



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

Session 2: Prayer in Secret

Introduction: Fr. Thomas continues exploring the conceptual background of Centering Prayer through the wisdom saying of Jesus from Matthew 6:6, through the deepening of our relationship to “God, as we understood Him,” at the very center of our being (in secret), the spiritual level of our being.

The first thing we then need to know is Jesus’ revelation that the source of “all that is” is Abba, is the God of all goodness, mercy, caring, tenderness, presence. And that a relationship with him is not only possible, but in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it’s a commandment (Exodus 20). Just think of the first commandment. “Hear, O Israel.” Notice the first word is a call to silence. When you’re listening you’re silent but you’re alert. And so: Hear, whoever you are, Israel, or the United States, or whatever our ethnic group—The Lord is one God, that is, your Father is the God of all the living, the Father of all of us. A message that has never been understood by a majority of people who think they need to compete or even to compete on the level of religions, whereas what God is concerned seems to be that everyone recognizes that they’re brothers and sisters in a common family who have a wonderful parent who’s desperately concerned about them. Not just to become good people is our destiny, but to be transformed into the attitudes, the interior dispositions and happiness of the divine nature itself. That’s what grace is, it’s calling us to share the divine life, not just human goodness.

The Father then as a word at the beginning of this wisdom saying simply means that our idea of God is probably screwy. If we have an idea of God as a monster or a judge or a policeman as some of us do from our religious training however well-intentioned, we don’t know this God. Hence the necessity of communicating to children at the earliest time that the experience, the assurance, that God is trustworthy and loving and is our protector from every point of view. So, the idea we have of God and our attitudes toward God need to be healed by replacing whatever negative feelings we’ve ever had about this supreme entity into the God whom Jesus is revealing to us through his experience of Ultimate Reality as a loving parent who is close to us. Hence any idea we have that God is far away has to be put aside. It’s not true.

God is at the very center of our being, and as I said, we're emerging from and manifesting that presence in everything we do, even when we do badly. The energy itself with which we do badly or even sin is coming from God's goodness, only it's been damaged by growing up without the experience of this presence in daily life. And so, if you want to pray to your Father, Jesus says, enter your private room. Move away from your ordinary psychological awareness for a certain period of time. Take an oasis, a vacation from the tumult and noise of the environment. Enter into your spiritual level of your being, which most of us are not in contact with until we seriously enter on some spiritual journey, take ourselves in hand and be willing as the sixth or seventh step says, to acknowledge our defects.

Self-knowledge, then, is one of the things that takes place in this private room. The deeper knowledge of the Father, of the mystery of the Ultimate Reality, who dwells in this private room and is waiting for us, that is to say, beyond the spiritual level of our being we enter into the ground of our being or center and this is where our life is emerging from the source of all that is at every microcosmic moment of time. As we cultivate the private room in silence or in secret from our ordinary environment with its noise and tumult on a habitual basis, daily basis, it's as if we were entering into a kind of divine therapy in which not only are we being reassured by the silent presence of the Father, but the divine action is beginning to heal the wounds of a lifetime by first of all bringing them little by little to our attention and by showing us the way to heal them.

The wisdom saying of Jesus suggests not only entering the private room but closing the door to emphasize the firmness with which we separate ourselves temporarily from our environment and the other people in it. But also, it suggests that we separate ourselves from the interior dialogue that goes on all day long and sometimes during the night, in which we comment on all the experiences that are happening or plan or remember. The private room is the place to forget our concerns temporarily, to get a breather, so to speak, in the action, or to get a perspective on our problem.

Besides that, there's an even deeper secrecy that is suggested in the final words of that wisdom saying, namely, pray to your Father who is in secret and your Father will reward you. To be completely in secret is to leave behind our thoughts and self-reflections during the time of this prayer. To be in secret, in other words, from ourselves, our own idea of ourselves, our idealized image of ourselves, perhaps, and also what our reactions are to this experience of the inner room or the private room. In other words, it's not the time to comment on whether this is a good experience or not, or to reflect on ourselves whether we're doing it well or it's doing us well. It's a time of inner freedom, of no-self-ness, so to speak. Or put it more, in another way, the time of no reflection on ourselves as a fixed point of reference.

So, secrecy then is an invitation to stillness. Be still, the psalmist says, and you will know (Psalm 46:10)—*know* that I am God, not by reflection, but by immediate experience through the intuitive faculties that are at work in the spiritual level of our being. As that experience is cultivated, we come forth out of that interior silence with a new view of ordinary psychological awareness and its daily contents. And the difference, of course, is

that now we've experienced some inner freedom, and so life becomes as if we were attending a lousy movie where we don't get over-identified with the characters or the people or the events or our reactions to them. In other words, it's a school of liberation from over-identification with our bodies, our feelings. We have feelings in our body, but that's not who we are. We're not our particular ethnic group or our nationality. We're not our role. We act as mothers and fathers, but that doesn't exhaust who we really are. We have feelings, but we are not the feelings. And so, from this perspective then, we are free. We can get up and leave the lousy movie if we want to. We don't identify with the characters, we simply relate to them as they are, not to manipulate them, but to respond to their needs or their gifts as the case may be, and to lead a fully human life in which our freedom has a place, and we decide what to do with our feelings and where to go and what to be responsible to.

So, the private room is first of all an education in being human and at the same time it opens us to the experience of the divine indwelling within us, which is really the basic principle of any spiritual life and is, as I suggest, the best focus for understanding what or who the higher power is. The extent of that presence, of the higher power, from this perspective of the divine indwelling, is really infinite and hence the support is more reassuring than any view that we might otherwise choose. And so, with that background I'd like to introduce you right away to this method, which is a little particular. But please remember in this background that Centering Prayer is two things: it's first of all a relationship with God within us, and secondly a method, a means of furthering that relationship.