

PRACTICES FOR THE CONTEMPLATIVE

LIFE

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Introduction

Welcome.

Silence.

My intention today is to spend the next sixty minutes or so exploring 'Practices for the Contemplative Life.' My hope is that this time we spend together, will be time spent meaningfully relating to each other and to God present within and among us ... here and now.

Our time together will be spent as follows.

First, we will discuss what is the contemplative life. Second, we will discuss why live a contemplative life. Third, we will discuss for whom is the contemplative life. And fourth, we will discuss how we can facilitate living a contemplative life. It is this fourth part which really addresses our topic. However, I do not believe we can engage in a discussion on practices for the contemplative life, unless and until we have some understanding and insight into what is the contemplative life, why we should strive to live it, and who it is meant for.

We will also participate in some of the practices that we will consider.

To succeed in this endeavour of transformation, of living the contemplative life, we must at least possess the following: an earnest and sincere desire, an unwavering determination and perseverance, patience and a sense of humour and a playful, open and flexible attitude. In addition we must establish right knowledge of the truth of who we are, who God is, and of the nature of reality. This knowledge paves the way to freedom.

Systematic Body Relaxation

We are physical, emotional, mental and spiritual beings. That is, we have a body, feelings, thoughts and a spirit. And, we are God's good creation. All of who we are, including our body, feelings and thoughts, is good. In the Christian

tradition any authentic spirituality is incarnational. That is, it is embodied – it encompasses, incorporates and uplifts all of who we are – our bodies, our feelings, our thoughts and our spirit.

Let us begin with an exercise located in the body, but also involving our feelings and minds. It is a relaxation exercise, in which the essential movement is to focus one's attention on a particular part of the body, become aware of what we feel there, and then to make a deliberate decision (choice) to relax that part of the body (to release any tension there); and then to shift one's attention to another part of the body, repeating the process and continuing the sequence until one has moved through the entire body. This exercise develops one's attention, awareness and will (intention and decision making capacity). All of these are vital if we are to live the contemplative life.

Before we start, let us focus on and clarify our intention/motive for doing this exercise. We do it in order to release any tension in our bodies that may interfere with our capacity be open and responsive to God's presence and action within and around us. Let us now state our intention together ... "I intend to relax my body so that I may become more open and responsive to God's presence and action in and around me."

[Do Exercise].

General Context

Hopefully we are now relaxed, open and alert. Before we embark on our planned journey. Let us first establish a very broad but essential context for our discussion. This involves considering briefly: who is God; who am I and what is the truest nature of our reality. Without a clear understanding of these matters, all that we do can be flawed. What I will present, I hope will be an acceptable Christian Perspective. I acknowledge that there are other understandings (arguably no less valid).

Who is God? For simplicity we can think of God as the Creator and Source and fountain of Light, Life and Love. These three we may say describe the nature of God. And, we can understand God in terms of God's qualities and attitudes. That is, in terms of the so called Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit and the Beatitudes. (Gal. 5:22-23; Is. 11:2; Mt. 5:3-12).

Who are we? We are God's good creation. We are the image and likeness of God. We are children of God. Thus, though ontologically (by nature) we are not God, qualitatively and for all practical purposes we are like God. This means, that though we have bio-physical bodies we are more than our bodies; and though we have emotions we are more than our feelings; and though we have minds we are more than our thoughts and imagination. We are souls whose nature is light, life and love and whose true qualities and attitudes are the Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit and the Beatitudes.

[The Fruits (Gal. 5:22-23)] are: agape (self giving love), joy, peace, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, goodness, patience and self control. The Gifts (Is. 11:2) are: wisdom and understanding, counsel and fortitude, knowledge and right relationship with God (fear of God), holiness and purity. The Attitudes are [the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-12): (i) trust in God and not in possessions (the poor in spirit); (ii) freedom from an exaggerated demand for affection, esteem, pleasure and approval (those who mourn); (iii) freedom from the need for power and control over people, situations, life (the meek); (iv) freedom from exclusive group norms and beliefs (those who hunger and thirst for justice); (v) cooperation, non-judgment, acceptance (the merciful); (vi) faith (the pure of heart); (vii) oneness and union (the peacemakers); (viii) disidentification with self and full identification with God (those who suffer for truth, justice and God)].

Finally, as children of God, there is a natural intimacy and union that exists between the Divine and us. [In him we live and move and have our very existence (Acts 17:28)]. By nature, though not of God, we are 'yoked' to God.

[Thomas Keating: Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit, and Invitation to Love (pp. 104 – 112)].

What is our truest reality?

The contemplative life, and indeed a fully natural life, is one in which though we live in the world we are not of it: because our truest reality is that we are eternal souls connected by Spirit to the Divine and to each other. The material, emotional and mental worlds are all impermanent and changing. God and soul are eternal and inter connected. This is our truest reality. It is who we in God.

The problem is that we have forgotten who we are and live false lives, believing them to be true: lives separate and apart from God and each other.

One of our greatest needs, therefore, is to remember who we are, who God is, and the true nature of the relationship between God and human. The practice of continually remembering (reminding ourselves) who we are, who God is and the nature of that relationship is invaluable (the remembrance of God, self, reality). Whether we are walking, talking, thinking, sitting or sleeping, this essential relationship remains. Our effort is to become conscious/aware of this connection, this relationship, and to consent and respond to it at all times. This is what it means to live in the Spirit, and to be led by the Spirit, and to live in the world but not be of the world. This is the contemplative life: living out of our connection to (relationship with) the Divine.

