

To Open one's Mind and Heart to God

My spiritual journey started a few years after I moved San Francisco. I was a cradle Catholic but I had compartmentalized my Catholic faith to Sundays, brief prayers and an odd retreat here and there, plus volunteering but nothing life changing. I didn't know how to integrate my faith into my busy day. I was overstretched with my career, social life and outdoor activities. I was comfortable with a culture that wanted religious beliefs to be "private," because I was inarticulate regarding my faith. I had received no Catholic formation since I had made my confirmation at 12 years of age. Additionally, while I grew up in a practicing Catholic home, there was no discussion of religion around our kitchen table. The family bible was used to record our key sacraments.

During Lent in 1995, the parish priest Fr. Gagan S.J. invited speakers into our parish to share with us a variety of different ways of praying. During this series, I resonated with Centering Prayer, a silent prayer method, which was introduced by a Trappist monk, priest and Abbott, Fr. Thomas Keating O.C.S.O. as a means of helping people living in today's frenetically paced world, to prepare themselves for God's gift of Contemplation. Through God's grace, Centering Prayer, was a game changer for me. This simple silent prayer method, is based upon Matt 6:6, "*When you want to pray enter your inner room, and pray to your Father in secret and your Father who sees in secret, will reward you.*" Centering Prayer teaches us to let go of our thoughts and to just 'be' with the Lord without words, with the intention of consenting to His presence and His action within.

I had to go through a re-education, as I had imbibed from the culture a deistic understanding of God, as remote and far removed from my life. It was fundamental to this prayer that I awaken to the Lord's presence within. I grew up learning that our bodies are "the temple of the Holy Spirit," 1 Cor 6:19, but I had never made the connection to praying to a personal God who is closer to me than I could ever imagine. St. Augustine articulated my quandary in his famous poem in the *Confessions*, "you were with me when I wasn't with you!"

Incrementally I learned to trust that Our Lord knows our hearts and wants us to spend time with him, to develop our relationship with Him. The concept of having a relationship with God that spanned the normal human range from acquaintance, to friendliness, to friendship, to intimacy, was new to me. As a lay person in the world, with a career and a busy life, this expectation of a personal relationship with Our Lord, Jesus Christ, came as a surprise to me.

I had never grasped the enormity of God's availability to us. I was too involved in the world, and way too busy. I needed to wake up, and the first jolt that I got was the expectation that I spend a minimum of 20 minutes twice a day in silent prayer. This prayer was making serious demands on my time, however I committed to the 40 minutes of daily prayer, for one month. I thought that I would assess how Centering Prayer worked for me and then decide whether to continue with it or not. Within weeks, I noticed that I was a lot calmer, and less reactive to things that would have previously triggered an emotional response from me. Wow, I experienced for the first time how God's grace can really impact our lives directly, by incrementally changing us. Through our intention to consent to God's Presence and His action during our prayer, we are inviting God to do with us as he wills, He is the potter and we are the clay!.

Invariably I encountered lots of distractions during my prayer periods, however I repeatedly returned to my intention to be with the Lord and trusted that each time I returned to my intention, it was pleasing to God. I was now aware of my incessant superficial thoughts, distracting my desire to just be with God. God was clearly at work, as I received a lot of consolations in the beginning. I knew within a few months that this prayer would become an

integral part of my life, as necessary as food and sleep were to me. I realized that my relationship with God had to be number one.

As my relationship with Our Lord, Jesus Christ, grew I started handing over small daily concerns to the Lord and with this exercise of trust, my faith grew. In retrospect I could see that outcomes were always different, but better than if I had tried to resolve each issue by myself. One day I noticed that my laugh had changed, it appeared to come from a freer place within. While I hadn't thought of myself as an anxious person, however as I entrusted my future to the Lord, I found myself greatly relieved, as if a weight had been taken off my shoulders. Jesus said, "*Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.*" (Matt 11:28). I experienced His rest during prayer and could carry some of this rest into my everyday life. I became a happier person.

Instead of reading my usual books, I read Fr. Keating's books, *Open Mind Open Heart, Intimacy with God* etc. The more I read the more comfortable I was with the novelty of this silent meditative prayer and the more enthused I became about my Catholic faith. I was eager to learn about contemplation. Fr. Keating O.C.S.O. had said that for the first sixteen centuries of the Catholic Church, the goal and summit of everyone's prayer life was contemplation! I read books by contemplative giants St. Teresa of Avila, St. Therese of Lisieux, Thomas Merton and Ruth Burrows.

After practicing Centering Prayer for two years, I changed prayer group, and was introduced to Lectio Divina, a contemplative reading of God's Word. I was blown away by the community's sharing in response to the day's scripture reading. I understood for the first time how God's Word is "living", it can break into our world, and touch our hearts deeply! "*I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*" (Ezekiel 36:26). I, like so many Catholics, was ignorant of scripture. I purchased my first bible. I learned that the Word always meets us where we are at. I was excited to have scripture opened up for me via personal sharings during the prayer meetings and by Fr. Thomas Keating O.C.S.O.'s talks and his books *The Mystery of Christ, Awakenings* etc. I learned to 'listen' to God's Word, in an open and receptive way, and slowly words or phrases started to shimmer or beckon to me. I pondered these living words as God's personal Word for me. It was a slow process of incremental formation. In time, I could see how my human condition was reflected in scripture. With time, an interior life opened up for me. Through Lectio Divina, I experienced the love God has for me, and that was so powerful that before I knew it, I had fallen in love with Jesus Christ.

Coming to self-knowledge was a bit of a shock for me. Self knowledge is always a hard and humbling experience. I appreciate the words of Theologian John Shea, that the cock has to crow for each one of us, just as it did for St. Peter two thousand years ago, for us to awaken to the reality of who we really are. We need shock therapy to face our faults and failings that are usually blind spots to us. Thomas Merton outlined that we are all prone to our false self (i.e. a self-centered self) and to be spiritually mature we should strive to live from our true self (i.e. a self whose will is aligned with God's will). The spiritual journey takes a lifetime, and we invariably are always a work-in-progress. It has taken many years for me to appreciate that the guidance of the Holy Spirit and God's Providence are both exquisitely fine tuned to save us from ourselves!

I have learned through many failures that we can never master or control either Centering Prayer or Lectio Divina. This is good because it keeps us humble, recognizing our creaturehood and that it is God who is ultimately in control. Any spiritual growth over the many years has been very incremental. Looking back over the decades, I can say that my attitudes have changed, my spiritual journey shifted from my head to my heart and I have come to recognize

my total dependence upon God. I am so grateful for the healings, strengthening and refreshment that I have received through God's grace.

If anyone is interested in finding out about Centering Prayer or Lectio Divina they can contact me or any member of the Contemplative Outreach Northern Nevada service teams, see our website for contact details: contemplativeoutreachnorthernnevada.org.

God Bless
Therese Coen