



# Our Myths of Peace

from an unpublished homily given by Thomas Keating on August 19, 2001

*Jesus said his disciples, I have come to set the earth on fire and how I wish it were already blazing. There is a baptism with which I must be baptized and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished. Do you think I have come to establish peace, honor. No, I tell you, but rather division, for now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three. A father will be divided against his son and the son against his father, a mother against her daughter and the daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.*

LUKE 12:49-53

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So here we are in a sharp confrontation with two apparently unreconcilable assertions or implications. Is peace something that Jesus brings or it isn't? And he says both. Obviously the purpose here is to address a very profound issue in human nature and in the whole presentation of the Kingdom of God — peace yes, but not any kind of peace. Perhaps a distinction that might help us here at the outset is to grasp the distinction between peace lovers and peacemakers. It's only the latter that Jesus congratulates in the beatitudes: *Blessed are the peacemakers*, a very high level of participation in the values of the kingdom. Peace lovers like the way things are, either at home, in their local community, in their nations, or their religion. They don't want anybody to rock the boat by raising inappropriate questions or pointing out things that need serious improvement or possibly things that are unjust.

Peacemakers are the voices of the voiceless. They are those who are not afraid to confront. They don't let themselves be distressed by most things, but when there is an issue of serious importance, they have a voice. They speak out. Peace lovers like everything as it is, for fear of losing the kind of peace that they mistake for the true peace that Jesus brings. ...

Everybody who is oppressed or suffers injustice or privation has to have a myth. It's the nature of human beings. The myths support a hope, however ephemeral it is in actual fact. And so in the time of Jesus, the favorite myth of the Israelites was the Kingdom of

***“Do you think I have come to establish what you think is peace? No, but to bring you the kind of division in the circumstances of daily life, that little by little and perhaps suddenly and with great urgency, force us to confront the superficiality of our ideas of peace.”***

God that was to be established by a messiah who would, by force, free the people from the oppression of the Roman occupation, which was smothering their social aspirations as well as their religious sensibilities. Each of us has a certain amount of frustration given the circumstances of the human condition. The more intense the oppression, the more the frustration. In the case of the Jewish people of Jesus' time, they had two great symbols that manifested or put into the concrete their aspirations, their myth, and one was the great banquet, a celebration on a mountain top, which was designed to rejoice over the vindictive triumph of all of their political enemies and the abundance that God would give God's triumphal people after generations of frustration and misery. The other was the cedar of Lebanon, which grows in their area in those days at least 200 or 300 feet high, like the sequoias of the northwest [United States]. And this was the symbol of the ascendancy of Israel over all the nations, which would flow into this theocratic kingdom and find their peace in submission to the theocratic rule of the God of Israel who was becoming the God of all the nations through the prophets.

In any case, this idea of the Kingdom of God was not Jesus' idea. His knowledge and experience of the God of the universe as a loving father was totally different. And that brought him into intense and enormous conflict with the authorities of the time and with the popular mind that was saturated with this image of success — vindictive triumph, liberation, freedom from all the miseries of daily life that the occupation of the Romans had caused. And these people were not about to give up this myth. Some of the disciples had it, probably Judas had it most of all. And when [Judas] saw that his idea of the kingdom was not going to happen, he fell into this terrible despair, hatred, anger, and alienation.

These are the consequences of the frustration of a myth on which we have lived on in order, in some cases, to survive. And so when Jesus says, *do you think I have come to establish your idea of peace in this world?* No. On the contrary, I have come to shake up your concept of what happiness and peace is. I have come to shatter the symbols that you think are important to the achievement of your myth. This didn't go down too well even for the disciples. It doesn't go down well

with us, because the same question is addressed to us in the liveliness of the Gospel as it's proclaimed in the present moment.

Jesus speaks of his anguish that this true concept of peace might be established. He wants to see this ablaze; he wants to see it burn up these other myths which actually produce sin and tragedy. When the frustration and oppression get bad enough and our myths have no longer the power to sustain us, then comes this intense pain, anguish and alienation. It can be so painful that we turn it against others and hate others and have critical thoughts. And finally this ends in alienation. Actually, this is the path to hell in a figurative sense — hell as the ultimate state of psychological loneliness, alienation, desolation, despair, and human misery.

This descent into hell is not an uncommon human experience from this figurative perspective. Most people cannot face the pain of that loss. It's so much easier to apply it outside ourselves and project it onto others and then comes not only hatred of others, which is really the hatred of ourselves, but machetes with which we destroy other people to get away from our own pain that is unspeakable and un-faceable. It's hell. Hence these myths that support this process of human degradation and deterioration are obviously not the peace that Jesus has brought. Rather he brings the kind of question that invites us ever-so-gently in the here and now to begin to dismantle the myths on which we live.



To face our own myths is a great accomplishment. It does not come easily and hence it requires the divine exercise of division. Jesus says, *I have come to bring division*. It's the division that God introduces into our life that points to the insubstantiality of our myth. That is the point of the question. *Do you think I have come to establish what you think is peace?* No, but to bring you the kind of division in the circumstances of daily life, that little by little and perhaps suddenly and with great urgency, force us to confront the superficiality of our ideas of peace.

What might be some of our ideas of peace? A few come to mind. Good reputation, good income, good portfolio, good entertainment, good acceptance by family and friends, good success in business, profession, ministry. These are not sources of peace. A certain moderate possession of these things ... are useful, but as life becomes more difficult, we may cling to these myths with the kind of utter totality that the people of Jesus' time clung to their myth of the kingdom. The kingdom is not worldly success. *My kingdom is not of this world* and these values that I enumerated, while having a certain value, are not the ultimate value or values by which we can live as a fundamental base for our activities.

The shattering of our myths is what is implied in this question: *I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing. There is a baptism with which I must be baptized and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished*. This is coming from somebody who perceived the

profoundest level, the true value, which is not a myth, but the love of God trying to free us from the false gods that our myths have created. What happens when we sit with the pain and face the failure of our myths and face our own moral failure at times to deal with the circumstances of life with justice and truth and charity? There comes this unbearable confrontation with the dark side of ourselves at the deepest level, that side that can rush out and destroy other people in order to get away from the pain. It's at that point in which our myths are frustrated and [we see] the darkness that we might do — at that point we understand who Jesus Christ is and what salvation means. It means that God joins us at this point of utter powerlessness in the face of our pain, the pain of loss of all the symbols that we thought would bring us peace. And it's that gift of God's presence in which God takes into Godself, so to speak — at least in the person of Jesus Christ and his passion and death and resurrection — that anguish, alienation, that self-made hell in which, when we cease projecting it on others, we have to face in ourselves.

