



Centering and Contemplative Prayer From A Catholic Perspective

By

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Centering Prayer and *Contemplative Prayer* are making huge inroads into many Protestant churches. That's at the same time many Catholics are speaking out against Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer had its beginnings with Catholics, so why don't some Catholics approve of it? And why are Protestants so interested in it?

Our goal is to answer those questions in this special series and help you decide whether *Centering Prayer* is something you want to participate in as a Christian.

What Are Centering and Contemplative Prayer?

First, let's define **Centering Prayer**:

*Centering Prayer is a 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. **Contemplative Outreach***

According to the Contemplative Outreach website, Centering Prayer began with Fr. Thomas Keating. The website states that "Contemplative Outreach is a manifestation of his longtime desire to contribute to the recovery of the contemplative dimension of Christianity."

Fr. Keating's interest in contemplative prayer began during his freshman year at Yale University in 1940 when he became aware of the Church's history and of the writings of Christian mystics. Prompted by these

studies and time spent in prayer and meditation, he experienced a profound realization that, on a spiritual level, the Scriptures call people to a personal relationship with God.

During Fr. Keating's term as abbot at St. Joseph's and in response to the reforms of Vatican II, he invited teachers from the East to the monastery. As a result of this exposure to Eastern spiritual traditions, Fr. Keating and several of the monks at St. Joseph's were led to develop the modern form of Christian contemplative prayer called Centering Prayer. Fr. Keating was a central figure in the initiation of the Centering Prayer movement. He offered Centering Prayer workshops and retreats to clergy and laypeople and authored articles and books on the method and fruits of Centering Prayer. In 1983, he presented a two-week intensive Centering Prayer retreat at the Lama Foundation in San Cristobol, New Mexico, which proved to be a watershed event. Many of the people prominent in the Centering Prayer movement today attended this retreat. Contemplative Outreach was

created in 1984 to support the growing spiritual network of Centering Prayer practitioners. Fr. Keating became the community's president in 1985, a position he held until 1999. Fr. Thomas Keating

I knew not to get involved with Centering Prayer years ago because of my personal experience with Eastern religions before becoming a Christian. What Fr. Keating called *Centering Prayer* is very similar to many types of meditation in Eastern Mysticism. The fact that Keating admitted to inviting teachers of Eastern religions to his monastery to learn about mystical meditation practices should serve as a warning to Christians not to get involved in it. It should, but it hasn't.

Notice that Keating chose the Lama Foundation to introduce Centering Prayer to the public. That says a lot about Fr. Keating's larger purpose.

Lama Foundation is a spiritual community, educational facility, and retreat center adjacent to the Carson National Forest about 30 miles south of Colorado near the town of Taos, New Mexico. Designed as a community that embraces all spiritual traditions, it has strong ties to Taos Pueblo, the Hanuman Temple in Taos, NM, Sufi Ruhaniat International, Dervish Healing Order, The Church of Conscious Harmony, St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, CO, and dozens of other communities, spiritual teachers, and thousands of pilgrims from nearly all religious heritages who call Lama their home. [Lama Foundation](#)

Notice that the Lama Foundation is a center “that embraces all spiritual traditions” where “nearly all religious heritage” call home. Interesting that Fr. Keating chose that location to introduce *Centering Prayer* to the public. The choice of the Lama Foundation was not a mistake or oversight. Keating knew what he was doing.

Next, let's define **Contemplative Prayer**. Here are definitions from different perspectives.

*Prayer in general, whether verbal or interior, is the active expression of one's relationship with God, who desires to dwell in the heart of every human person. Contemplative prayer is the simplest form of this relationship. **Aleteia** (Catholic Website)*

In general, that form of mental prayer in which the affective sentiments of the will predominate, as distinct from discursive reflections of the mind. Or again, it is that prayer which looks at God by contemplating and adoring his attributes more than by asking him for

*favours or thanking him for graces received. **Catholic Culture***

*Only the contemplative mind can bring forward the new consciousness that is needed to awaken a more loving, just, and sustainable world. Contemplation is the practice of being fully present—in heart, mind, and body—to what is in a way that allows you to creatively respond and work toward what could be. **Center for Action and Contemplation** (Established by Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr)*

