

# A CLOSER LOOK AT CENTERING PRAYER

Is it really Christian contemplation or a step into Hindu prayer?

by Anne Feaster

## **Introduction**

The Centering Prayer Movement has become very popular in Catholic circles today. People sign up for it in retreat centers, in workshops, and sometimes in their own parish. These people believe it to be authentic Christian contemplative prayer practiced by the saints. Is it really Christian contemplation?

In my past research on New Age which I did throughout the 90's, I found that it is not Christian contemplation and that this type of prayer is not recommended by Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Ratzinger, The Catechism of the Catholic Church, or St. Teresa of Avila.. There have also been warnings from Johnette Benkovic on EWTN (Mother Angelica's Network) Johnette has a program called "Living His Life Abundantly", and has had a series on the New Age. She has also written a book called "The New Age Counterfeit", and devotes one chapter on the problems of Centering Prayer (CP).

In my studies, I discovered that CP is the same thing as TM (Transcendental Meditation), which comes from Hinduism. I had included this information in my Question and Answer paper on the New Age. However, in recent months, I decided to do more research on it, and to take a much closer look at Centering Prayer. I would like to share these findings in order to warn all Catholics of the dangers of the Centering Prayer Movement as taught by Fr. Basil Pennington and Fr. Thomas Keating. I found it to be an unhealthy mixture of Catholicism, Hinduism, Zen Buddhism, and New Age.

First, before we explore the problems of CP, we need to look at some definitions..

## **What is Centering Prayer?**

Centering Prayer is a method of prayer that is supposed to lead a person into contemplation. It is supposed to be done for twenty minutes in the AM and twenty minutes in the PM. The person chooses a sacred word. He then tries to ignore all thought and feelings, letting them go by as boats going down a stream. When the thoughts keep coming back, the person returns to the sacred word. The goal is to keep practicing until ALL THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS DISAPPEAR. Fr. Keating says in *Open Mind Open Heart*, "All thoughts pass if you wait long enough."<sup>1</sup> The person then reaches a state of pure consciousness or a mental void. The thinking process is suspended. This technique is supposed to put them in direct contact with God. The idea is to go to the center of your being or your soul in order to find the true self. This process is supposed to dismantle the False Self which is supposedly the result of all the psychological and emotional baggage that we carry. It is described as the part of us that seeks survival, security, affection, esteem, power and control. Fr. Pennington and Fr. Keating claim that the regular practice of CP sets in motion "divine psychotherapy" organically designed for each of us, to empty out our unconscious and free us from the obstacles to the free flow of grace in our minds, emotions and bodies."<sup>2</sup> Some of these ideas are similar to New Age beliefs and practices.

## **What are New Age beliefs?**

New Agers borrow many of their beliefs from Hinduism. They believe that we are all connected to an impersonal energy force, which is god, and we are all part of this god. This god-energy flows into each one of us, so we too are god. (This is the heresy of pantheism, condemned by the Church at the First Vatican Council.) They think because we are god, we can create our own reality, experience our own god-power. This awareness of our godself is called god-consciousness, super-consciousness, Christ-consciousness, pure consciousness, unity consciousness or self realization. To reach this awareness, New Agers use mantras or yoga to go into altered levels of consciousness to discover their divinity. They look inside to find their True Self or Higher Self to find wisdom and knowledge since the True Self or Higher Self is god. They address god as the Source, the Divine Energy, the Divine Love Energy, or the Great Universal Intelligence. The goal of New Agers is to usher in a new age of peace, harmony, and unity. They hope that all mankind will come to god-consciousness which is the awareness that they are god. The complete definition on the New Age by Fr. Mitch Pacwa is as follows: "The New Age Movement is highly eclectic, borrowing ideas and practices from many sources. Meditation techniques from Hinduism, Zen, Sufism, and Native American religions are mixed with humanistic psychology, occultism, and modern physics."<sup>3</sup>

There is a scripture in Col. 2: 4,8 which warns us against this pitfall. It states, "I tell you this so that no one may delude

you with specious arguments....See to it that no one deceives you through any empty seductive philosophy that follows mere human traditions, a philosophy based on cosmic powers rather than on Christ.”

### **How do New Age beliefs compare to Centering Prayer?**

In CP, the people are taught to use a prayer word or sacred word to empty the mind. (Fr. Keating says it is not a mantra, but if it is used to rid the mind of all thoughts and feelings, then it does the same thing as a mantra). The goal is to reach a mental void or pure consciousness in order to find God at the center. Pure consciousness is an altered level of consciousness. This is exactly what the Hindus and Buddhists do to reach god-consciousness or pure consciousness. This is also similar to what actress Shirley MacLaine does to go into an altered level of consciousness and discover her Divine Center or her divinity. There are some minor differences in that she uses a silent mantra and may not limit it to 20 minutes. The CP techniques are almost identical to TM (transcendental meditation) which is from Hinduism.

