

I've recently come across something called Centering Prayer. What is it and is it Catholic?

Centering Prayer usually refers to a meditation practice with origins in Buddhism. Beginning sometime during the 1970's, Centering Prayer gained popularity in some Catholic circles due to the influence of two Catholic priests from the United States. It usually consists of quieting one's self, choosing a "sacred word", emptying one's mind of thoughts, and being "open" to God. It claims to be an attempt to deepen a person's relationship with God and provide them with healing and peace through entering into The Transcendent.

Some of those elements are not objectionable to Catholics. I mean, come on, sitting quietly never hurt anyone! And in this ultra-hectic and noisy world, the search for silence and the hunger for God is needed more than ever. But as a whole, Centering Prayer is not something any Christian should be engaged in. Now, of course, I do not want to over-react. There are many Christians who have entered into Centering Prayer. There are a number of clergy and religious brothers and sisters who not only practice this, but also teach others how to do it. And yet, as Catholics, we are called to "test all things, and retain what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

The fact that the origins of this method of prayer are from a culture foreign to many of us is not in and of itself problematic. There is a long history of the Church engaging what other cultures have to offer and "baptizing" them. By taking what Saint Paul wrote to the Thessalonians seriously, the Church has been able to incorporate everything from music to philosophy found in various cultures and understand them in light of Christ.

But the Church has also had to refuse to adopt certain practices as inconsistent with the Christian tradition in many cases. Centering Prayer is one of these cases.

To clarify, insofar as Centering Prayer involves quieting one's self down and entering into silence, it is to be commended. But the test has to do with the philosophy, practice, and fruit of Centering Prayer.

The late Pope John Paul II noted that, "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". This is a very liberal and generous approach, and is entirely consistent with Catholic teaching. So, is Centering Prayer inspired by Christ and does it lead to Christ?

Centering Prayer would be "fine" if it was merely "centered on Christ". The issue is that it isn't; it is awareness of one's own consciousness and some "sense" of the "Other". This might be the Triune God, or it might not be. That is a problem. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger wrote that those involved in things like Centering Prayer "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." This is a serious error.

Further, Pope John Paul II 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 Christ aside in preference for a mental void which makes no sense in Christianity."

The tradition of the Church is steeped with men and women who have been drawn into what might be termed "deep prayer" or "contemplation". But this is radically different from the method employed in Centering Prayer. This column will explore this topic in future months.

For the Christian, our prayer begins and ends with Christ. By meditating on His Word or on His life, we come to know a God who has revealed Himself and His will.