

Hold Fast to Sound Teaching

“The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3).

As Catholics, we have a wealth of spiritual expression available to us. In the Eucharist at Mass we become one in body and spirit with Our Savior who loves us! In Confession we experience the fullness of His mercy. In the Rosary we see the events of Jesus’ life through the eyes of His Mother. In *Lectio Divina* we experience the word of God in a deeply personal way. Through charismatic prayer we live the abundant life of the Spirit. Through the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola we achieve true self-possession. We do not need to experiment with hazardous forms of spirituality that will lead us astray from the truths the Lord has revealed to us through His Church on earth.

Let us now renew our faith in Jesus Christ. ...

ACT OF FAITH

O My God, I firmly believe that You are one God in three divine persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe that Your divine Son became man and died for our sins and that He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe these and all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches because You have revealed them, who are eternal truth and wisdom, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. In this faith I intend to live and die. Amen.

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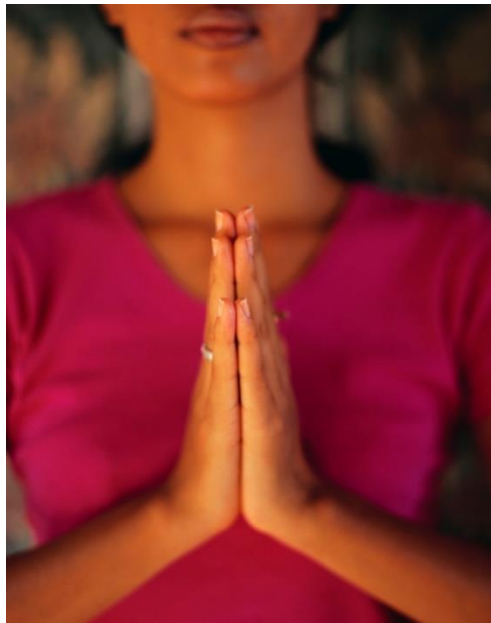
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What Is Centering Prayer?

And is it good for Catholics?



What Is Centering Prayer?

There are really two different types of centering prayer, one of which is beneficial and recommended for Christians to practice and another that is not. The good kind of centering prayer involves quieting the mind (but not emptying it) by focusing on a sacred word or phrase, as a way of eliminating distractions in prayer and entering into a deeper, more gratifying relationship with God. This kind of prayer is akin to the contemplative prayer of the great Catholic mystics—Saints Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Ignatius Loyola. The bad kind of centering prayer involves the attempt to completely turn off the mind, emptying it of all thoughts, and also tends to be an unsavory blend of Christianity with Buddhist and New Age teachings. This is the form of centering prayer we will be discussing here in this pamphlet.

Jesus Christ teaches us in Scripture to test the truth of a teaching by its fruits (Mt. 7:16). In examining the fruits of the centering prayer movement the differences between it and authentic forms of Catholic prayer become evident. Centering prayer groups, in fact, are very often linked to greater or lesser degrees with various false teachings, including *pantheism* (the belief that God is all things); *monism* (the belief that man is God); the denial of Christ’s divinity; the rejection of the Church’s teaching authority; and radical feminism.

“Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them.” (Ephesians 5:11)

A Mental Void

The centering prayer movement is a perilous blending of Christianity with elements of Hinduism and Zen Buddhism. The movement’s founders, Fathers Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and M. Basil Pennington, began in the 1970’s with the noble aspiration to build a bridge that would help those of the Eastern religions approach Catholicism. Tragically, though, they came to cloak Eastern prayer in Catholic terminology. Essentially, what came back across their “bridge” was a freakish mixture of Eastern religion and Catholicism in a kind of *syncretism*. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the following warning in 1989:

“With the present diffusion of eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves with a pointed renewal of an attempt which is not free from dangers and errors, to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian” (*Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* 12).

The centering prayer movement differs substantially from authentic contemplative prayer in two main ways. First, the participants in centering prayer are instructed to *banish all thoughts—even religious thoughts—creating a mental void*.

“Centering prayer is an exercise in letting go,” says Keating. “It lays aside every thought. ... [In order] to develop a mind that does not cling to anything” (*Open Heart, Open Mind*, p. 74). There is something innately disturbing and dehumanizing, though, in training one’s mind to *cling to nothingness*. Keating goes on to describe the altered state achieved in centering prayer as being very much like sleep.

Writing of “simple union” with God, Teresa of Avila also spoke of an experience similar to

sleep, in which “the soul is without consciousness and has no power to think” (*Interior Castle*, Fifth Mansions). The difference between her approach and Keating’s, though, is that for Teresa the loss of consciousness was not a specific goal she aimed for, but merely a passing sensation along the way. Also, for Teresa *the mind was always fully engaged* at the higher levels of contemplative prayer. The Saint wrote:

“This may lead you to think that such a person will not remain in possession of her senses but will be so completely absorbed that she will be able to fix her mind upon nothing. But no: in all that belongs to the service of God she is more alert than before” (*Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions).

Teresa employed a technique to eliminate “stray thoughts” from prayer—*stray thoughts*, but not *all thoughts*. This technique, in fact, involved using the imagination (*Life IV*). Genuine Catholic prayer *never seeks to turn off the mind*. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in fact, defines *meditation* as engaging “thought, imagination, emotion, and desire” (2708).

False Teachings

The second main way centering prayer differs from authentic contemplative prayer is its link to false teachings, such as *pantheism*, the belief that God is all things and all things are God. This teaching is often presented as belief in the *Cosmic Christ*. The Catholic Church, following the writings of Saint Paul, teaches that the Mystical Body of Christ consists of all baptized believers (Rom. 12:4-5). The Cosmic Christ teaching, however, holds that Christ’s body consists of all created matter, including rocks, trees, and animals.

One also often finds at centering prayer meetings the promotion of *monism*, a blurring of the distinction between the Creator and His creatures to the degree that they are said to be

one and the same! Christianity, by contrast, is an inherently *dualistic* religion, meaning we understand God and man to be separate, distinct beings. Even at the highest form of union with God (or *divinization*), the distinction between Creator and creature remains. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith teaches:

“Man is essentially a creature and remains such for eternity, so that an absorbing of the human self into the divine self is never possible, not even in the highest states of grace” (*Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* 14).

Yet many centering prayer teachers claim we are already God, and simply need to realize it! “The first part of the Christian journey is to realize that there is an Other,” says Keating.

“The second part is to become the Other. The third and greatest part is to realize that there is no Other” (incarnationalcontemplation.com).

One also often finds radical feminist teachings promoted in centering prayer circles, teachings that reject the Biblical identification of God as “Father” (Mt. 6:9), arguing the Bible’s teachings were corrupted by patriarchal thought. But if we can call into question the reliability of the Bible itself to suit our own personal agendas virtually any and all beliefs can be justified.

To call God “Father” is not to assign Him a sex. “He is neither man nor woman: he is God” (*Catechism* 239). Because woman, too, was made in His image and likeness we find Biblical passages that ascribe feminine attributes to God (cf. Isa. 63:13). Yet whenever His identity is revealed it is always “Father.” The Bible identifies God as Father because fathers *send* life, and He is the Creator. The Church, on the other hand, is called “Mother” because mothers *receive* life, and she receives life-giving graces from Him. To call God Mother would be to deny His sovereignty as the Giver of Life—a grave matter indeed.