



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

Session 6: Prayer as Relationship

Introduction: Fr. Thomas talks about the spiritual level of our being and Centering Prayer as a Way of Life.

Question: Is that intention that you keep returning to, its essence is beyond thoughts and beyond words, is it not?

Fr. Thomas: Yes, it's the spiritual movement of the spiritual will to God that is part of the spiritual level of our being. The passive intellect, the intuitive intellect, and the will to God are faculties of the spiritual kind that support the reflective apparatus in the sense experience that we are more in contact normally than with the spiritual level of our being unless we are on the spiritual journey. Some questions that you can only really answer by doing it and the spirit guides one, or you run into a sentence or a phrase in a book or meet someone who puts it in a way that it connects. I may not be able to say it in a way that connects it precisely with your question but somebody else will if you keep doing it.

And you see this is not a technique. It's a method of getting acquainted with a person, with the divine reality that at least treats us in a personal way. Hence it goes through stages of acquaintanceship which are a bit awkward where we use other people's prayers rather than our own. And "at-easeness" which is a kind of friendliness in which we begin to disclose ourselves to God and talk to him in our own words. And then there's friendship which is a commitment to a practice leading to union with God and that union can open up to various levels of union and unity. In fact, once that commitment is made the future is much more under the influence of the Spirit, whereas in the first two stages, our efforts are more important to get started and to prove our sincerity that we're interested in this journey. So, as this relationship deepens the spontaneity of it and also the interaction moves from a more psychologically apparent level to a more intimate and subtle level since God is the Spirit and, as Jesus said in John's Gospel, he wishes to be worshipped in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23). And Centering Prayer is in the service of that request. And so, there are levels of deepening relationship. Then after friendship has been established as a commitment to a life of prayer.

And so, the Centering Prayer practice then is not just a method of prayer, it's a way of life that will then eventually change our relationships and our attitude for the better in all aspects of our lives. And so, a relationship then is different, is a method, or Centering Prayer is a method of facilitating that living relationship whereas a technique is a kind of mechanical way of putting certain psychological or physical or bodily exercises into place with the expectation of achieving a certain result. Centering Prayer doesn't work that way. You can put in all this time and not apparently get any results sometimes. But the relationship of result is only that of reducing the obstacles at most. So, it's not a technique that you, if you do it, you get a result you expect. You do it and you get whatever God wants you to have but it works the other way too. You do it wrong or incorrectly and it doesn't matter as long as you keep doing it because God loves you and he'll fix it.

So, it makes quite a difference to have the personal relationship develop that involves self-surrender and trust, and so our progress doesn't depend on our activity. That's why we do the least amount of it during Centering Prayer, but we do something a little bit just to bring us and to maintain our intentionality to be open to God throughout the period of prayer. Is that clear distinction between a technique and a relationship?

If you have negative feelings about God, the relationship is going to be rocky getting started because we think of God with the emotionally-charged thoughts of early childhood. Hence one can do great damage to a child by frightening it or threatening it with the punishment so that it gets the idea that God is a hazardous God who's about to punish you or is watching for every fault that you make or is the judge always about to bring down the verdict of guilty. This is not the God of the Christians although it's certainly one that a lot of Christian denominations have communicated not too long ago. It also is changing very fast in the opposite direction today so that a lot of people, I think, have a diminished accountability for themselves that isn't healthy either.

So, we need to be in a balanced attitude towards God that is based on a true teaching of the Gospel and not on the cultural conditioning that sometimes arises in history. Tradition is to be distinguished from the *traditional*. The *traditional* can be subject to historical circumstances. The Christian tradition is the handing on of the experience that Jesus had of Abba as Father. It's the profound religious experience. It's not in a book, it's not in dogmas as such. These are simply pointing the way, so the Gospel is only transmitted by those of us and yourself who have absorbed in some degree or assimilated Christ's teaching and have some experience of the mystery of the tenderness and loveliness of whom he calls Abba.