[Do disidentification exercise].

What is the Contemplative Life

The act of contemplation is the act of being fully present with expectation. In the Christian tradition the act of contemplation – used in relation to the Divine, is the act of resting and abiding in God's presence. But it is more than simply a passive resting and abiding in; it is in fact an act accompanied by a pregnant expectation full of hope and meaning, grounded in a faith and belief that this act

of resting is a dynamic place of interaction and interrelating and resulting transformation. And, it is also an act preceded by an act of will: the intention, the choice, the desire, to be fully open and responsive to God's presence and action.

In the Christian tradition, the contemplation of God is not primarily an event of observation, whereby one somehow gazes upon God in order to observe Him/Her.

Rather, the contemplation of God is the process of entering into the very crucible of creation, by which we as creature open ourselves to the presence and action of the Creator. And through the resulting relationship we are transformed and become unique expressions of the likeness of God - true expressions of who and what we were intended to be and corresponding agents for transformation in the world, as we in turn interrelate with it.

In summary then, and for the purposes of our discussion, **the contemplative life is a life lived open and responsive to the presence and action of God both within and around us.** Indeed, it is when we become the presence and action of God in the world that we fulfill our purpose and the intention of our Creator. In this is our happiness. Therefore, the contemplative life is no extraordinary life, but simply the ordinary life lived as we are called to live it: as housewife, writer, lawyer, doctor, teacher, councillor, priest, business person. It matters not what we do, only why and how we do it. It is very much about intention and attitude.

[Write up definition. Invite some short comments].

Why live the Contemplative Life

The question "why" focuses our attention on our intentions and motivations. Without knowledge of intention there is really only ignorance. Why we do what we do is the first and most significant knowledge that we must have if we are to successfully embark on the contemplative life. Intention is our compass ... it sets

our direction and is highly determinative of whether we arrive at our destination, or end up somewhere else. For example, if our intentions for doing good works are recognition and praise, the result for us will be very different than if our intention is to do good works because we desire to love and serve God.

Sitting, Standing and Turning with Intention

An exercise for developing awareness of intention.

Discerning Intention and Motivation

Ask yourself and write down your responses to the following (be absolutely honest).

- (i) Why am I here?
- (ii) Why am I interested in practicing centering prayer/meditation?

Why should a person want to live open and responsive to the presence and action of God within and around him/her? Why should a person want to become God's presence and action in the world?

For starters, no other life is a true or authentic life. Paul attests to the fact that:

In God we live and move and have our very existence. [Acts 17:28].

Nothing exists outside of God. The Divine Presence and Energy supports, surrounds and interpenetrates all things. Paul puts this quite poetically, when he says, that all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth (Acts 8:22), as it unfolds under the influence of the vivifying (life giving) presence and action of God, the Divine Energy/Spirit. Fr. Keating quite graphically describes the same truth, when he jokingly says, that if God were to remove God's presence from our being for even a moment, we would be reduced into a 'grease spot' – that is, nothingness. We simply will not exist, cannot exist, without/outside of God. That we exist, is therefore indicative of the sustaining presence of God in

us. As it is put in the Christian Scriptures: **“The Kingdom of God is within/among you.” [Lk. 17:21].**

To live ‘cut off’ from this Divine Presence is thus to live an illusory or false life. Indeed, to say that one ‘lives outside of God’ is an oxymoron – for there is no life outside of God. Who we are, is who we are in God. At the center of our being, beyond body, emotions, mind, personality ... is God. And, to be truly human, to be fully human, is to live out of all of who we are: body, emotions, mind and Spirit.

The great 3rd Century mystical theologian Bishop Irenaeus put it this way:

‘The Glory of God is a human being fully alive.’

To be fully alive, is to be fully human; and this is only possible when we live open and responsive to the truest part of who we are, the presence and action of God within us. This is our true center; the ground of our being; the truth of who and what we are.

When we live out of this Truth; senses, emotions and mind function in accordance with their true natures and purposes, in balance and harmony, led by the Spirit. [Gal. 5:16, 25] Then, the Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit and the attitudes of the Beatitudes manifest.

To live the contemplative life is to completely awaken to life, and to living.

However, separated from the presence and action of God we are more asleep than awake. Unaware of who we are, why we are, and what we are, life has no real meaning or purpose. We are forever trapped in unending cycles of pleasure and pain – forever pursuing sensory, emotional and mental ‘idols,’ believing that the pursuit and/or attainment of them will somehow bring happiness ... only to be repeatedly disappointed. Separated from our true selves (who we are in God),

we experience a deep sense of meaninglessness; a sense of futility and pointlessness to life. Neither beauty, or health, nor wealth, nor status, nor power, nor pleasure bring lasting satisfaction.

Indeed, we experience a kind of emptiness and disconnection. Loneliness and separation are our underlying experiences of reality. Peace, joy, love are only words and ideas, not lived realities.

How can this be? Separated and closed off from the source of our life, the presence and action of the Divine, how could it be otherwise! [Gal. 5:22].

It is this 'human condition,' essentially of separation from authentic relationship with the Divine and each other, that the contemplative life addresses. And hence its justification. No! its necessity.

