

DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

Renewing an ancient christian prayer form: 'Centring Prayer'

MONASTICISM was beginning to flourish in fifth-century Gaul, and in response to an expressed need, St John Cassian produced two sets or collections of writings. The first, the *Institutes*, recounted the practices of the monks of Egypt and adapted them for use in the colder, western regions. In his second collection, he included what he considered the most significant teachings he had received in the course of his long pilgrimages among the monks of Egypt. These he presented in the form of *Conferences* given by various Fathers.

In Abba Isaac's second conference we find the first written expression in the west of that tradition of which Centring Prayer is a contemporary presentation.

The whole of Abba Isaac's magnificent Conference should be read. But let us here listen to just a few of the words of this wise old man, most directly related to our present concern:

I think it will be easy to bring you to the heart of true prayer . . . I must give you a formula for contemplation. The formula was given us by a few of the older fathers who remained. They communicated it only to a very few who were athirst for the true way. To maintain an unceasing recollection of God, this formula must be ever before you. The formula is this: 'O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me'.

The mind should go on grasping this formula until it can cast away the wealth and multiplicity of other thoughts, and restrict itself to the poverty of this single word. And so it will attain with ease that Gospel beatitude which holds first place among the other beatitudes: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Thus by God's light the mind mounts to the manifold knowledge of God, and thereafter feeds on mysteries loftier and more sacred. . . . And thus it attains that purest of pure prayers . . . the prayer which looks for no visual image, uses neither thoughts nor words; the prayer wherein, like a spark leaping up from a fire, the mind is rapt upward, and, destitute of the aid of the senses or of anything visible or material, pours out its prayer to God.

For the better part of ten centuries, this monastic approach to prayer prevailed. In this tradition, when the monks wished to speak in a reflective

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way of their experience, they employed four words: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. *Lectio*, or more commonly *lectio divina*, cannot be adequately expressed in the simple translation of the word as 'reading'.

In the fuller sense implied here, *lectio* means the reception of the revelation, by whatever vehicle it may come, the reception of the Word who is the Truth, the Way, and the Life. It may indeed come by way of one's own reading. But we also receive this Word through the ministry of others, above all through the Liturgy of the Word. Others will open it out for us in homilies, in instructions, in simple faith-sharing and everyday lived witness. It can also be presented in art: pictures, frescoes, sculpture, stained glass. There is also the larger book of revelation: the whole of the work of the Creator, his wonderful creation.

Again, with *meditatio* we have to be careful that our translation be not a betrayal of the truth. In the early monastic tradition, meditation involved primarily a repetition of the word of revelation, or the word of life one received from one's spiritual father or from some other source. The word — and here 'word' is not to be taken literally as one single word, but may be a whole phrase or sentence — was quietly repeated over and over again, even with the lips. In time, the repetition would tend to interiorize and simplify the word, as its meaning was assimilated. What *meditatio* does is to change (to adapt Newman's phrase) a notional assent into real assent.

Then, quite naturally, we turn to *oratio*, to prayer, to response. This response grows. It is constantly nourished by illuminating grace. A word or movement of the heart can no longer be adequate. Our whole being must say 'yes'. This is *contemplatio*. It is a gift, a gift of God. We can only open ourselves to it, in our God-given freedom, and express our desire to receive it by fidelity to *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* of the most delicate, open and receptive type. That is what Centring Prayer is.

The desert tradition out of which this teaching of John Cassian, Centring Prayer, evolved is the same as that from which the Jesus Prayer issued. However, while Abba Isaac gave John Cassian a word from the Psalms: 'O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me', the eastern christian current derived its source from two passages of the New Testament — that of the blind Bartimeus and of the publican — to form the well-known prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner'.

One of the most articulate of the Desert Fathers was the former courtier and controversial theologian, Evagrius Ponticus (A.D. 399). A true spiritual father, Evagrius championed pure prayer, seeing it as the 'laying aside of all thoughts'. Let me cite just a few of his *Chapters on Prayer* which are especially relevant to our topic:

69. Stand guard over your spirit, keeping it free of concepts at the time of prayer so that it may remain in its own deep calm.

114. Do not by any means strive to fashion some image or visualize some form at the time of prayer.

117. Let me repeat this saying of mine which I have expressed on other occasions: Happy is the spirit that attains to perfect formlessness at the time of prayer.

