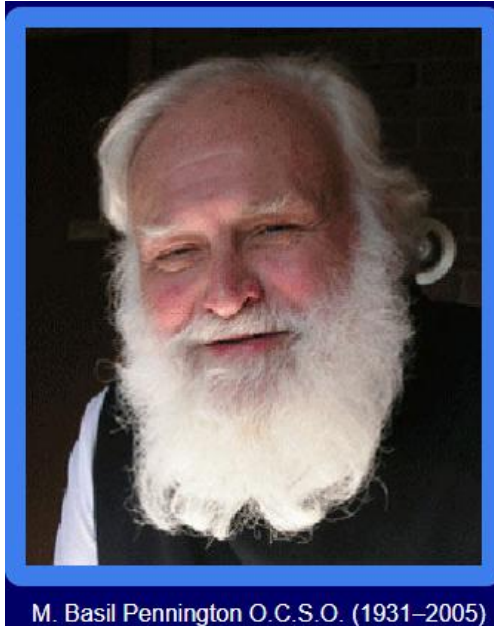


CENTERING PRAYER

(Contemplation)

To Know God is to be Known by God



Many voices vie for control of your mind, especially when you sit in silence. You must learn to discern what is my voice and what is not. Ask my Spirit to give you discernment. Many of My children run around in circles, trying to obey the various voices directing their lives. This results in fragmented frustrating patterns of living. Do not fall into that trap.

{Excerpted from [Jesus Calling](#), March 3rd, Sarah Vough, Thomas Nelson Press}

I would learn this experientially. This is my journey.

Circa 1981

Before describing my Centering Prayer journey—it would be useful for those interested in this contemplative model of prayer to better understand the difference between contemplation and meditation—as well as how to differentiate contemplation from channeling which is a form of Transcendental Meditation.

Regarding meditation and contemplation, the two excerpts listed below are illustrative. These were taken from a posting entered on the website of the [Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles](#).

Meditation

The basic difference between meditation and contemplation is that meditation is a human mode of prayer whereas contemplation is divinely infused prayer. Meditation uses images, concepts and reasoning, those means which are of the created order to commune with God, it includes nevertheless all forms of prayer in which human effort is quite active. *It can offer only a remote knowledge of God.* [emphasis mine].

Contemplation

[In Centering Prayer] [w]e have entered into a *wordless prayer*, an awareness of the Divine Guest within, not through the use of the intellect but through a *knowing loving*, a deep communion with the Triune God. It is a prayer of quiet calmness in which we drink deeply at the life-giving fount. There are *different intensities* within this prayer *but the way of experiencing and the passion of the experiences will vary among individuals*. Our external senses remain free and enable us to carry out our responsibilities and duties even when the interior faculties are captivated by God. [brackets and emphasis mine]

Channeling (Transcendental Mediation)

[Transcendental Meditation](#) refers to a specific form of silent mantra meditation and less commonly to the organizations that constitute the Transcendental Meditation movement ("Channeling"). Channelers (often called psychic mediums) use what are called "spirit guides," (who they consider friendly) to give them knowledge and who help them on their spiritual journeys. Channeling results in the binding of one's spirit to this spirit world and can ultimately lead to the loss of one's personal freedom.

Food For the Poor

In the late 80's, I began to do volunteer work with [Food for the Poor, Inc.](#) ("FFP") following ministry trips to both Jamaica and Haiti led by Ferdinand Mahfood ("Ferdy")—the founder of FFP. The squalor, poverty and deep despair of the men, women and children living in these countries shook me to the core of my being.

While one can capture a sense of the plight of these men, women and children through a video presentation—only visiting there can fill your nostrils with the stench of death which hangs in the air—an *actual unpleasant odor* sown in your nostrils which takes weeks to diminish upon returning home. In Jamaica it lingered in the garbage dumps of Kingston, and in Haiti it was *in the air* everywhere.

These experiences deeply troubled my spirit—but, in the end, they also led to a deeper conversion to the cause of Christ—for either you will conclude that nothing can be done (your personal wealth and efforts can never be enough)—or you will choose to practice a greater generosity (despite its lack).

In this volunteer position, I began to speak locally at various churches on the north shore of Boston. On occasion, I also accompanied and assisted Ferdy in various ways when he visited Massachusetts. Then, from time to time, I would visit the offices of FFP (then located in Pompano Beach, FL) to be updated regarding fundraising and outreach efforts.

On one such occasion while visiting the home of Ferdy I had the privilege of meeting [Basil Pennington](#) who was a Trappist monk and priest and at the time was very well-known as a spiritual writer, speaker and teacher. He was also recognized internationally as one of the major proponents of the [Centering Prayer Movement](#) begun at [St. Joseph's Abbey](#) in Spencer, Massachusetts, during the 1970s.

As a result of this meeting I was encouraged to read some of Basil's [books](#) and to listen to his teaching tapes regarding Centering Prayer about which I knew little.

From the onset—it is extremely important to recognize that contemplation is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition—but that it is also practiced by many non-Christian traditions (i.e., Hindus, Buddhists, etc.)—and is mimicked by the occult. As a consequence—Christians are sometimes dissuaded from practicing contemplative prayer fearing it is not Christian—which is unwarranted. Contemplation which is [Christocentric](#) is entirely Biblical.

