



Sit down and be quiet: How to practice contemplative meditation

By A U.S. Catholic interview | [Print](#) | [Share](#)
Article Your Faith

When you try to pray, do you fidget? Do you keep starting a grocery list in your head? Don't worry. Just give God 20 minutes.

When Father William Meninger left his post in the Diocese of Yakima, Washington in 1963 to join the Trappists at St. Joseph Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, he told his mother, "That's it, Mom. I'll never be outside again."

It didn't quite turn out that way. One day in 1974 Meninger dusted off an old book in the monastery library, a book that would set him and some of his fellow monks on a whole new

path. The book was *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous 14th-century manual on contemplative meditation. Menger says, “I was amazed at the practicality of it.”

He began teaching the method to priests on retreat at the abbey. “I have to confess,” Menger says, “that when I first started teaching it, because of my training, I did not think it could be taught to laypeople. When I say that now, I’m so embarrassed. I can’t believe I was that ignorant and stupid. It didn’t take long before I began to realize that this was not just for monks and priests, but for everybody.”

His abbot, Father Thomas Keating, has spread the method widely; through him it came to be known as “centering prayer.”

Now at St. Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, Menger takes four months a year from his monastic life to travel the world teaching contemplative prayer as presented in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

He also had the bright idea to teach it to his mom once, while she was on her sickbed. But that’s another story.

How did you end up becoming a Trappist monk after being a diocesan priest?

I was very active and successful as a parish priest. I had worked in the Diocese of Yakima with Mexican migrants and Native Americans. I was vocation director for the diocese, in charge of the Catholic Youth Organization, and I somehow felt I wasn’t doing enough. It was quite difficult, but I loved it. I was not at all dissatisfied, but I felt that I had to do more and I didn’t know where I could do it.

Finally it came to me: I could do more by doing nothing, so I became a Trappist.

You’re credited with rediscovering *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the 1970s and thereby starting what later became known as the centering prayer movement. How did that happen?

Rediscovery is the right word. I was trained during a period when contemplative prayer was simply unheard of. I was in a Boston seminary from 1950 to 1958. There were 500 seminarians. We had three full-time spiritual directors, and in eight years I never once heard the words “contemplative meditation.” I mean that literally.

I was a parish priest for six years. Then I entered a monastery, St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. As a novice, I was introduced into the experience of contemplative meditation.

Three years later, my abbot, Father Thomas Keating, told me to give retreats to the parish priests who would visit our retreat house. It really was a pure accident: I found a copy of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in our library. I blew the dust off it and read it. I was dumbfounded to find out that it was literally a manual on how to do contemplative meditation.

It wasn’t the way I learned it at the monastery. I learned it through the traditional monastic practice of what we call *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*: reading, meditating, affective prayer, and then contemplation.

But then in the book I found a simple method that was teachable. I was just amazed. I started immediately teaching it to priests coming on retreat. Most of them had gone to the same seminary I did. The training hadn't varied one bit: The lack of any understanding of contemplation was there from the oldest to the youngest.

I started teaching them what I call "contemplative prayer according to *The Cloud of Unknowing*," what later came to be known as "centering prayer." That's really how it began.

Can you tell us a little about *The Cloud of Unknowing*?

I think it's a masterpiece of spirituality. It's a 14th-century book, written in Middle English, the language of Chaucer. That's actually what drew me to pick this book out of the library—not because of its content, but because I loved the language. Then I was just amazed to discover what it contained. Since then we've had any number of translations. The one I like the most is William Johnston's translation.

In the book an older monk is writing to a novice and instructing him in contemplative meditation. But you can see that he's actually addressing a larger audience.

The third chapter is the heart of the book. The rest is just a commentary on Chapter 3. The first two lines in this chapter say, "This is what you are to do. Lift your heart up to the Lord with a gentle stirring of love, desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts." The rest of the book just unpacks that.

Another paragraph in Chapter 7 says that if you want to take all this desire for God and sum it up in a word, use a simple word of one syllable, such as "God" or "love," and let that be the expression of your love for God in this contemplative prayer. That's centering prayer, from beginning to end.

Do you have a preference between calling it centering prayer or contemplative prayer?

I don't like "centering prayer" and I've seldom used it. I call it contemplative meditation according to *The Cloud of Unknowing*. You can't help it now—it's called centering prayer. I've given in to that. But it sounds a bit gimmicky to me.

Do you think people who've never done this kind of prayer are hungry for it, even though they may not know it?

Starving for it. So many have already done the readings, the meditation, and even the *oratio*, the affective prayer—prayer with a certain verve, a spiritual intensity that comes about from your meditation, which comes about from your *lectio*. But they've never been told that there's a next step. The most common response that I get when I give a centering prayer workshop in parishes is, "Father, we didn't know about this, but we were waiting for it."

