



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

Session 10: Establishing a Daily Practice: The 11th Step and Centering Prayer

Introduction: Fr. Thomas introduces putting the 11th step into practice to assist the movement of the Spirit in our daily life. He offers practical suggestions for establishing a daily Centering Prayer practice, explains some of the effects of a regular practice in our lives, and cautions us to be considerate of our loved ones as we navigate our new life in recovery and on the spiritual journey.

We discussed at some length the human condition and the false self, with its basic sources in the emotional programs for happiness and in our overidentification with a particular group, family, ethnic, national, or peer group or whatever. It's pretty certain from a medical point of view that whatever our belief system is, meaning what we think we should do has an enormous effect on our emotions, and the emotions have an enormous effect on what we act out. And so, the great advantage of the practice of the 11th step is that it puts a whole new perspective on all the other steps. And it also spontaneously moves us, of its very nature, to express our experience of Centering Prayer in daily life.

At the same time, if we can find a suitable practice for ourselves that will assist the movement of the Spirit to bring the effects of our encounter in the private room with God, then you have a holistic program that is working in tandem. Or, if you want another image, you have the two wings of a bird that will help you to fly, namely, to put it this way: the interior letting go of thoughts, perceptions, memories, during the time of Centering Prayer, which we do passively by disregarding it all needs to be complemented by a vigorous and active letting go of inappropriate or harmful or damaging thoughts or words and activity in daily life.

So, let's first just refine for a moment the circumstances that would help to intensify and deepen the regular practice of Centering Prayer. First of all, to have its full effect it really needs to be done twice a day for a minimum of 20 minutes but perhaps a little longer can be helpful. At the same time, it shouldn't be too long, at least in the first few months or year—this is especially true for those just beginning a 12-Step program—because usually when they come into it, it's because they feel deeply damaged, they have chemical

imbalances in the body, and often they're suffering great pain and thoughts that are unbearable. And so, it would not be a good idea since Centering Prayer brings deep rest to multiply periods of Centering Prayer beyond what has been suggested here, namely, two periods of a half hour. The reason is if you do more than this and experience some deep rest, then these beginners in contemplative prayer may experience unloading that is overwhelming that they're not ready to deal with.

The process of doing the prayer every day builds up, as we saw, two things: the reassurance that comes from deep rest, at-homeness, an occasional consolation of God's love for us. This is an enormous help, as I think I pointed out earlier. It's like transference in a psychiatric situation. The therapist isn't going to do anything for you unless you have a good rapport, unless you trust this person. And so it is with the divine therapist. If we're going to be able to face the dark side of our personality, the dynamics of the unconscious, and the very roots of our pain which has brought about the addiction that we're suffering from, then we need trust in the divine therapist and confidence. And that affirmation, especially coming from God, is more likely to heal the deep wounds of rejection or lack of love that so often is at the root of our problems; that we will have a firm relationship both with God and a diminishing fear of facing the pain and its causes that we now know are coming from the instinctual needs of early childhood that have become outrageous, exaggerated, unlimited, and certainly to be frustrated programs for happiness in daily life that will not work.

So, a little thought about how best to provide for a regular practice of Centering Prayer. Most people find that on awakening is the best time—maybe a shower, maybe a cup of coffee, maybe a glass of water, maybe nothing, will help. Maybe you feel like diving for your favorite spot and getting started. But without exaggeration I would suggest that one plans to do that as the first major occupation of the day. It helps if you have such facilities in your home or house or apartment, to have a favorite chair and sculpt it in such a way that you can feel fairly comfortable, and a fairly straight back at least. Not too comfortable so you fall back asleep, but comfortable enough so you will not be thinking of how uncomfortable the body is during this process. It's good not to have the arms or the legs in a position where the circulation is cut off because of the nature of the chair. Also, our breathing is a significant factor in calming the body. In other words, we want to have the body cooperate in this project. And so, there's no doubt that a good posture, and a reasonable diet, a reasonable amount of rest, all contribute to the cooperation of our bodies during this prayer.