*The metaphor is that the mind is a river and thoughts are things that are floating by. In contemplative prayer the goal is to learn to just let the thoughts go, in other words, let them float by so you can just focus on God's presence. (Examples are: I need to put eggs on the grocery list, has it been 20 minutes yet, that email has to go out by 3PM.... etc.) Just let them go, or say the sacred word to get back on track. **Guided Christian Meditation***

Contemplative prayer begins with “centering prayer,” a meditative practice where the practitioner focuses on a word and repeats that word over and over for the duration of the exercise. The purpose is to clear one’s mind of outside concerns so that God’s voice may be more easily heard. After the centering prayer, the practitioner is to sit still, listen for direct guidance from God, and feel His presence. [Got Questions](#)

In both practice and purpose, contemplative prayer stands in contrast with what Scripture teaches about prayer. Practitioners believe that one must clear the mind of outside concerns so that God’s voice may more easily be heard and that one may be united with the “divine spark” within. Advocates of contemplative prayer believe and teach that it is a necessary practice if one desires to become more like Christ. In claiming this, however, they often appeal to the practices of ancient Roman Catholic mystic monks rather than the Word of God. [Berean Research](#)

*Contemplative prayer has two points of reference that must be understood: traditions in historical Christianity and modernized New Age teachings. Unfortunately, both use the term contemplative prayer, which can make the topic confusing and possibly dangerous if not understood properly. Any kind of “contemplative prayer” or meditation based on an emptying of the mind with the purpose of a mystical encounter with a higher being has its roots in Eastern mysticism. This is the type of “contemplative prayer” being used today by New Age practitioners who do not believe in the One true God and Creator as revealed in Scripture. Associated terms include praying to “the Divine” or “encountering a Higher Power.” On that description, no Christian would say they practice contemplative prayer. Any practice that is not founded in the truth of the Bible with the chief goal being the glory of the triune God is dangerous. Prayer is to be directed to no one other than the revealed God of the Bible. Any prayer outside of that is to be avoided. **Compelling Truth***

The examples above include Catholic, Progressive, and Evangelical perspectives. As you can see, there are some differences in how each group views Contemplative Prayer. We'll be looking at *Centering Prayer* and *Contemplative Prayer* from those three primary perspectives for this series.

Contemplative Prayer In The Catholic Church

Many Catholics practice Contemplative Prayer. That's based on its long history in the Catholic Church. However, the history of Centering Prayer is more recent. First, the history of Contemplative Prayer.

*Contemplative prayer, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church outlines by quoting St. Teresa of Ávila – one of the Church's masters in the school of contemplation – is “nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.’ Contemplative prayer seeks him ‘whom my soul loves.’ It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. We seek him, because to desire him is always the beginning of love, and we seek him in that pure faith which causes us to be born of him and to live in him” (CCC 2709). **Aleteia***

CCC stands for Catechism of the Catholic Church that Pope John Paul II promulgated in 1992. It presents the primary beliefs of the Catholic Church. The fact that the teachings of 16th century nun and mystic St. Teresa of Ávila are included in the CCC demonstrates that the Catholic Church believes in *Contemplative Prayer*. However, many Catholics are not in agreement with what Fr. Keating and fellow Trappist monks did by adding *Centering Prayer*.

Catholics' Problems with Centering Prayer

While many Catholics practice *Contemplative Prayer*, some don't agree with what Fr. Keating did by adding *Centering Prayer* to it. Why not?

Christian meditation holds a vital role in spiritual development. The Catechism and countless Church documents recommend it. Centering prayer is not Christian meditation. Centering prayer rejects images, thoughts and feelings. It is categorically different and does not correspond to any of the categories of prayer recognized by the Church. This is easily discerned through a review of part four of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Father Keating says it is unrealistic to expect to have no thoughts. Yet he still insists that "the goal is a state of no-thinking." He also says, "The method consists in letting go of every kind of thought during prayer, even the most devout thoughts." The point the great spiritual writers make is that until God gives us infused contemplation, a divine gift we can't acquire on our own, true Christian prayer uses thoughts

and feelings to draw near to God. Centering prayer sees all thoughts and feelings as “the enemy.” It rejects the use of the memory, intellect and will in prayer, which are the God-given faculties that make us human.

