



# CENTERING PRAYER

## Purpose and Heart of the Practice

Centering Prayer is a way of consenting to God's already-given presence. It is not an effort to quiet the mind, manage thoughts, or produce a spiritual state. It is a posture of availability... making room for God to meet us in the truth of our lived experience.

This prayer honors the truth that the Spirit dwells within us, connecting us to God from the inside out. Rather than trying to make something happen, we lean into being present to the God who is already here, already loving, already forming us in Christ.

Centering Prayer does not replace other forms of prayer. It offers a different kind of attentiveness: a way of practicing trust, surrender, and relational presence. The intention is not to change what arises, but to remain available to God with whatever is present.

For those carrying stress, trauma, or exhaustion, this practice may feel unfamiliar or unsettling at times. You are free to adapt, pause, or step away. God's presence does not depend on how this prayer unfolds.

## A Breath to Begin

If it feels supportive, bring attention to the body.

You might notice where your body meets the chair or floor.  
Perhaps your feet, your back, or your hands offer a sense of contact.

Allow one breath to arrive without shaping it.  
Notice the brief pause between inhale and exhale... the small space where nothing needs to happen.

**If words feel helpful, you may let the breath carry a simple awareness:**

Inhale: *"Here I am."*

Exhale: *"You are here."*

This breath is not a technique.  
It is an acknowledgment of presence... yours and God's. Now.

## The Practice

### 1. Entering with Intention

Settle into a posture that feels supportive or steady for your body. Eyes may be open or closed. Movement is allowed.

**Offer a simple intention, silently or aloud:**

*“God, I consent to Your presence and action within me.”*

Choose a sacred word or short phrase that expresses this consent... such as presence, love, good shepherd, peace, trust, or a brief line of a quote or Scripture. This word is not a focus for concentration. It serves as an anchor, a way of returning when attention wanders.

### 2. Noticing the Movements Within

As thoughts or sensations arise, you don't have to fight or follow them.

**You might imagine them as:**

- **Leaves Moving Along a Stream** (noticed, then released)  
You might imagine God's life flowing through you like a river. Near the surface, the water may move quickly, carrying fragments... thoughts, memories, sensations. Deeper down, the current moves more slowly. As thoughts appear, you may picture them as leaves resting briefly on the water. They come into view, then continue downstream. Nothing needs to be sorted or carried. When you notice attention drifting with a leaf, allow your awareness to return... to your breath, your sacred word, or the sense of God's presence holding the river itself.
- **Sounds Passing by an Open Window** (heard without being followed)  
You might imagine yourself seated with God in a room where a window is open. Life moves outside... voices, traffic, laughter, sirens... arriving and fading in their own time. The sounds are not a problem. They are part of the world continuing on. Your attention remains with the One who is with you. When a sound draws focus away, you may acknowledge it without pursuing it, then return, through your sacred word or breath, to the awareness of shared presence.
- **Boats Drifting by as You Sit on the Bank** (seen without climbing aboard)  
You might picture yourself seated beside a river, feet on solid ground. Boats move along the water... each one carrying a thought, an image, a memory, or a reaction. Some boats pass quickly. Others linger. There may be many at once. Nothing requires your engagement. You are not asked to judge the boats or push them away. When you notice yourself stepping aboard, you may return, again and again, to the simple act of sitting, supported by the ground beneath you and the presence of God beside you.

When attention becomes caught... when you notice yourself replaying, fixing, planning, or bracing... return to your sacred word or to the rhythm of your breath.

This returning is not correction.

It is consent.

It is a small act of trust in the God who remains present.

If a sacred word feels distracting, resting attention on breath, bodily sensation, or simple awareness is equally valid.

### 3. The Embodied “Space Between”

Notice the subtle spaces that appear:

- the pause after the exhale,
- the moment awareness shifts from thought to presence,
- the quiet before the next sensation arrives.

These spaces are not empty. They are places of freedom, where instinct loosens its grip and response has room to form.

Nothing needs to be fixed here.

Nothing needs to be achieved.

This is a place of meeting.

### 4. When Restlessness, Numbness, or Emotion Appears

If restlessness, sleepiness, numbness, or strong emotion arises, let this be part of the prayer rather than a problem to solve.

Notice how your body responds.

Return to your word or breath as you are able.

Everything that shows up... attention, distraction, fatigue, longing... becomes part of your offering. Presence matters more than clarity.

If at any point the practice feels overwhelming, opening your eyes, grounding in the room, or ending early is an act of wisdom.

### 5. Closing the Time

When you sense it is time to close, allow awareness to widen. Notice the room, your body, and the sounds around you.

**You may offer a simple prayer of trust, such as:**

*Here I am.*

*Continue Your work as I move into what comes next.*

Or another phrase that reflects consent and companionship:

*Remain with me.*

*Lead me in Your peace.*

Take a few breaths before transitioning.

## Reflection

These questions are invitations, not evaluations. You may linger with one, many, or none.

1. What seems to be forming within you as you recall this time of prayer?
2. What did you notice in the space between instinct and response?
3. What movements... settling, resistance, openness, fatigue... stood out in your body?
4. What felt easier to release, and what felt harder to let pass?
5. What might be unfolding as you consider God's nearness without demand?
6. What traces of trust, reluctance, or longing surfaced during the silence?
7. How might this prayer be shaping the way you meet yourself and others?

