

Search ...

About us

Contact us

Links

Our Sponsor & Partners

CathNews on YouTube

LIVING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD



The Sacredness of the Present Moment

This flower, this light, this moment, this silence:
Dominus est. Eternity.

(God) passes. (God) remains.

We pass. In and out. (God) passes. We remain.

We are nothing. We are everything.

(God) is in us. (God) is gone from us.

(God) is not here. We are here in God.

The flower is itself. The light is itself. The silence is itself.

I am myself.[1]

THOMAS MERTON'S poetic language draws us into a contemplative aware-ness of the sacredness of the present moment. He evokes the mystery that in the simplest tiny flower we can see everything and nothing. We can experience that God is. Moreover, as Merton identifies in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 'the ever changing reality in the midst of which we live should awaken us to the possibility of an uninterrupted

SUBSCRIBE TO CATHOLIC AUSTRALIA

Email

Subscribe

Unsubscribe

Submit

dialogue with God.[2] We live in the Presence of God—a God who calls us to live an un-interrupted dialogue, in intimacy, in union.

In this article I will draw our attention to the sacredness of the present moment in which we dwell and show how we can nurture a spirituality of Presence through the practice of centering prayer.

After situating the image of God as Presence within the context of scripture and tradition, I will focus on various aspects of this Presence: the presence as love, a relational presence, and a dark presence. I will then show how awareness of the Presence unites us to the Presence we are seeking.

Finally I will give an example of centering prayer as a way of disposing and opening us to the gift of contemplation that the Presence longs to give us, by leading us to a meeting place with God in our deepest centre, and sensitizing us to the oneness of all, in the uniting love of God.

Naming the Presence

One interpretation given to the Holy One's self-communication to Moses: 'I am who I am'(Exodus 3:14),[3] is I am Present or Presence.

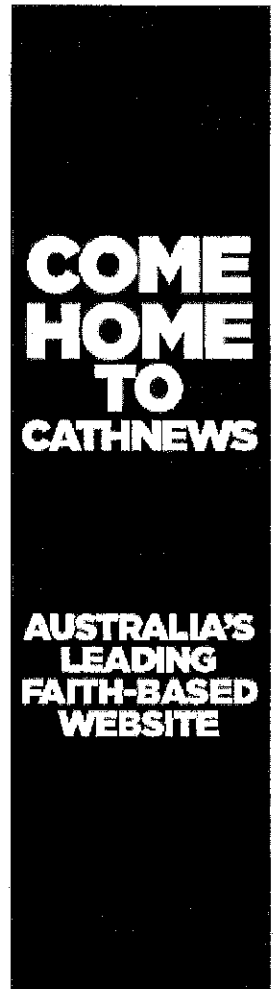
This sense of abiding presence is again reflected in Jesus' self-identity: 'Before Abraham was I am' (John 8:58), and the rich imagery that expands this identity such as: 'I am the bread of life' (John 6:35), 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12) and 'I am the true vine' (John 15:1).

Presence is further developed in Mathew's naming of Jesus as 'Emmanuel', 'God-is with-us' (Mathew 1:24) and his final words of the gospel 'know I am with you always' (Mathew 28:20).

Paul's theology of the Holy Spirit confirms the same sense of Presence, 'the Spirit of God has made a home in us.' (Romans 8:9). The author of Ephesians voices the deepest, most authentic desire that Presence incites: 'to live through love in the presence' (Ephesians 1:4b).

Within the tradition, the Rule of Benedict (chapter 19:1)[4] confirms, 'We believe that the divine presence is everywhere,' while Ignatius of Loyola urges us to be attentive to the Presence by 'finding God in all things and all things in God.'⁵ In the opening prayer on the sixth Sunday in Ordinary time we give further voice to the Presence in which we dwell when we pray: 'Help us to live in your presence.'

The scriptures and tradition affirm a sense of divine Presence generation



after generation. Presence calls us to attend, to be grounded in the Presence, to dwell in the Presence, to live in the Presence, to learn how to be in the Presence.

The Presence is Love

The first letter of John shows how everything that exists must of necessity be in the Presence of God. 'God is love,' the author acclaims, 'and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us.' (1 John 4:16 b-17).

Paul reflects the same sentiment when he reminds us, 'Love has been poured out into our hearts' (Romans 5:5). We live within a love that grounds and permeates our being, a love that is eternal, cosmic, transcending all that we are, and yet a love that is ever present, intimate personal, relational.