You see this *oratio* in many different traditions. My understanding is that *oratio* is the doorway into contemplation. You don't want to stay in the doorway. You want to go through it.

I have had an abundance of experience with this. For example, recently a Pentecostal pastor was on retreat at our monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. Seventeen years a pastor, a genuinely holy man, he was having problems and didn't know what to do. What he said to me

was, “I was telling my wife that I couldn’t talk to God anymore. I’ve been talking to God for 17 years and leading other people.”

I immediately recognized what was happening. The man had walked through the door and he was into the silence of contemplation. He did not understand it. There was nothing in his tradition that could explain it to him. His church, it’s all praying in tongues, dancing—all of that is good. But they forbid you to go beyond it.

The Holy Spirit doesn’t pay a lot of attention to that prohibition and took this man through the door.

How would you begin to teach someone like this about contemplative prayer?

This is one of those questions like, “You’ve got two minutes. Tell me all about God.”

Generally, follow the instruction of *The Cloud*. The words “a gentle stirring of love,” are important, because that’s the *oratio*. The German mystics, women like Hildegard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg, called it a “violent rapture.” But by the time it reached England, it had become “a gentle stirring of love.”

How do you lift your heart up to God with a gentle stirring of love? It means: Make an act of the will to love God.

Do it just insofar as you can—to love God for his own sake and not for what you get out of it. It was St. Augustine of Hippo who said—excuse the chauvinistic language—there are three types of men: There are slaves, there are merchants, and there are sons. A slave will do something out of fear. Somebody can come to God, for example, because he’s afraid of hell.

The second is the merchant. He will come to God because he’s made a deal with God: “I will do this and you bring me to heaven.” Most of us are merchants, he says.

But the third one is the contemplative. That’s the son. “I will do this because you are worthy of loving.” So you lift your heart up to God with a gentle stirring of love, desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts. I’m not doing this for the comfort or the peace I receive. I’m not doing it for world peace or to cure Aunt Susie’s cancer. Anything I’m doing is simply because God is worth loving.

Can I do that perfectly? No. I am doing it as well as I can. That’s all I have to do. Then you express that love, as Chapter 7 says, with a prayer word. You listen to that prayer word as an expression of your love for God. I suggest that you do it for 20 minutes. There you have it.

What’s important about the prayer word?

The Cloud of Unknowing says, “If you wish, you may express that desire with a prayer word.” I need it. I assume, as holy as I am, that if I need it, you certainly need it [laughs]. I’ve only actually talked to maybe a dozen people, out of thousands that I’ve taught, who don’t need a prayer word. *The Cloud* says, “This is your defense against abstract thoughts, your defense against distraction, something you can use to beat upon the heavens.”

Most people need something to grasp onto. It helps you to bury distracting thoughts.

Should you also separately pray for other things, like world peace or Aunt Susie's cancer?

The Cloud of Unknowing is very insistent on this: that you must pray. But it also insists that at the time of your contemplative meditation, you do not do it. You're simply loving God because God is worthy of love. Do you have to pray for the sick and the dead and so forth? Of course you do.

Do you think contemplative prayer is more valuable than prayer for other people's needs?

Yes. In Chapter 3 *The Cloud* says, "This form of prayer is more pleasing to God than any other form, and it does more good for the church, for the souls in purgatory, for the missionaries than any other form of prayer." And then it says, "Although you may not understand why."

Now see, I understand why, so I tell people why. When you pray, when you reach out with all the capacity that you have for loving God without ulterior motives, you are embracing God then, who is the God of love.

As you embrace God, you are embracing everything God loves. What does God love? God loves everything God has created. Everything. Now this means that God's love extends to the utmost bounds of an infinite cosmos that we can't even fathom, and God loves every tiny atom of that because he created it.

You cannot do contemplative prayer and willingly, deliberately hold on to hatred or unforgiveness of one single being. It's a blatant contradiction. That doesn't mean you've totally forgiven every possible infraction. It does mean, though, that you are in the process of doing it.

You're willingly acting to do it because you cannot love God without loving every single human being that you've ever confronted. You don't have to pray for anybody during your contemplative prayer because you are already embracing them without limitation.

Is it more valuable to pray for Aunt Susie, or is it more valuable to pray for all that God loves—in other words, creation?

A lot of people probably say, "I could never sit still for that long."

People use a Buddhist expression, "I have a monkey mind." I get this from people who have been introduced to centering prayer but not by good teachers, because that is not the problem. I tell people at the beginning of the workshop that I will guarantee that problem will be solved with a few simple instructions.

The point is there's no such thing as a perfect meditation. I've been doing this now for what, 55 years, and am I able to do this without a monkey mind? Absolutely not. I have distracted thoughts all the time. I know how to deal with them. A successful meditation is a meditation that you don't quit. You don't have to succeed, because in fact you won't.