And in doing so, we find the peace that surpasses all understanding, the peace which the world cannot give through all its promises of delightful mythology. It's the world that is. It's the world of God's infinite mercy. It's the world in which the power of God is totally at the service of infinite mercy in which God takes upon Godself the anguish, the desolation, the loneliness, the hellishness of which hell itself is the symbol. And



that is the peace that the world cannot give. And that is the peace which is total gift: when we let go of our undue attachment or dependency on all the methods we thought would bring us happiness, which is the peace that the world offers, but not the peace that Jesus has come and died to give us.

In a prison not long ago, someone was trying to preach to the inmates, and the question was raised, "what is spirituality?" And various suggestions were made by the inmates and the staff of this Christian volunteer group. And since they weren't getting anywhere, a gentleman in the back and in prison for life — and so he wasn't thinking much about time at this point — said "Spirituality takes place, or is possible, when you have been to hell and come back." ☸



MARY JANE YATES  
ADMINISTRATOR

# Growth in Secret: Contemplative Outreach 2021

*Jesus said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A person scatters seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when she is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, they do not know. Of her own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, at once they start to reap because the harvest has come.'* MARK 4:26-29, New Jerusalem Bible (adapted for pronouns)

**A**s Administrator for Contemplative Outreach (CO), it is my privilege to prepare a report on what has happened within our wonderful organism during the past year. In reality, this task is impossible, since most of our work is undertaken 'day and night' by countless volunteers and communities all over the world with whom I have had no direct contact. It is also impossible to gauge the impact of work that it is primarily spiritual in nature since the fruit of our 'prayer in secret' often remains just that: a secret! Nonetheless, thanks to the help of a wonderful team of dedicated staff and volunteers, I am pleased to share with you here at least some of what I consider to be 'the grain in the ear' of all that has transpired in our community this past year. I share it in the hope that you too will be inspired to share in the harvest and celebrate this miracle that is Contemplative Outreach!

## Sharing the Prayer

In addition to the countless individual and small group Centering Prayer (CP) sessions that occur all over the world daily, our CO *Service Teams* continued to support efforts to share the prayer. In February, the *Facilitator Support* service team

hosted an enrichment session for small group facilitators. The CP *Introductory Program* and the *Presenter Formation* service teams co-hosted a Presenter Enrichment session in April. Both these events attracted several hundred participants who for the first time were able to connect with other presenters and facilitators from around the world to receive encouragement and resources for sharing the prayer. Late in 2021, a need was identified by our *Global Team* to host an online formation for practitioners outside the U.S. who had indicated an interest in becoming commissioned presenters. A team of mentors has now formed to support seven presenters-in-training from countries as diverse as Canada, Barbados, the Netherlands, Italy, and Kenya. CO was also invited to present a brief introduction to Centering Prayer during the online *Conspire* conference hosted by the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) in September. With over 5,000 people registered, this was a wonderful opportunity to both share the prayer and deepen connections with our CAC colleagues!

Our CO *website* is another important tool for support and

enrichment about Centering Prayer and the teaching of Fr. Thomas. Inquiries are received from all over the world every single day and in 2021, over 157,000 users visited the site from 200 countries.

Now in its 8th year, our *Centering Prayer mobile app* was downloaded by 48,897 new users with a total of 3,874,109 sessions logged by new and continuing users. Since the app is used as a prayer timer to support a Centering Prayer practice, this number of sessions very likely represents about *1.3 million hours of prayer logged in 2021!* This year also saw the launch of the French-language version and the addition of new prayers and sounds, including original recorded chants.

Since March of 2018, Contemplative Outreach has also partnered with [Meditation Chapel](#) (MC), an online, Zoom-enabled prayer chapel originally created by members of the WCCM community and now operating and managed independently. Since the pandemic's beginning, MC has doubled size and now has more than 8000 people registered and over 150 groups. There are now groups offered in Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Swedish and the 12-step tradition. It is estimated that more than 2/3 of



the growth comes from Centering Prayer practitioners joining the chapel.

Our *social media outreach* also offers consistent support for a Centering Prayer practice, including Thomas Keating teachings, our CO vision & principles, the mobile app as a practice tool, Word of the Week enrichment, and any special program promotion. Our social media presence has seen consistent growth over the past year. A pool of eleven community volunteers moderate the CO Facebook group which now has 18,500 members (11.4% growth). Our Facebook page presently has 6215 Followers (9.8% growth); Twitter: 9822 Followers (2.1% growth); Instagram: 1867 followers (42.4% growth). The YouTube channel now has 19,600 subscribers (47.3% growth). In this period we've also experimented with using Tik Tok (117 likes, 40 followers) as a way to make Thomas Keating's teachings available to younger adults.

### Deepening Practice

Since the use of Zoom has now become commonplace for most CO chapters and service teams, 2021 saw a burgeoning of online offerings for our global community. Of these many offerings, *intensive or post-intensive Centering Prayer retreats* continued as a cornerstone of deepening practice for many in our CO community. The *Retreats Service Team* worked tirelessly to support those leading these retreats—some of them occurring online for the first time. Other opportunities for deepening practice were facilitated by the *Welcoming Prayer* and *Living Flame Service Teams* with the *Living Flame 2* program offered by Zoom over seven months for the Portland, Oregon, USA; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania USA, and Iceland chapters. The *Lectio Divina Service*

*Team* also offered an online training from August to September. 970 people registered with 390 attending the initial workshop and an average of 145 attendees per follow up session.

Another exciting development in 2021 was the launch of our free, online *Spiritual Journey Program*. Initiated at the request of Fr. Thomas in 2017, this course is based upon the original *Spiritual Journey* series that comprises the foundational teaching legacy of Thomas Keating. We are pleased that this beautiful course is now available for those who are looking to deepen their practice through individual study, retreats, or ongoing prayer and study groups.

