



*Catechetical Series:*

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What Catholics Believe & Why

# CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER VERSUS CENTERING PRAYER

**Behold The Truth**

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith  
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# What Is Centering Prayer?

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- ❖ Ordinarily, the term “centering prayer” simply refers to the use of a sacred phrase (or *mantra*) as a way of eliminating distractions in prayer, which of course is a good thing in and of itself.
- ❖ Unfortunately, though, the centering prayer experience often goes much farther than this.

A dark silhouette of a person sitting in a meditative pose, likely a lotus or similar cross-legged position, against a light background. The silhouette is positioned on the left side of the slide, partially overlapping the white background.

# What Is Centering Prayer?

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- ❖ The method promoted by the Centering Prayer Movement, for instance, seeks to form a mental void, emptying the mind of all thoughts—even *holy thoughts*.
- ❖ In some cases, participants are instructed to choose a nondescript mantra with no overt religious connotations, to avoid eliciting religious thought.

# What Is Centering Prayer?

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- ❖ “Centering prayer is an exercise in letting go. That is all it is,” wrote Father Thomas Keating, a founder of the movement. “It lays aside every thought. One touch of divine love enables you to take all the pleasures of this world and throw them in the wastebasket. Reflecting on the spiritual communications diminishes them. The *Diamond Sutra* says it all: ‘Try to develop a mind that does not cling to anything.’” *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 74
- ❖ In truth, there is something deeply troubling and dehumanizing about a mind that clings to nothing.



## What Is Centering Prayer?

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- ❖ Centering prayer practitioners will argue their method is akin to the contemplative prayer of the Great Catholic Mystics: Saints Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Ignatius Loyola.
- ❖ In reality, though, there are fundamental differences between the two.



# The Origins of Centering Prayer

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- ❖ The founders of the Centering Prayer Movement, Fathers Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and M. Basil Pennington, began in the 1970's with the noble aspiration of building a bridge to help devotees of the Eastern religions to approach Catholicism.
- ❖ Tragically, though, they came to cloak Eastern prayer in Catholic terminology; so that what came back across their “bridge” was a freakish mixture of Eastern spirituality and Catholicism—a kind of *syncretism*.



# The Church's Response

- ❖ The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith responded in 1989 with a direct warning against the attempt “to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian,” declaring, “These and similar proposals to harmonize Christian meditation with Eastern techniques need to have their contents and methods ever subjected to a thorough-going examination so as to avoid the danger of falling into syncretism.”  
*On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, par. 12



# The Church's Response

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- ❖ Genuine contemplative prayer never seeks to banish all thought and always involves the use of the faculties
- ❖ “Therefore,” says the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “one has to interpret correctly the teaching of those masters who recommend ‘emptying’ the spirit of all sensible representations and of every concept, while remaining lovingly attentive to God.”

*On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, par. 19





## The Church's Response

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- ❖ “While he raises us up, God is free to ‘empty’ us of all that holds us back in this world, to draw us completely into the Trinitarian life of his eternal love. However, this gift can only be granted ‘in Christ through the Holy Spirit,’ and not through our own efforts, withdrawing ourselves from his revelation.”

*On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, par. 20



## The Teaching of the Great Mystics

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- ❖ This is in keeping with the teaching of the Great Mystics, who recommended methods for avoiding distractions in prayer, but regarded union with God purely as a gift and not as something that could be produced through the use of a technique.



## The Teaching of the Great Mystics

- ❖ Describing the prayer of simple union with God, Saint Teresa of Ávila writes, “Here we are all asleep, and fast asleep, to the things of the world, and to ourselves (in fact, for the short time that the condition lasts, the soul is without consciousness and has no power to think, even though it may desire to do so). There is no need for it to devise any method of suspending thought.” *Interior Castle*, Fifth Mansions



## The Teaching of the Great Mystics

- ❖ The Saint is not speaking here of the suspension of *all thought*, however, but the suspension of distracting thoughts, “the things of the world, and ... ourselves.”
- ❖ She describes not a condition of the mind being turned off, but one of complete surrender to God, in which one’s faculties are held captive by the divine presence, his thoughts flooded with divine thoughts.
- ❖ The soul remains fully attentive to God throughout the experience.



