

Prayer of the Heart

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I "The ultimate purpose of creation is to have a visible finite manifestation of God this is man."

So says Father Moon.

Then, if the above expresses God's purpose, what about our purpose?

"My only desire," writes the great Benedictine teacher Thomas Merton, "is to give myself completely to the action of this infinite Love who is God, Who demands to transform me into himself secretly, darkly, in simplicity, in a way that has no drama about it..."

Contemplative prayer is opening, surrendering, healing, transforming. Practiced faithfully, it leads to the realization of both divine and human purposes.

II How, then, is it done? How does one practice? Thomas Keating offers four guidelines for the practice of Centering Prayer, his particular version of contemplative prayer.

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.

Importantly, the sacred word is not a mantra; it is not said repeatedly. We use it only when we find ourselves thinking, as tool to help us return to inner silence.

Also, "thoughts," as used here, include body sensations, feelings, images and reflections. All such digressions are to be let go, including thoughts that may seem to be inspired. Important content will come back later.

III One reason Thomas Keating had such a broad impact is that his teaching integrated wisdom from ancient spiritual teachings with modern psychological insights. He came to recognize that centering prayer could have profound healing effects, addressing what Keating called the "wounds of a lifetime."

Divine action provides internal balm. God as the ultimate psychotherapist.

Such healing resulting from this practice has been, and is, my experience.

During contemplative prayer, however, the practitioner typically has no knowledge of such divine dynamics. They occur below the level of our conscious awareness.

The process is comparable to a patient undergoing major surgery. The patient under anesthesia knows nothing of what is happening, yet deeply therapeutic interventions take place, interventions the effect of which will be felt in the course of a person's daily life.

In this prayer it may feel like nothing is happening. In fact, everything is happening.

IV Father Moon writes that the practice of polishing the heart can involve "intense loneliness."

Yes, contemplative prayer is a lonely practice. Lonely not only in the sense that it is undertaken in solitude, but also in the sense that during it we will likely have no awareness of God's presence. Further, we leave behind the friendly company of our thoughts, stripping away usual preoccupations, worries, plans and hopes. Shedding such thoughts, the practitioner is left alone and empty.

In fact, the essence of contemplative prayer is self-emptying. Pure emptiness, which is pure surrender and naked loneliness, is the goal.

This is the perfectly receptive environment for the silent, unrecognized action of Love.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Ignite within me the living flame of Your love