119. Happy is the spirit that becomes free of all matter and is stripped of all at the time of prayer.

St John Climacus († A.D. 649) receives his surname from the masterful treatise he wrote when he was abbot of the monastery on Mount Sinai: *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. On the twenty-eighth step of his *Ladder*, he speaks of prayer:

5. Let your prayer be completely simple, for both the publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single phrase. [Recall that it is the prayer of the publican that provides the text for the Jesus Prayer.]

9. Let there be no studied elegance in the words of your prayers. How often the simple and monotonous lisplings of little children make their fathers give in to them.

10. Do not launch out into long discussions that fritter away your mind in efforts for eloquence. One word alone spoken by the publican touched God's mercy. A single word full of faith saved the good thief. Prolixity in prayer often fills the mind with images and distracts it, whereas the use of one single word (*monologia*) draws it into recollection.

19. The beginning of prayer consists in banishing the thoughts that come to us by the use of a single word (*monologistos*) the very moment they appear.

42. During prayer do not let the senses create any images, so as not to be subject to distractions.

But now let us turn for a moment to the West. William of St Thierry († A.D. 1148) was Bernard of Clairvaux's closest friend: in some ways his mentor, in many ways his adviser. In his wonderful little treatise *On Prayer*, William speaks — or rather, prays — in his characteristic way:

Lord Jesus Christ, the Truth and the Life, you said that in the time to come the true worshippers of your Father would be those who worshipped you in spirit and in truth. I beseech you, therefore, to free my soul from idolatry [from image-prayer]. Free her, lest in seeking you she should fall in with your companions [the faculties of imagination and memory, which are in man, as it were, companions to the image of God in him, his free will], and begin to stray after their flocks [images coming from the imagination and

memory], during the sacrifice of praise. No, let me rather lie down with you and be fed by you in the noon-day heat of your love. By a certain natural sense derived from her First Cause, the soul dreams, after a fashion, of your Face, in the image of which she was herself created. But either because she has lost or has never acquired the habit of not receiving another image in place of it, she is receptive when, in the time of prayer, many other images offer themselves. If I envisage for you, my God, any form whatever, or anything that has a form, I make myself an idolater.

Then, turning and speaking to himself, he continues: 'rid yourself of all the usual ideas about locality and place and get a firm hold of this: You have found God in yourself'. Before leaving William, let me quote a few lines from one of his *Meditations* (the third), those deeply personal and profoundly human sharings he published 'to help beginners to learn how to pray'.

Where are you, Lord, where are you? And where, Lord, are you not? This much at least I know, and that most certainly, that you, in whom we move and have our being, are in a manner present here with me, and that from that most health-giving presence comes the longing and fainting of my soul for your salvation. I know in truth, I am aware most healthfully, that you are with me.

How does perception come into all this? Of what avail are mental images? Can reason, or rational understanding, effect anything? No. For although reason sends us to you, O God, it cannot of itself attain to you. Neither does that understanding which, as a product of reason, has lower matters for its sphere of exercise, go any farther than does reason itself; it is powerless to attain to you. But, when and how and as far as the Holy Spirit wills, he controls the believing mind, something of what you are may be seen by those who in their prayer and contemplation have passed all that you are not. . . .

I like, too, this passage from a contemporary of William, Julian, a monk of Vezelay. It occurs in the first sermon of a series he wrote in his old age:

I pray that the word of the Lord may come again today to those who are silent, and that we may hear what the Lord God says to us in our hearts. Let us silence the desires and importunings of the flesh and the vainglorious fantasies of our imagination, so that we can freely hear what the Spirit is saying. Let our ears be attuned to the voice that is heard above the vault of heaven, for the Spirit of Life is always speaking to our souls; as Scripture says, 'A voice is heard above the firmament which hangs over our heads'. But as long as we

fix our attention on other things, we do not hear what the Spirit is saying to us.

Let us return to the East and the great hesychasts of the fourteenth century. Nicephorus in his *Profitable Discourse on Sobriety* gives a long and rich instruction, part of which we cite here:

You know that in every person, interior conversation takes place in his breast. For, when our lips are silent, it is within ourselves that we speak and hold discourse with ourselves, pray and sing psalms and other things of this kind. Then, having banished every thought from this inner conversation (you can do it if you wish), give it the following short prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'; and compel it, in place of all other thoughts, to have only this one constant cry within. If you do this continually, with your whole attention, this practice will in time open for you the way to the heart. . . .

