



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

Session 16: A Case for Introducing Centering Prayer Earlier than Step 11

Introduction: Fr. Thomas talks about the history of Centering Prayer and how it evolved over time. When it was first introduced it was thought people needed preliminary practices before moving into a deep meditation practice, but eventually it was discovered that most people were ready for Centering Prayer without the preliminaries. He sees an analogy between Centering Prayer and 12-Step Programs and suggests that those experienced in both Centering Prayer and a 12-Step Program explore the potential evolution of the steps in regard to introducing Centering Prayer sooner than the 11th step. He reminds us that the Spirit guides us the process and will send us back to previous steps according to our individual needs.

AA only works thoroughly or effectively as a spirituality, that is to say, when it involves a relationship with the higher power, and this is why I have raised the question whether it would not help the 12-step program to introduce that relationship to the higher power which is not just discursive meditation or vocal prayer, but the kind of prayer that Centering Prayer is—a relationship beyond concepts and ideas—earlier in the steps. That's what I consider could be missing in the early steps.

And you can't get to the unconscious without some form of nonconceptual meditation. Thinking, for some reason, thinking about things, and that's what rationalizes and goes into denial, is what prevents us from experiencing head-on the contents of the unconscious. So, when he (Bill W) started doing that, as his letter suggests, then he got out of the depression right away. So, I think that's an area for discussion among those who have a lot of experience of AA and the spiritual journey. I think the two could go together at an earlier period of the process.

If AA works well, if the 12-step program works well, it will teach you all these things anyway, and what I'm saying will not teach you anything unless you experience it, so it's this combination or relationship of an explanation or at least some idea of what the root problem is, as Jesus says, it's more important to heal the roots of the tree if you want good fruit, because if you don't, the diseased roots will continue to propose bad fruit, no matter

how much you clip off the branches. And he uses that image even more profoundly in “I am the vine, and you are the branches. To abide in me you must abide in the vine.” The idea being, if we’re going to bring forth divine fruits or the fruits of the Gospel or the values of the Gospel, the Beatitudes in the fruits, we have to be rooted in the divine presence within us. Then we can see the divine presence everywhere else. And without that rootedness, every self-help program is questionable how far it can go, and if it doesn’t get into the unconscious motivation, it is not going far enough.

The journey is all about the God and, more particularly, the experience of the divine presence. I emphasize experience of the divine presence because this is what relativizes all the other attachments to anything less than God. Something I noticed when I was at the rehab center in Gateway, one of the new clients, who was there to dry off in order to have a baby without the influence of the cocaine, I guess, or the alcohol that she would otherwise be doing if she were out on the street. But she said, she had terrible suffering while she was struggling with alcohol and drugs. Then she got sober, at least for a few months, and then she said, she felt worse, more pain than before. This made a tremendous impression on me because I wouldn’t have known quite what to answer. She asked that question, actually, directly of me at the end of my presentation. And what it said to me is that the root of any addiction is some pain in regard to life—rejection, abandonment, loss of a loved one—some unbearable pain that an addiction at least relieves in some degree and that when the addiction is no more through sobriety, the pain is going to return unless you do something else to address the roots of that pain. And this is what the Centering Prayer practice is about.

And that’s why it raises the question for me whether the practice itself might not be helpful to a certain number of people who are trying to get rooted in AA. Because the human condition and its problems are so acute that underneath every addiction is the addictive process and the addictive process is rooted in the human condition with the emotional programs for happiness and overidentification. If we could just communicate that much of the program to new persons, and a period in which they rest in their faith in their own basic goodness, that now they’re in the land of likeness but they can come back. Some hope has to be given to people in great pain, and I believe there is hope that can be offered to them, but they have to freely accept it.

I’ve always thought myself that if Centering Prayer could be introduced a little earlier than the 11th step, it might facilitate all the other steps, but I’m not sure. In actual fact, in Christian tradition there are a lot of other steps before coming to contemplation and the idea of starting people off with the contemplative practice strikes a number of very respectable and traditional teachers as inappropriate. But you see, when we teach Centering Prayer, we also accompany it very soon after with teaching about the practice called *Lectio Divina*, which is a way of listening to the Scriptures from a prayerful perspective and using the faculties as a way of getting acquainted, you might say, or establishing an acquaintance and a friendly relationship, with the persons who are described in the scripture, especially with Jesus Christ, of course. And so, Centering Prayer also has preliminaries that are very helpful.

We also found that in the historical conditions in which we first taught Centering Prayer that people were not interested in Lectio Divina at that point—in rituals, in liturgy or anything else. They were alerted from the incursion of the Eastern spiritual experts that came to this country in great numbers after the World War II and are still coming, and they're welcome to them because they arrived on our shores saying, here is our method into meditation, what we would mean by contemplation—where's yours? Or what is it? And there was no answer to that in those days. And that was part of my inspiration in trying to put the Christian mystical tradition into some form comparable to a method because we live in an age when everybody has to have a book on how-to before they do anything.

So, Centering Prayer was designed to provide a Christian presence in the marketplace. Because Christians and Catholics and maybe some of you, never having heard about the contemplative dimension of the Gospel in Catholic schools or in any religious schools or even in seminaries were seeking (if they were interested in spirituality) out some Eastern guru or master or teacher. And in fact, in the late sixties, early seventies, figures I've seen reported that maybe 10,000 young people were heading for India every summer in search of spirituality or a guru. What does that say about the Jewish and Christian religions, of whom many who were going, were members? It says that it didn't cross their mind that there was anything comparable in the Christian or the Jewish religion. That's why we put Centering Prayer into a method.