Other online courses offered in 2021 include: *Practicing the Presence of God* (June, 554 participants); *Lumen Divina* (Advent, 380 participants); and *The Dynamic Center of Being: Awakening to Unity Through Centering Prayer* taught by David Frenette (November, over 1000 participants). A new writing team also formed for our liturgically-based program *Word of the Week*, which now has 2900 global subscribers.

### Serving Diversity

The *12 Step Outreach service team* hosted a 4-Week Spirituality Series in both spring and fall. Topics included an Intro Workshop, Welcoming Prayer, and Forgiveness Prayer. Approximately 700 people signed up and each session included a 20-minute prayer period. An ongoing weekly Welcoming Prayer Practice group formed out of one of these offerings and an online, international, 12-Step Formation for the Introductory CP Workshop was hosted in June and July with 14 people attending.

This year also saw the formation of our *Prison Outreach Service Team* (COPOST). An article about this appeared in last year's newsletter. Since then, the team held an initial discernment/trial meeting, then started hosting monthly gatherings in August. About 15-20 participants attended each meeting with the content alternating between special topics and an open forum. 62 letters were received from 51 different prisoners and the team discerned a process for answering these. 1508 newsletters were also mailed to prisoners and 1441 to volunteers to deliver in person to prisoners. COPOST participated in a panel discussion at our global conference in September and in late October launched their first "Outside the Walls" Centering Prayer group.



Teresia Hašanová celebrates the publication of her Czech translation of *Open Mind Open Heart*.

*Translation Working Group (TWG):* A dedicated team of volunteers continued to meet bi-monthly to share ideas and support for translating CO materials and Fr. Keating's work into diverse languages including French, Spanish, Hungarian, Polish, German, Icelandic, Italian and Korean. After many months of negotiating with local publishers, TWG members Teresia Hasanova and Joseph Kim were happy to announce the release of the Czech version of *Open Mind Open Heart* and the

Korean version of *Divine Therapy and Addictions*. The *Subtitle Working Group* also continued to meet bi-monthly with members working tirelessly to produce accurate subtitles for some of the countless videos of Fr. Thomas available in our YouTube channel. Although extremely demanding, this work also brings deep joy to these volunteers, who often remark on how much it benefits their spiritual growth to spend this in-depth time with words of Fr. Thomas.

## Building Community

Our *Chapter Support Service team* (CST) continued to provide foundational support for the formation and mentoring of both local and online CP communities. Chapter Planning and Prayerful Discernment events consisting of two sessions of two hours each via Zoom were facilitated for the following chapters: New Jersey; Columbus, OH, Charlottesville, PA; New York, NY; Central Pennsylvania and northern Virginia in the U.S. as well as for Central Ontario, Canada. These events were extremely useful as participants were encouraged to simplify activities and promote a team approach to leadership.

CO's monthly *e-news bulletins*, semi-annual *newsletters* and quarterly *The Voice* also continued to serve as tools for supporting and building connection for CO members. Our e-news bulletins have now been offered for 13 years and have grown in distribution to over 28,000 in 2021; the Q&A section attracts the most interest. Two issues of CO NEWS were mailed in June and December to 17,000 persons in the US and distributed digitally via website and e-bulletin.

Another important event for our community was the 29th annual *United in Prayer Day* (UiP) celebration and gathering held on March 6. For the first time, UiP was offered as 28 hours of continuous prayer, hosted by at least 14 countries representing at least nine languages on one Zoom-video prayer chapel. Comments flowed in afterwards such as: *I can use only one word to describe Saturday – sublime. I moved from Australia to Ireland – 7 hours – and this immersion in prayer and spirituality released a lot of my anxiety and heaviness...Our 3 Armenian groups are ecstatic! They have now experienced a glimpse of the body of Christ. For an hour (almost), we became whole, by finding our missing parts...The day had a powerful impact on me.....being together in the hundreds...gave me Hope. Not hope for anything specific. More of a hope in what God is weaving together.....in our unseen future. And being of small heart and vision — I was blessed by having both EXPANDED!*

Another first for CO in 2021 was the *community conversation project* that took place between May and July. A full [report](#) on this project can be found on the website and the Governing Board, staff, and service teams continued to use these findings to discern priorities for 2022. This project was followed closely by our first ever *online Global Conference* held on September 16-18. In total, 1400 people registered with an average of 300 attending each session. Overall, the feedback for this conference was very positive with the most common comment being an expression of joy at being able to join others from around the world. Since the conference was initially planned as a hybrid event with in-person attendance in Denver, USA, several challenges were encountered with time zone differences and access to breakout sessions

## Stewardship and accountability

The *Governing Board* of CO met bi-weekly by Zoom throughout most of 2021 to fulfill their role in overseeing our financial, corporate and legal affairs and ensuring our activities are in line with the [Vision, Theological Principles and Guidelines for Service](#). Two committees of the Board, the *Finance and Investment* committees also met quarterly to review budget documents and oversee CO's investments. Overall, CO was in a healthy state financially at the end of this year, thanks to the faithful generosity of our many donors. Our expenses were down as well because of the Global conference moving to an online format which meant reduced spending for scholarships and travel. It is with deep and overwhelming gratitude that we share the following summary of our year end financial statements:

INCOME SOURCES		EXPENDITURES	
DONATIONS (including for on-line courses):	\$445,352	PROGRAM	\$387,072
BEQUESTS	\$5,894	GEN & ADMIN	\$194,643
WEB SALES	\$60,899	COST OF SALES	\$46,340
ROYALTIES/COURSES	\$37,338	CHAPTER/VOLUNTEER SUPPORT	\$95,130
INVESTMENT INCOME	\$87,004	SCHOLARSHIP	\$1,309
CIRCLE OF FRIENDS	\$224,000	FUNDRAISING	\$28,427
TOTAL:	<b>\$860,487</b>	TOTAL:	<b>\$752,921</b>

# Sometimes You Just Got to Hang On

By Howard B., England

“*T*his journey is a process of dismantling the monumental illusion that God is distant or absent.” This is my favourite Thomas Keating quote, as it resonates with me deeply, perfectly describing my story thus far. I pray some of my missteps on the path may be useful to you.

