear the echo of Sergeant O's question: "Chappy how are you doing now?" And in my soul I know that this Chaplain is doing very well and is loved by the most gracious Lover of souls. ☸

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Please send your comments, suggestions and content submissions to Pamela Begeman at [pamela@coutreach.org](mailto:pamela@coutreach.org).



# Where The Spirit Speaks: Centering Prayer in Prisons and Jails

by Ray Leonardini  
Prison Contemplative Fellowship

This is my tenth year of leading Centering Prayer groups in Folsom State Prison in California. What drew me to begin this ministry is now less operative. What attracts me to it now is something I could not have foreseen ten years ago. The change came as I watched prisoners' growth toward intimacy with God. Over these ten years I have witnessed and come to trust the astounding, transforming power of Centering Prayer.

Going inside the prison as a volunteer for the first time, I felt a sharp mixture of fear and curiosity. Did I dare to hold myself out to prisoners as a "teacher" of the spiritual journey after watching all those videos of Thomas Keating? How could I possibly measure up? Did I even know what I believed to be true?

Over time, I learned that I had severely misjudged the situation. I was wrong about the prisoners who came to pray. I was wrong about what it took to be a volunteer. I woefully underestimated the power of Centering Prayer. I now see the most important attributes of a volunteer are simply the daily practice of Centering Prayer and the willingness to be honest about our experiences. Allow me to invoke several well-known themes of Centering Prayer to explain my experience.

## Prayer as Relationship

Prayer as relationship is fertile ground for prisoners. By and large, all their relationships are contorted by betrayal, desertion, trauma, absence, lack of trust, and suspicion. Their notion of God, the summation of all authority figures they've ever encountered, is anything but trustworthy and does not include even the remote possibility of intimacy with the Divine. No different for me, I discovered. Yet, as we explored our lack of trust, we recognized that this mystery of God is as baffling as the mystery of ourselves. Most prisoners do not know the God of Centering Prayer, nor do they have much sense of their own deeper selves.

The notion of consent proves helpful here. This prayer of consent is an entirely new concept for prisoners, as it was for the rest of us. But it is a game-changer. Most prisoners know consent in very specific personal terms. They consent to plea bargains that are frequently forced on them, where they must choose the better of two terrible choices. They consent under duress. Our consent to the presence and action of God within is similar, if the God of our relationship holds all the power. It's the same consent demanded from the district attorney. So, we needed to change our view of God.

At this foundational level, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the great gift of God, a life-saving drop of water on very parched tongues. As one prisoner put it, a "lifer" serving 125 years:

*"Neither son loved him, but the Father still loved them anyway. It's like he couldn't help himself. Nothing he did, or we do, is ever going to change that."*

Prisoners grab this parable and attach it to their souls. It was written for them. They understand how quickly a life can go down the toilet. They can feel in their gut the longing to go back home, yet they have no foreseeable way of doing it. Their experience hitting bottom becomes the incentive to change. The Father "looking lovingly from afar" is the encouragement they need.



## Listening in Relationships

Many prisoners, when asked why they are in prison, will say something like, “I made a lot of bad decisions.” This is drummed into them in every aspect of penitentiary life, and every self-help program offered in a penitentiary. Yet few programs give prisoners the tools for learning why they made these bad decisions. “Letting go of thoughts” is just the tool. They see the roots of poor decisions. They see that most thoughts are illusions emerging from energy centers running amuck. Prayer time prepares us for insights and realizations outside of prayer time. Peter (not his actual name) said in one gathering:

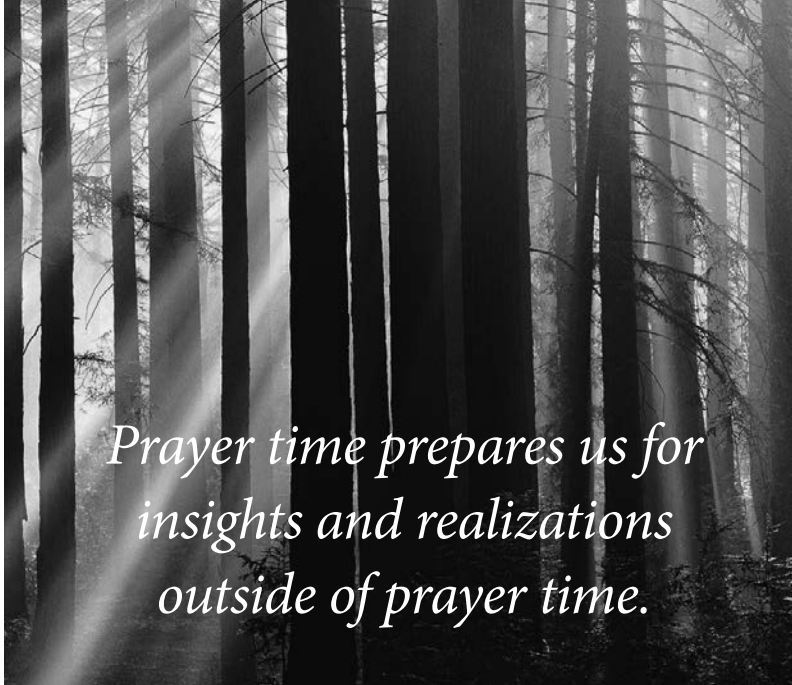
*“I can understand now that I was not a bad kid as they said. I was just a deeply lonely kid who couldn’t find a way to get the affection and esteem I needed. So much of my ideas about fitting into my group came out of my desperate need to be seen and accepted. It never worked, but I couldn’t think of any alternatives.”*

