

## CENTERING PRAYER AND THE VATICAN

The Centering Prayer Movement is very popular in retreat centers and parish programs. However, after a closer look, many people have discovered it to be a Hindu type of prayer rather than Christian. (See my published article “A Closer Look at Centering Prayer” on my website, swordoflightandtruth.org )

**What does the Vatican document say about Centering Prayer?** The Vatican recently released a document exposing the New Age and its dangers. It is called “*Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age.*” This 62-page document describes New Age spirituality and how it differs from the Christian faith. It lists most New Age practices and beliefs.

It does not mention the term Centering Prayer anywhere in the document. It does, however, **expose the four major beliefs or practices of Centering Prayer as being New Age.** These are: mantras (sacred word), altered levels of consciousness, Transcendental Meditation (which is almost identical to Centering Prayer) and the belief in the True Self (Higher Self).

Fr. Thomas Keating, the founder of the Centering Prayer Movement, has written a number of books on Centering Prayer. Fr. Basil Pennington has also written many books on the subject. According to Fr. John D. Dreher’s article, “The Dangers of Centering Prayer”, **Keating learned prayer techniques from Buddhists and Hindus in an effort to Christianize TM.** According to the article, Keating had 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, p. 15*) Frs. William Menniger and M. Basil Pennington took up the challenge, and Centering Prayer is the result. 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.”

CP is almost identical to TM. The only difference is that in CP the sacred word is usually love, peace, or Jesus. In TM, the mantra or sacred word calls on a Hindu god. Both CP and TM use a 20 minute meditation. Both CP and TM use a mantra to erase all thoughts and feelings. Both CP and TM teach that in this meditation you pick up vibrations. Both CP and TM claim that this meditation will give you more peace and less tension. Both CP and TM teach you how to reach a mental void or altered level of consciousness. Both CP and TM have the common goal of finding your god-center. In the books written by Keating and Pennington, they both teach the reader to use a sacred word, or mantra to achieve mind emptying in order to go into pure consciousness (which is an altered state) to find the True Self. (New Agers believe the True Self, the human soul, is the same as God) Keating makes a similar statement in his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart, p. 127*, where he states, “God and our true Self are not separate. Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing.” This statement represents the basic belief of all New Agers and is clearly contrary to the Christian faith! Our soul was created by God. It is not God Himself!

The techniques used in both Centering Prayer and in Transcendental Meditation, are used to empty the mind of all thoughts and feelings. Keating says in his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart, p.97*, “All thoughts pass if you wait long enough.” On p. 35, Keating says, “The method consists of letting go of every thought during the time of prayer, even the most devout thoughts.” Since New Age beliefs are contrary to the Christian faith, the document states, “It is therefore necessary to accurately identify those elements which belong to the New Age Movement, and which CANNOT BE ACCEPTED by those who are faithful to Christ and His Church.” (#4)

**What did Pope John Paul II have to say about this type of prayer?** When Pope Benedict XVI was Cardinal Ratzinger, he wrote *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation.* On p. 34, footnote 12, he writes “Pope John Paul II has pointed out to the whole Church the

example and doctrine of St. Teresa of Avila who in her life had to reject the temptation of certain methods which proposed a leaving aside of the humanity of Christ in favor of a vague self-immersion in the abyss of divinity. In a homily given on November 1, 1982, he said that the call of St. Teresa of Jesus advocating a prayer completely centered on Christ 'is valid even in our day, against some methods of prayer which are not inspired by the gospel and which in practice tend to set aside Christ in preference for a mental void which makes no sense in Christianity. Any method of prayer is valid insofar as it is inspired by Christ and leads to Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life' [(cf John 14:6). See Homilia Abulae habita in honorem Sanctae Teresiae: AAS 75 (1983) 256-257]

**What else did Cardinal Ratzinger say about mind-emptying prayer?** In the same document, Cardinal Ratzinger states, "With the present diffusion of Eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian." He goes on to say, "Still others do not hesitate to place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ." He says they abandon the Triune God, "in favor of an immersion in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity." Then he says mixing Christian meditation with Eastern techniques can lead to syncretism (the mixing of religions).

**What warnings does Fr. Amorth, the Vatican exorcist give us on CP?** Fr. Amorth, states that "Yoga, Zen, and TM are unacceptable to Christians. Often these apparently innocent practices can bring about hallucinations and schizophrenic conditions." (Centering prayer and Transcendental Meditation are almost identical, so this warning would apply to both CP and TM)

**What does the Catechism have to say about this type of prayer?** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to mind-emptying prayer as "erroneous". In section #2726, it describes "erroneous notions of prayer." It then lists different types of prayer that fall into that category. It states, "Some people view prayer as a simply psychological activity, others as an effort of concentration to reach a mental void."

**What does St. Teresa of Avila say about contemplation?** She said that contemplation is a gift from God, and no technique can make it happen. She says it is usually given to people who have a deep prayer life and are practicing many virtues, although God can give it to anyone he chooses. She repeatedly insists that contemplation is divinely produced. She said that entering into the prayer of quiet or that of union whenever she wanted it "was out of the question." She also said in her book, *Interior Mansion*, "For it to be prayer at all, the mind must take a part in it." Our Pope, when he was Cardinal, quotes St. Teresa in his booklet, *Letter to Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* on p. 34. She said "the very care not to think about anything will arouse the mind a great deal", and that the separation of the mystery of Christ from Christian meditation is always a form of 'betrayal.' St. Teresa advised her nuns to meditate or think about the Passion of Christ as a preparation for contemplation.

The Catechism describes contemplation as "a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus" (#2715) The focus is Jesus and the heart is involved.

In summary, the Vatican document on New Age, Pope Benedict XVI as Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope John Paul II, St. Teresa of Avila, the Catechism, and Fr. Amorth give warnings about mind-emptying prayer. We must remember that prayer is a dialogue with God. A person wanting to reach contemplation begins with normal prayer, or they may remain silent with a loving gaze toward God. Then if God so chooses, he may take that person up into ecstasy or some supernatural state. Then and only then would their normal faculties (ability to think) be suspended! It would be a gift from God!