



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

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Session 4: Thoughts and Use of the Sacred Word

Introduction: Fr. Thomas explains thoughts as an umbrella term for any perceptions we experience, the different kinds of thoughts, and some nuances of using the sacred word.

Just a few general points about the method of Centering Prayer that no doubt is emerging in your own awareness, but here are just a few preliminary clarifications. One is that the term “thoughts” in the Centering Prayer practice has a special meaning. It’s an umbrella term including any perceptions whatsoever: memories, plans for the future, perceptions outside, inside, of a sensitive nature, commentaries, feelings, images. Any perception whatsoever is a thought. “Thought” then is a sort of shorthand for any perception in this method.

And the basic discipline is whenever you’re thinking of any thought to return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. The term “ever-so-gently” suggests the minimum of effort, and that presupposes a friendly attitude towards the thoughts. Thoughts are an inevitable part of the Centering Prayer practice, and they’re not enemies, and they’re not what might be called distractions. We’re not on the level where distractions take place, which is if we were doing reflective kind of prayer or affective prayer, which is the making of particular acts of petition or praise or thanksgiving. Those other forms of prayer are good at another time, but this is the time to move from conversation with God—reflection about the mysteries of Christ—to communion with the mystery that all those thoughts or affective prayer are directed. So, we’re moving to a receptive kind of prayer from one that is concentrative. Hence, the least amount of activity is the best practice to facilitate the movement into interior silence.

For many people there’s a feeling there’s something wrong with having thoughts, or they’re interfering with our movement into rest and peace, or they’re taking away our attention from the mystery of silence that we may be beginning to access. So, we need to train ourselves to facilitate a positive attitude toward the thoughts as an integral part of the prayer. Thus, we suggest as a memory device four R’s, namely: *resist* no thought, feeling, perception; *retain* no thought, feeling, perception; *react* emotionally to no thought; and

when you notice you're thinking about any thought, feeling, or perception, *return* ever-so-gently to the sacred word, the symbol of your intention. So, the sacred word is not a device to sustain our attention to anything; it's a device to maintain the purity of our intention, our love, in other words, towards God.

The sacred word doesn't have to be clearly enunciated. It's not something we say over and over again, but it's something you may say continuously depending on what your psychological experience of the prayer today happens to be. So, you might find yourself saying it constantly, but again it should be ever-so-gentle, and not a kind of pounding. It's not appropriate to try to push the thoughts away, or to sort of inwardly shout the sacred word. The sacred word is not a bulldozer to get rid of thoughts, it's just simply the meaning you've given it as a gesture of your intention to listen to God within and God's language is silence.

So, we don't have the satisfaction of knowing that we've heard it. We believe it and to maintain that loving intention you'll notice that as time goes on an attentiveness develops, not an attention to the word or to any specific thought or content of your prayer, but a general loving awareness or attentiveness to God's presence, without being conceived in any particular way, as around you or within you or coming from above or coming from below. It just is in whatever way it presents itself to you in a particular period of prayer.

And so, the reacting emotionally and saying, "Oh dear, I'm having distractions" or "this is not going well today," or if it's going well, "I guess I'm getting somewhere," these are self-reflections and these are thoughts, hence when you notice you're thinking about anything, this is the time to return to the sacred word. Sometimes they're just casual things going by, the ordinary wanderings of the imagination, and these you just ignore. It's like music at the supermarket. You didn't go to listen to it, you don't want to hear it, but you can't turn it off. So, you get your groceries and put up with it and pay your bill and go home. And so, it is here. The thoughts are inevitable. You can't stop them and trying to resist them will only upset you and create a new thought, this time with an emotional charge which is more of a hindrance to moving towards a state of interior silence than the original thoughts.

The sacred word is an activity that we initiate even though it's the least amount of activity that we can initiate, since we're not yet in a state of infused contemplation, or if you are, you don't need Centering Prayer. You're already where we're going! So, there is a certain amount of effort that we put in to reduce the obstacles to the movement of grace and towards infused contemplation. So, the word is chosen as the least amount of activity that you can do and still maintain an attentiveness—notice I said not attention but attentiveness, which is characterized not so much by attention as by intention.

So, the word is not so much a thought as an expression of the will. It's a movement of the will that is concretized in a word. But one doesn't think about the sacred word or its content. If the sacred word is one that constantly reminds you by an association of ideas of a whole series of other thoughts, then you need another word. Perhaps the easiest way to grasp this is the distinction between thinking and thinking about. We can't avoid thinking. We can gradually train ourselves to disregard thoughts and not think about the perceptions

that go by, and it's that process that gradually develops this general loving attentiveness towards the presence of God, based on many brief but nonetheless real flashes of insight or experience of the peace and quiet that is accessible from time to time in our inner being that sends a message that God loves us and that everything is OK, and better than OK, even in the face of great difficulties, sorrows, tragedies, etc.

You don't go through the scared word. You just return, by means of the sacred word, to your original intention, and since it was already set at the beginning of the prayer, this does not require effort but simply a gesture or a reminder, as if you put your hand on your heart to remember that you love somebody if you were temporarily distracted by the stock market or something. And so, the sacred word is not the object of attention, it's simply a gesture of intention. And that's why, if you lose it, it doesn't matter, provided the reason you're not losing it is because your attention has become so well established that it doesn't need a gesture to keep functioning in its opening and consenting and surrendering to God's presence.

