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A pastor provides an informative critique "centering prayer", which departs from traditional Christian spirituality and misunderstands the nature of contemplation.

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The Danger of Centering Prayer

In the mid-seventies, Trappist Abbot Thomas Keating asked the monks, "Could we put the Christian tradition into a form that would be accessible to people ... who have been instructed in an Eastern technique and might be inspired to return to their Christian roots if they knew there was something similar in the Christian tradition?" (*Intimacy with God*, 15). Frs. William Menniger and M. Basil Pennington took up the challenge, and centering prayer is the result. In a few short years it has spread all over the world.

Centering prayer originated in St. Joseph's Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. During the twenty years (1961-1981) when Keating was abbot, St. Joseph's held dialogues with Buddhist and Hindu representatives, and a Zen master gave a week-long retreat to the monks. A former Trappist monk who had become a Transcendental Meditation teacher also gave a session to the monks.

Many people assume centering prayer is compatible with Catholic tradition, but in fact the techniques of centering prayer are neither Christian nor prayer. They are at the level of human faculties and as such are an operation of man, not of God. The deception and dangers can be grave.

Centering prayer differs from Christian prayer in that the intent of the technique is to bring the practitioner to the center of his *own being*. There he is, supposedly, to experience the presence of the God who indwells him. Christian prayer, on the contrary, centers upon God in a *relational way*, as someone apart from oneself. The

Christian knows a God who is personal, yet who, as Creator, infinitely transcends His creature. God is wholly other than man. It is also crucial to Christian prayer that God engages man's whole being in response, not just his interior life. In the view of centering prayer, the immanence of God somehow makes the transcendence of God available to human techniques and experience.

Centering prayer is essentially a form of self-hypnosis. It makes use of a "mantra," a word repeated over and over to focus the mind while striving by one's will to go deep within oneself. The effects are a hypnotic-like state: concentration upon one thing, disengagement from other stimuli, a high degree of openness to suggestion, a psychological and physiological condition that externally resembles sleep but in which consciousness is interiorized and the mind subject to suggestion. After reading a published description of centering prayer, a psychology professor said, "Your question is, is this hypnosis? Sure it is." He said the state can be verified

physiologically by the drop in blood pressure, respiratory rate, lactic acid level in the blood, and the galvanic conductivity of the skin. Abbot Keating relates that, when they began doing the centering prayer workshops in the guest house, some of the monks and guests "complained that it was spooky seeing people walking around the guest house like 'zombies.'" They recognized the symptoms but could not diagnose the illness.

In order to see clearly that centering prayer departs from Catholic tradition, let us review the differences between Christian spirituality and that of Eastern religions. These differences flow, above all, from their concepts of God, of man, and of their relationship. In light of this contrast, we should be able to see more clearly from which of these centering prayer draws its approach and techniques.

In Catholic teaching, all men are creatures, called out of nothingness to know God. All men are also sinners, cut off from God and destined to death. A Christian is one whose life has been reconstituted in Christ. He is no longer in the place and stance of a sinner, that is, apart from God, acting as if he were the ultimate source, measure, and goal of his own behavior. He is *in Christ*. Henceforth, his life is supposed to originate in Christ and to be directed to God the Father. I say "supposed to" for it is a possibility that must be acted upon. It is not automatic. The grace of baptism must be incarnated in obedience, and, even after baptism, the Christian can choose to conform to Christ or to his fallen nature, that is, to sin.

Eastern religions, in contrast, lack revelation of God as a personal Creator who radically transcends His creatures. Though possessing many praiseworthy elements, they nonetheless seek God as if He were *part of* the universe, rather than its Creator. This is because they are monistic, seeing all reality as one. Thus, God is a dimension, though hidden, of the same reality of which man is a part. The goal therefore is to peel away the exterior world to get to the spiritual reality beneath it. God is conceived of as an impersonal state of being. In contrast, for Christians, God is the Real, and the whole of the universe exists by God's free choice; creation is a second, contingent reality-and, in Christian thought, did not need to exist. Moreover, this contingent universe is the result of a God who is vastly more than mere being; He is a loving Father.