We exist in relationship with a God who is present to us, and whose way of being present, being with, and being for, is Love. God freely chooses not to remain self-contained, but to give God's self to us in love.

Consequently, created in love, there is a primordial Presence or love that is the source of who we are.

We are by our very nature in relationship with divine Presence who calls us to live in harmony with this presence, to be united, to be one with this Presence.

We have the potential to be one in love, to live through, with and in the infinite depths of divine love.

A Relational Presence

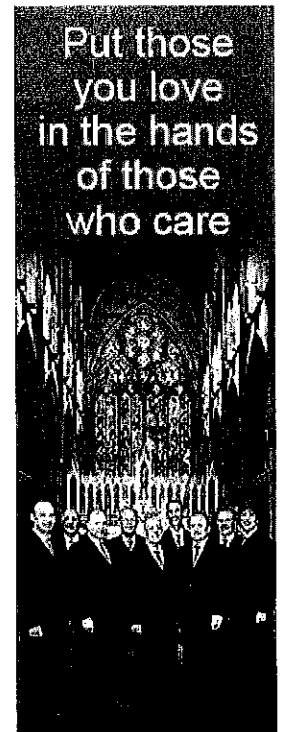
If this is reality: God is love and this love abides, dwells within, makes a home in us, all human beings of necessity dwell within and are indwelt by divine love.

Our destiny is to become beings in love.⁶

While we can become de-sensitized to the love in which we dwell and even choose to ignore its presence, it is impossible for human beings to completely sever themselves from the presence of love.

The psalmist eloquently reminds us:

Where can I hide from you




WN BULL
FUNERALS
Leaders in Personal Service
E: wnbull@wnbull.com
www.wnbull.com.au
(02) 9519 5344

How can I escape your presence?

If I scale the heavens you are there!

I plunge to the depths and you are there. (Ps 139: 7-87.)

We cannot escape this Presence, it is part of who we are. Presence creates a restlessness, a desire for life and love and peace. If we listen intently, in the words of the psalmist, Deep within a voice says 'Look for the face of God.' (Psalm 27:8).

The presence of the beloved calls us to look, to gaze, to centre, to contemplate, to see the face of God within our own being, within one another, within creation, within the cosmos.

A Dark Presence

Sometimes we feel immersed in the presence of God, we feel loved, at peace. We see glimpses of the face of God and know there is an abiding presence that unites all things in love. At other times, however, we are all too aware that 'no one can see the face of God and live' (Exodus 33:20).

In times of suffering, we can feel de-centered, dis-eased, dis-tracted and feel that God has abandoned us. Today the world seems anything but immersed in divine Presence. There is an impending darkness that threatens to blind us to the Presence.

Thunder-clouds of insoluble problems, existential despair, radical breakdown of structures, terrorism, war, and the irrevocable destruction of the earth loom. The choice between life or death lies before us in a way not envisaged before. In these times when we feel helpless, powerless, all we can do is name our fear, cry out in pain, not knowing if our lament is being heard.

If we risk trusting, move beyond our limits of comfort, detach from all that brings easy security, if we have the courage to speak personally to the Presence that seems absent, as Rahner says, to address God as You:

...to speak your You into the darkness in hope and trust,

if we do this again and again,

if we make no arrogant demand

that our call into the silent darkness should receive an immediate, particular answer which simply overwhelms us instead of being the soft and silent presence of mystery,

we notice that we can say You to God, trusting and so waiting for the moment

when this mystery of our existence will show his [a] face unveiled as everlasting love, which is an eternal You to You. [8]

When we call into the deep darkness again and again, entrust all to the silent inclusive mystery, Presence reveals itself to us unveiled as everlasting love. In the soft and silent presence of mystery we experience the intimacy of knowing that we are permeated in love that transcends the depths of our deepest personal and cosmic wound.

We experience the eternal and endlessly personal, You to You. In the darkness, when all we have is a cry screamed opaquely in a dark hope and trust, the experience that Paul describes becomes ours: 'We, with unveiled faces reflect like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect.' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Taking the risk of losing all, of being abandoned, of becoming nothing, begins the process of unveiling our face layer by layer, until we begin to reflect more completely the eternal You. We begin to mirror the Presence we seek. We begin to really live in the Presence.