Perhaps as you advance it doesn't matter quite so much because the capacity to enter into a quiet space grows on you and hence, some people as soon as they sit down immediately enter into a quiet place, apart from special circumstances. It also, when it becomes a habit, is something you can do when on an airplane, in traveling. It's not recommended while driving since that's a serious operation that requires concentration. But you can do it in a noisy place. The one thing that makes it very difficult is conversation or the radio or a telephone going. So, you want to avoid a place where you're going to be abruptly interrupted by a phone or a knock or a child or something else. If you're in a deep place and

you're pulled out of it suddenly, it can leave you with a little nervous tension or a headache even. So, the choice of the place and the time is worth giving a little bit of reflection to.

The first period is one that most people can do fairly easily with a moderate amount of determination. To find a place for the second one in a busy lifestyle requires a lot of motivation and determination. And I don't know how to bring that about except I guess your own experience will prove to you the difference. But the idea is that the oasis of silence and peace is so valuable that if it can sort of cover the whole of the day, like a bright cloud or an inner reservoir of peace, this will enable us to deal with the events of each day with its ups and downs and the sudden alarms that sometimes occur or occasionally, a really serious upset that under normal circumstances might blow us away. But with the growing stability or what might be called spiritual poise that comes from the regular practice of contemplative prayer, even in great tragedies one has a sense immediately of the presence of God and the movement of acceptance, whatever the other feelings are, grief or fear, it precedes the emotions in such a way that they do not blow you away. But that's the result of some degree of progress.

Another factor to keep in mind here is that as the divine therapy develops you not only experience it during the time of prayer, but it overflows into daily life little by little so that eventually it's as if you were always in the inner room, some part of you. The inner room becomes a kind of fourth dimension of your ordinary three-dimensional world, and you're aware of a kind of ever-present presence or awareness to your inmost being that is not really on the psychological level but is a presence that is a backdrop or a context in which you're living in which just a glance or a memory of it sort of reawakens its mysterious and attractive and supportive and protective awareness or presence.

So, it can happen that in the time of prayer, as a result of the deep rest, you loosen up some material that is not completed during the time of prayer, and you have to go to work and so on, and so you may feel it part of the day as a little uneasiness. There's not closure on something. In other words, some chunk of emotional undigested material got halfway up your gullet then you had to leave, and it got stuck there, so it's sort of sitting there, and the events of the day keep gently working on it and eventually it pops into awareness as a painful feeling or maybe a memory that the Spirit feels that you should look at, deal with, and hand over to the divine therapist. In other words, in this prayer, we don't just let go in itself, but we let go and turn it over to the therapist—to God.

In other words, we're not just feeling a private emotion, but we're telling somebody else about the feeling, and this is what resolves it in a way that is fully human. Some of our insights, if we keep them to ourselves are valuable. They become much more valuable, and the insight into them is greater when we share them with another person, which as you know, is one of the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. This other person can be a weekly or daily—I don't know what your custom is—exchange with your sponsor, but the sponsor should not take the place of God. And so, it's also important to express our feelings to God and as we let go of them to sort of turn them over into his lap, the lap of the divine therapist as soon as we hear about it.

So now, and from that perspective, eventually the whole of life becomes a part of the therapy and the healing process, and so it subtly changes our attitude to painful experiences so that we see them in a new light. They're not all bad. There's some kind of lesson to be found in each one. And the developing capacity to listen to God not only in prayer but in events in daily life, in other people, and to develop this attitude of welcoming.

What are you going to do about the second period? Well, you have to be kind of creative. Some people do it during the lunch hour. Some people do it before coming home from work. They can stay in the office another half hour and do it. Some on the way home can drive off to the side of the road and do it. Some people can do it at home.