### **What are the similarities between CP and TM?**

Johnnette Benkovic has interviewed people on her show and in her book who have done both CP and TM. They claim it is basically the same. The only difference would be that in TM the mantras are names of Hindu gods, and in CP the sacred word is usually Jesus or God. Fr. Finnbar Flanagan, who was involved in both CP and TM says CP is TM in a Christian dress. It is true that Pennington and Keating both use a lot of Catholic language in many of their pages. However, they interject Hindu ideas off and on throughout their books. In Fr. Flanagan’s article, *Centering Prayer: Transcendental Meditation for the Christian Market*” he states, “An increasing number of Christians, especially Roman Catholics, are attracted to Centering Prayer. They do not realize they are adopting a Hindu approach to meditation, which brings with it the Hindu view of reality.”<sup>4</sup> Fr. Pennington has endorsed TM “without hesitation”.<sup>5</sup> Let’s look at the similarities:

- 1) Both CP and TM use a 20 minute meditation .
- 2) Both CP and TM use a mantra to erase all thoughts and feelings.
- 3) Both CP and TM teach that in this meditation you pick up vibrations.
- 4) Both CP and TM claim that this meditation will give you more peace and lessen tensions.
- 5) Both CP and TM teach you how to reach a mental void or altered levels of consciousness.
- 6) Both CP and TM have the common goal of finding your god-center.

In regard to vibrations, Fr. Keating says that “as you go to a deeper level of reality, you begin to pick up vibrations that were there all the time but not perceived.”<sup>6</sup> (Vibrations are common TM and New Age language.) Fr. Pennington advises that when we meditate together, there are set up supportive currents of grace and even physical vibrations that are helpful.”<sup>7</sup> This concept has nothing to do with Catholicism. This is a New Age belief. Using mantras and reaching a mental void are also New Age, not Catholic.

### **What is the difference between Hindu/Buddhist prayer and Christian prayer?**

In Christian prayer, we ALWAYS use our minds and often our hearts. The Catholic Encyclopedia defines prayer as “raising of the mind and soul to God”.<sup>8</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church has a section on prayer from #2559 to #2758. In all of these pages, there is no mention of mantras or altered levels of consciousness. In the section on “Objections to Prayer”, it says, “In the battle of prayer, we must face in ourselves and around us *erroneous notions of prayer*. Some people view prayer as a simple psychological activity, others as an effort of concentration to reach a mental void.”(#2726)

Christian prayer is divided into two categories, vocal prayer and mental prayer. Benkovic gives the following definition: “While vocal prayer uses pre-determined words, mental prayer is spontaneous and expresses sentiments and emotions that rise up out of the pray-er’s own mind and heart.”<sup>9</sup> In Fr. Keating’s book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*”, he tells his readers to drop all reflection. He says “Reflection is an important preliminary to prayer, but it is not prayer.”<sup>10</sup> Benkovic goes on to say there are two types of mental prayer, meditation and contemplation.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes

contemplation as “a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus”, I look at Him, and He looks at me” (#2715) The focus is Jesus and the heart is involved. It also says “It is a gift, a grace” (#2713) St Teresa of Avila directed her nuns to prepare for contemplation by living a virtuous life, and then to pray in the normal Christian way, using the mind and heart. If God so desires, then He will take the person into contemplation. Some of us pray before the Blessed Sacrament exposed in the monstrance. We try to become silent and listen to the Lord. However, our thoughts are on Him and Him alone. We are praying in the normal level of consciousness (awake) in the normal Christian way. Even if we fall asleep, sleep is a normal level of consciousness. This is a desirable way to pray.

In Hinduism and Zen Buddhism, the pray-er uses mantras to go beyond all thoughts and feelings into altered levels of consciousness to find the god-center or god-energy. They consider all thoughts and feelings to be a hindrance. This is completely opposite to what we Christians believe about prayer.

### **When does a pray-er cross the line into Hindu/Buddhist/New Age prayer?**

In the beginning stages of CP, the pray-er is still ignoring thoughts as they float by. If they are still thinking of Jesus or heavenly things, they are still in Christian prayer. They cross the line when they get to the point where they bypass all thoughts and feelings.. In other words, there are no thoughts at all. Fr. Thomas Keating says in his book *Open Mind, Open Heart*, “As you go down deeper, you may reach a place where the sacred word disappears altogether and there are no thoughts. This is often experienced as a suspension of consciousness, a space.”<sup>11</sup> When a person is able to do this, they have crossed the line into Hindu/Buddhist/New Age prayer. **THEY ARE NO LONGER PRACTICING CHRISTIAN PRAYER.** Fr. Keating wants his followers to let go of even devout thoughts. He says, “The method consists of letting go of every thought during the time of prayer, even the most devout thoughts.”<sup>12</sup> (In Christian prayer, devout thoughts are important and desirable) He also tells his followers to let all feelings go. To do this, a pray-er would have to let go of any sentiments of love toward Jesus, the Heavenly Father or the Holy Spirit.