My name is Howard and I'm an addict. I say this several times a week sitting in circles with other men and women. We open our hearts and share our stories; and by doing so, transform dusty cold rooms into sacred spaces.

Our common affliction is what earns us our chair in the circle but what bonds us is the shared mercy we have experienced through working and living in the 12 Steps of recovery. A process that feels like divine archaeology; slowly getting rid of the dirt to get to the good stuff which was lying buried inside all along.

That sacred wound of addiction is only part of my story but re-surrendering on a daily basis to my powerlessness over cocaine and heroin is still, after many years clean, the portal that allows me to fully consent to the Divine presence and action within.

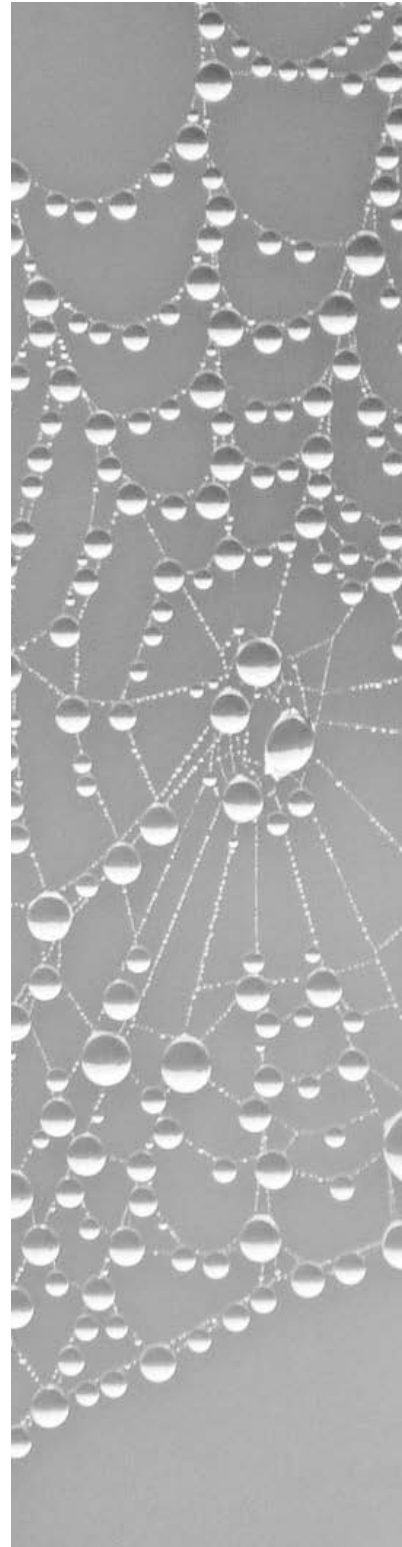
I was one of those so-called functioning addicts. Fortunately a successful creative life with its trappings didn't fill the hole in my soul; sadly neither did being surrounded by a family whose love I couldn't feel. I sported a huge ego, barely covering crippling low self-esteem. That brokenness went back to my first breath when I was given away as a baby. Drugs medicated that pain for decades until the daily grind of servicing a terrifying opiate dependency shattered the illusion that I was just more rock-n-roll than you.

More dead than alive I ended up in a psychiatric rehab facility. Even then when life hung by a thread I threw my toys out of the pram when I heard I was to undergo a spiritual program of recovery. Like so many others, denial and delusion were my last defence.

Sitting in group therapy, unable to make eye contact, I was dimly aware of trite inspirational posters and poems on the wall. Overcome by shame and the reality of my reality I became hysterical and collapsed. When I came to, I was mumbling these lines from a Hafiz poem that had been pinned up but that I don't remember seeing.

*Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly,  
let it cut more deep.  
Let it ferment and season you  
as few human or even divine ingredients can.  
Something missing in my heart tonight  
has made my eyes so soft,  
my voice so tender  
my need for God  
absolutely clear.*

From that moment my agnosticism and intellectual pride melted away and I was ready to be helped. At 45 years of age I was finally clean and sober but not well enough to go home. I was living in a dry house and the internal toxic noise which I had suppressed my whole life





through drink and drugs was suddenly at full volume. I received the gift of meditation through a mindfulness CD. If that little disc didn't save my life it certainly stopped me going mad. What a revelation to discover I am not my thoughts. Who knew? For decades I'd guessed that meditation would hold the key, however I wrongly imagined my mind would have to look like an uncluttered zen temple for me to even start. I learnt that it wasn't about having no thoughts but instead gently and repeatedly taking half a step back from them. The chaotic internal dialogue became less personal as I diligently practiced, worked the steps and slowly rebuilt a life.

The life I thought I was building came crashing down within a year. I reasonably imagined that if I substituted drugs and alcohol for recovery and meditation I could basically carry on being the version of me that I had always known. My body had other ideas. Decades of narcotic abuse caught up with me. I became bedbound and unable to care for myself let alone my young family.

It seems I needed the mental illness of addiction to bring God to my attention, but I also needed chronic physical illness to sit me down long enough to commit to an intimate relationship with Intelligent Love.

The condition I have seems to be beyond the remit of conventional medicine so I threw myself harder at meditation, my logic being that I'd already put my family through enough and perhaps this new spiritual life could stop me inflicting my despair and self-pity on my children.

I relied completely on God to keep me sober but as soon as I started meditating it was all back on me. I muscled through following my breath and because I was still desperate and ill, I was obviously failing. Not a moment too soon Centering Prayer appeared in my life through a David Frenette podcast. Rather than learning something new it felt like being reminded of something soul deep. The last vestiges of fight that life wasn't going how I'd planned started to evaporate.

My 12-Step life which told me *"We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found."* chimed with the life-long forgotten belief that divinity lies within. Thomas Keating's teachings showed me how to access that truth. Cocaine Anonymous gave me my life back but Centering Prayer allowed me to love what I'd been given — no matter what.

I've never done less than two sits a day, I meditate with others in recovery on a weekly basis and have experienced that deep unloading from prolonged silent retreats. On the journey I've been blessed with opportunities to pass our beautifully simple practice to others in recovery. Like me, so many of my fellows felt they were failing at meditation until they encountered Centering Prayer. Groups have sprung up supporting each other on the path. Prior to the pandemic we were a UK-based band of 12-Step Centering Prayer addicts in recovery. However, since we went online we have been joined by many other likeminded folk from around the world (details of how to find us below).

