

Spirituality, Contemplation, and Transformation: An Opportunity for the Episcopal Church

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“Spirituality,” “contemplation,” and “transformation,” the three words which give shape to this issue of *Sewanee Theological Review*, present a problem and an opportunity for the Episcopal Church. “Spirituality” is used so variously and indiscriminately that it often needs to be defined in any given context so that its meaning is clear, and yet this word points to the heart of our faith. “Contemplation” does not appear in scripture or in *The Book of Common Prayer*, and many Episcopalians thus have no conceptual frame of reference when they hear this word. But “contemplation” was seen to be the goal of the Christian life for most of the church’s history.¹ “Transformation” does have roots in scripture and our tradition, but as with “spirituality,” “transformation” has been deracinated from its soil in the life of the church. It is used in many different ways. This article will attempt to see these words in light of the larger Anglican tradition and to suggest a way that a transformative contemplative spirituality might find a home in the Episcopal Church in our day.

Spirituality

The Christian West is in the midst of a spiritual revival. The language of spirituality abounds. Retreat centers are full. The Dalai Lama is in high demand as a speaker, as is Thomas Keating. The Paulist Press series titled *Classics of Western Spirituality* is making available texts from the tradition that few laity have known before; many are buying and reading them. These are among the signs of our times.

This revival offers the Episcopal Church a rare opportunity. We see ourselves as part of catholic Christianity, claiming the heritage of the first 1600 years of the church’s life, including Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as that of the Reformation.

¹ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: Continuum, 1986, 2006), 19.

Our understanding of “spirituality” is, therefore, not limited to current use but rather draws on centuries of deep corporate and individual prayer.

While the word “spirituality” is used in many different ways in our day, all Christian spirituality begins with the third person of the Trinity. It is the Holy Spirit who pours God’s love into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). The Spirit of God dwells in us (Rom. 8:9). The Spirit empowers us to enter into the prayer of Jesus, crying “Abba! Father,” and thereby bearing witness that we are children of God (Rom. 8:5-6). So we are brought into the very life of the Trinity.

Once in a question-and-answer session at a centering-prayer retreat held at St. Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, Thomas Keating said, “The whole of the holy and blessed Trinity dwells within us.” I found that statement more than I could digest, and so I asked Father Keating to say more about it. He looked at me and said, “The whole of the holy and blessed Trinity dwells within us.” I felt like Nicodemus must have felt when Jesus said to him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things” (see John 3:10). Here I was, an Episcopal priest of many years standing, and I could not fathom that the Trinity dwelt within me and everyone else.

Later I discovered an essay in which Keating made his point even more emphatically.

The fundamental theological principle of the spiritual journey is the Divine Indwelling. The Trinity is present within us as the source of our being at every level. Each level of our being—from the most physical to the most spiritual—is sustained by the divine presence. . . . The Divine Indwelling of the Holy Trinity is a truth of faith that is easily forgotten or avoided. Yet it is the one on which a radical personal conversion depends.²

I am not alone in my initial surprise in hearing that the Trinity dwells within us. In fact, such disbelief is more the norm in our culture than the exception. Take, for instance, some lines from an often-anthologized poem by Robert Frost, perhaps the most popular American poet of the preceding century. The persona of the poem is riding past a field during a fast-falling snow. He sees only a few weeds and no animals. He finds himself in accord with his surroundings:

I am too absent-spirited to count;
 The loneliness includes me unawares.

 And lonely as it is, that loneliness
 Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
 A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
 With no expression, nothing to express.

²Thomas Keating, *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000), 3-4.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
 Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
 I have it in me so much nearer home
 To scare myself with my own desert places.³

It may be that such existential loneliness is behind the spiritual hunger of our day. The god of the enlightenment project—the clock-maker god who set the universe in motion and then abandoned it to wind down on its own—is no longer perceived to be “out there” somewhere. We now send spaceships into outer space, and they bring back no evidence of life as we know it, not to mention “god.” Even more disconcerting is the emptiness that we feel within. Is it any wonder that twenty-first-century Americans seek to fill this emptiness with addictive substances, food, sex, and various experiences to which the word “spiritual” is attached? Nor should it surprise us that compensatory twelve-step programs designed to free us from our addictions should also be called “spiritual.”

Returning to the Christian perspective, Anglican spirituality traditionally begins with corporate worship: at least weekly reception of the Eucharist on the Lord’s Day and daily morning and evening prayer are normative. Personal or private prayer is, at one level, a misnomer. When one goes into one’s room and shuts the door and prays to one’s Abba in secret, one goes as a member of the mystical Body of Christ, the communion of saints. So, in one sense, this prayer is seen to be an extension of corporate worship. But in another sense it is a category of its own and is acknowledged as such. At the very least, corporate worship gives shape to private prayer.