These differing conceptions of God issue in different approaches to God. In the East, human means are necessarily relied upon to come to God. The goal is not to seek God as an Other, but to achieve an altered state of consciousness. Where a Christian seeks dialogue and interaction with God and, with His help, the "restoration of all things in Christ," by a certain "participation in the divine nature" (2 Peter 4:4), the East seeks God in the self and seeks escape from the distractions of the outer world. The "experience of God" is essentially achieved by psychological and physiological *technique* rather than by *encounter*.

The confusion of technique over encounter arises from a misunderstanding of the indwelling of God. The fact that God indwells us does not mean that we can capture Him by techniques. Nor does it mean that we are identical with Him in our deepest self. Rather, God

indwells us by grace which does *not* blend human and divine natures. On the contrary, it perfects and empowers our limited human faculties, so that we can relate to Him. We can no more manipulate this indwelling of grace by psychological techniques than we can manipulate our existence.

Analogously, children do not come to know the parents who gave them existence by going dead inside themselves or back to the moment of their conception. They come to know their parents by interaction with them. As children use the faculties given them at conception to grow and become like their parents, so we use the faculties given us by the indwelling Spirit to interact with God and to put on Jesus Christ. As children speak to their parents, so we speak to God by the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells us.

This is what the Catholic tradition means by the term "sanctifying grace." Sanctifying grace is the grace of union with God. By it, we are given a share in the very holiness of God. Sanctifying grace is God's communication of himself to man. As such, it cannot be experienced by human faculties. However, Sanctifying grace gives us the "faculties" to relate to God. By it, we are given a new and additional "divine nature" and are made "sons and daughters" of God. With childlike simplicity, we can say "our Father." By incarnating this grace through acts of obedience to God (what the Church calls "actual graces") we are progressively converted from our sinful nature and "put on Jesus Christ," participating in the life of Jesus Christ as members of his Body. In the religion of Christ, the Incarnate Lord, there is no disengagement from the external, but rather a dedication of one's life and the world to God. The goal is not merely a deep inner peace but a sanctification of body, mind, and heart-indeed, of the whole world.

Centering prayer claims for itself the experience of God, while setting aside external realities and overcoming the "otherness" of God. It takes these characteristics not from Christian tradition but from Hinduism, through the medium of Transcendental Meditation. TM is Hinduism adapted by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a Hindu guru, for use in a Western cultural setting. Fr. Pennington, one of the authors of centering prayer and an ardent supporter of TM, says, "Mahesh Yogi, employing the terminology of the ancient Vedic tradition, speaks of this [practice of TM] 'to plunge into deep, deep rest for fifteen or twenty minutes twice a day' as experiencing the Absolute. The Christian knows by faith that this Absolute is our God of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. When he goes to his deepest self, he finds in himself an image and participation of God, and he finds God himself."

Fr. Pennington approves a Christian's participation in TM, despite the fact that the introductory ceremony to TM, the Puja, involves worship of a dead Hindu guru and that the mantras given those being initiated are in fact the names of Hindu gods. **For a Christian knowingly to participate in TM is a violation of the Second Commandment against false worship.**

What is to be said of this claim? Archimandrite Sophrony of Mount Athos and an authority in Orthodox spirituality, speaks from his own personal story. He was for years involved in Eastern religions, before he returned to the Orthodox faith of his youth. I quote him at length, for he speaks with clarity and power:

"In advising against being carried away by artificial practices such as Transcendental Meditation I am but repeating the age-old message of the Church.... The way of the Fathers requires firm

faith and long patience, whereas our contemporaries want to seize every spiritual gift, including even direct contemplation of the Absolute God, by force and speedily, and will often draw a parallel between prayer in the Name of Jesus and yoga or Transcendental Meditation and the like. I must stress the danger of such errors.... He is deluded who endeavors to divest himself mentally of all that is transitory and relative in order to cross some invisible threshold, to realize his eternal origin, his identity with the Source of all that exists, in order to return and merge with him, the nameless transpersonal Absolute. Such exercises have enabled many to rise to suprarational contemplation of being, to experience a certain mystical trepidation, to know the state of silence of mind, when mind goes beyond the boundaries of time and space. In such like states man may feel the peacefulness of being withdrawn from the continually changing phenomena of the visible world, may even have a certain experience of eternity. But the God of Truth, the Living God, is not in all this.

"It is man's own beauty, created in the image of God, that is contemplated and seen as divinity, whereas he himself still continues within the confines of his creatureliness. This is a vastly important concern. The tragedy of the matter lies in the fact that man sees a mirage which, in his longing for eternal life, he mistakes for a genuine oasis. This impersonal form of ascetics leads finally to an assertion of the divine principle in the very nature of man. Man is then drawn to the idea of self-deification-the cause of the original Fall. The man who is blinded by the imaginary majesty of what he contemplates has in fact set his foot on the path to self-destruction. He has discarded the revelation of a personal God.... The movement into the depths of his own being is nothing else but attraction towards the non-being from which we were called by the will of the Creator" (*His Life is Mine*, 115-116).

In short, true prayer goes to God *from* the center of one's being, not *in* the center of one's being. In authentic contemplation, our faculties are brought to God, not disengaged as they are in TM. Christianity seeks to redeem and restore man and the world in Christ. To seek escape from rather than to redeem the world is to set oneself against the mission of Christ. That is why even the Jesus Prayer and the rosary (often cited as Christian "mantras") are deeply charged with basic Christian theological content; they are used to relate in an interactive and personal way to the Lord and to the Virgin Mary. For a similar reason, Catholic spiritual writers consistently insist a person must have a moral life and spiritual maturity before entering upon a life dedicated to contemplation. A person who seeks contemplation must first steep his mind in the word of God, conform his behavior to the moral law, submit his body to the spirit by asceticism, subjugate his will in humility to the will of God, and take on a heart given over to the love of God and neighbor. These means are incarnational and redemptive.

The book often claimed as a precedent for centering prayer is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by an unknown fourteenth-century English author. But the claim is in vain, for *The Cloud of Unknowing* clearly repudiates the emphasis given in centering prayer to techniques: "I am trying to make clear with words what experience teaches more convincingly, that techniques and methods are ultimately useless for awakening contemplative love." *The Cloud* must be seen in its historic context. Though its emphasis is on the "negative way," we must remember that it presupposes its reader is well grounded in the "positive way" to God by means of the word of God, creation, and sacramental means. When this prerequisite is met, a book like this can help

prayer to go beyond creatures to the Uncreated God. But to see *The Cloud* as pointing us to technique (as centering prayer does) is profoundly to misread the text.

Some of those who promote centering prayer employ questionable practices. For example, I first experienced centering prayer during a retreat whose announced topic and method had nothing to do with it. Without explanation, the director conducted us into centering prayer. At first I followed the instructions, but, not liking the feel of it, I made the decision to ignore the instructions. The retreat master, even by secular standards, acted unethically in not giving us an understanding and choice in the matter.