National Catholic Register

In the mid-seventies, Trappist Abbot Thomas Keating asked the monks, “Could we put the Christian tradition into a form that would be accessible to people . . . who have been instructed in an Eastern technique and might be inspired to return to their Christian roots if they knew there was something similar in the Christian tradition?” (Intimacy with God, 15). Frs. William Menniger and M. Basil Pennington took up the challenge, and centering prayer is the result. In a few short years it has spread all over the world. Centering prayer originated in St. Joseph’s Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. During the twenty years (1961–1981) when Keating was abbot, St. Joseph’s held dialogues with Buddhist and Hindu representatives, and a Zen master gave a week-long retreat to the monks. A former Trappist monk who had

*become a Transcendental Meditation teacher also gave a session to the monks. Many people assume centering prayer is compatible with Catholic tradition, but in fact the techniques of centering prayer are neither Christian nor prayer. They are at the level of human faculties and as such are an operation of man, not of God. The deception and dangers can be grave. **Catholic Answers***

It's crucial to understand that the founders of Centering Prayer had already opened themselves to the dangers of Eastern spirituality. When Fr. Keating was the abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, MA (from 1961 to 1981), he encouraged the abbey to hold regular dialogues with both Buddhist and Hindu gurus. He promoted a week-long retreat led by a Zen master, and invited a former Trappist monk to give a session on his new specialty—Transcendental Meditation. Already we can see a huge problem, especially considering that it was Fr. Keating's specific goal to inject Eastern meditative techniques into Christian prayer. He did this with what seems to be good intention, thinking that he could make prayer more accessible to fallen-away

Christians “who have been instructed in an Eastern technique and might be inspired to return to their Christian roots if they knew there was something similar in the Christian tradition.” However, because he and his fellow monks were already infected with pagan spirituality of the East, his efforts took the form of darkness disguised as light. [Missio Dei Catholic](#)

The “centering prayer” movement is a relatively new phenomenon in the Church, but it has become remarkably widespread. In some areas of the U.S., for example, you will find centering prayer meetings almost as common as rosary prayer groups or Bible studies. Notwithstanding its acceptance in some quarters, however, at its core it is incompatible with Catholic teaching for at least three reasons, among others we could consider. [Catholic Answers](#)

What are those three reasons? We turn again to Catholic Answers:

1. Centering prayer has as a constitutive element a *monistic* view of God in relation to man.
2. There is a second reason why centering prayer is incompatible with Catholic teaching: it says that the ultimate goal of the spiritual life is the “realization” that we are God.
3. It is outside of Catholic orthopraxy. In fact, centering prayer is not really prayer at all.

Finally, here is a warning from the Vatican about mixing Christian and non-Christian methods of meditation:

With the present diffusion of eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of an attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, to fuse Christian meditation with that which

is non-Christian. Proposals in this direction are numerous and radical to a greater or lesser extent. Some use eastern methods solely as a psycho-physical preparation for a truly Christian contemplation; others go further and, using different techniques, try to generate spiritual experiences similar to those described in the writings of certain Catholic mystics. Still others do not hesitate to place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory, on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ, which towers above finite reality. To this end, they make use of a “negative theology,” which transcends every affirmation seeking to express what God is and denies that the things of this world can offer traces of the infinity of God. Thus they propose abandoning not only meditation on the salvific works accomplished in history by the God of the Old and New Covenant, but also the very idea of the One and Triune God, who is Love, in favor of an immersion “in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity.” These and similar proposals to harmonize Christian meditation with

*eastern techniques need to have their contents and methods ever subjected to a thorough-going examination so as to avoid the danger of falling into syncretism. **Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation**, Joseph Card. Ratzinger Prefect, 1989*

Mixing Methods

The reason appears to be “mixing” methods of spiritual meditation in *Centering Prayer*. Here’s a reminder from the Vatican:

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This “mixing” of spiritual methods seems to me to be an obviously bad idea, but many people believe mixing non-Christian beliefs and practices with Christian beliefs and practices is a good idea.