St Gregory of Sinai († A.D. 1346), a contemporary of Nicephorus, who also wrote extensively on hesychasm, the way of inner silence, has this to say:

Keep your mind free from colours, images and forms; beware of the imagination in prayer; otherwise you may find that you have become a fantasist instead of a hesychast.

St Nil Sorskii († A.D. 1408), who perhaps was responsible more than anyone else for keeping this tradition so alive among Russian Christians, said much the same. 'So as not to fall into illusion while practising inner prayer, do not permit yourself any concepts, images or visions'.

Like the Conferences of Abba Isaac, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (fourteenth century) is the word of a spiritual father addressed to a particular disciple. By drawing together and paraphrasing scattered texts, we can reconstruct the method of prayer that the father taught his disciple:

It is simply a spontaneous desire springing . . . toward God (cf chapter IV). Centre all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart (cf chapter III). The will needs only a brief fraction of a moment to move toward the object of its desire (cf chapter IV).

If you want to gather all your desire into one simple word that the mind can easily retain, choose a short word rather than a long one. . . . But choose one that is meaningful to you. Then fix it in your mind so that it will remain there, come what may (cf chapter VII). Be careful in this work and never strain your mind or imagination,

for truly you will not succeed in this way. Leave these faculties at peace (cf chapter IV).

It is best when this word is wholly interior without a definite thought or actual sound (cf chapter XL).

Let this little word represent to you God in all his fulness and nothing less than the fulness of God. Let nothing except God hold sway in your mind and heart (cf chapter XL). No sooner has a person turned toward God in love than through human frailty he finds himself distracted by the remembrance of some created thing or some daily care. But no matter. No harm done; for such a person quickly returns to deep recollection (cf chapter IV). Should some thought go on annoying you, demanding to know what you are doing, answer with this one word alone. If your mind begins to intellectualize over the meaning and connotations of this little word, remind yourself that its value lies in its simplicity. Do this and I assure you these thoughts will vanish (cf chapter VII).

You are to concern yourself with no creature, whether material or spiritual, nor in their situation nor doings, whether good or ill. To put it briefly, during this work you must abandon them all (cf chapter V).

Undoubtedly, the best known teachers of prayer in the West are St John of the Cross († A.D. 1591) and his spiritual mother, St Teresa of Avila († A.D. 1582). Let me just share a bit from her *Way of Perfection* and from John's commentary on his *Living Flame of Love*. St Teresa writes:

It is well to seek greater solitude so as to make room for the Lord and allow his Majesty to do his own work in us. The most we should do is occasionally, and quite gently, to utter a single word, like a person giving a little puff to a candle when he sees it has almost gone out, so as to make it burn again; though, if it were fully alight, I suppose the only result of blowing would be to put it out. I think the puff should be a gentle one because if we begin to tax our brains by making long speeches, the will may become active again. . . . Just so, when the will finds itself in this state of quiet, it must take no more notice of the understanding than it would of a madman, for, if it tries to draw the understanding along with itself, it is bound to grow preoccupied and restless, with the result that this state of prayer will be all effort and no gain and the soul will lose what God has been giving it without any effort of its own. . . . When the understanding (or, to put it more clearly, the thought) wanders off after the most ridiculous things in the world, the soul should laugh at it and treat it as the silly thing that it is, and remain in her state of quiet. For thoughts will come and go, but the will is mistress and all-

powerful, and will recall them without your having to trouble about it. But if you try to drag the understanding back by force, you will lose your power over it . . . (chapter XXXI).

John of the Cross, in speaking to the person who is passing from active, discursive meditation to contemplative prayer, urges him to 'the practice of loving attentiveness', and offers much practical advice in the course of his commentary on the third stanza of *The Living Flame of Love*. He begins with an analogy:

The more the air is cleansed of vapour, and the quieter and more simple it is, the more the sun illumines and warms it. A person should not bear attachment to anything, neither to the practice of meditation nor to any savour, whether sensory or spiritual, nor to any other apprehensions. He should be very free and annihilated regarding all things, because any thought or discursive reflection or satisfaction upon which he may want to lean would impede and disquiet him, and make noise in the profound silence of his senses and his spirit, which he possesses for the sake of this deep and delicate listening. God speaks to the heart in this solitude, which he mentioned through Osee, in supreme peace and tranquillity, while the soul listens, like David, to what the Lord God speaks to it, for he speaks this peace in this solitude (III, 34).

