

CENTERING PRAYER AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

A commentary by Boyd Reid on Chapter 14 of Cynthia Bourgeault's *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Cowley Publications, 2004)

With apologies in advance to anyone here with Bajan connections, I'd like to tell a story about a Trini who got lost in Barbados. Well he wasn't really lost, but he was having difficulty finding his way.

After taking several wrong turns and having to go back on his tracks a few times, he eventually gave in to his wife's pleading, stopped by a roadside shop and asked a man liming in front for directions.

He got plenty. The man described both the roads he should take and the ones he shouldn't, the landmarks to look for and the ones to avoid. After what seemed to the Trini like several minutes of explanation he ended with the words: "*An' yuh see over dere where yuh cyah see? Well is dere!*"

You may be wondering what this has to do with what I have been asked to talk about today: Centering Prayer and Christian life. I'll try to explain as we go along.

'Centering Prayer and Christian Life' is the title of the last chapter of a book by Cynthia Bourgeault called '*Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*'. The author is an Anglican priest who has been a practitioner of Centering Prayer since 1988. She has worked closely with Father Thomas Keating and his colleagues at Contemplative Outreach. In his Foreword to the book Father Keating calls it a "monumental contribution to the better understanding of the Centering Prayer practice ..."¹

As Cynthia Bourgeault knows infinitely more about Centering Prayer than I do, I thought the best way of dealing with the subject is for me to go through this chapter with you. As we go there will be questions that come up for me which I'll share with you and which you may want to consider during the small group discussions later today.

I hope you find it an interesting trip.

Christian life: following Christ

Before dipping into the chapter, let's stop a while to ask ourselves what we understand by the words 'Christian life'. And let's begin with 'Christian'.

The word 'Christian', as I'm sure you know, was first used about 1,960 years ago by the people of Antioch, the city of ancient Syria and modern-day Turkey that the Apostle Paul used for a time as his missionary headquarters.

St. Luke, writing in the Acts of the Apostles, tells us that "it was at Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'"². So 'Christian' was a nickname meaning 'supporter or follower of Christ'.

¹ p. viii

² Acts 11:26

Two thousand years later this, I think, is still the basic meaning of the word. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Christ.

Christian life, then, is life lived as a follower of Christ.

And what then does it mean to be a follower of Christ? Let's see what Jesus has to say.

Turning again to St. Luke, this time to his Gospel, we read in Chapter 9 that

.... one day when he was praying alone in the presence of his disciples he put this question to them, 'Who do the crowds say I am?' And they answered, 'John the Baptist; others Elijah; and others say one of the ancient prophets come back to life'. But you,' he said 'who do you say that I am?' It was Peter who spoke up. 'The Christ of God' he said. But he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone anything about this¹.

Peter and the other disciples had come to realize that the man whom they were following was 'the Christ'.

The Greek word that St. Luke used was 'Christos', which meant 'the Anointed One', translating the Hebrew 'Masiah'.

So what St. Peter said was: you are the long-awaited Messiah, the supreme king of King David's line whom God was to send to deliver the Jews from their oppressors and bring the whole world to worship the one true God.

But Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell anyone. Why? Because people would get the wrong idea. Most of the Jews of that time, including his disciples, saw the Christ as a warrior-king who would deliver them by force from the rule of the Romans. Jesus was not that kind of Messiah, not that kind of Christ.

That's why Jesus goes on to say that the Son of Man ('Son of Man' here is another name for Messiah or Christ)

'... is destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be put to death, and to be raised up on the third day.'

He's not denying that he is the Christ, but he is saying that he's not the warrior-king that the Jews were longing for. He is going to set them free, but not at all in the way they are expecting.

And then, St. Luke tells us, he turns from Peter and says to all his first followers, the disciples:

... If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it².

So following Jesus means going the way he goes, the way of dying to self and rising to new life.