Awareness of the Presence

We have seen that we live immersed within an all abiding Presence who is even more intimately with us in perceived experiences of absence, so how do we actually live through love in the Presence aware, attentive, awakened to the love in which we dwell?

As our awareness becomes sensitized to Presence as William Shannon remarks: 'awareness of God at its deepest level, is not so much something we do as something we are.' [9]

We are in the Presence of God. A growing awareness of Presence incites our desire to nourish this awareness, to be more consciously present to the Presence.

Shannon continues: 'A very deep sense of attentive awareness closes the gap between me and that of which I am aware. It brings us together. It unites.' [10]

Awareness of God's presence is transforming and unitive. It is an experience of oneing, of being made one. One way we can close the gap

between ourselves and Presence, and cultivate a maturing sensitivity and awareness of Presence, is through Centering prayer.

Centering in the Presence

The great Classic that gives succinct guidelines on how to centre in the Presence is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, composed fl 1380's.

The unnamed author writes to a friend interested in living in the presence of God. He gives clear helpful guidelines that have a wisdom and timelessness about them that comes from total commitment to living in harmony with the mystery of love that grounds us.

The author gives wise advice on how to be aware of and to center in the Presence of God that dwells in the depth of our being.

Centering is a totally natural way of prayer. Becoming centered in God and living out of this centre is a phase by phase, moment by moment journey of a life time that takes us more and more deeply, more and more completely into the stillness and silence of God.

Centering is a way of prayer that is gentle, non-invasive, never forceful, always respectful of the vulnerability of our humanity and the resistances we experience as we seek union with the divine. We simply bring who we are to our centre, our joys and our sorrows, our wholeness and our incompleteness. Centering harmonizes and integrates.

Paradoxically, when we centre, attend to the presence of God within, the movement in, draws us out. It is like the ebb and flow of waves washing the sand on the shore. We flow into our being in God, and we flow out and see the face of God in all humanity, all creation and the whole cosmos. Centering creates connections.

The more regularly we centre on a daily basis, the more we rid ourselves of dualisms, of divisions between peoples, race, and culture, of categories that split between the physical and the spiritual, and see, inter-connection, inter-relationship, inter-dependence, the union of all things in God.

Centering 1

For the author of the *Cloud* all prayer is concerned with the emptying (noughting) of oneself and the alling of God (151:11-12).[11] In prayer we seek to empty ourselves of all that is not of God so that we may be filled with God.

Throughout the text, the Cloud author illuminates critical elements that can assist us to centre in God.

In order to make his teaching more accessible, I have systematized some key elements of his teaching. We must be ever conscious, however, that while it can be helpful to envisage prayer in movements, these phases are in essence a whole

They resist systematic exploration and delineation. With this caution in mind, in adapting the Clouds's teaching, five moments emerge.

Centering 2

The first moment of centering is to focus on our desire. Though at times we may seem to have competing desires, the author advises us to lift up our heart with a meek stirring of love (16:3), [12] to come humbly, in an earthy way, stirred by the desire of love. We are to listen to the stirring deep within, focus on our only true desire.

When we attend to the voice deep within, the creative touch of God that desired us into being, that breathed life in our lifelessness and whispered words of love, arouses in us a desire to be one, a desire to seek the mystery, to be in union with the beloved, even if we are not even sure what it is we are desiring. If we attend to desire, Paul reminds us: 'when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us in sighs too deep for words' (Romans 8:26).

The more we attend to this desire, the more it increases, and the more urgent it becomes. Desire incites us to risk letting go of our resistances and defences and to seek the beloved with all our being.

The second moment of centering is to come as we are. The Cloud author suggests to come with naked intent (17:2), in other words, to come just as we are, simple, unadorned, nothing hidden, nothing covered over, poor in spirit.

We are reminded of Mathew 5:8 'blessed are the poor in spirit, they shall see God.'

We come in our poverty and reach out for God. This reaching out, intending, desiring to be with God, is an act of the will that has its source in God's desire for us.

Centering 3

The third moment is to choose a little word (28:10-16). This is to become our sacred word. The Holy Spirit inspires us with this little word. The Cloud author suggests that it can be a word like God or love. We are to fix it in our mind and use it to focus our attention from outer distractions into the stillness of our centre.

The word helps us to place all our concerns in a cloud of forgetting and to move more and more deeply into darkness, into a cloud of unknowing (26: 5-12; 2228:19-20). We are to answer our distractions with this word as we become empty and wait for God (29:1).