But if I try to love God for the 20-minute period or whatever my time limit is, I'm a total

success. You don't have to succeed according to your notions of success. *The Cloud of Unknowing* says, "Try to love God." Then it says, "OK, if that's too difficult, *pretend* to try to love God." Seriously, I teach that.

If your criteria for success is "peace" or "I lose myself in a void"—none of those work. The only criteria for success is, "Did I try it or did I pretend to try?" If I did, I'm a total success.

What's special about a 20-minute time frame?

When people first start, I suggest they try it for 5 or 10 minutes. There's nothing sacred about 20 minutes. Less than that, you could be fooling around. More than that could be an undue burden. It seems to be a happy mean. If people are having extraordinary difficulties, are exhausted with their troubles, *The Cloud of Unknowing* says, "Give up. Lay down before God and cry out." Change your prayer word to "Help." Seriously, that's what you should do when you're exhausted from trying.

Is there a good place to do contemplative prayer? Can you do it anywhere?

I always say that you can do it anywhere, and I can say that from experience, because I've done it in bus depots, on Greyhound buses, on airplanes, at airports. Sometimes people say, "Well, you don't know my situation. I live right downtown, and the trolleys are going by, and all the noise." Those places are as good as the quiet of a monastic church. In fact, I'd say the worst place to do it is a Trappist church. The benches are made for you to suffer, not to pray.

The only physical instruction *The Cloud of Unknowing* gives is, "Sit comfortably." So, not uncomfortably, and not on your knees either. You can easily be taught how to absorb noises so that they do not interfere. That takes five minutes.

You reach out figuratively to embrace all that noise, and you bring it in as part of your prayer. You're not fighting it, see? It's becoming a part of you.

For example, one time in Spencer, there was a young monk who was really having difficulties. I was in charge of the young monks, and I figured, "This guy needs to get out of the walls."

The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus was in Boston at the time. I went to the abbot, Father Thomas, and I said, "I want to take Brother Luke to the circus." I told him why, and—a good abbot—he said, "Yes, if you think that's what you should do."

Brother Luke and I went. We got there early. We were sitting in the middle of a row, and all the activity was going on. There were bands tuning, and there were elephants elephanting, and there were clowns blowing up balloons and people selling popcorn. We sat in the middle of the row, and we meditated for 45 minutes without any problem.

As long as you're not physically interrupted, I think any place is appropriate. Although, I must admit, if I'm traveling in a city, a big city, and I want to meditate, I'll go to the nearest Episcopal church. I won't go to a Catholic church because there's too much noise and activity. Go to an Episcopal church. Nobody's there, and they have soft benches.

What if you fall asleep?

You do what *The Cloud of Unknowing* says: You thank God. Because you didn't sit down to fall asleep, but you needed it, and so God gave it to you as a gift. All you do is, when you wake up, if your 20 minutes are not over, you go back to your prayer, and it's been a perfect prayer.

Some people say that contemplative prayer is only for monks and nuns, and that laypeople will rarely have time to sit and do this.

That's unfortunate. It is a fact that the monasteries are one place where contemplative prayer has been preserved. In fact, though, it has also been preserved by a countless number of laypeople who didn't write books on mystical theology.

My mother is one of them. My mother was a contemplative long before she ever heard of me, never mind me teaching contemplative prayer. And she would have died and never said a word about it to anybody. There are countless people who are doing that. It isn't limited to monasteries.

How did you find out your mother was a contemplative?

The very fact that when she died at 92, she had worn out four pairs of rosary beads. When she was 85 and she was very sick, the abbot permitted me to visit her. I decided I was going to teach my mother contemplative prayer. I sat down by the bed, and I held her hand. I very gently explained what it was all about. She looked up at me and said, "Dear, I've been doing that for years." I didn't know what to say. But she's no exception.

Do you think that's true for a lot of Catholics?

I do indeed.

Do you ever hear God at all?

I wish I could stop. Once I was giving a retreat to a Carmelite community. The nuns were coming in, one by one, to see me. At some point the door opened and in came this old woman, with a cane, bent over—she couldn't even look up. I found out she was about 95. I just patiently waited. As she was hobbling across the room, I had this sense that this woman was going to prophesy. I'd never had that before. I thought, "This woman is going to speak to me on behalf of God." I just waited. She painfully sank into the chair.

She sat there for a minute. Then she looked up and said, "Father, everything is a grace. Everything, everything, everything."

We sat there for 10 minutes just absorbing that. I've been unpacking that ever since. That was 15 years ago. That is the key to everything.

If you want to put it this way, the worst thing that ever happened was human beings killing the son of God, and that was the greatest grace of all.

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