¹ Lk 9:18-21

² Lk 9:22-24

St. Paul goes further. He writes to the followers of Christ living in the Macedonian town of Philippi:

“In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus:

His state was divine,
yet he did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are,
and being as all men are,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross.
But God raised him high
and gave him the name
which is above all other names
so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus
and that every tongue should acclaim
Jesus Christ as Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”¹

Christ Jesus ‘emptied himself’.

In an earlier chapter of her book—Chapter 8: ‘The Theology of Centering Prayer’—Cynthia Bourgeault says that, in this passage, St. Paul is telling the Philippians that

“... self-emptying is the touchstone, the core reality underlying every moment of Jesus’ human journey. Self-emptying is what first brings him into human form, and self emptying is what leads him out, returning him to the realm of dominion and glory.”

And St. Paul is saying that what was true of Christ must be true of his followers: “In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus ...”

We began by asking what the words ‘Christian life’ meant. What have we got by way of an answer so far?

We have got that Christian life is following Christ. And we have got that it is following him on his journey of self-emptying, of total self-giving, in other words, of perfect love.

¹ Phil 2: 5–11

Christian life: a journey of Faith

The Trini traveller in Barbados was on a journey. So too is the Christian.

The Trini traveller got directions from the Bajan limer. The Christian gets directions from Christ, mainly through the Church.

The Bajan limer gave many instructions. So too does the Church.

In the end, though, the Bajan asked the Trini to have faith. He asked him to see where he couldn't see.

The Christian journey is the following of Christ whom you cannot see. It is a journey to God whom you cannot see. It is a journey of self-emptying—a real leap in the dark.

As the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, “Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that at present remain unseen.”¹

Seeing where you can't see: the Christian life is a journey of faith.

Centering Prayer as self-emptying

When St. Paul told the Philippians that Jesus ‘emptied himself’ he was using a form of the Greek word *kenōō*. So theologians have for a long time now used the word ‘*kenosis*’ when talking about Christ’s self-emptying. It’s not a word we need to know if we are to be saved, but Cynthia uses it from time to time so knowing it will help us as we read.

We have an example of this when, in the same Chapter 8, she asks what St. Paul’s words to the Philippians have to do with Centering Prayer? “Plenty” she says: “Of all the methods of meditation, it most purely approximates meditational *kenosis*. It is pure self-emptying.”²

She goes on to say, “It is a prayer that simply exercises the kenotic path: love made full in the act of giving itself away. It is practice, over and over, with that one bare gesture. ... Slowly, steadily, Centering Prayer patterns into its practitioners what I would call the quintessential Jesus response: the meeting of any and all life situations ... by the complete, free giving of oneself”³

Father Keating, in his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, when talking about the different kinds of thought that can come to you while practising Centering Prayer, says that Centering Prayer is “an exercise in letting go of everything”.⁴ And he means everything: all thoughts, feelings, experiences—even very holy thoughts, even mystical experiences.

¹ Hebrews 11:1

² p. 87

³ p. 88

⁴ Thomas Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life*, Continuum, New York, 2002, *Open Mind, Open Heart* ch. 8, p. 77

As the practice develops, he says, “it will help you let go of things and events that are outside the time of prayer. This doesn't mean that you do not use the good things of this world. It is only the clinging or addiction to things that reduces the free flow of God's grace and hinders the enjoyment of His Presence.”¹

In the Christian journey—in the following of Christ—we let go of everything, even happiness itself.

“We are made for happiness” says Father Keating, “and there is nothing wrong in reaching out for it. Unfortunately, most of us are so deprived of happiness that as soon as it comes along, we reach out for it with all our strength and try to hang on to it for dear life. That is the mistake. The best way to receive it is to give it away. If you give everything back to God, you will always be empty, and when you are empty, there is more room for God.”²

When you are empty, there is more room for God. That is why self-emptying, or *kenosis*, is central to the Christian life.

And that is why Centering Prayer, as a practice of self-emptying, can be such a great help to living the Christian life.

This makes me ask myself:

In what ways, if any, is Centering Prayer self-emptying for me?