### **What does Pope John Paul II say about this type of prayer?**

In Cardinal Ratzinger’s booklet, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, he quotes the Pope. On p. 34, footnote 12, he writes “Pope John Paul II has pointed out to the whole Church the example and doctrine of St. Teresa of Avila who in her life had to reject the temptation of certain methods which proposed a leaving aside of the humanity of Christ in favor of a vague self-immersion in the abyss of divinity. In a homily given on November 1, 1982, he said that the call of St. Teresa of Jesus advocating a prayer completely centered on Christ “is valid even in our day, against some methods of prayer which are not inspired by the Gospel and which in practice tend to set Christ aside in preference for a mental void which makes no sense in Christianity. Any method of prayer is valid insofar as it is inspired by Christ and leads to Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” (cf. John 14:6)” See Homilia Abulae habita in honorem Sanctae Teresiae:AAS 75 (1983) 256-257.

### **What does St. Teresa of Avila say about contemplation?**

Throughout their books, Fr. Keating and Fr. Pennington mention St. Teresa of Avila. However, since I have been attending the meetings for the Lay Carmelites, I have been reading her books. I have found that her teachings on prayer are the opposite of what Keating and Pennington are teaching. First of all, she says that contemplation is a gift from God. No technique will make it happen. She says it is usually given to people who have a deep prayer life and are practicing many virtues, although God can give it to anyone He chooses. She repeatedly insists that contemplation is divinely produced. She said that entering into the prayer of quiet or that of union whenever she wanted it ‘was out of the question’.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, she says “not all souls are suited for contemplation, and some reach it late.”<sup>14</sup> In the book, *Conversation with Christ*, St. Teresa speaks of a nun who could do only vocal prayers. She would spend two to three hours saying Hail Marys and Our Fathers. Before long, “she was experiencing pure contemplation, and the Lord was raising her to be with Him in union.”<sup>15</sup> She also said in her book, *Interior Mansion*, “For if it is to be prayer at all, the mind must take a part in it”<sup>16</sup>. Cardinal Ratzinger, in his booklet, also quotes St. Teresa as saying “the very care taken not to think about anything will arouse the mind to think a great deal”, and that

the separation from the mystery of Christ from Christian meditation is always a form of “betrayal.”<sup>17</sup> St. Teresa advises her nuns to meditate or think about the Passion of Christ as a preparation for contemplation.

### **What are the warnings on this type of prayer from Cardinal Ratzinger?**

Christians dabbling in Eastern religions in the 70’s and 80’s had become such a problem that the Vatican had to respond. In 1989, Cardinal Ratzinger of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, put out a document called “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation.” “With the present diffusion of Eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, *to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian.*” He goes on to say “Still others do not hesitate to place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ”<sup>18</sup> He says they abandon the Triune God, “in favor of an immersion in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity.” Then he says mixing Christian meditation with Eastern techniques can lead to syncretism (the mixing of religions).

### **In Christian prayer, what do we do with distracting thoughts?**

When we are praying, we do not want distracting thoughts such as what we need to buy at the store, our to-do list, or angry thoughts etc. When we have this problem, we just ask the Lord to take away these thoughts. We may just want to gaze on the crucifix without words and thank Jesus for his death on the cross. Whatever we do, we do not want to suspend the thinking process. Prayer is a communication with our God, the God who loves us and desires to hear from us regarding our desires, needs, problems, and successes. Scripture tells us that He holds us in the “palm of His hand”.

### **What does Fr. Keating teach about reaching “pure consciousness”?**

In his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, he says, “. . . the word can flatten out, become vague or just an impulse of the will, or even disappear. Accept it in whatever form it arises.”<sup>19</sup> The goal is clearly to reach a mental void, which the Pope says “makes no sense in Christianity”. The long range goal is to reach pure consciousness. Fr. Keating says on p. 51 “As the Spirit gradually takes more and more charge of your prayer, you may move into pure consciousness, which is an intuition into your True Self.”<sup>20</sup> Again, pure consciousness is an altered state of consciousness. Fr. Keating says to a retreatant, “If you are aware of no thoughts, you are aware of something and that is a thought. If at that point, you can lose the awareness that you are aware of no thoughts, you will move into *pure consciousness*. In that state, there is no consciousness of self. When your ordinary faculties come back again, there may be a sense of peaceful delight.”<sup>21</sup>

### **What exactly are altered levels of consciousness?**

Let us ask Maharishi Yogi, the guru who introduced TM to America. Fr. Finbarr Flanagan writes in his article “TM’s founder, the Maharishi Yogi, claims that the regular practice of TM leads beyond the ordinary experience of waking, sleeping, and dreaming to a fourth state of consciousness called “simple awareness”. Constant practice leads to cosmic consciousness, then god-consciousness, and finally “unity consciousness.”<sup>22</sup> The fourth state in other books is also referred to as “pure consciousness” People who have reached these altered levels of consciousness describe them as a pleasant trance-like state. Chris Noble, a layman who used to do these New Age techniques before his conversion, says it is merely a state of rest in which there is no real contact with God. (This trance-like state which resembles self-hypnosis can last for many hours, and re-entry to a normal state can be difficult.) Chris Noble has appeared on EWTN network, and has published a booklet on the dangers of Centering Prayer. He also wrote an article on CP for *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*. He was interviewed in Johnnette Benkovic’s book, *The New Age Counterfeit*. Noble states “The aim of Christian prayer is not to reach “states of consciousness but to attain higher degrees of prayer through the use of the Intellect and Will.”<sup>23</sup> Spiritual growth takes place through conversion, repentance, and self-denial.