The Journey Begins

Never for a moment did I consider the possibility that the Lord was about to teach me more from the fount of His unmerited mercy and grace. Why this grace? Perhaps, it was simply because I was always hungry for more and utterly grateful that the Lord had miraculously delivered me from the abyss of eternal loss only a few years earlier.

After reading one of Basil's works—and then listening to his teaching on tape—I began to practice the principles that he taught.

I found a quiet place in my home where I could pray and placed a comfortable kitchen chair there in which to sit. The time allotment was twenty minutes (in the beginning this could be shorter). Then, you were instructed to close your eyes and to mentally repeat a short prayer (i.e., “Jesus, I love you.”) while ignoring extraneous thought.

In Basil's teaching you were alerted that extraneous thought would likely flood into your mind like a river—and that you would have to work hard to overcome this intrusion. This proved to be very accurate as ideas long forgotten would mysteriously resurface—and new and novel ones constantly emerge for consideration. It was extremely hard to ignore them—as they all seemed very valuable, important and relevant. It took considerable perseverance to have victory over this constant intrusion—which I eventually learned to suppress—albeit, never perfectly.

The result of praying in this manner (listening) was an increase in the fruits of the Holy Spirit. I experienced that the virtues of peace, patience, kindness, understanding and wisdom—among others—found a deeper foundation on which to rest. I was both amazed and delighted. Consequently, I regularly practiced centering prayer—that is, until a *variant occurrence*.

As alluded to in the short narrations above from the Carmelite Sisters, and as emphasized by Basil Pennington in his teaching materials, centering prayer could offer *different intensities* of prayer and *the passion of the experiences will vary*. When first meeting Basil at Ferdy's home in Florida I remember him saying [and I paraphrase]: "There may be moments of intense in-breaking and revelation, but these times are not often, and for the most part rare."

Prior to this occurrence my own experience of centering prayer had been deep and transforming—and I could easily accept that the fruits I had come to enjoy were from the Holy Spirit—and rooted in the love of God. This is true—even though at times—overwhelmed by a *knowing loving* so great that I could not plumb the depth of such a love—I would exude: "*How can this be!*"

On the day of this occurrence I was praying as usual—when out of nowhere I heard two voices speak to me. One was clear and audible, while the other was soft and hardly discernible. They seemed to speak almost simultaneously. The first voice lauded me on my spiritual progress and encouraged me to become more public in my ministry efforts. The other, very softly and virtually indiscernible, said: "*No, you are not ready.*" That was it!

Confused, overwhelmed and dismayed—I thought: "*What the heck am I getting into?*" "*Is this really God?*" "*Am I being deceived?*" "*Do I really need this?*" I immediately concluded: "*No, I do not really need this!*"

From that day on I ceased to pray in this manner. I just took a break. I just abandoned centering prayer altogether.

Over the next few weeks, I began to process what had occurred and to realize the nature of the spiritual warfare into which I had entered. It was to be *violent*.

In Luke 9:62 (RSV) Jesus makes the following stark declaration:

No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.

To reiterate from the narrative above from the Carmelite Sisters:

We have entered into a wordless prayer, an awareness of the Divine Guest within, not through the use of the intellect but through a knowing loving, a deep communion with the Triune God. It is a prayer of quiet calmness in which we drink deeply at the life-giving fount.

It was this communion about which Basil Pennington often spoke—and which he desired to make known to every Christian seeking to know, love and serve the Living God in a profound and deeper way. It was this communion that I had intuitively sought—and which I had come to know and experience in centering prayer. In centering prayer—what I had been wondering about—and what I had been seeking—I had found.

In John 4:23-25 (RSV) Jesus makes an unmistakable invitation to every Christian to enter into such a communion:

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

God used Basil as His priestly instrument through whom I could finally ferret out the meaning of this profound declaration.

Knowing God cannot occur without first being **known by God**. Through centering prayer, I had given God permission to speak into the silence of my heart. There, He infused a *knowing loving* so transcendent as to be unspeakable and offered my heart healing regarding shame and guilt. Basil would say that this *infused knowing loving* is available to all believers and is vital and necessary for a firmly rooted faith.

Regarding this **seismic truth** the following excerpt from [*Anatomy of the Soul*](#) by Curt Thompson M.D. is very insightful:

To be known is one of God's passions. While he desires for us to have the experience of being known by him, just as important is his desire to experience being known by us. This is not simply for our benefit, as if he is not affected by us. He desires to be known by us as much for what it does for him as for what it does for us. And that is why the need to be right about God often gets us into trouble. As a friend of mine once told me, "Christianity is not about being right. It's about being loved." . . . At this point some might begin to worry that I am saying that God needs us in the way that we need him. I am not. But I am saying that you and I affect God as significantly as he affects us. [[*Anatomy of the Soul*](#), Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., pg. 23]

The following Scripture profoundly sums up the revelation of God's love unearthed for me in the practice of centering prayer:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

(1 John 4:7-8 ESV)

So, after a period of reflection and disregarding my variant occurrence—and emboldened by an increasing desire to know him more—I returned to centering prayer and there to encounter His **Loving Knowing** once again.