Centering Prayer: seeing where you can't see

Some of us here are old enough to have been taught that prayer is ‘the raising up of the mind and heart to God’.

The problem for some of us, old or not so old, is that we find it hard to raise our minds to someone that our minds cannot grasp. And when we try talking with God it seems that we are just talking to ourselves.

The problem is that God is over there where you can't see, in here where you can't see, everywhere and anywhere where you can't see.

Father Keating says in ‘*Open Mind, Open Heart*’,

God is incomprehensible to our faculties. We cannot name Him in a way that is adequate. We cannot know Him with our mind; we can only know Him with our love. That is what some mystical writers call *unknowing*. It is *not* knowing Him in the ways that we know Him, that we *do* know Him.³

He is telling us that, in Centering Prayer, by letting go of all thoughts, we open ourselves to the action of God's Spirit and begin to know God, not with our minds but with our hearts.

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ *Foundations*, p. 73

A little further on in his book Father Keating says:

In this life we cannot know God directly and still live. To know Him directly is what the next life is all about. The closest way to know Him in this life is by pure faith, which is beyond thinking, feeling and self-reflection. Pure faith is experienced best when there is no psychological experience of God. God is beyond sensible or conceptual experience. The state of pure faith is beyond anything we can imagine. We simply look around and realize that the divine Presence is everywhere. It just is. We have opened ourselves wide enough to be aware of what is without being able to say what it is.¹

It seems to me that he is telling us that Centering Prayer helps us to see where we can't see.

Can I say that my practice of Centering Prayer has helped me to grow in faith?

Growing on the vine

This brings us back to Cynthia Bourgeault's chapter on 'Centering Prayer and Christian Life'².

Our author begins by pointing out that the self-emptying love that we see as central to the life of Christ is actually a revelation of the inner life of God. It is a revelation of what she calls "the self-emptying love with which the Father spills into (or gives himself fully into) the Son, the Son into the Spirit, the Spirit into the Father."³ She says that this "complete intercirculation in love" is like "buckets on a watermill; as they empty one into the other, the mill turns and the energy of love becomes manifest and accessible."⁴

Then she says that what we experience in Centering Prayer as personal self-emptying, is always part and parcel of the self-emptying that is the inner life of God.

In St. John's Gospel, Our Lord tells us that he is the vine and we are the branches. He says, "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you."⁵

So the Christian life is not just the following of Christ. It is living *in* Christ and Christ living in us.

And when we empty ourselves in contemplative prayer we are growing on the vine that is Christ.

Living together in Christ.

Many Christians are suspicious of meditation, especially if it is in any way influenced by the religions of the East. They think of it as self-absorbed 'navel-gazing' or, as Cynthia says, "focused on one's own personal development or special relationship with God, not shared with others (because we're under the impression that the only way to share with others is to talk)."⁶

¹ p. 75

² ch. 14, pp. 153-160

³ P. 153

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John 15:4

⁶ p. 154

But she points out that whenever we empty ourselves we are sharing in the self-emptying of the Trinity. “That is the essential Mystery,” she says, “the beauty that Jesus lived and died and through which he rose again. There is no gesture more ultimately communal than *kenosis*, for it is the ultimate act of self-transcendence. As we participate in this gesture, no matter how isolated it first may feel, how divided and cut off from others, the deep truth we will eventually come to know is that any act of *kenosis* reconnects us, inevitably and instantly, to that great vine of love.”¹

She gives the example of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton who, when he entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemane in December 1941, saw himself as withdrawing from people and going straight to God. But after seventeen years dedicated to silent contemplation, while on a routine shopping trip into town, he had a transforming experience. This is how he describes it:

In Louisville, at the Corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was waking from a dream of separateness, of a pure self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.²

Cynthia is saying that this is what the contemplative life can do for you. It can bring you closer to living the commandment to love your neighbour ‘as yourself’. “Not *as much as yourself* ... but *as yourself*: interchangeably One in that great vine of love which is the mystical body of Christ.”³

I ask myself:

Has the practice of Centering Prayer helped me to grow in love?