Fr. Keating mentions in his book that a person should not go over 4 or 5 hours in this state of pure

consciousness or pure awareness. He also says a person may notice slight pains or twitches while doing this prayer. He may also notice “heaviness or lightness in the extremities.”<sup>24</sup> He was referring to the 20-minute prayer period. Fr. Flanagan wrote in his article, “. . . this rest may be found and possessed within themselves in mere nature by all men without the grace of God.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, anyone can do this, whether they are a believer or not, and whether or not they are in the state of grace. He also said that altered levels of consciousness can be induced by drugs. Other times they are induced by anoxia, insufficient supply of oxygen to the tissues of the body. He says “Techniques for deliberately producing anoxia are widely used in Eastern religions to induce altered levels of consciousness.”<sup>26</sup>

Cardinal Ratzinger says, in regard to ALC’s (altered levels of consciousness), that these can be pleasant experiences only. He states “Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life. Giving them a symbolic significance typical of the mystical experience, when the moral condition of the person concerned does not correspond to such an experience, would represent a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations.”<sup>27</sup>

### **What are the dangers of going into altered levels of consciousness?**

People who have been involved in the New Age movement give stern warnings about entering into ALC’s. Claire Mirkle, a former New Age healer and yoga practitioner, has been interviewed in the last few weeks on EWTN (Mother Angelica’s network) She has been appearing on Johnnette Benkovic’s show, “Living His Life Abundantly”. She was a devout Catholic who became upset with goings-on at the parish and turned to the New Age. She was introduced to yoga by a priest, and became heavily involved in New Age practices. She later repented and renounced it, but she had to go through many deliverances and healing sessions. It took her five years to be completely freed from the effects of her involvement in New Age. She said on TV, “when we open ourselves up to foreign religious practices that have ties to the occult, we open ourselves up to the demonic”. (Hinduism and Zen Buddhism have ties to the occult.) She said going into ALC’s can be dangerous, because they can lead to out-of-the-body experiences or to hallucinations. Some people cannot come out of them. She said she saw many people harmed by these experiences, and that the New Age has a hotline to handle crises from New Age techniques. How does this relate to Centering Prayer? In Fr. Keating’s book on CP, one of his followers commented that he had a hard time coming out of an ALC during Mass and could not concentrate on the Mass. Fr. Keating told him, “That is a nice problem to have.”<sup>28</sup> He went on to say not to be concerned, as long as he was not leading the congregation. He also says that if praying the prayer over and over “brings on a headache or backache, it is not for you.”<sup>29</sup> He says “if you turn off your ordinary thinking and emotional patterns, you open yourself to a new world of reality.”<sup>30</sup> What world would this be? He does not explain. Fr. Amorth, who is the Vatican exorcist, says that “yoga, Zen, and TM are unacceptable to Christians. Often these apparently innocent practices can bring about hallucinations and schizophrenic conditions.”<sup>31</sup>

In Ralph Rath’s book, *Mantras*, he relates the story of TM instructor who later became a Christian. She said “As my consciousness changed, I began to become aware of the presence of spirit beings sitting on either side of me as I was meditating”.<sup>32</sup> She goes on to describe them as evil spirits. (Ralph Rath has written some excellent books on the New Age.)

Chris Noble says, “This type of meditation has in fact been associated with disintegration of personality, with certain kinds of hysteria, and with a high degree of openness to suggestion, and with other dangers.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Does Centering Prayer lead to a Hindu view of God?**

CP can lead to a Hindu view of God depending on the person’s depth of involvement. For example, Fr. Keating studied mythical methods of meditating and inviting his teacher to teach himself and others. Fr. Keating wanted to “devise an approach to Christian Spirituality that would be comparable to the methods of the East.”<sup>34</sup> However, somewhere in his studies, he appears to have succumbed to the Hindu view of

