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Prayer as Relationship

IN THE CONTEMPLATIVE Christian tradition, when we say “let us pray,” we are actually saying “let us have a relationship with God” or “let us open to a deeper relationship with God.” This is the key to understanding Centering Prayer. That is, Centering Prayer is simultaneously a *relationship with God* and a *discipline* to continually foster that relationship. It is a method that prepares you to receive the gift of contemplative prayer—that intimate communion with God. In this way, Centering Prayer becomes the act of deepening your relationship with God. We revisit Matthew 6:6 as the reminder of how we can begin to do this:

*“ . . . When you pray,
go to your inner room,
close the door,*

*and pray to your Father in secret.
And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

—MATTHEW 6:6 (NAB)

Through the method of Centering Prayer, this sacred relationship begins to unfold. First, you are invited into the inner room—the spiritual level of your being. This room is always available to you, because it is *within* you. It’s a place where you are not doing anything, but rather, just being—resting in relationship with the Divine Indwelling. As you allow yourself to simply rest, you close the door to the physical world; that is, you let go of your attachment to ordinary occupations—to the immediate environment, the people in your life, and your endless list of activities and distractions. You leave your interior dialogue outside the door—your thoughts, emotional reactions, and perceptions. You lower the curtains on all of your usual psychological imagery, preoccupations, and rationalizations so that finally, in this private place, you may even cease thinking about yourself.

In the inner room, you pray to your Father in secret—without words, but with intention. Seeing the intention of your heart in secret, the Father rewards you. In Aramaic, the word for reward is *nepreok* and can be interpreted to mean “blossom” or “flourish.” In this way, your reward is a blossoming in the presence of the Beloved. This process continually unfolds: you open your heart, God reads your heart, and the relationship is deepened further. There is no effort required except your consent. In fact, the heart and soul of Centering Prayer is the act of consenting to God’s presence and action within.

Centering Prayer becomes a practical way of implementing Jesus’ recommendation for how to pray, as revealed in Matthew 6:6 (above).

The method guides you through this movement into your private room, into the willingness to close the door and enter into a silent solitude with God.

GROWING IN INTIMACY

All human relationships develop through a process of growing intimacy. As a relationship deepens, it progresses through four stages: acquaintanceship, friendliness, friendship, and intimacy (see Figure 1, pg. 18). As you look over the chart in Figure 1, you can intuit from your own experience that an overlapping movement takes place through each level of relationship. This progression reflects a similar growth process in your relationship with Christ. Ultimately, this maturation is one of continual deepening, one that has no definitive end. Thus, the rewards of engaging in this process are limitless.

Think about your own relationships. Call one into mind now, perhaps someone with whom you are intimate now or someone with whom you had an intimate relationship in the past. How did you become acquainted with that person? How did the circumstances of your original meeting feel? How long did it take to become friendly with that person—did you have lunch with him or her, talk on the phone, or chat at a party? Now think about the growth of that relationship into a friendship—the point where you began to trust this person—perhaps sharing secrets, vulnerabilities, joys, and challenges. What did it take for you to forge a solid friendship with this person? Perhaps your phone conversations got longer or you went through a difficult situation together, supporting one another throughout. Perhaps you each matured as time went by, and were able