Contemplative prayer and practice: a working definition

Next in this chapter we read that, in October 2003, a group of Christian meditators convened by Father Keating set about putting together a working definition of contemplative prayer and practice. This is what they came up with:

The Gospel is the core of Christian living. It has within it a contemplative dimension. This dimension is God’s invitation to every human being, through Jesus Christ, to share God’s very nature. It begins as a way of listening with ears, eyes and heart. It grows as a desire to know God and to enter into God’s love. This is made possible by a dying to self or emptying to self that becomes a radical emptying to God and experience of God’s love. Through a pattern of abiding in God that we call contemplative prayer, a change of consciousness takes place. This dynamic sharing of God’s nature forms each person and opens them to the mind and very life of Christ, challenging them to be instruments of God’s love and energy in the world. This contemplative consciousness bonds each person in a union with God and with all other persons. It enables them to find God present in all things.⁴

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid: quoted from Thomas Merton, “A Member of the Human Race,” quoted from Thomas P. McDonnell, ed., *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 346.

³ p 155

⁴ p 156

Radical transformation

Cynthia says that what is striking about this statement is that:

... the word “silence” isn’t mentioned even once. Instead, what these mature contemplatives set their sights on is the radical transformation of the person! Contemplative prayer is fundamentally about a change in consciousness that enables the practitioner to see and participate in the very nature of Christ. It is a bold way of saying “yes” to the profound invitation of Ephesians 3:18–19: “...that rooted and grounded in love [you] may come to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ—that you may be filled with the very nature of God.”¹

To see and participate in the very nature of Christ. Isn’t that what the Christian life is all about?

Cynthia continues.

You would think, being contemplative masters, that these group members would specify how much and what kind of silence constitutes a minimum prerequisite for transformation. But they don’t. Contemplative prayer itself is merely loosely defined as “pattern of abiding in God.” The thing that actually does the trick is “the dying to self or emptying to self that is a radical opening to God.”²

So there we have it. Back to St. Paul: “In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus: ... he emptied himself”. Becoming more and more of the same mind as Christ Jesus, that’s the change of consciousness that contemplation brings about.

United to all

Cynthia goes on:

Nor does contemplation have anything to do with “a life apart” or even, as in that celebrated motto of the hermit path, “separated from all, but united to all.” Here it is simply “united to all.” Whether that unity is lived out in physical reclusion or in the trenches doesn’t really matter; it’s the union that counts.³

What makes this statement so interesting is that it displaces just about every available sacred cow that would allow us to think of contemplative prayer as some sort of “life apart,” at the opposite extreme from a life of action or Christian engagement. If anything, it’s just the opposite. Contemplative prayer, when it becomes full and mature, doesn’t widen the gap between prayer and life; it narrows it. Both prayer and life flow out of and give authentic expression to that “dying to self or emptying to self that is a radical opening to God.”⁴

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ p. 157

When you talk to people about Centering Prayer do you, like me, feel uncomfortable telling them it is a form of *contemplative* prayer and that by practicing it you are trying to live *a contemplative life*? Doesn't that sound a bit pretentious?

If it does, then it's because those sacred cows she talks about are very much out there. Spreading the practice of Centering Prayer should help to get rid of them. It should help more people realise that contemplation is not just for hermits but for all who seek God.

God is always present

Cynthia continues:

Along the learning curve silence is useful, of course, but not for the reason most of us might think. It is not that silence is in itself pious, holy, or closer to God. We tend to picture God as a wild wary thing at home only in the ineffable; if we're extremely silent, he may cautiously approach. But it's not like this at all. The reality is that God is always present, and we're the ones who are absent! We hide in ... our noise, our stories, our self-talking, our busyness. Silence is useful in that it takes away the evasions; it forces us to befriend our own consciousness and stop running from our own shadows. Once that willingness has been found—the willingness simply to endure ourselves in the present moment—then the external conditions of silence become much less important. I've seen Thomas Keating do his Centering Prayer in the middle of an airline terminal! On the other hand, without the consent to fully inhabit ourselves, even silence itself will get soon piled high with rules, self-definitions, rigidity, and piety; it becomes itself a form of evasion.¹