Centering Prayer clears a good amount of the chronic self-loathing, and opens the prisoner to the deeper soundings of the Spirit. Peter says that he would not have recognized his profound personal ache if he hadn’t discovered how his daily thoughts covered it up. Letting go of thoughts, “listening” in Centering Prayer, created the spaciousness outside of prayer to recognize inner motives and judgments.

Once that happens, it is a relatively short step for prisoners to grasp that they are not such bad people after all. And many prisoners say just that! Closely following that realization is the personal affirmation that they might even be lovable. They begin to understand that it’s very possible that this Father of the prodigal son could indeed love them as he loved his sons. The dynamics of the “unloading of the unconscious” does its remarkable work.

## Trauma as a Gateway to Compassion

There is no escaping the experience of personal trauma when conducting Centering Prayer groups with prisoners. Becoming aware of the deep wounds of a lifetime amounts to more than the psychological insight of past events impacting present realities, although it certainly is that. This new awareness brings with it an irresistible primal urge to look with compassion on their own original wounds. This



*Prayer time prepares us for insights and realizations outside of prayer time.*

urge arises out of their depths, free of willpower or decision. Luis (not his actual name), a Mexican national, described his experience in a session after Centering Prayer:

*“I just remembered an experience. I was around two years old and lived in the country with my mother and father and sisters. My father was a criminal in some fashion that I didn’t understand. One day he took me out to the field near our house. Some distance away from the house my father was shot several times. I think he died right on the spot because I tried to revive him and couldn’t. This part of the story I’ve always remembered. What I just now remembered is that my most basic feeling at the time was not about my father, but that I was lost. I couldn’t find my way home. This feeling of being lost, unable to find my way, has been with me all my life. Yet I’ve never recognized it before.”*

Being “lost” made sense to all of us. There was more.

*“Now I can be with that two-year old in a way I could never be before today. I can bring him into the spaciousness I experience in Centering Prayer as a place of healing and comfort. I can bring him home.”*

We all knew that of which he spoke. We all knew the spaciousness that emerges in Centering Prayer. It goes by many names: nonduality, non-ordinary awareness, a vacation from ourselves, the place of



inner stillness. Whatever name we give it, it is the place where the trauma of a lifetime is met by the compassion of the Infinite. We seem to be able to access this healing space in large measure because we learned in Centering Prayer to be still in the presence of the trauma.

This experience of healing does not change the deeply-rooted pain. But our relationship to the pain has changed. Somehow as it now emerges in Centering Prayer we find it easier to be with it, “neither resisting, nor retaining.” It lessens the intensity of the original pain.

### Finding God Within

On one recent trip, I went into Folsom with three other volunteers. I’m now used to passing through the barred metal gates and long anonymous hallways. I don’t have the old anxiety, but I am on alert. As I walk across the yard to get to the chapel, I see a prisoner whom I don’t know sitting alone on a steel table that has been bolted to the ground. His dark blue Levi jacket is buttoned to the top and pulled up over his nose below his eyes. Those eyes are darting back and forth, as if waiting for some dangerous intrusion.

I acknowledge him and make an off-handed remark with a smile, “Seems like a good way to stay warm.” He nods and says nothing. Ten minutes later to my surprise, he comes inside by himself to the Centering Prayer group. It’s his first time. I happen to be at the door, meet him, and start a brief introduction. He still has panic in his eyes. He tells me he’s coming to do something about his anxiety: “I can’t be around other people. My anxiety is killing me.” I hold still and don’t say a word. I try to be with his panic and loneliness. I don’t have advice. I can’t predict whether his level of panic will allow him to sit still. I know there are a lot of prisoners in the room who have similar pain. If only he could get to know them and create the slightest opening, he might begin to get to know himself.

He stayed through the gathering. When we were done, he made straight for me, and with a grin told me he’d come back next week. ☸

You can reach Ray at [office@uspcf.org](mailto:office@uspcf.org)

*Contemplative Outreach will henceforth be sending this printed newsletter to U.S. prisoners in over 465 prisons who have received Centering Prayer materials through Prison Contemplative Fellowship.*

Ray Leonardini is the Executive Director of Prison

Contemplative Fellowship (PCF), a nonprofit

organization dedicated to bringing Centering

Prayer to the incarcerated. PCF sends books

and other resources directly to prisoners in

over 500 prisons across the United States, free

of any charges, when they write and ask for

the materials (Books for the imprisoned and

volunteers can be found on the Contemplative

Outreach bookstore and on Amazon). PCF also

recruits and supports new volunteers with a

Centering Prayer practice to respond to prisoners

trying to start Centering Prayer groups.