I do all this because I intuitively know this is what is required to treat the condition that is me. Having said that, I liken my Centering Prayer sits to an extreme sport — sometimes you've just got to hang on. During my twenty minutes I don't tend to get peace and although I love silence it's a rare visitor between my ears. What I do get, which is way beyond what I could have dreamed of, is that when I open my eyes and reengage with the world, I'm calmer, more loving, and on some days everything from the dog's wagging tail to drying laundry to waving trees and clouds of starlings seem like precious gifts that were waiting for me to wake up and appreciate.

By returning ever-so-gently to my sacred word I've learnt to Let Go and Let God, not just in my sits but in most waking moments. I consent to the divine presence and action within. The monumental illusion is slowly fading. God is no longer distant or absent. ☸

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The Guttermonks hold weekly meetings on Zoom and are open to anyone in 12-Step Recovery. Every Saturday 3pm U.K. time.  
Meeting ID: 371 135 351 Password: guttermonk

More resources may be found at <https://cp12stepoutreach.org/>



# God's Hands in the Prison Ministry

By Johanna Ash, Corrales, New Mexico

**A**s I look back over our 6 ½ years corresponding with each other, I think my key motivating factor was to do God's will. I am constantly in awe of God's work in us. We are agreed, Tee and I, that we are still learning about each other. We are still revealing our pasts and our hopes while we share our present times. I wonder if Tee feels as vulnerable as I do, in our sharing. Our sharing moves beyond daily living and travels into our faith journeys. We are trusting each other. Tee is an inmate in the Texas State Prison System sentenced for life.

He is young enough to be my son. I first started writing him after a Centering Prayer retreat day. A plea came through that there were lonely men who needed to know they were not forgotten. I signed up for three, because I had the time and ability. I figured, realistically, in another year, there would no longer be any of the three still interested in letters from a married, retired kindergarten teacher. In the meantime, maybe I could take some of the burden of loneliness away.

They had personal recommendations from a team of our prayer group that traveled to Tennessee Colony in east Texas every week or so. Once I signed certain papers, I was cleared by the criminal justice department and our letters began.

I sent my introductory letters and invited each to write to me. Two



years later, one man was released on probation. We still write about once a year. Another inmate thanked me and said he no longer had the time to write, because he was studying to become an Oblate. And I am still writing to Tee.

We exchange letters about once a month. He writes about his studies, his days and sometimes he writes about a book he is reading. Sometimes he writes about what he is studying, or the types of conversations he is having with fellow inmates. Sometimes we reference the days before he went to Darrington, which has a seminary and courses to become a chaplain.

When I first became acquainted with him he was in East Texas. In the third month of our writing letters, he had been accepted into the Heart of Texas Foundation College of Ministry located in South Texas.

It is an amazing effort to pull off a Centering Prayer group in prison. The logistics seem almost impossible to overcome. The group going to Tennessee Colony may have driven for two hours and then told the units were in lock-down. Lock-downs are not only for some infringement of inmates but also due to lack of staff to supervise groups or to contain Covid among the prisoners or guards. It can be difficult to find a quiet corner for prayer; most all the places are high use and not very prayer inducing. Tee was one who thrived on the quiet peace and love of prayer.

He was lonely. His family all pretty much disowned him after court sentencing. He knew he needed to accept the consequences for poor judgment, for breaking the law, for doing what he did. I am still not totally clear about Tee's crime. It is difficult to believe he is

a major criminal. He has many gifts that are helping him overcome the hardships of being incarcerated. It is not perfect — how could it be? His faith is strong, he is educated, creative and smart. Tee is also humble enough to know he cannot get through these years of prison on his own. Each letter comes to me with a Bible verse under his signature. These passages give him strength as he makes his way through his days.

I don't think I need to write descriptions about life in prison. I am sure you have seen shows or heard about the constant racket, fights, humiliations, abuse by the guards.

My correspondence also was under censorship. I had to stop using address labels with adhesive. Stop sending colorful pictures and magazine articles. Certainly no greeting cards can be sent.

The first letter I got from him after his transfer was written two days after his arrival. He was so excited to be there. His cell assignment hadn't been made yet and he was in temporary housing. Tee made it a sound like a resort — a bottomless coffeepot, windows to look across the fields, friendly faces. He writes really good letters. As the days went by, he wrote about his classes. He liked everything about them, the learning, the structure, the professors. There were readings and books and papers to write. Papers were done in longhand, often in pencil, since pens are limited. Tee graduated in four years with a bachelor's degree. I was able to access the video of the graduation using the website for the penitentiary. The team of students that had been studying and sharing faith together was disbanded. Tee was the only one who was not

given his new placement of choice. He had to stay in Darrington. It was a bitter disappointment.

I do see God's hands in this as well. Tee is now Field Chaplain and walks the floors, talks and counsels those in Administration Segregation, those most dangerous for themselves and others, the worst-case criminals. He is the one the office calls for if there is a problem or if there is a risk of suicide.

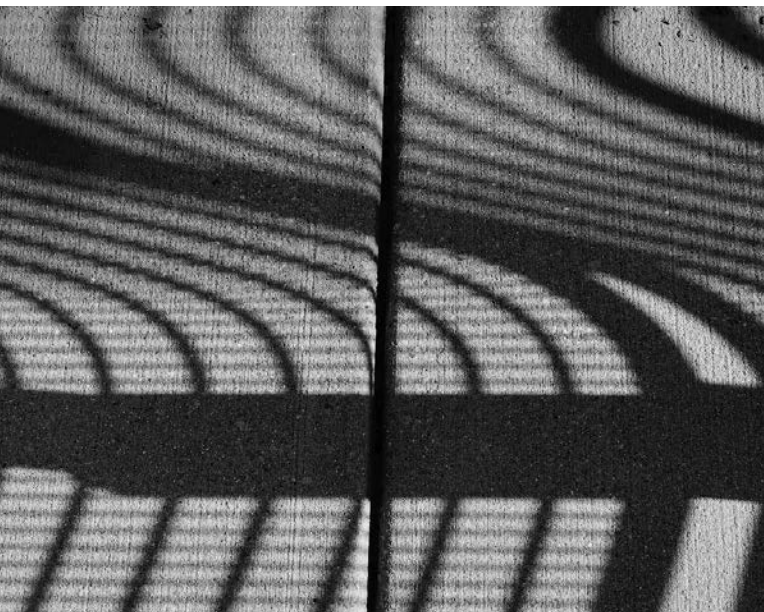
I do not see the men as prisoners when I write Tee. I see them as I see my brothers in Christ. "There but for the grace of God go I."