What in most people begins as an “attraction to silence” is really, at root, a desire to end the evasion. ... silence heralds the dawning inner recognition that the thing you've been running from all your life is really you; you have to turn and embrace it. That fundamental turn is what contemplative life is built on and what silence celebrates and honours: the realization that who and what you are can neither be exhausted nor fulfilled in that endless cycle of doing, running, desiring, and demanding. As Jesus so long ago taught, “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.”²

I like what she says about God being always present and we being the one's who are absent, hiding in our noise, our stories, our self-talking, our busyness.

So I ask the question:

Do I find that silence takes away my evasions, forces me to befriend my own consciousness and stop running from my own shadow?

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

The promise

Cynthia again:

Of course, when you are first trying to establish a meditation practice (and for a long while afterward), it looks like a huge arm-wrestle with time: trying to find a way to shoehorn those one or two periods of Centering Prayer into a day already overscheduled and overcommitted. ... But the promise contemplative prayer makes is that if you show up, things will start to change. Not in the way you expect, of course, but change they will. ... And while everybody's journey is different, the general direction ... is that rather than pulling you out of life, it will deposit you back in the midst of it, with a soft and warm heart and a deepening sense of wonder.¹

Most of you, I believe, have, like me, been practicing Centering Prayer for some time. So by now, if Cynthia is right about the promise contemplative prayer makes, things should have started to change.

So I ask myself:

Have I found that Centering Prayer rather than pulling me out of life, has deposited me back in the midst of it?

There is nothing that is not God

Here is Cynthia's final comment on the working definition of contemplative prayer and practice:

The goal of the contemplative is unitive seeing: not so much "union with God" understood as wanting God to the exclusion of all else, but rather, gradually coming to realize that really, there is nothing that is not God. God is the higher and the lower, the dots and the spaces between the dots; nothing can fall out of God, and all is tenderly and joyously held. To see this is to behold the Kingdom here and now and to be in constantly renewed immediacy with the source of your own true abundance.²

"Yuh see over dere where yuh cyah see? Well is dere!"

More needed

We have now come to the end of our walk through Cynthia's chapter on 'Centering Prayer and Christian Life'.

We have seen how the practice of Centering Prayer can help open us to the transforming action of God's Holy Spirit so that, with St. Paul we become more and more in our minds 'the same as Christ Jesus'.

But of course, it does not stand alone.

¹ p. 158

² Ibid.

In the 'Epilogue' that concludes her book¹, Cynthia points out that besides practising surrender to God during prayer time we must practise it in daily life. And she has some useful things to say about this, especially her chapter on 'The Welcoming Prayer'². Those of you who were at the 2005 Conference will remember Peter Jamadar's talk on this and other 'Practices for the Contemplative Life'.

Cynthia also says that we must participate regularly in some form of Christian liturgical community. This will keep us grounded in the Mystical Body of Christ and feed us "with the direct soul food of the Eucharist and sacred scripture"³.

And we mustn't forget our Centering Prayer groups, without which many of us would find it hard to persevere.

Beyond the purely personal

Before I stop, I'd like to go a bit further than she does and look at how Centering Prayer may affect the society in which we live.

The contemplative life is a very personal thing. It is a way for each one of us to live more fully in Christ and he in us. But he is the vine and we are the branches. So, as we saw with Thomas Merton, it takes in others, all others. "Love one another, as I have loved you."⁴

Whenever I am reminded that I should love all human beings, I think to myself, "That's impossible!" Don't you?

We obviously have to love all those with whom we come in personal contact. And that's hard enough for most of us.

But what about the rest of the world? Or just the rest of the population of Trinidad and Tobago?

I think that we can begin to keep the commandment to love all people if we do whatever we can to make our society more just.