To be fully and truly who we are, we are invited to live the contemplative life: a life lived open and responsive to the presence and action of the Divine. However, cut off from our Source of Life, we dwell among the living dead, stumbling over ourselves and others in the futile pursuit of happiness. Shadows grasping after shadows.

Moreover, the rationale for living the contemplative life is not only the resulting personal transformation, meaningfulness and happiness that results; but equally the social transformation that occurs when individuals manifesting the Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit and the Beatitudes come into relationship with all of life.

To be the presence and action of God in the World, is to be a presence of peace, love, joy, compassion, understanding, wisdom, gentleness and purity – and an agency for justice, righteousness and charity.

For whom is the Contemplative Life

For a long time it has been thought and taught, that the contemplative life was only for a select few. And, that those few could only exist within the walls of monasteries and in the context of cloistered orders ... or at least only in special conditions, separate and apart from the external world and even from the body and emotions. Now it is recognized that this thinking is but a form of Jansenism (which sees the world and body as corrupt and bad and to be overcome) ... a false spirituality, far from the Judeo-Christian understandings of what it means to be truly human and of the relationship between God (as Creator) and human (as creature).

Let us recall the words of Bishop Irenaeus: **'The Glory of God is the human fully alive.'** Every human is created and intended to become fully alive – to be truly and fully all of who we were created and intended to be/become.

The contemplative life provides one way of realizing this purpose.

We are all called to live out of our relationship with God, within and around us. There are many ways to achieve this: lives of service and devotion being well known. But so also is the contemplative life. In living the 'contemplative life,' we simply live as God intended we should, in and out of relationship with Him/Her present in us and in all creation around us.

Indeed, all are invited to live the contemplative life. And, if we so choose, we can discover our true identities, our unique purposes, and the real meaning of our lives. In this process we can come to know true peace, love and joy.

However, the question for us to ponder is the 'why' question: why do we want to live the contemplative life? Without a clear intention (choice) we really cannot begin to tread this path. And, in answering we must fully understand and

appreciate, not only the personal implications of living the contemplative life, but also the very real and concrete impact that such a life has for society at large.

[Invite short comments].

How does one live the Contemplative Life

We now have an idea of what the contemplative life is, and why we should live it. However, as with most things involving God, **though simple, they are often not easy.** This truism applies equally to the contemplative life.

To understand why we do not easily live the contemplative life is the subject of another discussion, one which Fr. Keating addresses in his treatment of the 'human condition,' and which is explained in any of the introductory courses on Centering Prayer offered by the Foundation for Human Development. Many of you are already familiar with this explanation.

In short, because of our life experiences and of consequential attitudinal and behavioural patterns of behaviour, we react to life in compulsive and habitual ways that generally exclude any conscious or authentic relationship with God or each other. Indeed, even when we intend to live out of a relationship with God, we discover that our human condition gets in the way (Rom. 7:15-25).

Practices for the contemplative life are all practices that help us become more open and responsive to the presence and action of God within and around us. Thus, any practice which achieves this is to be acknowledged. And, most of us have several practices that we use to help us surrender and consent to God's presence and action.

Any attempt to exhaustively identify all such practices would be impossible.

Since this is the Annual Conference of Contemplative Outreach of Trinidad and Tobago, which is part of the worldwide body of Centering Prayer practitioners, I

intend to do is to first identify in Centering Prayer the basic movements of the prayer. Then, to select some practices that resonate with the methodology of Centering Prayer and some that complement its movement.

During this period there will be some demonstrations. After lunch there will be an opportunity for reflection and discussion.

The Basic Methodology Of Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a conscious choice that we make to enter into a deeper and more sustained relationship with God. It begins with the intention to consent to God's presence and action within. Yet this intention is common to many meditative methods in many traditions. How then is Centering Prayer unique?

Cynthia Bourgeault, in 'Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening,' identifies Centering Prayer's distinctiveness among the many methods of meditation. In her opinion, with which I agree, Centering Prayer is a surrender method which seeks purity of heart (page 119); whereas concentration methods (such as the continuous repetition of a mantra; as in say the Jesus Prayer of the Orthodox Tradition or the Christian Meditation method of John Main and Lawrence Freeman) and awareness methods (where one pays continuous attention to the mental phenomena - "the stream of consciousness" - as they arise) seek clarity of mind.

In Centering Prayer there is attention, but it is not by use of the mind. Rather it is 'attention of the heart.' This 'attention of the heart' is really 'Presence.' What one brings in Centering Prayer is neither concentration in the repetition of a word or continuous attention to the stream of consciousness, but simply Presence – achieved by and through surrender, the simple release of all that one may be clinging to – whether good or bad, inspiring or insightful.

However, what supports this 'attention of the heart' and this 'presence,' is intentionality: the sincere choice and earnest desire to consent to God's presence and action. And, speaking entirely out of my own experience, because intentionality and choice are functions of the will, a most subtle underlying experience during centering prayer and indeed in the contemplative life, is the 'union of wills' (between oneself and the Divine). One experiences a union which transcends the physical, emotional and mental levels; and which I believe is located in the 'intention to consent.'