PCF also functions as a clearinghouse for

prison volunteers and chaplains looking for

contemplative teaching ideas and suggestions.

Contact PCF at [office@uspcf.org](mailto:office@uspcf.org).

## RESOURCES IN OUR ONLINE STORE



# GOD *is* LOVE

## *The Heart of All Creation*

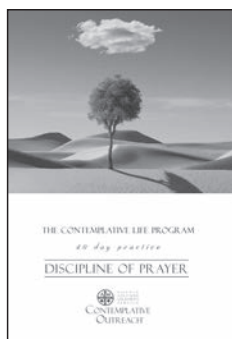
*God is Love: The Heart of All Creation* Series continues and builds on the works of Thomas Keating over the past 30+ years, beginning with the *Spiritual Journey* series. It offers a vision of hope and a view of reality that at once integrates the sciences, religion and humankind's place in the cosmos as divine in origin, unifying in purpose, unfolding in its grandeur.

### SEGMENTS:

Introduction  
SEGMENT 1: Prologue  
SEGMENT 2: Cosmology  
SEGMENT 3: Human Evolution  
SEGMENT 4: Christ, Evolution and Religion  
SEGMENT 5: Christ, Evolution and All Creation  
SEGMENT 6: Into Unity Consciousness  
SEGMENT 7: Playing with God  
SEGMENT 8: Silence and Centering Prayer  
SEGMENT 9: Surrendering to Love  
SEGMENT 10: A Blessing  
BONUS 1: Spiritual Not Religious  
BONUS 2: A Word About Service

### FORMATS:

- **DVD package:** includes 13 segments on two DVDs and guidebook (200 pgs.): **\$59.95 USD**
- **Standalone guidebook** (200 pgs.): **\$25 USD**
- **MP3 (audio only)** – 13 segments with downloadable PDF of reflection booklet (note that the reflection booklet contains reflection questions for each segment): **\$20 USD**
- **MP4 (video)** – 13 segments with downloadable PDF of guidebook: **\$30 USD**
- **Standalone guidebook downloadable PDF** (200 pgs.): **\$12 USD**



### CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE PROGRAM

## The Discipline of Prayer

A daily companion for the deepening of our relationship with God through dimensions of the rich tradition of prayer; attitudes to prayer; ways of prayer; tools of prayer; and a sacramental life of prayer. Each of the 40 days presents beautiful images, brief inspirational readings and teachings and a mini practice on which to focus for the day. **\$10 USD SALE PRICE**



## Free Prayer Timer App

Download our free **Centering Prayer Mobile App Prayer Timer** for both iOS and Android; both include a Spanish-language version.



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# GOD *is* LOVE

## *The Heart of All Creation*

### Silent Retreats Include:

- showing of new DVD series by Fr. Thomas Keating:  
*God is Love: The Heart of All Creation* with discussion
- contemplative teachings on evolution, higher levels of consciousness and the capacity to see God in everything
- 3+ hours of Centering Prayer daily in common
- silence & solitude
- daily celebration of the Eucharist
- the practice of Lectio Divina
- daily prayerful movement
- opportunity to meet individually with retreat leaders for spiritual companionship

St. Mary's Sewanee, Sewanee, TN  
Weekend Only: September 15-17, 2017  
Immersion: September 15-21, 2017  
Visit: [godislovestmarys2017.eventbrite.com](http://godislovestmarys2017.eventbrite.com)

Garrison Institute, Garrison, NY  
Weekend Only: November 10-12, 2017  
Weekend and Immersion: November 10-16, 2017  
Visit: [godislovegarrison2017.eventbrite.com](http://godislovegarrison2017.eventbrite.com)

For more information or to register contact Donna Cole,  
[donna@coutreach.org](mailto:donna@coutreach.org), tel: 973.838.3384

## Directory

For a complete listing of the  
Contemplative Outreach worldwide contacts,  
please visit the **Community** section of our website  
at [www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org) > Community.  
Choose US or International Contacts.

In the USA contact  
**Marie Howard**  
Coordinator of Volunteers  
ph# 973.846.6915  
[MRHfamlife@aol.com](mailto:MRHfamlife@aol.com)

### INTERNATIONAL

#### SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE SPEAKING COUNTRIES

Please contact Extensión Contemplativa at  
[info@extensioncontemplativainternacional.org](mailto:info@extensioncontemplativainternacional.org).  
Visit the website at  
[www.extensioncontemplativainternacional.org](http://www.extensioncontemplativainternacional.org)

#### OTHER INTERNATIONAL COUNTRIES

Please contact  
**Sr. Fionnuala Quinn O.P.**  
ph# 353-1 86-2352299  
[fmquinn48@gmail.com](mailto:fmquinn48@gmail.com)

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## CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH NEWS

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Contemplative Outreach is a network of communities and individuals seeking the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit and to make a contribution to the renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition through the practice of Centering Prayer.

Contemplative Outreach Theological Principle #1