First, let's hear from a Catholic "mystic" who approves of mixing Christian and non-Christian beliefs and practices, then we'll hear from the Trappist monk who did the "mixing."

Carl McColman is a Catholic "layperson under formal spiritual guidance with the Trappist monks." Here's how McColman's website describes him

*Carl's approach to contemplation and mysticism is grounded in the Christian tradition, yet inclusive and expansive; he is dedicated to exploring the common ground between faith traditions, with a particular interest in the connecting points between Christian, Buddhist and Pagan wisdom. **Anamchara***

That's an interesting description. He is dedicated to exploring "the common ground" between various belief systems. As a former adherent to Eastern mystical traditions, I wonder what "common ground" can be explored? What possible connecting points are there "between Christian, Buddhist and Pagan wisdom"? McColman is a "commissioned Centering Prayer presenter

with Contemplative Outreach of North Georgia.” Here’s a portion of what he teaches about Centering Prayer:

*Centering Prayer fosters a sense of well-being, a sense of being loved by God, and a sense of inner healing. Longstanding practitioners of Centering Prayer also often find that they are more open to ecumenical and interfaith expressions of spirituality — which is what I think the critics of Centering Prayer really dislike, most of all. They simply cannot grasp the idea that God would love people whose spiritual practice is different from their own. Again, this is not to be held in contempt, but it is sad and something to be pitied. **Anamchara***

Next, we hear from the man who is one of the founders of Centering Prayer, Fr. Thomas Keating. Keating was a Catholic monk until his death in 2018.

In this video, Keating explains his theory of “You and the Other.”

You and the Other (with a capital O) >

In this video, Fr. Keating says the essence of the spiritual life can be summed up in these three steps:

1. “The realization... that there is an Other, capital O.”
2. “To try to become the Other, still capital O.”
3. “The realization that *there is no Other*. You and the Other are one... always have been, always will be. You just think that you aren’t.”

*The central problem with this “third step” can hardly be overstated. It is monism, plain and simple. Fr. Keating is not speaking of theosis, of Christians being made “partakers of the divine nature” through union with Jesus Christ, as we find revealed in 2 Peter 1:3-4. He is talking about the realization that there is no individual at all. There is only “the Other,” or God. **Catholic Answers***

Keating wrote several books about Centering Prayer and an audio training program. The explainer notes for the audio program include a section called – *A Prayer Practice Inspired by the Christian Mystics*.

*Father Thomas Keating, answering a life calling, sought to renew a prayer practice that goes beyond asking for aid or offering praise—one that invites you to enter into a deeper relationship with God. Based on the wisdom sayings of Jesus and inspired by teachings from the classic 14th-century text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Saint John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton, and others, Centering Prayer is a method of four guidelines that has sparked the modern renewal of contemplative Christianity. “Centering Prayer does not replace other types of prayer,” teaches Keating. “Rather, the practice gives a new depth of meaning to all forms of prayer.” **Centering Prayer: A Training Course for Opening to the Presence of God***

What the explainer does not mention is that the “others” included teachers of Eastern spiritual traditions. That’s where Keating got the idea for mixing Christian and non-Christian ideas about prayer into what he called *Centering Prayer*.

During Fr. Keating’s term as abbot at St. Joseph’s and in response to the reforms of Vatican II, he invited teachers from the East to the monastery. As a result of this exposure to Eastern spiritual traditions, Fr. Keating and several of the monks at St. Joseph’s were led to develop the modern form of Christian contemplative prayer called Centering Prayer. Fr. Thomas Keating

Progressive Christianity and Centering Prayer

Progressive “Christians” generally support Centering Prayer. So do many Evangelical leaders.