Thus the basic methodology of Centering Prayer begins with a declaration of intent. The intention to consent to the presence and action of God within. This consent is achieved by simply being oneself, present to the presence and action of God. And therefore, the only essential instruction in Centering Prayer is to resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought; and whenever one realizes that one has become attached to or identified with a thought, to return to the symbol of one's intention to consent and be present to God's presence and action. The quality of relationship sought is that of parties simply present to each other; the creature open to the Creator's presence and action. To be present in this radically naked and empty way requires two basic movements – release and return. A continual release of all that takes one away from being present to the other and a continual return to being present to the other.

In practise, bodily sensations that one may become attracted to, interested in, identified with or attached to – are released. So also for emotions, feelings, ideas, imaginings – i.e. 'thoughts.' Indeed, even if an image of God were to appear, this too must be released, because an image is still secondary, an image of God, not God as God is. In Centering Prayer one returns, over and over to simply being present to that which is unknown and unknowable to the senses, emotions and mind – God within.

The methodology of Centering Prayer can therefore be summarized with the words 'release' and 'return'. What occurs in this process is purity of heart and a knowledge of the Divine that transcends body, feelings, mind.

Clearly, integral parts of this process are awareness and choice.

First, there is the initial choice, achieved by the declaration of intent, to consent to God's presence and action. Then, there is a continuous need for awareness of when one has been distracted (or drawn away) from being present to God's presence and action and from one's intention. And, the consequential choice again and again to release the distraction and to return to the relationship of presence, facilitated by repeating one's intention.

In the intention exercises done earlier we practised becoming aware of and discerning intentions. Such practices are helpful because they help us develop awareness of and accuracy in uncovering our true intentions. We must become aware that every action is preceded by an intention. We need to practise becoming aware of these underlying intentions. Practise asking yourself: "why am I thinking, saying, doing this?" Ask: "what is my motive, my intention?" Without absolute honesty, these exercises are pointless. And, without knowledge of intention, there can be no real choice.

A. GOD WITHIN

Practices involving primarily the body

The systematic body relaxation exercise that we did earlier cultivates the development of: clarity of intention (to release all tensions); awareness (of body parts); and of will, in the exercise of choosing to release (any tension) and return (to awareness of another body part). This practice reinforces the basic methodology of Centering Prayer. It also heightens body awareness and the capacity to relax by releasing tensions (stress) in the body. And it also trains the mind and develops a sense of self as an agency of will.

Practices involving primarily the emotions

Centering Prayer seeks to move beyond all feelings, even those for God, (because they are always secondary) to unmediated relationship with God. If feelings arise in Centering Prayer we release them and return to simply abiding in God's presence. However, outside of our periods of Centering Prayer we have some 15 to 16 hours of life (allowing for 8 hours of sleep).

We are all too familiar with what happens during these 15-16 hours. Both our afflictive and affective emotions 'rule' us. Something happens, it triggers a habitual pattern of behaviour, and we react - with anger, fear, lust, anxiety, hate, greed, grief, or with pleasure, satisfaction, pride.

Particularly with our afflictive emotions, there is a practice that can help us release them and return to center, and not get caught and overwhelmed by them.

Fr. Keating highly recommends the practice of the welcoming prayer. Here is how it is done.

At the point just when the emotion is arising (i.e. immediately after the triggering event) and before it becomes full blown (and so beyond control): (i) simply become aware of the emotion and identify and name it (e.g. fear, anger); then (ii) WELCOME/EMBRACE it (e.g. 'welcome fear, anger'); then (iii) WELCOME God ('welcome God'), letting this welcome be the symbol of one's intention and consent to the presence and action of God (page 176, CB), and finally (iv) make a choice, to let it go and/or respond in an appropriate way.

Notice that the underlying method used is one of disidentification with the emotion, which is how one releases oneself from its grip/hold. Following this disidentification, one shifts to identification with the Divine. Thus we move from the personality center to the Divine center within.

How does this process of disidentification work? Usually we are overtaken by the emotion. Or, if we become aware of it and want to deal with it, we either run from it, by avoidance, denial, suppression or repression or confront it and try to overcome it. These are the instinctive flight or fight responses. However, neither one is really effective. If you run from your emotions they follow you, like the fleas and ticks on a dog that accompany it wherever it goes. If you fight them, applying the law that force is met with resistance, they actually grow stronger. In neither case are you free of them.

However if you welcome your emotions, embrace them, you defeat and disarm them – that is, through an attitude of love they are truly overcome. The first welcome achieves this. The emotion is embraced. Disidentification is achieved, because identification is suspended. Note however, that one only welcomes the emotion, not the event that triggered it. For example, if on receiving news of cancer one becomes afraid, one welcomes the fear not the cancer. In embracing the emotion, one accepts it fully, even as one moves to disidentification. The second welcome, builds on the first. Having disidentified with the emotion, i.e. no longer “am I afraid,” but now “I am welcoming fear,” one then welcomes God, and so a further shift occurs – to being present to God’s presence and action. The movements of release and return have occurred. One is now located in one’s true center, and from that place, where the Divine presence and action can flow, one can then decide what to do. The movements of release and return, are the movements of disidentification from emotions, to identification with God. Let us always remember, that whatever we identify with, controls us.

We benefit more from this Welcoming Prayer, by practicing the disidentification exercise described above, since it creates in us the habit of disidentification with body, emotions, thoughts and identification with who we are in God.

[Welcoming Prayer].

