

Centering Prayer

CHOOSE A SACRED WORD AS THE SYMBOL OF YOUR INTENTION TO CONSENT TO GOD'S PRESENCE AND ACTION WITHIN.

The word itself should be short, one or two syllables at most. Common choices are *Jesus*, *God*, *Spirit*, or *Love*, or meaningful foreign words like *pax* or *shalom*. Do not choose a word that has too much emotional attachment, because that will only cause you think about it. Take the time to prayerfully consider the word by which you will express your intention to be with God. If the word you choose doesn't feel right, don't change it in the middle of a prayer period; give it thought after you have finished, but before you pray again. If no particular word seems right, use the name *Jesus* until you and the Spirit find the right one.

SITTING COMFORTABLY AND WITH EYES CLOSED, SETTLE BRIEFLY AND SILENTLY INTRODUCE THE SACRED WORD AS A SYMBOL OF YOUR CONSENT TO GOD'S PRESENCE AND ACTION WITHIN.

Once you have gotten into a comfortable position, a short scripture reading or prayer helps to enter this time of prayer. Close your eyes, and then introduce the sacred word, silently, inwardly and gently. It is, in the words of the sixteenth century mystic Teresa of Ávila, "a small puff of air." After repeating the word several times in the course of beginning the prayer, over time the sacred word may get very vague, barely there, or disappearing altogether.

WHEN YOU BECOME AWARE OF THOUGHTS, RETURN EVER-SO-GENTLY TO THE SACRED WORD.

In the language of Centering Prayer, thoughts or perceptions are an umbrella term for sense perceptions, images, emotions, memories, reflections or those dialogues we have with ourselves. When a thought arises and you become aware of it, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word, with the gentlest puff blowing it away. You are neither denying the thought nor trying not to think, only letting it come and letting it go. This minimum of effort is the only real activity of Centering Prayer. You take up the sacred word again only if or when you need it, not with every thought but only as you become aware of a thought and begin to follow it.

AT THE END OF THE PRAYER PERIOD, REMAIN IN SILENCE WITH EYES CLOSED FOR A COUPLE OF MINUTES.

After being silent with your eyes closed, you may wonder why an extra few minutes is tacked on. The reason is as simple as it is important: it is a time of transition from God's time to our time, from *kairos* to *chronos*. You've been deep in prayer, deep in silence, and like a deep sea diver it is best to come up slowly, so it is not so jarring to your system. In this way you retain the heart of what you have experienced, all the better to take it into the world. It is recommended that this prayer be practiced twice a day for twenty to thirty minutes each time.

For further reading:

Thomas Keating. *Open Mind, Open Heart*. NY: Continuum, 1992.

Carl Arico. *A Taste of Silence*. NY: Continuum, 1999.

For further information:

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