## The Fruit of This Prayer Over Time

- Deepening awareness of union with Christ
- A growing capacity to remain present amid inner noise
- Increased attentiveness to the movements of the Spirit
- Less urgency to control outcomes
- Greater trust in God's work unfolding in real time
- A widening compassion for self and others
- A life shaped more by love than by reaction

May this practice support truth-telling, courage, and rest.

May it make space for God's presence to meet you as you are,  
and to form you in love that does not need to be forced.

## Insights from Father Thomas Keating Addressing Common Queries on Centering Prayer:

### 1. Is there a right or wrong way to pray?

How you pray is not as important as the reason why you pray. It's the motive. Just the desire to pray is always a success no matter how difficult or how much a failure we experience.

### 2. The noise bothers me when I meditate. How can I decrease this distraction?

The first principle is not to resist the noise. As soon as you resist it you start thinking about it more. Just accept it and let it be. Move on sounds like a good solution.

**3. Is it all right to fall asleep when I meditate?**

Fortunately, God loves us as much as when we are asleep as when we are awake. It could be that the best response is to thank God you got a little extra snooze. And if this time when you wake up, then you can just start over. It is important not to take our faults or failures seriously. This is a real apprenticeship, so we are bound to make many mistakes. And I don't think these mistakes matter to God as long as you are working on them.

**4. Can I meditate even though I haven't done all the steps?**

Yes, although, there are a lot of haunted patterns of thoughts in our minds that need to be attended to by our emotional and mental health before we can benefit "fully" from meditation, we have to remove these patterns of thought by doing the steps of mental and emotional health thoroughly. And until we address them, we can benefit fully from meditation and be able to keep the calmness and peace that we find from the meditation. It is said that both are integrated. Both are needed for holistic well-being.

**5. Do you have to use a sacred word?**

The sacred word gives us a way of returning to our intention to be in that quiet place. When a thought comes, we can use, for example, this image. Imagine you are sitting on the edge of a river and you see boats going by. Lock on to the boats going by just like a bad thought or a negative action that happened throughout the course of the day. Gently return to just sitting on the edge of the river and enjoy the water going by rather than staying focused on that boat. Let your word help you to return to your intention to sit there quietly before God in that peaceful space. Remember, there may be times that it may be not just one boat, there are times you may see a lot of boats. Give yourself a few minutes to get to that peaceful space. If the sacred word isn't working right now, some people feel more comfortable in just following their breath as a symbol of breath which really means the spirit of receiving the Holy Spirit into their inmost being and when they exhale of breathing out the love of the Spirit into all of humanity or into the atmosphere of wherever we are living. So, if for some reason after a reasonable try, the sacred word doesn't seem to work for you. You might think of just following the breath which is not following it physiologically but simply noticing your breathing when you have a distraction or thought that you don't want.

**6. I struggle with too many trash thoughts when I try to meditate. So why try?**

As soon as you start thinking how bad these are, then you go to another thought, and it's worse than the first one because it has an emotional charge to it that upsets or takes you away from silence even more so the thoughts can't do you any harm unless you think about them or want them. And so, by disregarding them, letting them go is about all we can do. And gradually the habit forms of letting go of them more and more promptly. Then a deeper peace occurs and then eventually you get to ignore most of them not all of them. Some of them get to you but you get better at it. It's important to give it a good try. To give it a good try, that is to say, if you are thinking of doing it and haven't done it on an everyday basis, think of giving it a 90-day trial. No money-back guarantee, however. The reward would be in experiencing what it's like to really have that discipline.

**7. What am I supposed to think about when I meditate?**

The discipline in centering prayer is precisely not thinking but it really means not thinking of anything particular so that when you are not thinking of anything particular and have the intention of being there with God and loving God then there gradually develops a general loving attentiveness that has no thought content which is just a presence or a sense of God's presence or a peace or a sense that everything is okay or being forgiven or that God is close. So what God is really doing in the centering prayer practice is affirming our basic goodness and as that conviction develops in us and heals ourselves, our doubts, and guilt feelings or shame or humiliation or the sense of having failed God or feeling

betrayed by God or whatever it is. All these thoughts are for the birds. They don't please God at all, and they just get us upset. So, the idea is just to endure the thoughts that are going by without thinking about any thoughts. You don't have to be afraid of thoughts because beyond them is always the silence of God. And so, even if you are bombarded with thoughts, even between the various words, there is a certain moment or split second of silence and God is right there always sort of peeking through between the sounds of the word so it's good to take a friendly attitude towards the thoughts because you're sure going to have them and just to say hello and goodbye. Let them come and let them go. And when they get a little aggravating or attractive or cause an aversion ever so gently return to the sacred word or the sacred breath. So, it's really an exercise of the love of God, and the less self-motivation the better it goes. In other words, to look for peace or to look for a spiritual experience is to misunderstand what love is which is simply giving ourselves way to God again and again.

8. **Should we fall asleep**, we continue with the prayer when we awake. When engaged with our thoughts, we return ever so gently to the sacred word. Thoughts are inevitable, an integral and a normal part of Centering Prayer. Thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections. They may be ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memories. Thoughts and feelings that come may bring feelings of attraction or aversion. Insights and psychological breakthroughs may come, as well as self-reflections such as, "How am I doing?" or, "This peace is just great!" They all arise from the unloading of the unconscious mind. When you realize you may have become engaged with any of these thoughts return gently to your sacred word, leading you back to an awareness of God's presence.
9. **Take several minutes to come out of prayer**. Don't hurry. Breathe in the presence of Christ. Offer yourself to God for the tasks awaiting you (e.g. "I am yours," or "Remain with me").