

Prayer Helps

Founded, formed and framed in the practices of prayer, our Church's strengths include: Caring for Youth & Children, Meaningful Worship, Empowering Leadership and Focus on Community. This booklet is intended to help you increase your confidence and effectiveness in prayer to impact our church and your life.

CENTERING PRAYER

"Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10

The Maitri Upanishad describes it well: "There is something, beyond our mind which abides in silence within our mind. It is the supreme mystery beyond thought. Let one's mind and subtle body rest upon that and not rest on anything else." Contemplative practices seek to nurture our encounter with mystery. Contemplation is the inner journey toward that mystery. St. Augustine says that God is "more intimate to us than we are to ourselves," or as the Koran observes, "nearer to us than our jugular vein."

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Basil Pennington and Centering Prayer

Centering prayer' is a popular method of contemplative prayer, placing a strong emphasis on interior silence. Though most authors trace its roots to the contemplative prayer of the *Desert Fathers* of early Christian monasticism, to the *Lectio Divina* tradition of Benedictine monasticism, and to works like *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the writings of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, its origins as part of the "Centering Prayer" movement in modern Catholicism and Christianity can be traced to several books published by three Trappist monks of *St. Joseph's Abbey* in Spencer, Massachusetts in the 1970s: Fr. William Meninger, Fr. M. Basil Pennington and Abbot Thomas Keating.

From www.contemplativeprayer.net/

In 1974, Father William Meninger, a Trappist monk and retreat master at St. Josephs Abbey in Spencer, Mass. found a dusty little book in the abbey library, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. As he read it he was delighted to discover that this anonymous 14th century book presented contemplative meditation as a teachable, spiritual process enabling the ordinary person to enter and receive a direct experience of union with God.

This form of meditation, recently known as 'Centering Prayer' (from a text of Thomas Merton) can be traced from and through the earliest centuries of Christianity. The Centering Prayer centers one on God.

The Cloud was written, not in Latin but in Middle English - which means that it was intended primarily for laymen rather than for priests and monks. Father Meninger saw that it was a simple book on the ultimate subject, with only 75 brief chapters.

He quickly began teaching contemplative prayer according to *The Cloud of Unknowing* at the Abbey Retreat House. One year later his workshop was taken up by his Abbot, Thomas Keating, and Basil Pennington, both of whom had been looking for a teachable form of Christian contemplative meditation to offset the movement of young Catholics toward Eastern meditation techniques.

Suggested Guidelines for the Practice of Centering Prayer

The actual practice of centering prayer is not entirely alien, at least to Catholics, who are advised to meditate in some form daily — usually on the rosary or on the more structured practice of *lectio divina*. The purpose of centering prayer is to clear the mind of rational thought in order to focus on the indwelling presence of God,

Basil Pennington, one of the best known proponents of the centering prayer technique, has delineated the guidelines for centering prayer:

Sit comfortably with your eyes closed, relax, and quiet yourself. Be in love and faith to God. Settle briefly.

Choose a sacred word that best supports your sincere intention to be in the Lord's presence and open to His divine action within you (i.e. "Jesus", "Lord," "God," "Savior," "Abba," "Divine," "Shalom," "Spirit," "Love," etc.).

Silently, and very gently, introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.

Let that word be gently present as your symbol of your sincere intention to be in the Lord's presence and open to His divine action within you.

Whenever you become aware of any thoughts simply return to your sacred word, your anchor. In this prayer, "thoughts" is an umbrella term for every perception including sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, associations, analysis, reflections, et cetera. Use little effort when returning to your sacred word. If you are not distracted by thoughts, the sacred word may become vague or even disappear. Let it go.

Practitioners suggest that twenty minutes is a minimum to experience inner silence.

Ideally, the prayer will reach the point where the person is not engaged in their thoughts as they arrive on their stream of consciousness. This is the "unknowing" referenced in the 14th century book.

The impact of this prayer has been found to be profound, especially in how it effects healing to body, spirit, emotions; sometimes in gradual, imperceptible ways.

MOVING MEDITATION

The practice of body movement from Martial Arts to Sacred Dance to Yoga and Tai Chi promote the circulation of energy within the body, encouraging wellness and vitality of the person. They benefit both genders and people of all ages. If you observe a practitioner you will notice that each exerciser is very much self absorbed into the art of inner meditation and are actually oblivious of the actions of their neighboring meditators. There has been a resurgence of practices such as Tai Chi and Yoga in local health clubs and parks.

The point of these practices as a form of meditation is the absence of strenuous action, there are no jumps, no aerobics, no running. The feet always rooted within the earth, the torso and arms making graceful, deliberate, and sequenced movements take on the form of physical poetry. These art forms have developed into exercises meant for relaxation and reduction of stress and moving meditation.

With moving Meditation, not only are you reaping the mental benefits of de-stressing your inner core. You are also getting physical exercise through the movement of your body. They emphasize and practice controlled movements. This control comes from the careful use of the muscles in your legs, torso, arms, almost every part of your body. This leads to physical sanctity as well as inner peace.

In this practice, you do not sit still and ruminate; instead, you move your energy and awareness through your body to reach out and eliminate the stress that you feel. This is practiced through constant movement of the body. The movement is slow, but constant. You are constantly shifting your weight from one side to the other of your body. While doing this you are slowly and in a large circular motion moving the extensions of your body. Meditation is involved as you become fully focused on and consciously aware of each movement as you do them. The movements are in perfect control and alignment with one another.