The Welcoming Prayer is particularly helpful in cultivating the awareness and habit of unconditional presence – especially in the midst of life’s greatest challenges. It reinforces the practice of Centering Prayer. It helps us live continuously out of a relationship with God (1 Tess. 5:17). This prayer is also worth practicing when the affective emotions arise. Though we enjoy these emotions, they can also take us away from living out of God’s presence.

Practices involving primarily the mind

In the same way that our emotions can lead us away from the presence and action of God; so also can our thoughts (which include our ideas and imagination).

There are few who will deny that our thoughts are often the greatest cause of separation between ourselves and God.

Though we have thoughts and we are more than our thoughts, yet our thoughts have a great influence over our lives. Indeed, what we think about and imagine often comes to pass. Put another way, if we cannot conceive of something in our minds we cannot create it. Our thoughts have a creative capacity. Their potential and power is obvious. But this is a two edged sword, for the creative power of thoughts can be used to build us up or to break us down. Paul’s advice on thoughts is clear: think of what is good, and uplifting and holy (Phil. 4:8).

For us, if our earnest desire is to live out of the presence and action of God, what we think about becomes very important. For if we think about things that tend to separate us from or create barriers to God’s presence and action, living the contemplative life becomes more difficult. Thus we need to develop a practice of becoming aware of our thoughts and of looking at them. Thoughts from God, and that unite us to God and each other, we need to cultivate. Thoughts that

separate us from God and each other, or that are unloving, we need to identify and weed out.

The teachings of John Cassian, the highly respected 3rd Century Desert Father, assert that God is already blooming within us. All we need do, therefore, is to remove the obstacles, the weeds, and then God's presence 'springs up' (pages 2-3, Tools Matter, by Mary Funk).

In the context of thoughts, Cassian teaches that all we need do is to lay aside our thoughts so that the love of God can spring up within us. Already, it must be quite obvious that this practice of renunciation (laying aside) of thoughts has certain resonances with Centering Prayer.

Again, though simple, it is not easy. This is because of the nature of thoughts. There are no isolated thoughts. Thoughts come as a 'train of thoughts.' And, a thought thought about (given our attention) 'thickens' and forms feelings and emotions. And, if those feelings and emotions are given attention, they in turn 'thicken' and become desires. And, if desires are given attention, they 'thicken' and become passions. Soon we cannot control the snowball effect and an avalanche is upon us. We are out of control, and our thoughts are in control.

However, one gift of being human is the capacity to be aware. We can observe our thoughts as they come and go. We are not our thoughts. We can disidentify from them. And, if a thought is not 'thought about,' given our attention or accompanied by another thought, the thought will go away. And so the practice is to become aware of our thoughts, to be 'vigilant,' and because of their nature to develop the practice of noticing them early and of responding to them deliberately (TM, Pages 6-8).

The movements here are to become aware, then to choose, either to release or keep, the thoughts that enter our minds. The secret or key to success is to act early.

As with the welcoming prayer, this practice of renunciation of thoughts reinforces the basic movements in Centering Prayer. And, it facilitates the living of the contemplative life.

So far, we have dealt with three basic practices that support the movements in Centering Prayer; practices involving the body, emotions, and mind. I commend them to you. They help us become more and more able to live out of the presence and action of God within us.

Other Practices

To these practices one can add many others, such as the active prayer sentence, the practice of the presence of God, (as per Br. Lawrence), the practice of lectio divina, and the practices of fasting and keeping vigils – all of which specifically help with becoming more open and responsive to God's presence and action within us (though they also open us up to God around us and in each other).

Of these, Fr. Keating recommends highly the practice of the active prayer sentence and of lectio divina. Fr. Keating also recommends highly the practice of the prayer of forgiveness – a practice which is fundamental to the Christian life, and necessary if we are to achieve freedom to be truly open of God's presence and action within and around us.

I do not propose to deal with the practice of lectio divina today. Many of you are familiar with it and practise it. For those who may be interested in learning more about it, Fr. Michel de Verteuil has a short and readable booklet describing the practice ("Your Word is a Light for my Steps").

As for the prayer of forgiveness, that is the subject of a course on love and forgiveness that the Foundation will soon offer, and I also do not propose to deal with it today.

The Active Prayer Sentence

However, the practice of the Active Prayer sentence is an effective corollary to the practice of Centering Prayer.

The active prayer is a sentence of up to five to nine syllables from scripture that is repeated over and over during free moments in synchronization with one's heart beat. By this process this prayer works itself into your subconscious, and takes on a life of its own. Fr. Keating recommends choosing a single prayer sentence and sticking with it. He points out that it may take up to one year for the prayer sentence to work itself into the subconscious. When this happens, the prayer arises spontaneously from within; when you wake up, in your dreams, and even when you are under general anesthesia on the operating table!

This practice can be done whenever your mind is relatively free, for example while driving, doing light and routine chores, walking or waiting. The practice must be done without anxiety, haste or excessive effort.

During the course of life, the prayer sentence becomes a touchstone that one can turn to, and that also arises, whenever one is drawn away from one's center. By returning to it at these times, one connects immediately with the presence of the Divine within. It is therefore a link to the Divine – a lifeline in times of trouble.

Examples are:

- (i) Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.
- (ii) Open my heart to your love.
- (iii) Lord increase my faith.
- (iv) Not my will but thine be done.

(v) My Lord, my God.