God. Throughout his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, he refers to God as the Ultimate Mystery, the Ultimate Presence, and the Source. (This is the way God is addressed by New Agers. Shirley MacClaine calls God the Source and the Divine Energy in her book, *Going Within*. Keating does not address God as God the Father, Abba Father, or the Heavenly Father. In his new book, *Invitation to Love*, he says “the divine energy in itself is infinite potentiality and actuality.”<sup>35</sup> In several places, in his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, he refers to the Ultimate Mystery as God. However, in the back of his book, he gives this strange definition of the Ultimate Mystery/Ultimate Reality. He says it is “the ground of infinite potentiality and actualization; a term emphasizing the divine transcendence.”<sup>36</sup> To me, this definition sounds like an impersonal god-force rather than the God the Father of the Old Testament. Keating also talks about “melting into God” which is a Hindu/Buddhist belief. He says, “you may reach a point where you no longer think of the sacred word at all. When you sit down for prayer, your whole psyche gathers itself and melts into God.”<sup>37</sup> Then he says, “The sacred word enables you to sink into your Source.”<sup>38</sup> (Melting into God and sinking into your source are Hindu beliefs like a raindrop into the ocean. This is pantheistic belief.) He says “Every human being has the incredible potential to become divine.”<sup>39</sup>

Fr. Pennington makes similar statements in his book, *True Self, False Self*, where he speaks of God as the Divine Energy or the Divine Love Energy in many places. He says, speaking of being in prayer, “in those blissful moments when the Divine does indeed grasp us and bring us into our true selves in the Divine Self.”<sup>40</sup> He also says, “We are in some mysterious way a participation in the Divine Being.”<sup>41</sup> He also says, “True, it is totally within the Divine Discretion and Freedom to decide when and how the Loving God will reveal Godself to us.”<sup>42</sup> What is Godself? He does not explain this confusing term. God is God Almighty and we are sinful human beings. So what is Godself? In the same book, he says “I now know that I am, existing within and ever flowing forth from the Divine Creative Energy of the I AM.”<sup>43</sup> God the Father of the Old Testament is NOT an energy force that flows out like a liquid. This is a Hindu/Buddhist/New Age concept of God. This is not Catholicism. This is not Christian belief. Catholic dogma refutes these statements. “In the Mass, it is said that we are ‘partakers of His divinity’. Yet this must not be conceived in the pantheistic sense of the transition of the soul into the Divinity. The infinite distance between Creator and the created remains.” (Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, Ludwig Ott, p. 256)

### **What other statements do Keating and Pennington make that reflect New Age beliefs?**

In his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 37, Fr. Keating mentions Yoga and jogging. Then he says, “Such methods are fine for relaxation.” The truth is that yoga is a form of Hinduism, and is the most common way that New Agers enter into altered states of consciousness. However, Webster’s Dictionary Library gives this definition: “Yoga is a system of Hindu philosophy, strict spiritual discipline, practiced to gain control over the forces of ones own being to gain OCCULT POWERS, but chiefly to attain union with the Deity or the Universal Spirit.

On page 125, Keating speaks of “Energy Centers,” common New Age language. In his book, *Invitation to Love*, he says, “We are beginning to grasp the fact that the human brain possess potentialities not commonly tapped or explored, which are simple by-products of the process of human growth. If this energy were well grounded in the body by means of chanting, Taoist or Yogic exercises, vigorous walking, moderate jogging, or light work like crafts or gardening, the body itself would normally distribute the increase in energy. If the natural energy gets stuck in the body or nervous system, however, it may manifest itself in physic or physical phenomena.” Fr. Basil Pennington makes a similar statement in his new book, *Awake in the Spirit*. Talking about the way to sit, he says, “If our back is well supported and relatively straight the energies can freely flow up and down the spinal system.”<sup>44</sup> Actress Shirley MacLaine, promoter of the New Age movement, makes a similar statement, “Sitting upright with my back resting against something is what works best for me. This position gives me a “centered” freedom of energy in the spinal column and allows even, gentle, rhythmic breathing.”<sup>45</sup> New Agers believe that the body has seven energy centers called Chakras. She says, “The seven Chakras govern how our consciousness is experienced in the physical body.”

Benkovic says, “Hinduism teaches at the base of the spine is a triangle which lies in the “Kundalini Shakti” (Serpent Power). It is usually dormant but when it is awakened it travels up the spine to the top of

the head, passing through six psychic centers called “chakras.” As it passes through a chakra, one receives psychic experiences and powers. When it reaches the top chakra, supposedly, the power to perform miracles and achieve liberation is realized.”<sup>46</sup>

Ralph Rath says in his book, *Mantras*, “In a foreword to the book, (written by Philip St. Romain) *Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality*, Keating calls kundalini “an enormous energy for good” and does not point out that uncontrolled kundalini can kill or drive a person mad or that some cults use kundalini in an extremely debased way.”<sup>47</sup> He does not show discernment here, because kundalini power is of the occult. These powers from Hinduism are the same as psychic or occult powers which are dangerous and off limits to Christians.

Keating also states in, *Invitation to Love*, on p. 115, “In the Hindu tradition, there are over a hundred SIDDHIS or psychic powers listed by Patanjali, a near contemporary of Jesus. These powers are meant to be integrated into the unfolding levels of consciousness.” Calling on psychic powers is an occult practice. He does not explain this, giving the impression that it is okay to do this.