ONE PERSONS DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF MOVING MEDITATION

"Slowly, slowly, more slowly than I have ever dreamed I could move, I extend my foot and, fully conscious of my of toes, heel, shin, knee, thigh, buttock, stomach, chest, neck, head, arms, hands, I take a step. I concentrate on my back foot first. It starts flat on the path with all my weight on it, then the heel tips up, the arch starts to bend,

the toes stretch as they are squashed against the earth. I am conscious of when, with the lifting of the foot, the mild pain-pressure-ache of this stretch stops, and also aware, at the same time, that the heel of the other foot, all by itself, unobserved, is already bending, stretching, lifting. I note my breathing: in -- out; in -- a pause; out -- a pause; in through the nose -- the pause of nothingness -- out through the mouth -- nothingness. My lungs move up and down, expanding, contracting.

First one foot moves and then the other. In my mind's eye I follow each foot through all its levering motions, its skimming flight, its setting down. My concentration is centered on my shifting weight, my hanging hands, my breath.

My gaze has lifted, I notice, from the path on which I walk to the world around me. A grassy knoll to my right and the brilliant undergrowth of green beneath trees to my left, moves past me as slowly as the world must move past the perceptions of a caterpillar.

I walk for twenty minutes and cover, perhaps, no more than forty yards, heel arching up over the toes, lifting, swinging, setting down. I walk through the sunshine, which feels like a veil of gold on the skin of my face and my hands. And slowly I begin to know why a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. I sense the presence of God."

LECTIO DIVINA

Using the Bible for Meditation

From our denomination website UCC.org Spirit Cafe

In Latin, one of many ancient languages spoken by the first disciples, Lectio Divina literally means "divine reading." It can also be translated as "holy reading" or "reading with God."

What is Lectio Divina?

Lectio Divina is a traditional way of praying meditatively with the Bible so that the Word of God can reach into our hearts and minds. It's a simple and natural way of meditation practiced by the early monastics—women and men who followed God's call to a radical vocation of silence, prayer and love. Other great faith traditions—including Islam, Judaism and Buddhism—independently developed similar methods for meditative reading of sacred texts.

This method can help us let go of our own agendas when we read the Bible. Like other forms of meditation, Lectio Divina silences the noise of the world around us, leading us in stages to an inner silence where God is waiting for us. But Lectio Divina is not an escape from the world. Instead, God's Word helps us see both our lives and the world around us through God's eyes—and to love what we see with the heart of God. It is both inner-directed to the presence of God within and outer-directed to the world God created.

When we listen to God's Word in this way, meditation can be both a calming and a disturbing experience. Sometimes, God may want to quiet our fears and hold us gently. At other times, God may want to confront us with uncomfortable doubts or unanswered questions.

Four stages

In the 12th century, a Carthusian monk named Guigo described four stages in the practice of Lectio Divina.

- "Lectio" (reading). Read the Word of God slowly and reflectively. Any text from the Bible can be used for this purpose, but the text should not be too long. Pay attention to the words and phrases that seem to resonate and capture your imagination and heart.
- "Meditatio" (reflection). Think quietly about the text you read it. Sometimes, a text can be read many times to let the words sink into your mind and heart.
- "Oratio" (response). Leave your thinking aside and simply let your heart speak to God.
- "Contemplatio" (rest). Let not only of your own ideas and plans but even of your holy words and thoughts. Simply rest in the Word of God. Listen at the deepest level to God who speaks within you with a still, small voice.

As you read, reflect, respond and rest, you leave ourselves open to be transformed from within by God's Word. Whether over time this transformation has an effect on the way you see and live in the world is one test of the authenticity of prayer. You take what you read in the Word of God into your daily life.

Okay, but how does it actually work? What do I do?

There is no "right" or "wrong" way to read the Bible as a source for meditation. As you experiment, you may find yourself adapting this old tradition in ways that are useful to you. Here's one method:

- First, look for a quiet space where you can read and pray. This could be a chair that is comfortable—but not so comfortable that you fall asleep! You want to be relaxed and attentive at the same time. You could sit on the floor with a cushion for support. You might want to set apart in your home a "holy place" to use for daily prayer. A lighted candle, icon, cross or some other meaningful object can be used to center your attention.
- Second, ask God to enter you through God's Word. Any "prayer of illumination," or your own spontaneous prayer, is suitable. Here's one example: Prepare my heart, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in me any voice but your own, that, hearing, I may also obey your will, through Jesus Christ my Savior. Amen.*
- Third, use deep breathing to calm your body and mind. This is an ancient technique used for centuries in Christian and other faith traditions. Breathe in slowly and deliberately, then out in the same manner. Be conscious of your breathing: remember that all living things breathe and that "spirit" means "breath." Find a slow but natural and comfortable rhythm for your breathing. Continue until you feel relaxed and attentive.
- Fourth, pick up the Bible and read through your chosen text. You can read the text quietly out loud or silently in your mind. Read slowly and quietly. You can either read in silence or repeat the words out loud. Take your time. Read several times until one verse or a few words from a verse "speaks to you."
- Fifth, repeat the verse or words you have chosen. If it helps, divide the text into two parts: think the first part as you breathe in and the second part as you breathe out. Continue repeating the text until God moves you to silence.
- Sixth, spend time in silence. Be aware that you are in God's holy presence. Continue looking at the object you have chosen as a focus of meditation: an icon, cross or lighted candle. Be open to whatever may happen to you: you may feel an emotion, or a sense of awareness, or simply a sense of God's presence.
- Seventh, bring the time of meditation to a close. When you feel the time is right, reread the Bible text one more time. Then conclude with the Prayer of Our Savior (the Lord's Prayer), or any other prayer, or a personal prayer you feel moved to say to God.

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