

## **London: Contemplative Outreach**

# **The Development of Centering Prayer**

I'd like to invite you to go back in memory to your first introduction to Centering Prayer. What brought you there? You may have had experience with a Charismatic Prayer Group and grown in deeper appreciation of the scriptures or been a part of a Faith Sharing Group, exchanging insights on scripture. And then you heard about Centering Prayer and you were curious. A person comes seeking, they may be restless, yearning and longing for God. If you are like me, you had a certain attraction to silence and so you showed up. A mighty step indeed!

In Prayer as a Relationship, you saw how prayer moves, is not static, is organic, like all relationships it has twists and turns. In Contemplative Outreach we love the *Lectio Divina* process of the four R's. We Read, Reflect, Respond, and Rest. St. Gregory the Great in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, calls this resting "A deep knowledge of God marked by love," "A taste of God." We say, Resting, "beyond word, beyond thought and beyond emotion." This is an adventure, a journey of love to be a part of your own creation.

Our keystone quotation is Matt 6:6 " When you pray, enter your inner room. Close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

What is the Inner Room? The Inner Room is not fixed, static or empty, but something living, spacious, and open. A place needing to be nourished and attended to like a garden. The Inner Room will have its seasons. There will be spring growth, characterized by a movement from exterior to interior silence. Summer will be joy in the awareness of God's presence. Then autumn will come before winter. The journey to purification and transformation has begun. God has taken the initiative and invited you in. The False Self needs to be dismantled. By definition, "The false self is our self- image developed to cope with the emotional trauma of early childhood." The journey at times may seem long, long psychologically, long emotionally, long spiritually, and long chronologically.

In the end it is the journey itself that matters. In the autumn and winter of the spiritual journey we will experience dryness, restlessness, even boredom. You will feel like getting up and running away from the group. I know that is how I felt even after many years of Centering Prayer. For the first ten years or so, I was a nineteen-minute practitioner at the best of times. On one occasion when making a twenty-one day retreat with Cathy McCarthy, a coordinator in New York, Cathy asked me did I Center twice a day. I said no, but sometimes I do a little longer once a day. Cathy was not impressed. She said, once a day is maintenance and twice a day is transformation. At the same retreat with Fr. Thomas present, we Centered for an hour at a time. This was broken up with the meditative walk taking place twice in the hour. On a few occasions, Fr. Thomas nodded off to sleep and snored. I felt so encouraged as I was trying to do 'it right.' Know when restlessness comes, the prayer is working! But this is something learned. Growth is always slow and gradual. If the heart is right, all will be right. We are moving gradually to the True Self - which is "the image of God in which every human being is created; our participation in the divine life manifested in our uniqueness." This is how you participate in your creation. Fr. Thomas says, 'this is not a magic carpet to bliss.' What develops is a knowing not found in books but deep within the pilgrim heart. New insights emerge, new self awareness develops. We will experience the mystery of the Cross; it will be endurance, a desert experience. Some along the way may turn away to social action groups, allowing themselves to be distracted and busy. This is the testing time, where some stay and never get out of the 'parking lot'. Reason is still in control and love has not reached the point where it overwhelms reason. Fear can prevent us taking the risk and entering into unknown regions. While God beckons, God also waits on our response. Basil Hume says "despite everything, we want to go on praying."

The first glimmer of love with which the search began must now grow into something personal, that is friendship with Christ. As we respond, in stops and starts, we open

ourselves to the gift of love. The heart of our Centering Prayer is love. And love is the only reality that will ultimately change us. Only when we have found a greater and deeper love can we let go of the lesser loves that can ensnare the heart and hold it captive. Centering Prayer is the key to opening ourselves to the embrace of God's love. St. John of the Cross says that only love will ultimately change the heart from within.

The Inner Room is the place where we are transformed not only spiritually but also humanly. The journey is a movement toward wholeness: a kind of 'homecoming' to oneself. God does not swallow up our human nature: rather it is enriched, making us fully human, fully alive. The beginning of contemplative prayer is the movement away from words and thoughts to something more interior and silent, less talking and more listening, the mind hosting quietness. What matters is that we enter into this presence and that we 'rest' in it. Here we are at the innermost and deepest center of the soul, the abode of peace, and a 'peace that the world cannot give.' We enter into the mystery of the Triune God more fully - the divine indwelling. Here we discover whom we really are and what it means to be loved unconditionally. The movement is away from self-absorption and predictable patterns towards an ever more complete participation in the life of the Trinity: the Father gazing at the Son, the Son gazing at the Father, and the gazing itself is the Holy Spirit. God is not a noun, God is a verb, and God is life, energy, and movement. Prayer is never a concept or an idea. It is always life, friendship, and love.

Our sitting in Centering Prayer is never a waste of time. Back in November 2015 on the morning of the Second Saturday, our group met as we have done for the past nine years. We had just heard of the stunning news of the terrorist attacks in Paris. We felt helpless. And yet silent prayer is never a waste of time or energy. Sitting together as the Body of Christ, united by Intention and in receptivity, places one at the very center of the pulsating world. 'The one who sits in meditation, the Zen masters remind us, 'sits for the whole world.' Nothing in the universe is more intensely alive and active than genuine

prayer and contemplation. One act of pure love, according to John of the Cross is of more value to the whole world than all other acts put together.

As we sit in silence, we serve the world. Fr. Thomas in referring to the 2001 disaster at the Trade Center in New York said, “we have to evolve to respond to violence in a new way, and I trust that we will. I have more trust in the future than optimism about it. This evolution to higher states of consciousness is present in all world religions. In other words our rational level of consciousness is not the end of biological evolution. It is the gate, the beginning of higher states of consciousness, of developing the brain beyond where it is now.”

The human race is on the crest of the wave moving into the intuitive level of consciousness. As we sit, and consent to the Spirit praying in us, we cooperate with this movement. And as I said, nothing in the universe is more intensely alive and active than genuine prayer and contemplation. Since Fr. Thomas spoke about the ‘9/11’ disaster now fifteen years on, there are *some* signs of the human race working more closely together having reached the ability to sit down and negotiate, a testament to the evolution of intuitive consciousness. A recent example is the Paris Agreement on climate change. According to the organizing committee of the summit in Paris, December 2015, the objective of the conference was to achieve, for the first time in over twenty years of the U.N. negotiations, a binding and universal agreement on climate from all the nations of the world. Representatives of the 196 parties attending agreed to a joint statement limiting fossil fuels. The parties still need to sign the agreement in New York on Earth Day, April 22, 2016. So we keep our finger crossed, and contribute through our silence. Pope Francis published *Laudato Si*, intended in part, to influence the conference. The encyclical calls for action against climate change.

Contemplative Outreach “creates a context in which the transformation of humanity can take place.” This is where we are headed as we follow the developmental path of the spiritual journey. The person who is most truly and fully

human is the one who has come closely to the source of life, the place where light, truth, and beauty dwell. As we sit and enter the Inner Room we come closer to the ultimate center of all things and to finding our place in the heart of the world. This work of *love* is never done. And the greatness of our works will be seen in light of the love with which they are done. Growth is the only sign of life: growth in love, growth in service, and growth in compassion - the compassion of Christ. The crucial test is the quality of our relationship with Christ and our willingness to put our lives in the service of others. This is the reason for the prayer, the purpose of every endeavor. Love can only show its true depth in deeds of love. "You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb. On our journey, we cannot know what will occur, just make the journey worth the taking and pray that we are wiser than we were at the beginning."  
*Sir Winston Churchill.*

Fionnuala Quinn O.P.  
Contemplative Outreach International  
Contemplative Outreach Dublin

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