Tee wears many hats now. In addition to his counseling work, he is working towards a master's degree. He organizes church services, and does the pastoral work asked of him. He works in the library and is hoping that the next time he is offered a chance to do different work he can learn how to quilt. He dreams of opening a fabric shop when he is released. He has also been reacquainted with his daughters and they bring him much joy.

I have been so blessed to be on this journey with Tee. His letters arrive into my bubble of retirement. My days are so uneventful and during these Covid times almost monotonous. His letters remind me of marginalized people, those in prisons as well as those marginalized for other reasons. Knowing this helps me stay humble. There isn't a lot I can do to bring solace, but I can write. I try to put some humor into his days.

We both think he gets all the letters I send, but there is no guarantee. There is a little slip of paper in his letters letting me know someone else has read them before they were sent. This happens after Tee has submitted the letters for approval. I am thinking my letters are examined the same way; I don't know. I hand write sometimes, and sometimes I type my letters. Often I will write on the back of a few of my favorite Richard Rohr meditations. I do my best to encourage Tee in his work. In his last letter, he informs me that a section of Darrington is being outfitted to help with housing for the asylum seekers. There are some name changes happening.

God blesses them all. We are all in God's hands. If you have an opportunity to write to inmates, I recommend saying yes. ☸





# The Interplay Between Scuba Diving and Centering Prayer

by Celpha Sands, Bahamas

**I**n November 2004 when I heard the Centering Prayer presenter in New Providence, Bahamas describe how to deal with thoughts that are encountered during Centering Prayer as a scuba diver sitting on the bottom of the ocean watching boats floating overhead, I eagerly looked forward to hearing more. Even though I had never scuba dived, I immediately identified with the imagery, especially as a Bahamian living in an archipelago surrounded by beautiful, clear and pristine waters regarded as one of the world's scuba diving meccas. She continued, "You know that they are there because you see them, but you do not pay attention to them, you just allow them to float by on their merry way because your attention is on the ocean where you are already resting in God's Presence."

Much later, I attended an online Shalem Institute of Formation Group Spiritual Workshop. One of the facilitators shared an awe-inspiring story about her scuba diving experience when she placed her finger into the gill of a fish and felt its heartbeat. I was determined to try it!

On the threshold of my 60th birthday, I decided going scuba diving would be a fantastic way to celebrate such a milestone and made a booking. Whilst speaking with the dive master, I said, "I am not a strong swimmer." He calmly assured me saying, "There is no need for concern because you do not need to know how to swim to scuba dive." What a relief it was to hear these comforting words.

On the actual day, I was filled with excitement and nervousness. Upon arriving at the boat yard, I was

warmly greeted by one of the dive masters, Sheena, who guided me through the learning process.

After being suited up with mask, vest, weight and belt system, tank, regulator, buoyancy control device etc., I instantly felt like I weighed 500 pounds as I waddled down to the seashore like a duck. Amazingly, once I got into the water, the weight became a non-issue and my nervousness miraculously disappeared. Standing in ankle-deep water, Sheena provided further instructions and explained the hand signals to be used to indicate whether I was okay, I needed to ascend, or if I was uncertain about how I felt. I did several drills in the shallow water to familiarize myself with the equipment and the hand signals. Having completed the drills, she and I moved progressively into deeper waters. As I descended to the sea bottom and knelt, I was aware of the boats, buoys and people on the surface and schools of small silver fish swimming around me. I was acutely aware of these movements, yet I did not pay any attention to them; my focus was solely on my breathing and keeping my lips properly wrapped around the regulator.

The following morning while standing at the kitchen sink, it suddenly dawned on me that my maiden scuba dive adventure perfectly personified the 4 Rs of Thoughts in Centering Prayer:

**Resist** no thought.

**Retain** no thought.

**React** emotionally to no thought.

**Return** ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

The experience has certainly changed my Centering Prayer



practice because it is no longer a beautiful thing that I imagined or a metaphor, but something I have experienced. Thomas Keating reminds us, "Some thoughts we are indifferent to, they're just the inevitable passage of our imagination from one thing to another. So, we have to have a friendly attitude towards thoughts in general, which is very different from getting involved with the thoughts. We resist no thought. We hang onto no thought. We react emotionally to no thought. And we return to the sacred word when you notice you're getting interested, either by attraction or by aversion with any particular thought or perception ... [The] proper attitude is to pay no attention to them at all, let them come, let them go" (Continuing Series: The Discipline of Centering Prayer).

There are two other insights that can be related to Centering Prayer. Firstly, I was assured that I didn't have to be a strong swimmer, that no special training or effort were needed. Likewise in Centering Prayer, all we need are the four simple guidelines and our intention of letting go of thoughts as we become present to Divine Presence. Secondly, once I got into the water, the burdensome 500-pound feeling disappeared; in Centering Prayer, we become open and receptive, no effort is needed in the simplicity of the practice. The Divine Therapist does all the work. ☸

# A Daily Prayer Practice Inspires the Creation of a Supportive Community

by members of [Minnesota Contemplative Outreach](#)

**O**n May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, two months into a worldwide pandemic lockdown, George Floyd died after being handcuffed and pinned to the ground by an officer's knee in an episode that was captured on video, touching off nationwide protests. Our city burst into flames with violent outbursts of anger stoked by feelings of distrust directed toward the police.