### **Do Keating and Pennington endorse occult practices?**

Yes. As it has been explained, Fr. Pennington and Fr. Keating endorse yoga, TM, kundalini power, and psychic powers. Also, they have enthusiastically endorsed the book, *Meditations on the Tarot, a Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, on the jacket cover. This is very serious because the book espouses many principles of theosophy, a Western occult movement.<sup>48</sup> These concepts are clearly against the Catholic faith. (The tarot is a form of divination or fortune-telling.)

Fr. Keating also placed occult practices in the same sentence as charismatic gifts. He said, “A lot of publicity is given to psychic gifts such as out of the body experiences, channeling, levitation, control of bodily functions, various forms of healing, prophesy, and many others.”<sup>49</sup> This could be confusing to some readers because he did not show a distinction between gifts from the Holy Spirit and occult practices which are grave sin such as channeling spirits, which is the channeling of evil spirits. Out of the body experiences and control of bodily functions are New Age/Hindu practices. The Charismatic renewal is approved and encouraged by our Pope. The gifts or charisms are listed in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

### **Is the goal of CP to find the “True Self?”**

Yes. All through their books, Keating and Pennington talk about finding the true self, finding out who we really are. What exactly is the True Self? Fr. Keating states, “God and our true Self are not separate. Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing.”<sup>50</sup> This statement contradicts itself. How can it be the same thing and not God? Since the True Self is described by them as the human soul, how can it be the same as God Almighty? The soul is created by God. It is tainted with sin, and the soul will come before God on judgment day to be sent to heaven, hell and purgatory. God and the human soul are very separate according to the faith of all Christians. There is no way they can be the same! We are sinful, finite beings inferior to our God. The idea that our soul is the same as God is Hindu/Buddhist/New Age belief. This idea has nothing to do with Catholicism. This idea is not presented by Keating or Pennington as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the word Holy Spirit is rarely ever mentioned in their books. They use the word “the Spirit.” New Agers also use the term “the Spirit” to refer to universal energy. So when a writer uses the term “the Spirit,” they may be referring to the Holy Spirit, but not necessarily.

In the Hindu religions, what we see is an illusion. The Hindu’s believe according to Benkovic, *The New Age Counterfeit*, “The self is none other than Brahman or god. . . The *true self* is god. The I which I consider myself to be is in reality the *not self*. This not-self is caught in a world of illusion, ignorance, and bondage. You must lose your personal ego-consciousness into god.”<sup>51</sup> On p. 81 of *Awake in the Spirit*, Fr. Pennington speaking about spiritual directors says, “But what if in truth we cannot find a father or mother who will work with us in this process of deification.” He says in *True Self False Self* there is “already present in the human spirit the whole potential for divinization.” The idea of the True Self was taken from the writings of Thomas Merton. Although his early works were good, Merton himself embraced Hinduism

and Buddhism at the end of his life. In Pennington's book, Merton talks about "a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody."<sup>52</sup> This is similar to the New Age belief that we are a spark of the divinity, that everyone is divine, or a part of God.

If Merton's blaze of light represents sanctifying grace, he is in error. If a person is not baptized or if he is in the state of mortal sin, his "light" has gone out. That light or sanctifying grace can only be restored through the sacrament of Reconciliation. Merton also makes this amazing statement in the *New Seeds of Contemplation*. He says, "For me to become a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding who I am and discovering my true self."<sup>53</sup> Could he be saying true self is god? Is this the great discovery? He may be, but this is contrary to Christian belief.

### **Are there similarities between the True Self and the Higher Self?**

Yes. In her book, *Going Within*, Shirley MacLaine says, "The Higher Self is exactly what the words imply --the best positive elements of your own being, the most reassuring aspect of your own inner strength, your personal expression of the Divine in you. It links you with everything else that exists; it is your channel to the enormous resources of the human potential."<sup>54</sup> And also she says, "So when we go within and come into alignment with our spiritual power, we come into connection with the spark of Divinity that I have mentioned before, which I call the Higher Self. Some call it the Divine Oversoul, the Divine Center, the God within, the personal interface with God. . . whatever one calls it, it is the personalization of the God Source within us."<sup>55</sup> This idea is similar to the True Self, going within to the Divine Center. MacClaine claims that the soul is god. Keating states that "God and our True Self are the same thing". She also states that "we are full of hurt, wounds, and scars. The negative baggage that we carry around with us can be alleviated by meditation."<sup>56</sup> Keating also teaches that this meditation empties out our unconscious and frees us from the obstacles to the free flow of grace in our minds, emotions, and bodies.

