



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

Session 1: The Inner Room

Introduction: Fr. Thomas covers the conceptual background of Centering Prayer from the wisdom saying of Jesus in Matthew 6:6, the relationship of Centering Prayer to the 11th Step, our basic core of goodness, and the addictive process and how it relates to the human condition.

We're going to begin this workshop by entering into the practice of Centering Prayer to suggest a possible program for an 11th step experience. Centering Prayer is based on a wisdom saying of Jesus and hence it comes out of the Christian tradition with some adaptations for our time. Jesus said to his disciples at one point, "If you wish to pray to your Father, enter your private room, close the door and there, pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6).

To understand what we're trying to do in Centering Prayer, a few words of explanation of the hidden or the spiritual meaning of some of those words might be helpful. First of all, "Father" here suggests the religious experience that Jesus had of the Ultimate Mystery whom he calls in the Aramaic (his own language) "Abba" which is usually translated "Father," but which really means the relationship with a very loving, tender, caring, and *present* parent. Now Father is not like any father we know so we should lay aside any difficulties we might have had with such a parent. It's rather a pointer towards the mystery of the source of our being at every level of that being: body, soul, and spirit. We're all emerging from this Ultimate Mystery and hence Father is a human symbol of this idea of our beginning, our source. And more profoundly, of the divine indwelling of the Ultimate Reality within us 24 hours a day. Our life in this world is an ongoing creation so that we all are sort of resting in the palm of God's hand, resting on the creative power of the source of everything that is so that all our thoughts and feelings and spiritual activities are really based on the divine energy that is coming from this source, but unfortunately, has been slightly distorted by what we might call the human condition. And this is something I'll speak about in some detail tomorrow.

Right now let's just concentrate briefly on some of the other aspects of this saying. What do we mean when we say, "Let us pray" or "I want to pray?" It really means let's start a relationship with God, the Christian name for the Ultimate Reality. Or let's continue the one we have. Or let's improve the one we have. So, prayer in its deepest meaning is relationship. And as you know from your experience of Alcoholics Anonymous and our 12-step program, it's a process. And the 11th step is a sort of movement towards a turn for that process in which the relationship's begun and the first steps begin to take on a certain intimacy and power that obviously we don't contact in the first or second or even third step.

So, if we want to have a relationship with our source—with the source of our basic goodness (which in the Christian religion is an article of faith), so whatever the damage we've experienced in growing up or in the process of living, can never touch this basic goodness that is inalienable. In Genesis this is referred to as we were created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). So that image in the Christian tradition can never be obliterated by any activity whatsoever. But it can be and is distorted and hence we experience within ourselves what might be called the addictive process—a movement to hide the pain of not having a relationship with the Ultimate Reality, with God, when we first came into this world.

And so, we came into this world as a bundle of needs, of emotional needs, in a very fragile state and none of these were ever met adequately. No parent has the omnipotent power of fulfilling all the needs that an infant seems to have and so at some point in the evolving into childhood the infant decides you have to make a go of this on his or her own steam, and they begin to seek for happiness in pleasure or instant gratification, and they complain loudly when it's withheld. The instinctual needs are for security and survival, for affection and approval and esteem, and for, a little later in the process of childhood, power and control. And these instinctual needs or drives while necessary for survival have no moderating influence in early life except the parental supervision which may be experienced as a withdrawal of the gratification of those needs.

So, the infant then has the problem of developing a self—a self-identity, a self-consciousness that gradually distinguishes itself first from the environment and then from the other little beings crawling around on the floor, and then from the body, and finally reaches full self-reflective consciousness around 14 or 15. But during all this time, I think for everybody, we don't have the kind of experience of God's presence that is meant to be the full fulfillment of those needs, hence we come into full reflective self-consciousness without the experience of the divine presence.

The spiritual journey—the 11th step as I understand it anyway—is the invitation reflected in the Gospel, but in all the world religions, to experience what true happiness is which is the experience of the divine presence ever-expanding in breadth and height and depth and intensity, in reassurance in the experience of inner freedom, in the reassurance of being loved by God, by the loving Father that *is* the experience that Jesus is trying to communicate to us through prayer, ritual, sacraments, service of others, human relationships, nature, art. All the beautiful and good things of life are to be made available to us as steppingstones for

the presence of God, not as substitutes for that presence which is the way it was as we were growing up. In other words, we had to find reassurance somewhere. We had to find independence somewhere. We had to find esteem and approval somewhere. But there was no limiting factor and so as children we set no boundaries to our demands for those gratifications that are necessary for survival in early life, but which will not work in adult life. And the pain of not experiencing that gratification, the pain of emotional trauma in early childhood, the pain of perhaps the subjective experience of rejection, abandonment, loss, fear, panic, possessiveness, all of those things become, as time continues, drives, needs, and shoulds, which become stronger as we grow older, more complex as we enter the socialization period from 4 to 8 and unquestionably absorb the values and ideas of the culture or ethnic group of parents, family, national interest, even religious affiliations.

So, we might call these three instinctual needs “energy centers” around which our thoughts and feelings circulate like planets around the sun. And whenever something enters into our consciousness, our awareness, or our life, it’s judged not on the basis of what it is, but whether or not it’s good *for me*, whether it fits into *my* idea of what life should be like or religion should be like, or society should be like, or other people, how they should treat me and how they should respect my demands, however outrageous these might be. So, we live then in a world that might be compared to a great movie in which we’re totally absorbed in the plot, what’s happening, or the characters that are there, and are not aware of our own inner capacity to decide what to do, such as to get up and leave, such as to control the situation instead of being dominated by it. This is the level in which most people live their ordinary psychological awareness with their emotional reactions to experiences that are out of control and hence the experience of constant frustration, some of which are so significant that we, in childhood, repress them into the unconscious or develop compensatory activities to hide the pain.

Addiction is a way in which human nature hides its pain when it’s too painful to face. And so, as life goes on, the addictive process will produce some kind of exaggerations in our attachments to things that are destructive and will interfere with our relationship to others, to God, and to ourselves. The 12-step program, of course, is a spirituality designed to reverse that process. What Centering Prayer offers as the 11th step is the kind of confidence, reassurance, in God’s help, that this recovery process is possible. The program that Centering Prayer offers, then, is singularly similar to the 12-step process in a number of places. So, it seems congenial and that’s why many people in AA and in Centering Prayer have thought of Centering Prayer as a significant contribution, if not one of the best ways of implementing the 11th step and bringing all the other steps to a certain fulfillment and completion so that one can enter into the transforming experience of the 12th step.

This wisdom saying of Jesus is exactly directed to this problem—to our basic goodness and the unfortunate distortions of divine energy that have led to the addictive process and to a specific addiction that we may presently have to struggle with. The poignant thing is that this isn’t anybody’s fault! This is the human condition; that’s the way it is. It’s almost impossible to conceive of human nature as it is *not* seeking to find happiness in those instinctual infant needs if what true happiness is, or some inkling of it, is not present in earliest life, and it is not present in earliest life.

And so, this is really what the consequences of the fall, or in Roman Catholic theology of original sin, really means, and the theology of it is simply that everyone comes into the world suffering from the consequences of this fundamental alienation or separation from God. Maybe alienation is too strong to speak about that in regard to an infant. But it's the separate self-sense that is constantly becoming more self-conscious, that is experiencing the fear and guilt, the need for happiness, the need to hide from the pain, the need to find substitutes for happiness, true happiness, in ephemeral gratifications of those three basic instinctual needs, or energy centers as we call them.