During this time a Centering Prayer group from Minnesota Contemplative Outreach was formed after an intense period of rioting and looting, when curfews were being enforced to ensure safety. We came together on Zoom to find our center and to pray for peace. The intention was to do this for a day or two, but members of the group were inspired to build on our momentum and form a daily prayer practice at 7 am each morning, seven days a week. It is clear that daily prayer gives special graces to those with the discipline to walk this path. This can be done individually but there seems to be a mystical force at play when one holds this space with a supportive community like this one.

As the weeks, months, and years have gone by, the desire to continue our vigil has not ceased. Every week on Monday we renew our intention to pray for peace and justice. Participants come and go as schedules adjust but a core group remains with an average of 30 Centering Prayer participants, 20 of whom remain to practice *Lectio Divina*.

We are blessed to have one person who manages and organizes our group so that everything runs smoothly. She is truly the glue that keeps us together. Facilitation for our group rotates daily and is a commitment that is honored for three-month intervals with an opportunity to continue leading for a longer commitment as the Spirit wills.

Our Centering Prayer sessions begin with three minutes of silence marked by a photo on a shared screen. The facilitator for the day begins with a prayer and gently brings the group out of 25-minutes of silence with the recitation of the "Our Father" prayer. The group is then invited to introduce themselves individually either out loud or in the chat. Those who choose to do this state their name, where they are from, and then share a word or thought from their heart. *Lectio Divina* begins directly afterward for those who choose to stay online.

We share a wide variety of texts focused on both traditional Scripture passages and contemporary material. We read, listen, and reflect on lectionary readings, Nan Merrill's *Psalms for Praying*, daily meditations from Richard Rohr and Henri Nouwen, and daily devotions from *Jesus Calling* by Sarah Young, just to name a few. The text is emailed to the group the day before so, for some, reflection on the text has already begun before we meet. This is helpful for those not able to attend the Zoom meeting so they are still able to reflect on it. In our smaller group setting, members formulate and share prayers that speak directly to the mind and heart. Those present are able to experience the text in ways they may not have otherwise considered which fosters a sense of peace, encouragement and enrichment.

We end our time together by reading the "Prayer for our Community" by Richard Rohr. We often include prayer intentions for group members and world events as they unfold. We sign off with a quote that relates to what we've discussed or if the mood is right, we may add a little holy humor to lighten our hearts! After our time together an email may be sent



with a short reflection of what was read, occasionally a music video with lyrics is sent that matches the theme of the day. This helps further cultivate the insights received.

Knowing we cannot change the unrest that is swirling around us in a world coming undone, we turn inward with the help of Centering Prayer to find inner peace – to let God love us through all our experiences and to welcome all that comes to us because we know it's for our healing. Being a member of a group that reminds us of this daily has become a vital way to live in the moment. In this way, as we share our experiences through prayer and internet communication, we allow our little lights to shine in the darkness. It helps us maintain a focus on what is good in this world and, in turn, a way to spread joy. In a world where the answer to most questions is "I don't know," what we do know is that we have a Zoom community available and waiting for us at 7 am every day. We are not alone.

Our group represented Minnesota at the United in Prayer event on March 5, 2022. After a 25-minute period of Centering Prayer, we led a Lectio Divina session. It has been said that out of the silence, text is heard on a much deeper level and with greater openness. On March 5, a little more than a week after the invasion of Ukraine, the theme of the reading fit what the world was experiencing and for that moment in time we were indeed united in the feelings expressed in the text.

It was powerful to hear all the voices chime in from across the globe after the text was read the second time. A variety of different words resonated with the group, and the words just kept coming. Finally, instead of sharing individual prayers we focused our time on listening to the music video "Let Your God Love You" by Edwina Gateley. There were no voices, just written lyrics. We watched together silently. The music seemed to have the power to unify our hearts and lift our spirits in a way that nothing else could in that moment.

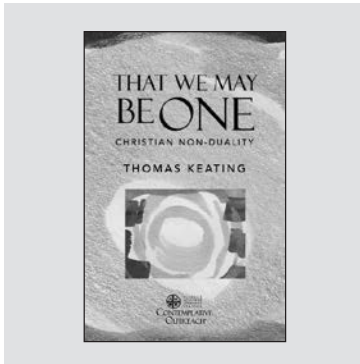
In the words of Thomas Keating, "It seems that events that turn our lives upside down and inside out are part of God's redemptive plan, not only for us, but for the world in which we live. God may be preparing a great awakening for the world, if God can find enough people to cooperate in this mysterious plan."

Thomas Keating also said, "The best way to receive Divine Love is to give it away, and the more we pass on the more we increase our capacity to receive." ☸



## RESOURCES IN OUR ONLINE STORE

We offer a variety of companion books to recent Thomas Keating video series. These companion books are edited transcripts of the series, with beautiful images, Scripture and other wisdom teachings woven throughout. Each book comes in a hardcopy or PDF digital version.

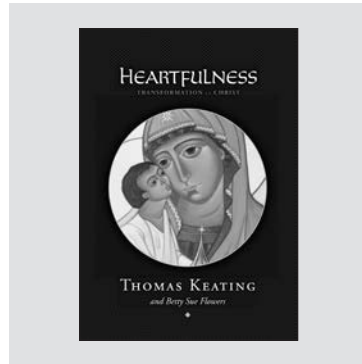


### ***That We May Be One: Christian Non-Duality***

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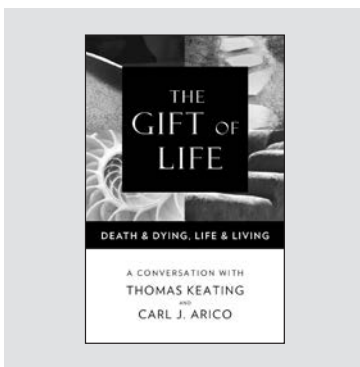


### ***Heartfulness: Transformation in Christ***

Hardcopy book: \$6 USD on sale

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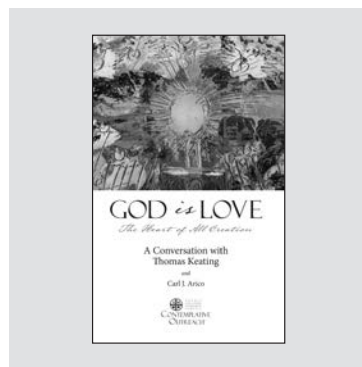


