

Centering Prayer

What if prayer is not about words, but about silence and presence?

- **Centering Prayer** is a modern contemplative practice rooted in ancient Christian traditions.
- Focus on inner silence, consent to God's presence, and deepening one's relationship with the Divine.

Historical Background

- **Ancient Roots:**
 - Inspired by the early Christian desert fathers and mothers (3rd–5th centuries) who emphasized silence and solitude more than the written or spoken word.
 - In the medieval period, monastic medieval mystics like St. John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, and *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th century), which described a practice of surrendering thoughts to encounter God in the "cloud of unknowing" continued the practice of silent prayer.
- **20th-Century Revival:**
 - Amid increasing interest in meditation from Eastern traditions during the 1960s–70s, Christian leaders sought ways to reclaim their tradition of contemplation and Father Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, became widely recognized for his contributions to interfaith dialogue and contemplative spirituality, particularly through his development of centering prayer. Keating's interactions with a broad array of spiritual seekers, including those drawn to New Age and Eastern spiritual practices during the 1970s, were instrumental in shaping his mission to make Christian contemplative practices accessible. But who was he?

1. Fr. Thomas Keating (1923–2018)

- **Who He is:**
 - A Trappist monk at St. Joseph's Abbey in Massachusetts for about 20 years, and a key proponent of Centering Prayer, deeply influenced by the contemplative legacy of his monastic order.
- **His Contribution:**
 - Co-developed Centering Prayer in the 1970s alongside Fr. William Meninger and Fr. Basil Pennington.
 - Presented it as a method of silent prayer accessible to modern Christians, aiming to deepen intimacy with God.
- **His Vision:**
 - Fr Thomas Keating saw it as a way to heal the spiritual fragmentation in modern life and integrate divine presence into daily living.

2. Cynthia Bourgeault author of Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening

- **Who She Is:**
 - An Episcopal priest, author, and contemporary mystic.
 - A leading voice in advancing the understanding and practice of Centering Prayer.
- **Her Role:**
 - Bridged Fr. Keating's work with broader spiritual traditions, emphasizing its connection to the contemplative wisdom path.
 - Wrote extensively on Centering Prayer as a transformative practice for personal and collective awakening.
- **Unique Perspective:**
 - Introduced insights from other mystical traditions, especially Sufism and non-dual spirituality, enhancing the depth of Centering Prayer.

The Practice of Centering Prayer

What It Is:

A method of silent prayer where one sits quietly, gently letting go of thoughts to rest in God's presence. The impact of which facilitates spiritual transformation by fostering trust in God/Higher Power, self-surrender, and a non-dual awareness of unity with the Divine.

Why It Matters Today

Responds to modern needs for spiritual depth amid noise and busyness. It offers Christians and all spiritual seekers a means to integrate ancient contemplative wisdom into daily life and builds a bridge between the ancient Christian tradition and global meditative practices so many people use today including Mindfulness, therefore fostering interfaith understanding.

Centering Prayer is not just a method but a way of life, cultivating a heart open to God's presence. To quote Fr. Keating: *"Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation."*

How might the practice of Centering Prayer transform your own soul's odyssey?

Instructions:

Choose a Sacred Word

- Select a word or phrase that symbolizes your intention to consent to God's presence and action within (e.g., "Love," "Peace," "God"). It could be one of the words you uncovered from the reflections earlier. This word acts as a gentle anchor when your mind wanders.

Settle into a Quiet Place

- Find a comfortable, quiet location where you won't be disturbed.
- Sit comfortably with your back straight to promote alertness while maintaining a relaxed posture.

Begin with Silence

- Close your eyes and silently introduce your sacred word to signify your openness to God, the Universe of Higher Power.

Gently Return to the Sacred Word

- When you notice thoughts, sensations, or distractions, gently return to your sacred word.
- Don't force yourself to suppress thoughts; simply let them go and refocus.

Avoid Effort or Expectation

- The goal is not to "empty" your mind but to rest in presence. Be patient and allow yourself to let go of expectations or achievements.

Conclude with Gratitude

- After 20 minutes (or your chosen duration), gently transition back to awareness of your surroundings.
- You can end with a prayer or thanksgiving or reflection.

Practice Regularly

- Practice Centering Prayer twice a day, if possible, typically for 20 minutes each session.

Tips for Success

- **Nonjudgment:** Thoughts will arise; this is natural. Simply return to your sacred word.
- **Regular Commitment:** Establish a routine to make the practice a habit.
- **Be Gentle with Yourself:** The process is about intention and surrender, not perfection.

Here are the four “r’s” of Centering Prayer that may be useful to note: **Resist** no thought. **Retain** no thought. **React** to no thought. **Return** ever so gently to the sacred word.

Resources:

Online: **App**

The Centering Prayer app is free and includes a digital version of a pamphlet with the basics of centering prayer.

BOOKS

Open Mind, Open Heart, by Thomas Keating.

Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening by Cynthia Bourgeault

Healing Our Violence Through The Journey Of Centering Prayer, by Thomas Keating & Richard Rohr

Online Podcast: **Opening Hearts, Opening Minds Podcast from Contemplative Outreach**

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/opening-minds-opening-hearts/id1655013251>

<https://open.spotify.com/show/567lLmyS9WQjP9aQlGxV3J>

Contemplative Outreach UK

<https://contemplativeoutreachuk.com/>

<https://contemplativeoutreach.org.uk/>

Contemplative Outreach UK was founded by Elizabeth Smith to transmit the spiritual teaching of Fr. Thomas Keating to a wider audience.

The main purpose of Contemplative Outreach UK is to teach Centering Prayer as well as the spiritual and psychological background, as taught by Thomas Keating bearing in mind new developments.

We seek to preserve the integrity of the method of Centering Prayer, as Fr. Thomas Keating wished. We also seek to pass on the Western Christian Tradition.

Elizabeth met Fr. Thomas Keating in Upholland, Lancashire, England, in 1988.

In 1989 in Indianapolis, USA, Elizabeth started training with Fr. Thomas to present Centering Prayer along with the spiritual and psychological background to the practice.

She continued to be mentored by Fr. Thomas Keating until his death in October 2018, travelling to USA many times to meet with Fr. Thomas and continuing a correspondence with him via letters and phone calls.

Deeper Love: An Introduction to Centering Prayer by founder of Contemplative Outreach, Elizabeth Smith.