We use the word to shift our attention from head knowing to heart loving. We can wrap our desire in the little word and repeat the word until it takes us into our heart, into the depth of our being. We only return to the word if we become distracted.

Keating, the person responsible for teaching centering prayer to millions of contemporary seekers, also suggests that we can use a simple inward gaze upon God rather than a sacred word.¹³ In this case we simply acknowledge God's presence within the depth of our being and turn inwardly towards God as if gazing upon the face of God that is inscribed in our being.

The fourth moment is to sit comfortably and silently with eyes closed. If we become distracted we return to our word or gaze until we are centered again. We simply stay attentive to the presence of God deep within us. We rest in this darkness in the cloud of unknowing with a loving stirring and a blind beholding gazing into the naked being of God (32:5-8).

In other words in centering we discover a darkness, a cloud of unknowing that we simply abide in, dwell in (16:19-20; 17:1-10).

This cloud of unknowing conveys a profound sense that we live in the Presence, dwell within a love that is beyond knowing, beyond our wildest imagining.

Centering 4

Finally we end the prayer period with prayer that arises from the depths of our heart.

Thomas Merton describes the experience of contemplation that centering prayer nourishes:

A door opens in the centre of our being and we seem to fall through it

into immense depths which, although they are infinite, are all accessible to us; all eternity seems to have become ours in this one placid and breathless contact. God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. He (God) moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us. All variety, all complexity, all paradox, all multiplicity cease. Our mind swims in the air of understanding, a reality that is dark and serene and includes in itself everything. Nothing more is desired. Nothing more is wanting.¹⁴

In centering prayer we dispose ourselves to the gift God desires for us, to live through love in the Presence.

Centering prayer empties us, draws us more and more deeply into the immense depths where time and eternity unite. Centering prayer sensitizes us to the sacredness of the present moment.

It gives us a sense of the inexpressible reality that is dark and serene. It nurtures in us a growing awareness that we exist in a mysterious eternal, yet tenderly immanent mystery. We belong to the all in All (Colossians 3:11).^[15]

Implications

Daily commitment to centering prayer changes the way we view reality. It creates a deepening awareness that God is the centre of all things, that God is the only centre that is worth spending our lives in. There are many graces that emerge. I will draw out five implications that I consider are critical for the Church today.

First, when we centre, the love in which we dwell draws us to deeper and deeper silence where we come to know with all our being that we cannot exist apart from divine love. Gradually we experience a growing awareness of the oneness of all people, all things in God.

In this time where we are experiencing that we are anything but one people, one world, one universe, people with this awareness can create a paradigm shift in a way of life, that if left untouched, will lead us into annihilation. The world needs a renewed sense of the union of all things in Presence.

Second, when we bring the whole of who we are to God in centering prayer, our lives, our love, our relationships, our distractions, our brokenness, our sinfulness, we experience deeper and deeper reconciliation of the contradictions of opposites. The inner spiritual and out physical dimensions of our lives become more in union.

In a world that is still scared by the split between the dualisms of spirit and matter, an appreciation of the connectedness between the spiritual and the physical and the need to integrate our contradictions will enhance all life experience.

Third, centering assists us to recognize clearly that we live in the Presence. This deepens trust. We begin to experience a joy that we didn't know existed, even in the midst of suffering. People with joyful hearts know how to be with the other, to care for the other, to work for justice for the other.

Fourth, centering prayer enables us to participate in ongoing conversion. It supports the diminishment of self-sufficiency and self-centeredness replacing this with compassion. We become more self-accepting and tolerant of others, more peaceful and less judgmental. The divides that separate begin to crumble and our need to possess and control diminish. Domination and submission lose their appeal. When we are centered in God we know the futility of greed and war. We know that the only way to everlasting peace is through love.

Fifth, when we are faithful to centering prayer, life becomes full of invitation and possibility. We see the Presence of God in the ordinary and realize that every moment has the potential to engage us in deeper transforming union.

Conclusion

The darkness in which we dwell is full of pregnant potential. It offers us the invitation to let go of past ways of being and living and to really live, to know with the whole of our being that this flower, this light, this moment, this silence: God is.

We live in the Presence. Centering prayer can centre us in the Presence, and nurture an awareness that the Presence longs for us to be one. Centering prayer helps us to recognize the one true I am in which all beings and all creation shares in being. In the words of Basil Pennington:

The whole cosmos rests ever in the creating love of God, and we come to know in our oneness with the Divine, that it rests within us to be held in tender love. We are one with the all and with All. [16]

And so we pray, may we live through love in your Presence.