### **Does Fr. Keating believe in evolution?**

Yes. In Fr. Keating's book, *Invitation to Love*, he outlines the stages of evolution from 3000 BCE to the present time. He believes we were once animals and we remember it in our collective unconscious. (The collective unconscious is from Carl Jung.) Keating says, on p. 30, "Since each stage of human evolution is recapitulated in each one of us, we dimly recall how pleasant it was to be immersed in nature and to enjoy the animal functions of eating and reproducing without accountability." This is contradictory to what the Catholic church teaches on evolution. The Church teaches that evolution is only a theory. According to *The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism on p. 56*, by John Hardon, "even if a man's body evolved from a lower species, man's soul was immediately created by God out of nothing. And finally if there was such an evolution of the body, God would have to exercise his special providence over the process, so that the first man could not literally be generated by brute beasts." Fr. Pennington has a chart on evolution in his book, *True Self, False Self. On p. 60 and 61*, he names six time periods, the fourth one being the present time which he calls the Iota Period. The sixth time period, which is in the future, he calls the Omega Point (Cosmic Christ). On p. 65, he says, "The consummation of the journey with all of its wonders is in sight: Christ, the Cosmic Christ, the Omega Point." He does not explain the Cosmic Christ. In New Age circles, the Cosmic Christ is the "I AM" in every person, or the god-power in each one of us. Matthew Fox taught the Cosmic Christ. The Vatican condemned his books.

### **Do they recommend the rosary and Lectio Divina?**

Yes. In Lectio Divina the basic idea is to meditate or "think about" the scripture you read and decide how to apply it to your life. It is a beautiful type of prayer with 4 simple steps. However, there is no reason to reduce it to one word as Fr. Keating suggests. In Lectio Divina, a person reads scripture, reflects on the meaning and then rests in God.

In regard to the rosary, Fr. Pennington wrote a book called *Praying by Hand*. He presents the rosary correctly. However, the Introduction tells us all about how the Hindus and Buddhists fingered their beads. But he does not explain that they are doing it as a mantra to reach a mental void. We Catholics are using the beads to meditate or think about the life of Christ. In his book, *Awake in the Spirit*, on p. 44, Fr.



Pennington says, "As we finger the beads we can just rest in the reality of the respective mystery. No imaginings, no thoughts, just resting in the reality -- a truly refreshing resting, one that deepens and enlivens faith and hope and love." The whole purpose of the rosary is to meditate or think about the life of Christ, and imitate the virtues. If you can't have any thoughts, why even hold the rosary?

#### **Does Fr. Keating misquote some important scriptures?**

Yes. Keating quotes Jesus saying in Mark 8, "Unless you deny your inmost self and take up the cross, you cannot be my disciple."<sup>57</sup> He adds a word (inmost) that is not there. Then he says, on p. 15, "Denial of our inmost self includes detachment from the habitual functioning of our intellect and will, which are our inmost faculties." This word changes the whole meaning of the scripture. The scripture means to carry our crosses without complaint and to deny ourselves through fasting, or little sacrifices. Carrying the cross is part of being a follower of Jesus. This scripture has nothing to do with mind emptying. Mark 8:34 states "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

#### **Does Fr. Keating add new sentences to Jesus's words after Luke 10:17?**

Yes. In *Invitation to Love*, p. 129, Fr. Keating quotes Jesus after Luke 10:17 as saying, "Do not get excited about that kind of success. Anybody can work miracles with a little psychic energy and the divine assistance. What you should rejoice over is that your names are written in heaven." Jesus never said the last 2 sentences and only part of the 3rd sentence. In the Catholic Bible Luke 10:17-20 it is written, "The seventy (two) returned rejoicing, and said, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name.'" Jesus said, "I have observed Satan fall like lightning" from the sky. Behold I have given you the power to tread upon serpents' and scorpions and upon the full force of the enemy and nothing will harm you." Nevertheless, do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven." Jesus would never suggest the use of psychic energy.

#### **Does Fr. Keating give a strange definition of the Eucharist?**

Yes. In *Open Mind, Open Heart* he says, on p. 128, "The Eucharist is the celebration of life: the coming together of all the material elements of the cosmos, their emergence to consciousness in human persons and the transformation of human consciousness into Divine consciousness. It is the manifestation of the Divine in and through the Christian community. We receive the Eucharist in order to become the Eucharist." The Eucharist is not composed of the elements of the universe. The New Agers believe that all is one, and all is god. In our Catholic faith, the Eucharist is the body, blood, soul, and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. We need to reflect on Hebrews 13:9 "Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching."

#### **Does Fr. Keating give a strange definition of repentance?**

Yes. In *Invitation to Love*, Fr. Keating says, "To repent is not to take on afflictive penances like fasting, vigils, flagellation, or whatever else appeals to our generosity. It means to *change the direction in which you are looking for happiness.*" (p. 9) Repentance is asking God forgiveness for our sins. Penance is for purification.

#### **Does Fr. Pennington's writings reflect any of de Chardin's ideas?**

Yes. On the back cover of *True Self False Self* it says, "Integrating his own powerful spirituality with the humanism of Teilhard de Chardin and the contemplative wisdom of Thomas Merton, Pennington deftly uncovers the direct route to happiness and peace our age so desperately seeks." Teilhard de Chardin's books were banned by the Vatican. He had New Age ideas and he wanted a one world government.