Centering Prayer is a form of meditation as well as the act of creating space for being rather than thinking. It's being present to stillness. It's listening with one's whole heart and body. It's opening to the most intimate and direct experience of the divine. Centering Prayer is a mode of experiencing oneself and the world as one. It's about opening to our inner experience without judgement, recognizing that God is, if anything, the emptiness and stillness found within and beyond all ideas, thoughts and things. ProgressiveChristianity.org

Tony Campolo, who I met at a seminar in the 1970s, was a leader in Evangelical circles for many years. He has since moved toward Progressive “Christianity,” and practices Centering Prayer every day.

*The Rev. Tony Campolo, founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education, frames his busy days with a centering prayer in the morning and the prayer of examen at night. “I ask Christ to reach out and absorb from me those dark things in my personhood that have accumulated during the day,” said Campolo, who has written about spiritual practices with Mary Albert Darling in “God of Intimacy and Action: Reconnecting Ancient Spiritual Practices, Evangelism and Justice.” “I find that is crucial if I am to do centering prayer in the morning and receive the Holy Spirit, it is important that I be cleansed at night. **Centered by Prayer***

Dr. Brian Wilson, a professor of biblical studies and former dean at Asbury Theological Seminar, wrote about Centering Prayer in his 2021 book, *Centering Prayer: Sitting Quietly in God's Presence Can Change Your Life*.

Centering prayer has enriched my life .. Centering prayer is part of a morning ritual that prepares me for the abundance of each day .. I wish that I'd learned of centering prayer earlier in my life. Prologue

You may find it interesting to search for a Christian leader's name along with *Centering Prayer* to see what they've said or written about it.

Guidelines of Centering Prayer

What are the guidelines of Centering Prayer? In other words, how do you do it? What's the method?

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 engaged with your 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. **Centering Prayer Method**

If you are familiar with Eastern Mystical meditation, you will recognize these guidelines. It's the same method. What usually happens when "Christians" mix Eastern Mysticism with Christian beliefs and practices is that the methods of mysticism become dominant. Christian teaching and practice are pushed to the background by non-Christian teaching and practices.

Is Centering Prayer Heretical?

The short answer is YES.

The longer answer is that Centering Prayer is an attempt to mix Christian and non-Christian beliefs together into a spiritual soup that is really spiritual poison. That poison has a name. It's called *Monism* and has its roots in Hinduism and Buddhism. Keating's involvement with teachers of Eastern Mysticism might explain why he developed a prayer based on Monism.

Here are several definitions of Monism:

a view that there is only one kind of ultimate substance : the view that reality is one unitary organic whole with no independent parts **Merriam-Webster**

The view in metaphysics that reality is a unified whole and that all existing things can be ascribed to or described by a single concept or system. The doctrine that mind and matter are formed from, or reducible to,

the same ultimate substance or principle of being. [The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition](#)

*The philosophical idea that all of existence is unified in a type of oneness. In monism, only one supreme being exists, which may be conceived of as a type of God. Although different people, animals, and objects exist, monists would argue that these individuals are all part of the same basic whole, which might be called God, the universe, nature, the source, the One, or something else. Different monists give different names to this supreme being or ultimate oneness, but the basic tenet of monism shared by all monists is that everything is really only one thing. As such, monism is opposed to **dualism**, which postulates that there is a fundamental difference between the mental realm and the physical realm. [Study.com](#)*

Monism is a philosophical worldview in which all of reality can be reduced to one “thing” or “substance.” This view is opposed to dualism (in which all of reality is

*reducible to two substances, e.g., good and evil; light and darkness; form and matter; body and soul) and pluralism (all of reality is comprised of multiple substances). **Got Questions***

*Monism is the belief that there is no essential distinction between the creature and the creator. **The Heresy of Monism***

The Catholic Church made its position clear in the **First Vatican Council** (1869-1879).

Canons

1. On God the creator of all things

1. If anyone denies the one true God, creator and lord of things visible and invisible: let him be anathema.

2. If anyone is so bold as to assert that there exists nothing besides matter: let him be anathema.

3. If anyone says that the substance or essence of God and that of all things are one and the same: let him be anathema.

Monism is not acceptable to the Catholic Church and should not be acceptable to Protestants or any other congregation of Christians. Since *Centering Prayer* is based on Monism, all Christians should avoid practicing it and warn others of its spiritual danger.

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