### ***The Gift of Life: Death & Dying, Life & Living***

Hardcopy book: \$12 USD on sale

Digital PDF: \$8 USD

Also available in DVD, mp4 and mp3 packages



### ***God is Love: The Heart of All Creation***

Hardcopy book: \$25 USD

Digital PDF: \$13 USD

Also available in DVD, mp4 and mp3 packages

## OTHER RESOURCES



<https://www.youtube.com/coutreach>

There are hundreds of free resources on the Contemplative Outreach YouTube channel, including these newly-posted offerings:

- **Return to the Heart of Christ Consciousness:**  
Four videos of talks with Fr. Thomas at Snowmass from Integral Life are now public on YouTube. Click on the Playlist tab to find it.
- **Search under the Playlists tab for more video series**



## On-Demand, Self-Guided Online Courses for Practice and Spiritual Enrichment

Choose from a variety of options including e-courses to learn practices such as Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina, Welcoming Prayer, The Prayer of Forgiveness and the Process of Discernment. Or choose e-courses for spiritual enrichment and practice support including *Practicing the Presence of God*, *The Transformation of Suffering*, *Wisdom for Living: The Parables of Jesus* and more.

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



## Seeking Two Governing Board Candidates



The Governing Board of Contemplative Outreach (CO) is a volunteer group of Centering Prayer practitioners entrusted to serve the community at large, discern the call of the Holy Spirit in light of the Theological Principles and Guidelines, and provide leadership and oversight to the administration and operations of Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. Together, the whole community of Contemplative Outreach and the Board seek to embody our Vision, fostering growth and openness to the Holy Spirit through the various branches and expressions of service in our communities.

Qualifications include:

- being deeply rooted in the daily practice of Centering Prayer and fully embrace the CO Vision, Theological Principles and Guidelines for CO Service
- desire to work collaboratively with others in service of the CO community in a spirit of patience, humility, and a sense of humor, but mostly a humble confidence in the leadership of the Holy Spirit
- diverse experience and focus
- active participation in CO programs and offerings.

The term of this position is three years, beginning January 1, 2023, and is renewable once.  
If you are interested, please email Jim McElroy, [jmac150@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jmac150@sbcglobal.net) or Phil Jackson, [jaxon900@aol.com](mailto:jaxon900@aol.com),  
for a full position description and application.



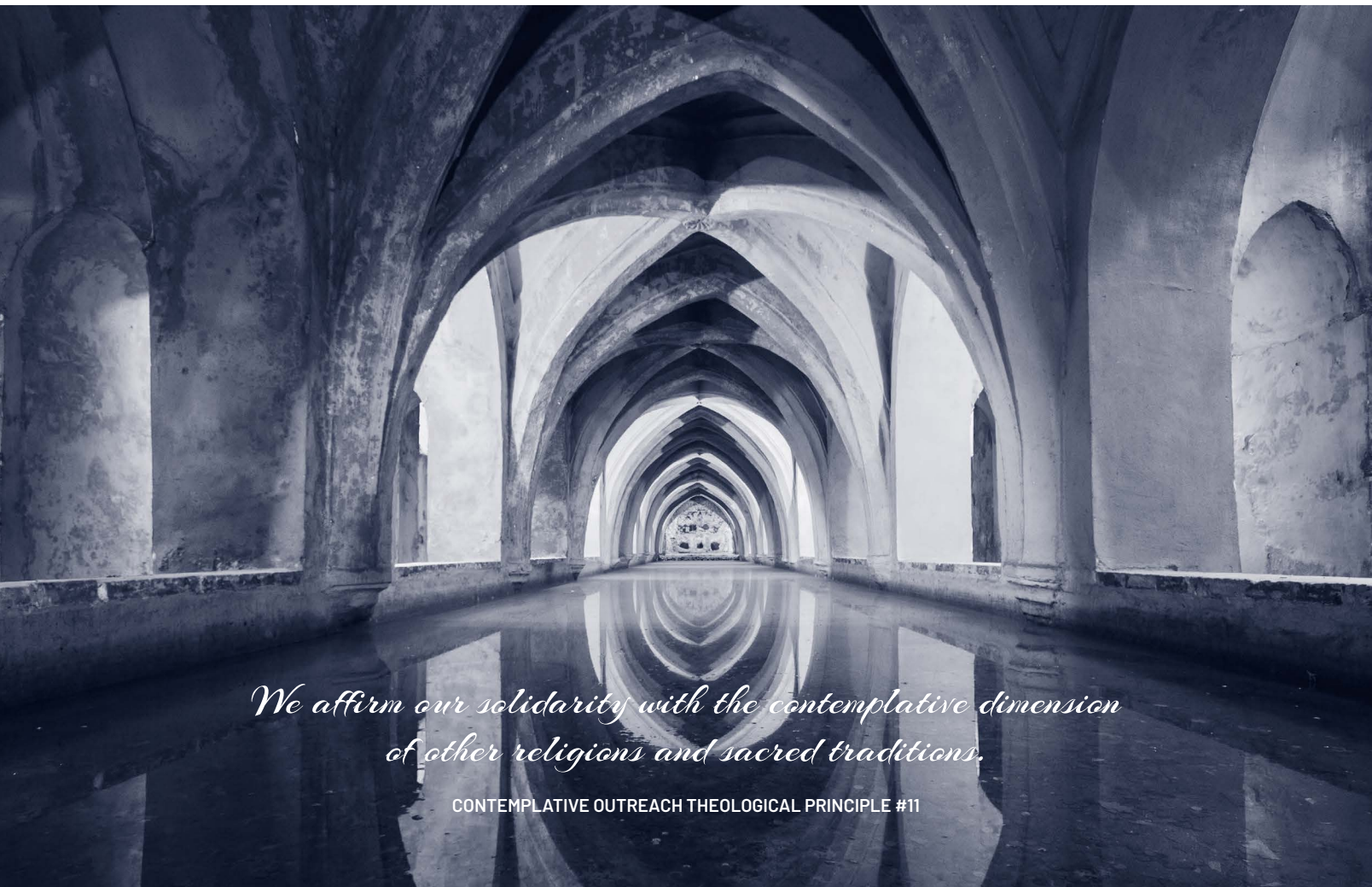
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