Kerrie Hide (ACU, Signadou Campus) won first prize in the gender

category of the Catholic Press Association awards for her Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfilment — The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich (Liturgical Press, 2001).

Notes

1. Thomas Merton. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. (Garden City: Image Books, 1968), 146. I have replaced the masculine pronoun he with the more inclusive image God. I consider that this is very much in keeping with Merton's spirituality.
2. Thomas Merton. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. (New York: New Directions, 1972), 14.
3. All biblical translations are from the Jerusalem bible unless noted otherwise.
4. Fry, Timothy. *The Rule of Benedict*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press), 1981.
5. See, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. translated by Anthony Mottola. (New York: Image Books, 1964), 15.
6. This is Lonergan's final movement of conversion. See Bernard Lonergan. *Method in Theology*. (London: SCM Press), 105.
7. Translation, ICEL. *The Psalter*. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).
8. Karl Rahner. *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*. (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 87.
9. William Shannon. *Silence on Fire*. (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 32.
10. *Silence on Fire*, 32.
11. See, 'The Book of Privy Counselling' in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Early English Text Society. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944). All references refer to page number and line numbers. Translations are my own from the Middle English Text.
12. All quotes are now from 'The Cloud of Unknowing' in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Early English Text Society. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944).
13. See www.centeringprayer.com.
14. Thomas Merton. *Seeds of Contemplation*. (London: Burns and Oates), 85.
15. New American Bible translation.
16. Basil M Pennington. *Centered Living: The Way of Centering Prayer*. (New York: Doubleday, 1986) 104. Used with permission Compass A Review of Topical Theology Australian Province of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.

For more on Thomas Merton, go to Building Community on God's Love.

<< Prev: Conclusion | Next: Index >> *By Kerrie Hide. Copyright © 2006,
Commission for Australian Catholic Women.*



© Catholic Australia 2019



Church in Australia

- > The Catholic Community
- > History
- > Religious Orders
- > Dioceses
- > Facts & Figures
- > Liturgical Calendar
- > Prominent Australian Catholics

The Church

- > Pope Francis
- > Benedict XVI
- > Vatican II
- > Papal Encyclicals
 - > HOPE - Pope Benedict's Encyclical
 - > "SPE SALVI" – In Brief
 - > God is Love - Benedict XVI
- > Ecumenism
 - > Ecumenism 1: Call for a change of heart
 - > Ecumenism 2: Striving towards full communion
 - > Ecumenism 3: Reaching out in Faith
 - > Prayer for Christian Unity
 - > Genuine Ecumenism has its Roots in Prayer

Church Documents

- > Introduction
- > Types of Documents
- > Vatican II Documents
- > Papal Documents

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

PO Box 1579
Chatswood NSW
2057 Australia

Tel: 1300 432 484
Tel: +61 2 6201 9859 (International)



The Scripture

- > Opening the Bible
- > The New Testament
 - > Luke & Acts

What Catholics Believe

- > The Saints
- > Who is Jesus?
- > "Who do you say that I am?"

The Sacraments & Liturgy

- > Sunday Mass
- > Eucharist
- > Advent & Christmas



- > The Aussie Bible
- > The Old Testament
 - > The Pentateuch
 - > The Old Testament
 - > Genesis
 - > Exodus
 - > Leviticus
 - > Numbers
 - > Deuteronomy

> The Holy Spirit

- > Lent & Easter
- > Baptism
- > Marriage
- > Anointing of the Sick
- > Christian Funerals
- > Vocations
- > Divorce FAQs

- > Lectio Divina
- > The Da Vinci Code

Spirituality & Prayer

- > The Blessed Virgin Mary
 - Living in the Presence of God
- > Prayer in a busy life
- > Quiet Space
- > Reflection
- > Classroom
- > Thought
- > Feature
- > Daily Readings

Living the Faith & Mission

- > Questions Catholics Ask
- > Women in the Church
- > Pastoral Care on the Road
- > Parenting
- > Mission
- > Poverty
- > Aid
- > Refugees
- > Timor-Leste
- > Human Rights
- > News
- > Youth Ministry
- > Links

CathNews Room

- > CathNews Archives

CathNews on YouTube

