

Introduction to Contemplative Prayer

A Brief History

Contemplative Prayer (also known as Christian Meditation, The Prayer of the Heart, Centering Prayer) is a kind of “Silent Gazing on God”, an exploration into the limitless Mystery that is God. Its history is closely tied with the development of the Monastic movement from the times of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. In the middle of the 3rd century AD, Decius was the Roman Emperor and many Christians were being persecuted and killed at that time. This was the catalyst for the move of some Christians to flee into the Egyptian desert in order to devote themselves to living the kinds of lives they saw as closer to the Biblical ideal. By the late 3rd century this became the start of Monasticism in the eastern Mediterranean area.

In the later part of the 4th century a young man named John Cassian, from modern-day Romania, entered such a monastic society and stayed 20 years. At the end of this period, in the early 5th century, he was sent off to Marseille in the South of France to begin a monastic community there, one that accepted both men and women, in which he taught in a methodical way the wisdom of the desert which included the practice of Contemplative Prayer.

Fast forward some 80 years or so and we have St Benedict, the son of a Roman nobleman who left his privileged life to enter a monastery himself. It is Benedict who is normally regarded as the founder of Western monasticism, though he leaned heavily on the work of John Cassian. Benedict’s way of living and praying, known as *The Rule*, has greatly influenced monastic communities (including our own cathedral community) to this day.

In our modern times the late Irish Benedictine monk, John Main, set about making the practice of meditation accessible to the lay Christian; he wrote:

“The all-important aim in Christian meditation is to allow God’s mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but **the** reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are...”

The Nature of Contemplative Prayer

Most people, when they hear the word “prayer”, think essentially of talking to God, a kind of monologue in which God is listening to them asking Him to sort out a “shopping list” of issues. More mature prayer extends this to speaking **and** listening. Contemplative Prayer is perhaps the most mature and the deepest form of prayer – here are some of its characteristics:

Contemplative Prayer:

- Is not a string of petitions or requests.
- Is carried out in an environment of **complete silence**. This is a condition that must not be wavered from.
- Does not involve any ideas, images or other constructs of the mind, nor invoke any trance-like state.
- Is a metaphorical "face-to-face" encounter between person and God, in which God reveals Himself directly to the person. Since the, as it were, "raw nature" of God is so different from our human nature and so utterly unknowable, this revelation takes the form of silence and absence – we are confronting, as it were, a "Cloud of Unknowing."
- Is undertaken simply to **be** with God, not to expect any feelings, experiences or insights of any kind, but simply from a desire - however feeble - for Him and Him alone.

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- Is not an endeavour in which we ourselves discover God through our efforts; it is God who, for love of us, reveals Himself to us. Therefore, Contemplative Prayer does not make us "special" Christians - our Lord loves us no more and no less than others who do not practice this discipline.

Aspects of the Contemplative Session

Preparation

- Are we right with God?
- Examining our attitude and outlook – the need for humility.
- Is anything weighing heavily on our minds?
- Getting physically comfortable in an environment with the minimum of interruption.

Opening Prayer

*O living God, may your Spirit enfold us as you clasp us to yourself, that in this holy endeavour we in Christ may grow in ever deeper communion with yourself and our lives blaze forth your glory.
Amen.*

Execution

The aim of each session is to get to that point at which we are simply **being** before God in silence. This being-in-the-moment is a condition in which we are not dwelling on any thoughts and are unaware of the passage of time; indeed, we are unaware of ourselves at all. Unfortunately, basic human nature intrudes and we are frequently bombarded with stray thoughts. So how can we deal with this?

The monk John Main suggests:

“Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to "say" a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase **maranatha** (which is Aramaic for "come Lord, come Lord Jesus.") Recite it as four syllables of equal length:

mA rA nA thA

Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything – spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts or images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word.”

Now, it is important that your entire attention is brought to bear in mentally repeating each successive syllable. This must not be rushed. Occasionally we will find ourselves free from stray thoughts and then we simply hold our attention before God. When thoughts come upon us again, as they eventually will, we go back to *silently* and *slowly* repeating the phrase with our whole concentration. I must stress that we are not using our minds explicitly to meditate on the phrase itself; we are using it to discipline our minds that we may, after some practice, enter a period of *being* in which the attention of the whole person is on the mystery and reality of God. By an act of will, we are "dying to self" in order that we may "live".

The word recommended by John Main need not be the only one used. We can choose any word or phrase that has particular resonance with ourselves, usually from the Bible, but it should be one with relatively few syllables; Main's example has just 4. I myself tend to alternate between Main's word and a phrase borrowed from Julian of Norwich: "Lord Jesu, thou art enough to me" which, after a few repetitions, I shorten to "Jesu, thou art enough" - which has 6 syllables. Again, the phrase is repeated not out loud but within ourselves, *slowly* and with complete concentration.

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It is possible that we may experience occasional physiological effects, such as events in our visual field as our eyes are closed; very occasionally we may experience particular feelings. Whatever they are there is always the danger that we will begin to focus our attention on them rather than on the silence of God. If this occurs, we must simply and silently yield them to God and refocus our whole attention once more onto the phrase. It is also possible we may fall asleep during the session; if so, once awake we again simply re-focus on our phrase as before until the end of the session.

Effects of Contemplative Prayer Over Time

The discipline of Contemplative Prayer should become part of the fabric of your existence for the rest of your life; its effects operate at the level of our spiritual foundations and roots. Regularity and perseverance over time will:

- Develop a deep inner attentiveness that increasingly remains with us throughout the day.
- Develop an ever closer bond to God whose presence resonates deeply within us.
- Feed back positively on our relationships with others, on our liturgical responses and on our other expressions of prayer.

It must be noted, however, that as we expose ourselves more and more to the "Divine Light" the more we tend to become uncomfortably aware of our own human imperfections, and the more we can expect spiritual opposition at other times.

Other Resources

- The website www.johnmain.org is a good resource for practical help in meditation and contains references to PDF documents as well as audio clips. The PDF document "Learning to Meditate with John Main" gives a particularly good grounding in the discipline.
- The book "Silence and Honey Cakes" - *Lion* - by Rowan Williams (ex Archbishop of Canterbury) is a short guide to the history of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the importance of Contemplative Prayer, of which he is a practitioner himself. An accessible but profound treatment.
- The book "Contemplative Prayer" - *Darton, Longman & Todd* - by Thomas Merton focuses more on the nature of Contemplative Prayer itself.

Effigy of St. Benedict
by David Holgate
Norwich Cathedral