I would recommend that you choose your prayer sentence during a time of deep listening prayer. You will likely use it for many, many months, if not years. Like a good pair of shoes, it must fit you comfortably and be durable ... for together you have many steps to take.

Through its use as recommended we come close to fulfilling the instruction to pray continuously (1 Tess. 5:17). And, ever so gently approach the ultimate objective of living continuously out of a relationship with God, enjoying an awareness of the abiding presence of God. [See, by Fr. Keating: 'Open Heart, Open Mind,' at pages 124, 133 – 135; and 'The Better Part,' at pages 98 and 99].

We should note an important distinction between the practice of the active prayer sentence and of centering prayer: whereas centering prayer is a surrender method, the active prayer sentence is a concentration method (or at least it starts off as such). To this extent its effect is similar to the practice of the Jesus Prayer [see, TM. Pages 93 – 97].

B. GOD AROUND

There are also specific practices that can help us live out of the presence and action of God amongst us ... in others, in the encounters of our lives (whether with people or things – such as books, movies etc.), in events and in creation.

God is no less present in the other and in all of creation that in us. Here awareness and openness become paramount. Right perceiving becomes critical. That is seeing and hearing beyond eyes and ears and with one's heart, from one's center.

As before intention is primary. Do we intend, do we want and desire to meet God in the encounters of our lives? Do we engage life with that intention, and with the

expectation that we will encounter God in all others and in all things? Recall the meaning of contemplate: to gaze upon with expectation. That is the primary attitude of the contemplative. It is based on the belief that God is present and at work in and through all things, and therefore in every encounter God is present. With this attitude nothing is mundane, all is magical – infused with God's presence and action. The only issue is, are we open to perceive and receive this Gift?

Let us explore some practices in this area: practices to facilitate seeing and hearing, beyond eyes and ears.

As before 'presence' is all important. If one is in the past or in the future, one can never be present to God in the moment. The contemplative life is a life lived in the 'now' – the present moment. For it is only in the present moment that we can truly engage the other and find God amongst us.

Attention/Intention

Attention and intention are important keys to these practices and to the general way in which we come into relationships with all of life. Attend to what is before you, with the intention to be open and responsive to the presence and action of God.

To be attentive means to simply do what you are doing and not to be distracted. Thus when one is engaged in an activity, do it. If one becomes distracted, return to attending to the task at hand. If your intention is set rightly, you will become aware of God's presence and action and you will become a transmitter of that Presence and an agent for transformation. We see and hear beyond eyes and ears, and become open to God's presence and action around us, when we do so with presence, attention and right intention.

The Practices of seeing and hearing Contemplatively

These practices, like all the others, are premised on the belief that God is present in all others and all of creation. Thus, if we look and listen with an open and receptive heart, we can 'see' and 'hear' God's presence everywhere. To facilitate this I would suggest three practices:

(i) **The practice of imagining God present everywhere, in everything and in every encounter.** Though this starts as an exercise of the imagination and with an attitude of playfulness, it opens one up to the reality that we believe in. Using the imagination imagine the interconnectedness and interrelatedness amongst all things. Then affirm that we are all One in God. Then imagine/see God in all others. Then imagine talking to God in the other; serving God in the other; encountering God in creation; finding God in every circumstance. Do it mentally or people may think you are a little strange! By this use of our mind, we open ourselves to the Reality that is present everywhere – God.

(ii) **The practice of looking with innocent eyes.** [Inevitable Grace, Piero Ferrucci, page 47].

This is a practice to regain unconditional seeing. That is, seeing that is not conditioned by a life time of experiences, in which prescribed meanings and interpretations are given to all things.

For example, if you look at this (chair) you see 'a chair,' because your mind has instantaneously interpreted it as a chair. Once you see 'a chair,' your seeing has become limited, because with that seeing comes all the meanings associated with a chair.

Is there more to see? Sure there is! All the poets, artists, composers encountered exactly what we encounter, yet saw and heard things that we could not. Why? Because, in part, they saw with innocent eyes.

To see with innocent eyes requires that we lay aside all explanations; we set aside all pre-conceptions; and strive to look as though one had never seen before. It is a search for pure perception. It is like being blind all your life and suddenly being able to see. It is like looking with the eyes of a child. Awe and wonder are the result. The perception of Beauty the reward.

It is said that: 'Beauty is the splendor of the Truth.' And again, that: "Beauty is the reflection of the Infinite." By practicing looking with 'innocent eyes,' one can enhance one's openness to seeing God in every moment, in everything, in everyone.

In this process of innocent seeing, mystery emerges. And, so does love; for as it is said: 'In innocence abides love.' This practice therefore helps one embrace life in its mystery – without explanations or conditions, as it is. Indeed, Fr. Keating in his talk on God, at La Romain, said that if we wanted to give God a nickname, 'Issy' would be appropriate, because it acknowledged the mystery and ineffability of God. God is who God is. 'I Am who I Am.' [Ex. 3:14].

The advice of the great French painter Monet maybe useful here:

When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you, a tree, a house, a field or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here is an oblong of pink, here is a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you ... until it gives you your own naïve impression of the scene before you.

This is the method for the practice of seeing with innocent eyes. It is seeing from a place beyond body, emotions, mind; it is seeing with the eyes of the Divine. It requires an emptying, a release, of all feelings and

thoughts, and a seeing with a purity of heart. One is simply alert, open, empty. [IG, page 107]. In this way all things are received.