I should say just a word about the relationship of one who is growing in this prayer—and I imagine you must experience this in a practice as serious as the 12-step program—it involves the whole family. You can't get away from it because you're putting time in it. They see you meditating, or they see you going to an AA meeting. They may have feelings about this. "What about us? I mean, where's the old man. Well, he's at an AA meeting." Oh, well, all those things happen. So, in regard to Centering Prayer which is perceived by the family members as another relationship that one's spouse or parents have gotten into, if they don't like it or if they feel they're being left out of it and you're growing into a new person and they aren't, there are issues here that really have to be considered, and it's up to the one who is touched by grace and is called into this relationship to have the greatest respect and consideration of the other member of the partnership and not to wave the red flag needlessly in front of the one who is sort of turned off by this thing.

It definitely is jealousy sometimes, or it could be envy. Or it could be, "I didn't marry a nun or a monk or something. I preferred my spouse when they had all their faults and addictions to this thing. Now they're changing." And it's true, if you change, the spouse has to change. If you become as a result of the affirmation, the deep affirmation that comes upon us during this prayer of being loved by God, you're not going to be stepped on anymore. I mean you realize a responsibility to state your mind about some issues, not aggressively, but you're not going to be quite the same person. Now much depends on whether you can make the new person really loveable or not.

And so, we should not at least needlessly aggravate the spouse by meditating at times when that would be inappropriate. For instance, suppose the whole family is, you know, come home from school, your wife has had a second job, she's worked all day, and cooked dinner, and everything is ready, and the children want to sit down so dinner can be over and they can watch the television, and you come in from a hard day's work, and this is a time for Centering Prayer. You couldn't do it on the road. You're longing for a little peace and quiet. The office has been unbearable and details. You have every reason in the world to look for a little solitude. You burst into the door and your wife rushes to your arms, the children cling to your legs, and you say, "Out of my way! It's time to meditate." And you head for the cellar, hang a sign out, "Meditating, do not disturb." Well, when you come back to the supper it's going to be a rather delicate atmosphere at the table.

So, we have to plan prime time with those you're living with who love you, and it may mean you have to get up in the middle of the night to get another period. I don't recommend that, but also, we don't recommend doing it just before sleeping, because you may enter into enough rest to release some energy. Remember, the unconscious is full not just of the negative, repressive material that we put there to avoid pain in early childhood, but there are all kinds of positive energies there, including just plain energy. So, you may get deep enough just to let off enough energy so that you won't be able to get to sleep right away. Or if you get to sleep, you wake up two hours later raring to go. So, for most people that is not a good time to pray for that reason.

After the main meal is not a good time to pray because then the digestive apparatus is operating unconsciously, but really, and it prevents us from really settling down to the kind of a deep level. Here's where diet enters in. I don't believe in prescribing any diet. A lot of people do. Because we wanted to make Centering Prayer as accessible to everybody at every age and invite them to use their own good judgment as to what enables them to do this in the most efficient kind of way or the most accessible way.

Just a few anecdotes that may be helpful here in regard to the relationship of Centering Prayer to the family. I know one feisty lady who started this prayer and the family objected quite a bit. And so finally she brought them all together and they sat down. And she said, "Now look, you want three meals a day on the table, and you know my disposition. I'm easily upset by things when they go wrong and so that if you want me to be pleasant and to smile and support your needs and to do the wash and so on, you have to allow me to take these two periods of 20 minutes. So, let's give it a try. Either I do that or you get the old false self." So, they said, "Well, we'll try, you put it that way." And so, she began to change and began to be sweetness and light and smile at everybody in the morning, and they couldn't help but see the improvement, I guess. And eventually it came to a point where the children would take a peek at the clock and say, "Mother, isn't it time for your meditation?" Because they saw that if she did it, they benefitted.

Now it doesn't always work with this happy ending, and it may take a while. But I think the most fundamental attitude for our family and friends is, as the prayer teaches you to be less judgmental because you see your own faults more realistically, it's so important to offer the utmost respect and esteem to the spouse and the other members of the family, but especially one's spouse, and to include them as much as you can in your activities, to invite them to come to occasional meetings that might be of interest to them, if those are available, to hear a significant speaker or something. But above all, to respect the fact that they're on a spiritual path too even if they don't know it and if you don't recognize it. And to treat them as an equal or a superior to yourself and to really love them. And to negotiate to be present to them at other times when you might prefer to do something else.