

The Sacred Word in Centering Prayer

The word is sacred because it is a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence beyond thoughts, images, and emotions. The sacred word is not a mantra in the strict sense of the word. The sacred word is not meant to be repeated continuously. It can become vague or even disappear. It is a condition, an atmosphere that we set up, that allows us to surrender to the attractive force of the divine presence within us. What you are saying by means of the sacred word is, "Here I am, waiting." It's a waiting game to the nth degree. Nothing flashy is going to happen, or, if it does, you should gently return to the sacred word as if nothing had happened. Even if you have a vision or hear infused words, you should return to the sacred word. Even if you see the heavens opening and Jesus sitting at the right hand of the father, forget it. Return to the sacred word.

It is easier for most people to let go of their thoughts with a word of one or two syllables. But, if you find that a visual is more helpful, use it. Noticing one's breathing...or a general loving look toward God can also serve as a sacred symbol of one's consent to God's presence and action within. The meaning of the sacred word or its resonances should not be pursued. It is not chosen for its content but for its intent. It is better to choose a word that does not stir up other associations in your mind or cause you to consider its particular emotional qualities. The sacred word is only a gesture, an expression of your will's intention; it has no meaning other than your intention. There is no question of repeating the sacred word as if it were a magic formula to empty the mind. This does not demand effort but surrender. Thus, whenever you return to your sacred word, do so without exasperation or desperation. Over-reacting is counter-productive. No one cuts a lawn with a bulldozer. In centering prayer, the gentle, patient renewal of your consent is sufficient activity.

To start, silently introduce the sacred word as gently as if you were laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton. When you become aware that you are thinking about or engaged with some thought, return to the sacred word as the expression of your intent. A thought in the context of this method is any perception that appears on the inner screen of consciousness. This could be a concept, a reflection, body sensation, emotion, image, memory, plan, noise from outside, feeling of peace, or even a spiritual communication. The method consists of letting go of every kind of thought during the time of prayer, even the most devout thoughts.

The effectiveness of this prayer does not depend on how distinctly you say the sacred word, or how often, but rather on the gentleness with which you introduce it in the beginning and the promptness with which you return to it when you are engaged with some thought. Thoughts are a normal, inevitable, and integral part of centering prayer. Let the various thoughts come and go. The basic principle for handling them in this prayer is this: resist no thought, retain no thought, react emotionally to no thought; just return to the sacred word.

The sacred word is like a refiner and the silence to which it inclines you is the process that clarifies your consciousness. As your consciousness is clarified, you resonate with spiritual values and the radiance of God's presence.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

The teaching on Centering Prayer as a method for contemplative prayer is subtly distinct from other contemporary expressions of meditative practices, such as mindfulness. Thomas Keating, as a Christian practitioner with theistic belief in a personal, loving God, is careful to carve out the important role of relationship in the method of Centering Prayer. It is not a technique for learning how to focus or for increasing one's capacity for concentration and attention (though those skills might be helpful). At its heart, Centering Prayer seeks the development of relationship to the Holy One, who is recognized as both Ultimate and Intimate. The sacred word is the anchor on which this subtle-yet-important distinction is based. Rather than a tool for forming the faculties of concentration, such as is one of many common purposes of a mantra; the sacred word intends to ground the seeker in a cycle of returning and returning to an intention to be in relationship with the ineffable One.

Furthermore, the fullest expression of this relationality is not marked by simply being in relationship. Rather, Keating calls out a relationship of pure faith, in which the ultimate goal sought by the Christian seeker is a stance of self-surrender before the Holy One. The kenotic posture of emptying oneself over and over again in favor of a posture of surrender before God is the actual "magic" of this method, the firing of the kiln, in which the seeker's life and actions and entire being are forged and transformed. However, the transformation is not instant or quick, such as in a wildfire. The fiery transformation of Centering Prayer comes at the cost of one log at a time, each return to the sacred word stokes a slow, simmering pile of embers. Keating suggests we might need as many as a billion logs, a billion opportunities to renew our commitment to consent to God's activity and presence in our lives and our prayer. Total surrender takes time.

Questions for Reflection:

- Acknowledging that Christians and Jews have entered into a Holy Week, what is your lived sense of the role of surrender in your own contemplative practice, especially in this week when Christians celebrate the Mystery of the Paschal Mystery—life, death, resurrection?
- If you draw upon a sacred symbol in your prayer, what has been your experience? How did you find it? What form does it take in your prayer? Do you notice it slipping into your daily life activities?