We might distinguish five kinds of thoughts or perceptions that come down the stream of consciousness during our prayer. The first kind that can be distinguished is the ordinary wanderings of the imagination, which I suggested we treat as background music in the supermarket, and we simply ignore them.

The second one is when a thought or a perception or a feeling is attractive or causes an aversion, hence we're dealing with an emotionally charged thought. And emotionally charged thoughts are more of a hindrance to the movement towards interior silence and rest and peace than our ordinary awareness and hence those thoughts especially we need to ever-so-gently and kind of spontaneously and automatically and effortlessly return to the sacred word, because if we follow those thoughts they pull us, our intention away from consenting to the presence of God in the degree of purity that we originally intended.

So, the sacred word is simply a way of renewing our will's intention and the intention is very powerful. You are where your will is, so to speak. That is, where your intention of choice is where we are in any particular moment in relationship to God. So, whenever we notice we're thinking about a thought or a feeling or a perception, we return to the sacred word, as distinct from when we are aware of just thinking but without being interested in the thoughts, as in the supermarket. Then, strictly speaking, you don't need to return to the sacred word, but you may decide to do so just because in the beginning there's so many thoughts that it's helpful, again I say without forcing anything, just to keep returning to the sacred word until it begins to repeat itself.

The third kind are insights or inspirations that we think come from the Holy Spirit. For example, you might feel inspired to pray for someone. And then you might well raise the objection, "Well, I feel inspired, shouldn't I do this?" And our answer is no. And the reason is because Centering Prayer is a more profound experience of the Holy Spirit's inspiration and if we ever get established in interior silence, you'll be praying for everybody on earth or you'll be praying for your friends in a more profound and effective manner because the Spirit will be praying in you.

Hence, it's important to remember that once one begins a serious method of prayer such as this, leading to contemplation and it's an extraordinary world that it opens up in its evolution, is that it's no longer a question in our lives between good and evil. It's a question of good, better, and best. Praying vocally is good. Praying mentally is better. But praying in the Holy Spirit, that is to say, in utter silence, is the best. And God, being the best of the best, seems to lead us to that place, at least at some part of the day, and the experience of contemplative prayer and its insight into the mysteries of faith, then, gives a deeper meaning to our ritual and the practice of the sacraments or the psalms or the scriptures, and to our relationships in daily life.

So, we might also have not only inspirations but insights which is another kind of inspiration. Maybe you figure out the mystery of the trinity. Well, no one on earth has every figured this out. And so, you might fall for that and say, "Well, let me just think this out, and then I'll make a great contribution to humanity, at least to the theological community." But when you come out of the prayer you won't even remember that you... it was so foolish. So, insights as attractive as they are because it's a bright light, is an intellectual hazard for people who are well trained in theology or scripture. In other words, it's a special hazard of professionally trained people.

The fourth one I mentioned was self-reflection. That is, I referred to that as, as reflecting on how the prayer is affecting me today, or allowing ourselves to complain or to feel sorry for ourselves or to get angry at God because the prayer over a certain number of days has been kind of dry, and to threaten God if he doesn't behave to give up praying. God is not impressed with these threats, I assure you.

And finally, there was the thoughts that come from the unconscious, where we have feelings that bear no relationship to the immediate past or any kind of identifiable source. Pretty sure sign they're coming from this unloading process that enables the body to free itself from warehousing the emotional trauma of a lifetime, which are real packages of energy which can be dissipated by feeling them again, and then they disappear. So, the only response we need to make, really, to the unloading process, is to wave goodbye to the thoughts as they pass through.

Time, remember, is the measure of motion. And so, thoughts are events in that continuum, and hence any thought, if you just wait a minute, will go by. If you get interested in it, by attraction or aversion, or reflect about it, then you're hooked on it. If you just let it sit on the river of consciousness, or the stream of consciousness, time will do everything, and it will just go by. Wait a minute. But if it has a strong attraction, or if you notice you're thinking about it, the discipline of the prayer is to return ever-so-gently to the sacred word without any recriminations if you find yourself downstream on top of the boat. You just get off and start over without any reflection on self. Too bad—no! It's not too bad. It just happened and the less you think about it, the more quickly you return to the basic movement towards interior silence, peace, and rest.

With this teaching in mind, the more rest and peace you have in a particular period—and, as a matter of fact, this rest over time can deepen so that at first one's will is grasped so that you don't want any thoughts. This is really the beginning it seems to me of infused contemplation because I don't think people could do that unless the Spirit gave them that power and inwardly from his presence in the private room, grasps the will and holds it so to speak, so that all kinds of thoughts can go by without one having the slightest interest in them. At least, such is the psychological experience. That grasping of our faculties can be deeper still when the Spirit holds our memory or suspends the memory or the imagination briefly, and then one experiences a moment of real union with God. But, full union occurs when there is no self-reflection, when all the faculties and all our attention is grasped by the Spirit, and usually it doesn't last too long, but it has very profound effects in relating us to God as the Beloved, and prepares us then with the strength to face the special parts of unloading that St. John of the Cross describes as the night of sense and the night of spirit, and which lead to transforming union.