## The Teaching of the Great Mystics

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- ❖ Describing the state of *transforming union*, Teresa writes, “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 on nothing. But no: in all that belongs to the service of God she is more alert than before.” *Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions



## The Teaching of the Great Mystics

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- ❖ Similarly, Saint John of the Cross describes the soul in the midst of contemplation as being “in oblivion and unaware of time,” but goes on to say, “even though the harmonious interaction of their sensory and spiritual faculties ceases, the soul is occupied with knowledge.”

*The Ascent to Mount Carmel*

14:11



## The Teaching of the Great Mystics

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- ❖ “Though I (according to what I am) sleep, naturally, by ceasing to work,” the Saint adds, “my heart watches, supernaturally, in its elevation to supernatural knowledge.”  
*The Ascent to Mount Carmel* 14:11
- ❖ Even at the highest levels of contemplation, therefore, the Mystics remained aware of God’s presence and responded to Him with “loving attentiveness.” *Ibid.* 12:9



## Centering Prayer vs. Guided Meditation

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- ❖ An activity often associated with centering prayer (and sometimes mistaken for it) that does not involve the emptying of the mind is *guided meditation*.
- ❖ This consists of listening to a recited Scripture passage or story, designed to facilitate a moving encounter with Christ.
- ❖ This way of praying can truly be beneficial.





# The Danger of Nihilism

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- ❖ The Centering Prayer Movement is often linked to various false teachings that cannot be reconciled with the magisterial teaching of the Catholic Church.
- ❖ There is a real tendency in centering prayer circles, for instance, towards *Nihilism*, an extreme and harmful attitude of de-personalization.



# The Danger of Nihilism

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- ❖ Christ spoke of the need to detach oneself from selfish and material concerns, of *dying to oneself*, but not the dissolution of self.
- ❖ The soul is purified by Christ, but remains intact—more intact, one could argue, than before.



# The Danger of Nihilism

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- ❖ By contrast, when centering prayer leaders speak of union with God their teaching bears nihilistic overtones.
- ❖ Justin Langille, for example, presents the story of a salt doll who in contemplating the sea exclaims, “What are you?!”
- ❖ In response, the sea declares, “Touch me and you will find out.”
- ❖ In doing so, she is gradually dissolved by the water bit by bit till in her last moments she cries out, “Now I know what the sea is! It is I!”

*There Is Nothing Between You: Awakening to the Wisdom of Contemplative Silence*



## Teresa's View of Union

- ❖ Teresa of Ávila also spoke of dissolving in the divine presence, saying, “O joy of angels, when I think of it, I long to dissolve in love for You!” *Life VIII*
- ❖ Yet she did not understand union with God to mean the loss of her identity, nor that she herself would become divine.
- ❖ Even at the highest levels of union she continued to distinguish between the creature and the Creator.



# The Danger of Monism

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- ❖ Centering prayer leaders also commonly (and somewhat deceptively) promote *Monism*, the Eastern belief that God and the soul are one and the same substance.
- ❖ From this perspective, union with God consists of the individual's awareness that he himself *is* God, and has been all along.



# The Danger of Monism

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- ❖ New Age guru, Eckhart Tolle, revered in centering prayer circles, writes, “The Truth is inseparable from who you are. Yes, you *are* the Truth. If you look for it elsewhere, you will be deceived every time.”  
*A New Earth*, p. 71
- ❖ Christ said to His followers, “You are the light of the world,” Matt. 5:14, but this was to be understood in the context that He Himself is “the true light that enlightens every man” John 1:9, and when we live lives of holiness, as He asked, His light shines through us.
- ❖ We do not turn to ourselves for enlightenment, as Tolle suggests, but ever to Christ.



# Divinization

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- ❖ In the same way, the Church's doctrine of *divinization* holds that in heaven we will come to experience divinity, not in our *nature*, as God alone does, but only through *participation* in His divinity.
- ❖ The Congregation for the doctrine of the Faith says, "It is necessary in the first place to bear in mind that 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." *On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, par. 14



# True Catholic Spirituality

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- ❖ As Catholics, we have a wealth of spiritual expression available to us.
- ❖ Through the Holy Eucharist we are united body and spirit with Our Savior Jesus Christ.
- ❖ In Reconciliation we experience the fullness of His mercy.
- ❖ Through the Holy Rosary we are privileged to see the events of His life through His Mother's eyes.
- ❖ In *Lectio Divina* we enter into the word of God in a powerful way.
- ❖ Through charismatic prayer we live the abundant life of the Spirit.
- ❖ Through the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola we achieve true self-possession.





# True Catholic Spirituality

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- ❖ 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.



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