

Text from the Tradition: Open Mind, Open Heart by Thomas Keating (text drawn from pp. 1-2, 14, 158-164)

God and Self in Contemplative Prayer

Contemplative prayer is a process of interior transformation, a conversion initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union. A restructuring of consciousness takes place which empowers one to perceive, relate, and respond to everyday life with increasing sensitivity to the divine presence in, through, and beyond everything that happens. If you let go of your ordinary way of thinking and emotional patterns, you open yourself to a new world of reality. Centering prayer is part of a dynamic process that evolves through personal relationship rather than by strategy. The method of centering prayer is not concentrative, but receptive. Centering prayer is consenting and surrendering to God. It presupposes a personal relationship; there must be a movement of self-surrender.

Our basic core of goodness is our true Self. Its center of gravity is God. The acceptance of our basic goodness is a quantum leap in the spiritual journey. God and our true Self are not separate. Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing. Original sin is not the result of personal wrongdoing on our part. Still, it causes a pervasive feeling of alienation from God, from other people and from the True Self. The consequences of original sin include all the self-serving habits that have been woven into our personality from the time we were conceived; all the emotional damage that has come from our early environment and upbringing; all the harm that other people have done to us knowingly or unknowingly at an age when we could not defend ourselves; and the methods we acquired—many of them now unconscious—to ward off the pain of unbearable situations.

God is not some remote, inaccessible, and implacable Being who demands instant perfection from [us] and of whose love we must make ourselves worthy. God is not a tyrant to be obeyed out of terror, nor a policeman who is ever on the watch, nor a harsh judge ever ready to apply the verdict of guilty. We should relate to God less and less in terms of reward and punishment and more and more on the basis of...divine love. Divine love is compassionate, tender, luminous, totally self-giving, seeking no reward, unifying everything. The experience of being loved by God enables us to accept our false self as it is, and then to let go of it and journey to our true Self.

The inward journey to our true Self is the way to divine love. Regular periods of silence and solitude quiet the psyche, foster interior silence, and initiate the dynamic of self-knowledge. Growing awareness of our true Self, along with the deep sense of spiritual peace and joy which flow from this experience, balances the psychic pain of the disintegrating and dying of the false self. As the motivating power of the false self diminishes, our true Self builds the new self with the motivating force of divine love. The disintegrating and dying of our false self is our participation in the passion and death of Jesus. The building of our new self, based on the transforming power of divine love, is our participation in His risen life.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

The Christian tradition celebrates the many, diverse and concrete ways to name and relate to God through the kataphatic tradition, which suggests that since God is so vast, one could never run out of ways to concretely express the many manifestations of the Holy One. As a child, I prayed to an image of God as a white man with a beard in the sky who watched over everything my brother and I did. My sense of self was dependent on growing up to be a good girl. As an adolescent, I prayed to the Lord Jesus as a companion at my side. My sense of self was grounded in my family and my community and my people.

The Christian tradition also celebrates the Mystery of God through the apophatic tradition, which suggests that since no one will ever be able to conceivably grasp the entirety of God, it is best to refrain from using names, images, words, or anything concrete in futile attempts to conceptualize God. Silence is best; unknowing is okay in the apophatic tradition. In my young adulthood, personal images for God grew stale and my prayers towards those images grew sporadic. My sense of self greatly expanded, widening and deepening. Similarly, my specific names for God shifted, again, into a more constant awareness of Presence, which I could sometimes conceptualize or realize in the movement of the wind or in the image of incense rising from a solid stick as it swirled and danced and permeated the air I breathed.

Shifts in our sense of Self are normal and to be expected in natural human development. Many of us are surprised to learn that the same is true of our sense of God. Shifts in understanding who or what God is and in our relationship to the Holy One are also natural and normal. The sense of attraction to contemplative, wordless prayer is often a natural calling within the scope of these ongoing shifts.

Questions for Reflection:

- What are the images, concepts, or lack thereof, in your ongoing understanding of and relationship to God?
- How has your experience of prayer shifted over time and in response to those shifts?
- How do you perceive God in your practice of contemplative prayer?