A good deal of commentary could be written on these words of the masters, in each case showing how they apply to the practice of Centring Prayer. But for now let us go on to listen to another great spiritual father of the Russian school of the nineteenth century, Theophan the Recluse. Archbishop Theophan was one of those who led the revival of traditional spirituality in Russia, and gave very clear and concrete instruction on the Jesus Prayer:

The practice of prayer is called an 'art' and it is a very simple one. Standing with consciousness and attention in the heart, cry out unceasingly: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me', without having in your mind any visual concept or image, believing that the Lord sees you and listens to you.

The various methods described by the Fathers (sitting down, making prostrations, and the other techniques used when performing prayer) are not suitable for everyone; indeed, without a personal director they are actually dangerous. It is better not to try them. There is just one method which is obligatory for all: *to be still with the attention in the heart*. All other things are beside the point and do not lead to the crux of the matter.

This tradition lives on among the russian emigrés of this century. Staretz Dorofey of Konevitsa, who lived according to the *Sketic Tradition of Saint Nilos*, gave this instruction to one of my friends:

Solitude is the exclusion during prayer of all alien thoughts, even those which seem good to us.

In order to avoid spiritual illusions while praying, we should not entertain any pictorial representations in our mind, though they will come even when our mind remains in our heart; that is, when we pray with attention and feeling. True unceasing prayer is a state in which we persevere at all times in the adoration of God. This adoration is free from words and images.

Another contemporary, Fr Kallistos of Patmos, gave voice to the tradition in these words:

The Jesus Prayer is not a form of meditation on specific incidents in the life of our Lord. Rather, it is a method for controlling thoughts, for concentrating the attention and guarding the mind; more precisely, it is a way of containing the mind within the heart. Under normal conditions, a man's attention is scattered and dispersed over a multiplicity of external objects. In order that he may acquire true prayer of the heart, his mind must be unified. It must be brought from fragmentation to singleness, from plurality to simplicity and nakedness; and so it will be enabled to enter and dwell within the heart. Such is the aim of the Jesus Prayer: 'By the memory of Jesus Christ', as Philotheus of Sinai puts it, 'gather together your mind that is scattered abroad'. That is why the Jesus Prayer must be at once uninterrupted and imageless . . .

Hans Urs von Balthasar sums up for us as follows: 'Contemplation is an inward gaze into the depths of the soul and, for that very reason, beyond the soul to God'.

And that thought very directly and immediately brings us to the great spiritual master of the West in our century, from whom Centring Prayer has derived its name, Fr Louis of Gethsemani, better known as Thomas Merton.

. . . prayer begins not so much with 'consideration' as with a 'return to the heart', finding one's deepest centre, awakening the profound depths of our being in the presence of God who is the source of our being and of our life.

Two things are new about Centring Prayer: the name and the 'packaging'. There is no copyright on the name. Others were using it

before it began to be applied to this particular method of prayer. And it is still being used in a general sense, to refer to any method by which the prayer seeks to bring his or her scattered thoughts and feelings together to allow for a certain deepening.

The new 'packaging' is the formulation of the method in three rules:

Rule One: At the beginning of the prayer we take a minute or two to quieten down and then move in faith to God dwelling in our depths; and at the end of the prayer we take several minutes to come out, mentally praying the 'Our Father' or some other prayer.

Rule Two: After resting for a while in the centre in faith-full love, we take a single, simple word that expresses this response and let it be present silently, repeating itself as it will.

Rule Three: Whenever in the course of the prayer we become *aware* of anything else, we simply gently return to the Presence by the use of our prayer word.

The prayer, then, begins with those elements we have spoken of earlier: the *lectio*, or reception, in an instantaneous recall of the goodness of God's personal, creative and redeeming Presence; the *meditatio*, or momentary reflection on this, evoking the *oratio*, or response of faith-full love, the movement of faith, which brings us into the Presence, and then we are ready for the *contemplatio*, simply to *be* to that wonderful Presence. It is simple, it is full, it is total.

In a fraction of a minute — and ordinarily we should not take much more than that — we pass into a prayer of quiet recollection, of presence. And it is there we wish to stay, in a state of loving attention, wholly centred on God — 'the heart of true prayer'.

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