

What is Contemplative Prayer?

The Christian Contemplative Tradition¹

Though it has acquired other meanings and connotations in recent centuries, the word contemplation had a specific meaning for the first 16 centuries of the Christian era. St. Gregory the Great summed up this meaning at the end of the 6th century as the knowledge of God that is impregnated with love. For Gregory, contemplation was both the fruit of reflecting on the Word of God in scripture and a precious gift of God. He referred to contemplation as "resting in God." In this "resting," the mind and heart are not so much seeking God, as beginning to experience what they have been seeking. This state is not the suspension of all activity, but the reduction of many acts and reflections to a single act or thought in order to sustain one's consent to God's presence and action.

In this traditional understanding, contemplation, or contemplative prayer, is not something that can be achieved through will, but rather is God's gift. It is the opening of mind and heart - one's whole being - to God. Contemplative prayer is a process of interior transformation. It is a relationship initiated by God and leading, if one consents, to divine union.

Modern Contemplative Practices

In the 20th and 21st centuries, initiatives have been taken by various religious orders, notably by the Jesuits and Discalced Carmelites, to renew the contemplative orientation of their founders and to share their spirituality with laypeople. In addition, several monks, such as Fathers Thomas Keating and John Main, have pioneered efforts to answer the call of Vatican II to return to the Gospels and to biblical theology as the primary sources of Catholic spirituality. The product of these initiatives is a myriad of modern prayer practices based on historical contemplative teachings. Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina, are two such practices.

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a receptive method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.

Centering Prayer Guidelines²

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

¹ <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>

² <https://www.cpt.org/files/WS%20-%20Centering%20Prayer.pdf>