For each one of us, this will be different. What I can do may not be what you can do, or you or you. But each one of us can be more aware of what needs changing and make some efforts alone or, better still, with others, to change it.

You may be aware that there are a number of poor families in your neighbourhood. So you readily agree to join a group that distributes free meals. This is good. But suppose the group can find a way of helping some of these families to get out of their poverty such as teaching them skills that they can use to earn some money, for example. This is better.

The Good Samaritan, when he came upon the man left half-dead on the road was moved with compassion, tended to his wounds, took him to an inn and arranged with the innkeeper to look after him. This was good, very, very good.

¹ p. 167

² ch. 13

³ p. 167

⁴ John 15:12

But was there anything more he could have done? Could he, for example, have done anything to stop brigands from robbing and beating up people travelling down from Jerusalem to Jericho? Probably not. He was a Samaritan, after all. As a member of a despised minority, he would have not been able, for example, to persuade the Roman authorities to increase security on that notorious road. But he may very well have *wished* he could have done something like that.

When we help those in need, don't we often wish we could do more? Don't we often ask ourselves what could be done to reduce poverty or crime, for example? And don't we sometimes join or support others who are working not just to relieve the suffering of the poor or of the victims of crime but to eliminate its causes?

It seems to me that we cannot be said to be living a full Christian life, a life of self-emptying, of self-giving, of real love, if we do not at least try to go further than relief of individual suffering. In many cases, in most cases even, there may be nothing we as individuals can do. But we can join with others or at least support others who have the time, the energy, the talent, the training to make a difference.

And if I am one of those with some time, energy, talent or training then I cannot shy away from social action and still call myself Christian.

A question for us then is:

Has Centering Prayer helped me become more socially conscious, more socially active?

Purity of heart

Soon we will be having General Elections. The politicians are out there trying to get us to vote for them. They say that, if elected, they will work hard and well for the good of all. But how many of them are really out to serve themselves more than others?

And what about us, the voters? How many of us are more concerned with what the politicians will do for us and the groups with which we identify than for the society as a whole?

In fact, the average politician, like the average voter, has mixed motives.

The average politician genuinely wants to work for the good of all but he or she is also following, largely unconsciously, what Father Keating calls the emotional programmes for happiness: security/survival, esteem/affection and power/control—especially power/control. Many see gaining and holding power as taking precedence over any other consideration. So, for example, they will go so far as to buy people's votes.

Average voters also want to see a party in power that governs for the good of all, but they are also following those emotional programmes, 'looking out for number one'. And 'number one', or number one's family or number one's ethnic group often take precedence over the country as a whole when they cast their votes.

What is true of politicians and voters is true of all who take part in social action of any kind. Motives are mixed and when the self-regarding motives are stronger than the other-regarding ones, society suffers.

So the last question I have for you is:

Has Centering Prayer helped make my service of others more selfless.

In sum

- To live a Christian life is to follow Christ.
- To follow Christ is to empty oneself in love and so be filled with God.
- Centering Prayer is a self-emptying that let's God into our lives.
- It helps us to find God or, maybe we should say, God to find us.

This is what I understand Cynthia Bourgeault to be telling us in Chapter 14 of her book.

The group that meets on Wednesdays at St. Joseph's Convent, Port-of-Spain, is mourning the loss of Terry Thorne, a truly remarkable person who gave us so much.

Terry was blind. He couldn't see the world around him. In that he was different from us. But when it came to seeing the One that holds the world and all of us in existence, he was just like us.

We are all blind when it comes to seeing God.

I remember him saying that Centering Prayer helped him to manage situations. I think he meant, among other things, that it helped him to put situations, especially difficult ones, in their proper perspective. That is another way of saying: seeing things as they really are—seeing things as God sees them.

I remember him saying that Centering Prayer helped him say and really mean the Lord's Prayer, especially "Thy will be done".

Centering Prayer can help us all, blind or sighted, to see where we can't see.

Boyd Reid
Ortinola Great House
Maracas Valley
06.10.07