(iii) **The practice of listening with body, mind, heart and spirit.**

Contemplative Listening, like contemplative seeing is a way of listening, conditioned by the intention to hear God, that is open to receive Truth. There is full attention, though not in a narrow and limited sense. It is about being fully present and attentive, to the events unfolding before one.

There is no grasping for anything. Simply an openness to receive – an attitude of pure presence. All of who and what we are is present to the unfolding moment – body, emotions, mind, spirit. You may call it loving attentiveness. It is listening from one's center, from who one is in God. [Listening with Presence, Awareness and Love, by Christine Longaker, in 'The Wisdom of Listening,' page 15].

Quite clearly this kind of listening “requires us to get out of our own way” (WL, page 51). And, it also requires us to bring a certain quality of heart, wisdom, attention and intention – presence, to the relationship. Whenever, we find that we have been pulled away from this attentive empathetic presence, we have to release the distraction and return to presence (WL, p. 52).

No doubt you see the resonances with Centering Prayer. And, like in Centering Prayer, through this kind of contemplative listening we open ourselves to the presence and action of God present all around us.

CONCLUSION

We have explored together:

- (i) **WHAT** is the contemplative live: a life lived open and responsive to the presence and action of God within and around us.

- (ii) **WHY** one should live the contemplative life: because it is the only life that is truly and fully human, that can give us real meaning and purpose, and by which we can know true peace, love, joy. And, it is a means by which we can become effective agents for transformation in the society, even as we ourselves undergo personal transformation and manifest the Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit and the attitudes of the Beatitudes.
- (iii) **WHO** should live the contemplative life: each and every one of us is invited.
- (iv) **HOW** one can live the contemplative life.

In exploring how one can live this life, we have considered several practices that help us become more open and responsive to the presence and action of God. We have divided these practices into two broad categories:

- (i) those which facilitate consent to God within us, and
- (ii) those which facilitate consent to God around us.

And, with the former, we have considered practices which involve the body, emotions and mind.

I hope some of this information has been useful. The practices discussed were selected because I think that taken together they can be incorporated into a daily routine, and become foundational practices upon which we can construct our lives as contemplatives in the world. [A suggested daily schema is provided for your consideration]. These daily practices are further enhanced by participation in community worship and work, and in a contemplative community (such as a centering prayer support group). It is important to note that many of these practices require little additional time. What they demand is a change of attitude in how we come into relationship with life.

I hope most of all however that you will be motivated to earnestly desire the contemplative life. Armed with that desire, you will find the practices that you need. Most of you have already done so.

In discussing why we should live the contemplative life it was pointed out that the contemplative life results not only in personal transformation, but also in the transformation of society as transformed individuals become agencies of the Divine and enter into relationship with the world.

Today, faced with escalating violence and crime, the loss of life supporting value systems, the breakdown of family and society, any lifestyle that does not impact constructively on the world is justifiably considered irrelevant.

For this reason alone, the contemplative life is a most relevant lifestyle given the world we inhabit today.

Can true peace be achieved through violence? Ghandi has pointed out: "**There is no way to peace, peace is the way.**" The time has come when we must move beyond 'praying for peace,' and become living, breathing manifestations of peace. Then every breath we take becomes a prayer.

Yet so much of what we think, feel and do is violent. Such behaviour contributes to the increasing levels of violence in our collective unconscious, which in turn manifests in horrendous acts of violence and evil.

How can we free ourselves from the culture of violence that enslaves us?

The contemplative life offers a way out. By constantly letting go of our habits of violence and opening to the presence and action of the Divine, we, little by little, become more and more like God. In this rediscovery of our true nature, we in turn become agencies for peace, love, compassion, healing, understanding etc.

in the world. And so, through personal transformation there is transformation of the world.

More than anything else this is what the world needs now – the healing presence of God's love. The contemplative life helps us to become channels of peace, love, wisdom, understanding, joy etc. as we come into relationship with the world.

Can there be peace on earth?

Yes. And it begins with you and with me.

Living the contemplative life is one way in which each one of us can make a difference, both for ourselves and each other. But it takes effort. These practices are tools to help us along the way.

Finally, if you are interested in finding out more about some of the practices discussed today, the Foundation for Human Development offers workshops on most, as can be seen from its course calendars.

Thank you for your time and presence.

Suggested Schema for Daily Practise

5.00 am – 7.00 am: First period of Centering Prayer. 30 minutes.

Centering Prayer time can be structured as follows:

- (i) Declaration/affirmation of Intent – ‘to consent to God’s presence and action.’
- (ii) Disidentification practice.
- (iii) Prayer time (20 minutes).
- (iv) Reaffirmation of intent – ‘to live open and responsive to the presence and action of God within and around.’

7.00 am – 6.00 pm: Working day. Practise:

Active Prayer Sentence – whenever it is possible.

Welcoming Prayer – whenever afflictive or affective emotions arise that separate you from God and each other.

Renunciation of Thoughts – whenever thoughts arise that distract you from the business at hand or separate you from God and each other.

Contemplative Seeing and Hearing – whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Remembrance of God, self, reality – periodically throughout the day.

Right intention and attention – constantly.

6.00 pm – 8.00 pm Second Period of Centering Prayer. 30 minutes
[Structured as above].