#### **Does Fr. Keating write approvingly of Fr. Bede Griffiths?**

Yes. On p. 122 of his book, *Invitation to Love*, he speaks approvingly of Fr. Bede Griffiths who lives in an ashram. He says, "In Fr. Griffiths's ashram, texts from the Hindu scriptures are incorporated into the liturgy along with the customs of the sannyasi, the monastics of India." Hindu scriptures have no place in

the Holy Mass. To believe that one religion is as good as another is the sin of Indifferentism. When St. Paul was trying to convert the Gentiles, he had to pull them away from their false gods to give them the true Faith. He did not mix the Greek gods in with the Catholic Faith. Many of the saints and missionaries were martyred trying to convert people in false religions to Catholicism. We still have that command today to “Go forth and teach all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

### **What are the dangers of syncretism?**

Claire Mirkle says of Catholics mixing with New Age is like taking a glass of water and adding a little poison. Then the whole glass is poison. Catholics should not mix in any New Age at all with their Catholic faith. Some “Examination of Conscience” booklets list New Age practices as sin. Bishop Donald W. Montrose of Stockton, California, wrote a pastoral letter entitled Spiritual Warfare in which he writes about “the evils of occult practices such as fortune-telling and horoscopes, devil worship, the New Age movement”

### **Summary**

- 1) Christian prayer always involves the mind and often the heart. Even in preparation for contemplation, St. Teresa of Avila advises people to meditate or “think about “ the Sorrowful mysteries.
- 2) Mind-emptying techniques are not Christian prayer, but rather practices of Hindus, Zen Buddhists, and New Agers. The Pope says this type of prayer “makes no sense in Christianity.”
- 3) There are dangers involved in going into altered layers of consciousness.
- 4) The true self is not God. The human soul is inferior to God. It is separate from God because it is stained with sin.
- 5) Involvement in the occult practices listed in Deuteronomy 18 is grave sin.
- 6) Hinduism, Zen Buddhism and New Age do not mix with Catholicism. They are false religions. Their beliefs are contrary to the Catholic faith. We must not let any non-Christian beliefs or practices contaminate the beauty and purity of the Catholic or other Christian faiths.

### **Closing Remarks**

In closing, I would like to say that I would not recommend books written by Fr. Thomas Keating or Fr. Basil Pennington. They have demonstrated a lack of discernment, and therefore are not reliable sources of information for spiritual growth. I agree with the Pope when he said this type of prayer “makes no sense in Christianity.”

It is wiser for Catholics to read the lives of the saints and Catholic dogma in order to know their faith. The Catholic faith is complete, with all of the truths handed down to us from Jesus to the Apostles. There is no need to add any Hindu or Buddhist practices to our faith, especially since these religions contain very grave errors.

It is also wise to question the teachings of popular writers. Sometimes a reader will overlook strange statements if they like the writer or not trust in their own discernment. We must be on guard and heed the words of St. Paul in 2 Tim. 4: “For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths.”

Our Lord loves the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and all people. However, he wants to rescue them from false religions. He wants us to work toward bringing everyone to the True Faith, Catholicism. We are to evangelize non-Christians, not practice their religions or mix them in with ours, which is syncretism.

Many good Catholics have gone to retreat centers or parish programs across the U.S. to enhance their spiritual growth. Unfortunately, they were exposed to New Age beliefs or practices, from Wicca to astrology to the Enneagram, to Christian Zen. Our Pope has spoken out against the New Age in his new document, and asked that those people in charge would put a stop to these programs.

Anyone who has done or is doing Centering Prayer need not feel embarrassed. You trusted that these programs were good. I, myself, chanted mantras for a week in the 80's. I also attended an Anthony DeMello workshop, whose books have been condemned by the Vatican. I was not discerning at that time, and I followed the crowd wherever they were going.

Even if a person innocently falls into these traps, there are still dangers. When Catholics mix Catholicism with non-Christian religions, the line between truth and error becomes blurred. The spiritual experiences that result from these techniques can gradually start to replace the sacraments, and a person can lose sight of God as Creator and Savior. Claire Mirkle says that New Age practices are seductive and addictive. She said New Agers avoid the cross, and want to be in control of themselves and others. The belief that they are god is the height of arrogance and pride, similar to sin of Lucifer, the fallen angel. To follow Christ is to be humble and obedient, to give up control and surrender our lives to Jesus seeking to do His will.

For those who are interested in contemplation, please consider joining the Lay Carmelites, who study St. Teresa of Avila's teachings on prayer and virtue. Please join me every Tuesday to pray for all of those people who have been deceived in any way by the New Age Movement. Please help me to inform others of the dangers of New Age.

If we want to "center", we can center our lives on Jesus Christ. We can "center" on Him during prayer and think about Him all day. We can meditate on the Passion, practice virtue, and ask Him to take us up into authentic contemplation one day if He so desires. We can remind others that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.