Nor is this uncommon. I know of an incident where several thousand people attending a charismatic conference were brought into centering prayer, again without explanation or choice. This incident was particularly objectionable, because the priest who was leading the session did not even bother with a Christian "mantra" but used an explicit hypnotic technique (e.g., "Imagine you are on an elevator. You begin going down, down inside yourself. The twenty-first floor, the twentieth floor," etc.). In many Catholic schools, teachers and officials have made centering prayer part of religious exercises without parental notice, understanding, or choice. Equally questionable is the setting aside of traditional safeguards. Centering prayer is often offered to large groups, where there is no way of knowing the psychological and spiritual problems some people may have. And this can be very dangerous indeed, leading to any of the following: (1) The delusion that one has found and pleased God, when in fact he has not. God is not part of the universe. The attempt to reach God by human technique is not only futile, but objectively sinful. (2) A self-absorption which forgets that life in the Triune God is relationships and that we have been inserted into these relationships through Christ. People who come out of this type of prayer often express it as coming into a freedom they did not know that they had lost. (3) The danger of opening oneself to evil spirits. Such techniques can bring people in touch with the spiritual realm. But the spiritual realm includes not only God but human and angelic spirits. A person with a problem in a moral or psychological area can open himself to some degree of demonic influence.

A mother wrote to ask me for advice: "In the Catholic school in [name of town], Sister has been using this [centering prayer and use of the Jesus Prayer] in the religion classes. My ten-year-old daughter took to it right away. This was about two-and-a-half years ago. The things she shared with me that Jesus had told her didn't appear to me to be imagination. They made her feel very close to Jesus. About six weeks ago, Kristy started having difficulty going to sleep. She didn't want to stay in her own room and would lie there afraid to close her eyes, until I would let her go into her sister's room and sleep with her. Finally she confided in me that she would see something scary if she closed her eyes. A few days ago, she confided that it laughed. Kristy had used the centering prayer on her own at bedtime for some time before this fear started."

What happened to Kristy? The laughter is very characteristic of evil spirits. It would have taken personal contact and prayerful discernment to know for sure. From the description, I would suspect an evil spirit is harassing her. I would doubt that it has any serious hold on her, unless there was immoral behavior or a special vulnerability in her psychological state. I suspect that her use of centering prayer opened her to evil spirits and such harassments.

The past several decades have seen an explosion of groups and movements involved in spiritual and psychic pursuits. Some of these no doubt are of God; some clearly are not. The New Age Movement, which is actually as ancient as the Eastern religions from which it draws its resources, has shown a phenomenal growth. A materialistic civilization is trying to find what it threw away. I believe that the interest is more than a sociological phenomenon and that it is part of a conflict of the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness.

I see the springing up of so many spiritual and psychic movements as part of the rebellion of man and evil spirits against God. The totalitarian movements of the twentieth century managed to capture the major sectors of society, and what destruction they brought on the world! But they fell short of total possession of man. In his interior life, man remained free. Nazism and Communism had some success in penetrating the interior life of man by persuasion, by socioeconomic pressures, and even by the violence of brainwashing.

But the vulnerability of man today to manipulation is today much greater than it was even a half-century ago. The moral order and faith in God have drastically declined. Man's technology and managerial abilities have increased. Tyranny has better tools to dominate others and, more and more, a ripe situation in which to do so. The restraining influences on the work of evil spirits are being stripped away: loss of moral standards, break-up of family life, uprootedness, merely functional relationships, emptiness of meaning. In this context, what centering prayer does, at a minimum, is make respectable the false spiritualities that are rushing in to fill the spiritual void.

My hypothesis is that it is Satan's strategy, in all these things, to strip away the physiological and psychological forces that, in our fallen state, are a fail-safe protection for the human spirit. (This is a possible interpretation of Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-10 about the lawless one and the force that restrains him.) Thus, he can hope to capture the spirit of man worldwide and establish a kingdom of darkness.

The Catholic Church is the major obstacle to the Devil's plan-and the Lord of it the only hope of mankind. Hence the Church has been the special target of today, as indeed it has been since Pentecost. The rapid spread of centering prayer in the past decade into so many areas which are at the very heart of Catholic faith is, I believe, part of the Devil's strategy against the Church.

Yet none of this has escaped God's hand. As I see it, He has given us the modern world's problems right in the very heart of the Church, so that, when we get our own house in order, we will be in very good shape to bring the gospel to every nation. No Christian can read the Great Commission and fail to have hope for the future. "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. And behold I am with you always" (Matt. 28:18-20).