8.00 pm – 11.00 pm Practise:
Lectio Divina or Study or Reading.
Examen (as an introspective reflection at the end of a day – done with the intention of discerning God’s

presence and one's own intentions and motives during the course of the day).

Active prayer sentence.

11.00 pm – 5.00 am Rest/Sleep.

N.B. The systematic body relaxation exercise can be incorporated at any time. Before beginning the Centering Prayer sequence is very helpful, as it prepares the body for the time of prayer.

N.B. Throughout the working day, every activity can become a contemplative one if performed with right attention and intention.

N.B. The use of the Examen, at the end of the day, is effective for developing awareness of intentionality and acquiring self knowledge.

NOTICE The primacy of intention. And how, used together, the practices operate at every level – body, emotions and mind; to facilitate our continuous openness to the presence and action of God within and around.

NOTICE Many of these practices require no additional time; but are really an invitation to live life differently.

REGULAR STUDY AND A GENERAL ATTITUDE OF SERVICE AND CHARITY ARE RECOMMENDED, AS WELL AS PARTICIPATION IN A CONTEMPLATIVE SUPPORT GROUP.

Systematic Body Relaxation

Sit in an upright but comfortable posture. Head, neck and trunk aligned and balanced above the hips. Feet placed shoulder width apart and flat on the floor. Hands resting on the knees and thighs.

Close your eyes. Focus on your breath. Breathe easily and gently; naturally. Allow your breath to become smooth, even and effortless, no stops, no starts, no strain ... just an easy, gentle rhythmical breath. Breathe in peacefulness and quietness, exhale all thoughts of the past and concerns for the future. Bring your attention to your breath as it flows in and out of your body. Become fully aware of your breath.

Now gently shift your attention to your forehead. Become aware of any tension you may be holding there. Release that tension. Relax the muscles in your forehead.

Now shift your attention gently to your eyebrows and eyes. Become aware of any tension that you may be holding there. Release that tension. Relax the muscles of your eyebrows and eyes [continue the process].

- (i) Gently shift attention to the next body part.
- (ii) Become aware of any tension in that body part.
- (iii) Release that tension.
- (iv) Relax the muscles of that body part.
- (v) Move on.

From the eyebrows and eyes continue as follows: cheeks; corners of the mouth; lips; tongue; lower jaw and ears; neck muscles (front and back); shoulders; upper arms; elbows; forearms; hands, fingers; fingertips.

[BRING ATTENTION TO THE BREATH AND BECOME AWARE OF BREATH FOR A SHORT WHILE; THEN CONTINUE].

Chest muscles; stomach and abdominal muscles; upper back; lower back; hips groin; buttocks; thighs; hamstrings; knees; calves; feet; toes; tips of toes.

[BRING ATTENTION TO THE BREATH AND BECOME AWARE OF THE BREATH; THEN SLOWLY OPEN EYES].

Walking with Intention [I.G. page 110]

Stand upright and perfectly still. Allow your arms to hang loosely at your sides (or in a comfortable, relaxed position). Look at the ground far enough ahead to see where you are going. Concentrate on the body. Become aware of the whole body standing. As you begin to walk (slowly) – notice the intention to raise one leg. Place your attention on that leg. Raise that leg a little and momentarily hold it there. Notice the intention to move the leg forward. Move it forward and hold it for a moment just above the ground. Notice the intention to place the leg down. Place it down. Repeat the process.

The key is to name what is happening: “Intending to raise, raising; intending to move, moving; intending to place, placing.”

Walk for 10 – 15 steps. Stand for a moment or two. Be aware of the whole body standing Be aware of the intention to turn. Notice that intention. And then turn slowly. Name what is happening: “Intending to turn, turning.”

Continue walking back, becoming aware and noticing the intention that precedes the action and naming what is happening.

Every movement is slow and deliberate.

Disidentification Exercise

Adopt a comfortable position. Become aware of your body and your senses. Feel the air on your skin and of your clothes on you. Become aware of the sounds around you; the sights around you; the tastes in your mouth; the smells that surround you.

Who is aware of your body and senses?

Affirm – I have a body and I am more than my body.

Close your eyes. Become aware of your feelings. Are you feeling happy, sad, afraid, anxious, tense, relaxed, playful. Feel your feelings. Experience them.

Who is experiencing your emotions?

Affirm – I have emotions and I am more than my emotions.

Become aware of your thoughts. Observe them as they arise in your awareness and move along. Just watch your thoughts as they come and go.

Who is observing your thoughts?

Affirm - I have thoughts and I am more than my thoughts.

Who are you?

Ask: Who am I, beyond body, emotions and mind?

Become aware of this self who is aware of body, who experiences emotions and who observes thoughts.

Affirm **I AM**
 I AM WHO I AM
 I AM WHO I AM IN GOD
 WHO I AM IS WHO I AM IN GOD

Affirm **I AM A CHILD OF GOD**
 I AM GOD'S GOOD CREATION
 I AM THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD

I AM LIGHT, LIFE, LOVE

I AM AN ETERNAL SOUL

MY NATURAL STATE IS TO LIVE IN UNION WITH GOD

MY QUALITIES ARE THE GIFTS AND FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

MY ATTITUDES ARE THE BEATITUDES

I AM WHO I AM IN GOD

I AM WHO I AM

I AM