And so, when they came to the monastery to check us out way down the line, because most of these young people had never heard of a monastery, we were able to speak to them in comparable terms and so that's what we've been doing since then. And many folks who are Christians with a deeply a Christian background have been through Eastern traditions, found them extremely helpful, but also, if they were in reaction to their Christian religion, as many of them were, had rejected it, the practice of Eastern meditation reduced their anger sufficiently that they were able to reconsider returning to their roots. And believe it or not, some of these people are our best people who go back. I mean they were enriched by the East, and at least, then they heard there is a Christian practice that's comparable and indeed, a very rich tradition because we're not the only one presenting a Christian mystical tradition, they wanted to return to the religion of their roots and did so.

Now the question arises for you in AA, whether the knowledge or at least experience of a method of meditation could help the process itself. I personally think it could, but I don't have that much experience of AA. I just see that we were able to do without that preliminary process in the Christian introduction of Centering Prayer.

The advantage of a meditative practice is that if you touch base with the experience, it puts meaning into all the other steps, into all the other things. You see for the first time what prayer is about, what vocal prayer is, what ritual does, what sacraments do, spiritual reading, good works; they're all moving in the same direction, to open us to the fact that really, at the deepest level of truth, God is what is most important in every event and in every person, and that if we're in contact in some degree with that presence, then we

become transmitters or channels, in some degree, of the divine goodness which is incredibly powerful, though secret.

Remember, God operates at a level that transcends all our apparatus to interpret it. It's like the subatomic energies. We don't perceive him with our three-dimensional world apparatus, but with proper microscopes and so on, these energies can be perceived, or even now, as an example, this room is full of radio waves, telephone waves, and neutrinos from outer space, the place is loaded! But we have no apparatus with our bare hands to contact this part of reality. So it is that the greatest part of God's reality, the divine energy, in its purity so far surpasses any apparatus that we have of recognizing, knowing it or feeling it, that all we can ever perceive is just a tiny, reduced speck of it.

Augustine has the delightful phrase that the Eucharist, for instance, is the milk that God provides for us in this life because our stomachs, our tastes, aren't ready for the solid food of the divine essence. In other words, we're not ready to assimilate the meat, so to speak, and potatoes of the divine essence. So, all that we can receive are little trickles or hints of that, that manifest themselves in a certain peace, a certain at-homeness, sometimes spiritual consolation and sometimes very high gifts of enlightenment. At the highest enlightenment is sheer darkness compared to the pure light of God's presence. And that energy is totally available, provided you're willing to believe it, to accept it in faith and relate to it. And as you do relate to it you find out that its effects are working in your life in the point of transformation.

So now you move, not from a series of devotions to God, of trying to get along with the old man, you might say, with the father to use papa—instead of trying to please papa to get what you want or to manipulate him to get what we'd like to have, we begin to love him on his own terms and love is basically surrender. And surrender then puts us in an attitude in which God can transform us.

So Centering Prayer is a transformative practice. If I understand the 12 steps correctly, they are transformative, they are a way of life. What is missing, to me, in AA is this dimension of wisdom that is reserved for the 11th step, and perhaps wisely. But remember Bill W and the others came out of a milieu and were being advised by a Catholic nun and a wonderful Catholic priest who is something of a saint, named Ed Dowling, and they didn't have this view of the Christian mystical life yet. It was only being renewed gradually with Merton and other outstanding people. It was only in the last 25 or 30 years that the tradition is being looked at, and the great texts of the past are being translated into English, and so on.

And so here's where cultural conditioning comes in. Is the idea that you can't teach Christian contemplation without putting people through discursive meditation and vocal prayers and acts, is that the way you have to do it? Well, that's what the tradition says you do. What's a little original about Centering Prayer, although it reflects the tradition, is that it starts with God instead of with us. If we can do this successfully with Centering Prayer, without all the preliminaries, and start out with the experience of meditation, is it possible that AA and the steps could be enriched by starting the 11th step, not so much in the

fullness of the 11th step, but starting the practice of meditation at least a little earlier, while accompanying the 12 steps?

That's my question, and that's why I went to Gateway, and we had an experiment there, and I don't know how it's going to go. I think that some people coming in off the street are too confused to get it. I imagine maybe ten percent might benefit from it. But remember, in Centering Prayer, if we give an introductory, at the most half will pursue it. That's high. And then after the six-week follow up, maybe another half will drop out. But is the progress of those people worth putting it out there? I think those who don't do it, it won't do them any harm; they just won't do it. But I think it needs, you know, a lot more consultation and dialogue and thought.

So, with such outstanding people with so much experience, I hesitate to suggest, but I see an analogy between Centering Prayer and the 12-step program. We were able to do it without the preliminaries to great advantage because then when they got back into the preliminaries, the Spirit sends you back if you skip a few steps. He sends you back to fill them in later on. But now you fill them in with a much greater insight because you realize where they're going, and you have a much stronger motivation to pursue the Centering Prayer practice. And the preliminaries, so you work the thing into all your faculties. In other words, I think that the steps of Lectio Divina, for instance, are a dynamic process of relating that you can go back and forth and can even enter into the rest of contemplative prayer, even from the beginning. But since it's based on a rather fragile foundation, the Spirit sends you back to the other steps and you move around with a certain spontaneity according to each person's need.