For many twenty-first-century Christians, including Episcopalians, corporate worship has become rote and sterile. It no longer touches the inner life. Wade Clark Roof, a noted religious sociologist, puts it this way:

A . . . problem for contemporary religious consciousness is the reification of the religious. When the institutional forms of religion become fixed, objective entities—that is, abstracted as a belief system or somehow set apart from the everyday world, as has happened in the Western tradition—there is a real danger that they will get cut off from the inner meanings and feelings that gave them life to begin with. Religion risks losing its subjective and experiential qualities, thus becoming ritually dry and unmoving.

The word “religion” derives from the Latin *religio*, which historically was used in a variety of ways: to designate a greater than human *power*, to refer to the *feelings* that people have in responding to such power, and

³Robert Frost, *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 386.

to the *ritual acts* by which people expressed their awe and respect in relation such power. In every instance, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith points out, *religio* embraced the human capacity to perceive meaning and design in life, "to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension."⁴

We can hear in this quotation the roots of the dichotomy between "religion" on the one hand and "spirituality" on the other. "Religion" is the objective, corporate, institutional carrier of a tradition. It runs the risk of becoming a fixed, objective entity, a belief system set apart from the everyday world. From this perspective "spirituality" is the subjective, experiential quality open to a greater than human power; it involves the human capacity to respond to a transcendent dimension in life. This dichotomy lies behind the contrast in the following quotation, a contrast that has become a cliché in our day:

"I'm really not religious, at least not in any institutional sense," students often say to me. Then they add, with varying degrees of urgency, "But I have a strong commitment to spirituality."⁵

If religion can go bad in the way mentioned above, this understanding of spirituality can go bad in another way. It can become fixated on experience for experience's sake without attending to the character of the experience. Drug trips, aromatherapy, and sweat-lodge sessions are all associated with one form of spirituality or another, as are Zen meditation and Christian contemplation. If our religious rituals cry out for spiritual renewal, our spiritual experiences need grounding in a tradition.

Perhaps those who design and lead corporate worship should attend to this need for subjective connection, but the worshiper also has a responsibility here. Worship does not begin when we enter the church door and end when we leave. It is a way of life. And personal prayer is at the center of this way of life. A worshiper who only begins to pray when she enters church on Sunday is more likely to find the service "cut off from inner feelings and meanings" than one who has a faithful daily practice of personal prayer. It also helps to be grounded in a corporate tradition of prayer that bears witness to what Keating calls "the Divine Indwelling." I am more likely to flee the inner journey of personal prayer if I believe that I am finally empty inside than I am if I believe that I am in relation to the God who breathes the Spirit of Jesus in my soul, the God who is one in three and three in one.

⁴ Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby-Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 78-79.

⁵ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), ix.

Contemplation

Religion always tends to lose its inner consistency and its supernatural truth when it lacks the fervor of contemplation. . . . The most important need in the Christian world today is this inner truth nourished by this spirit of contemplation.⁶

Here Thomas Merton agrees with Wade Clark Roof that the collective forms of religion tend to lose their life when they are cut off from an inner quality that Merton calls "contemplation." But what is contemplation? And what is its relation to Anglicanism?

Merton's use of "contemplation" differs from the definitions found in most standard dictionaries. It emerges from a particular strand of monastic prayer that has been lost to much of Western Christianity for almost four hundred years.⁷ This tradition is behind the growing centering-prayer movement which is deepening the prayer of so many today.

Thomas Keating traces the history of this tradition in the third chapter of *Open Mind, Open Heart*. The following passage focuses on a central period:

The Greek Fathers, especially Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, borrowed from the Neoplatonists the term *theoria*. This originally meant the intellectual vision of truth, which the Greek philosophers regarded as the supreme activity of the person of wisdom. To this technical term the Fathers added the meaning of the Hebrew *da'ath*, that is, the kind of experiential knowledge that comes through love. It was with this expanded understanding of the term that *theoria* was translated into the Latin *contemplatio* and handed down to us in the Christian tradition.

This tradition was summed up by Gregory the Great at the end of the Sixth Century when he described contemplation as the knowledge of God that is impregnated with love. For Gregory, contemplation is the fruit of reflection on the word of God in scripture and at the same time a gift of God. It is a *resting* in God. In this resting or stillness the mind and heart are not actively seeking Him but are beginning to experience, to taste, what they have been seeking. This places them in a state of tranquility and profound interior peace. This state is not the suspension of all action, but the mingling of a few simple acts of will to sustain one's attention to God with the loving experience of God's presence.⁸

⁶Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1969), 152.

⁷Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 19.

⁸Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 19-20.

This passage gives us the etymology and history of this use of “contemplation,” but it also describes something of the experience as well. Resting, stillness, taste, tranquility, interior peace, and loving experience. Contemplation is finally not so much an intellectual idea as it is an experienced relationship with the Trinity who dwells within the one praying as well as in the external world.

Liturgical worship is the context for this relationship. Monks would participate in the liturgical office, which they called “the Work of God”; then they might remain following the office to continue their prayer. The Rule of Benedict makes special provision:

When the Work of God [the liturgical office] is finished, let all go out in deep silence, and let reverence for God be observed, so that any brother who wished to pray privately may not be hindered by another’s misbehavior. And at other times also, if anyone wished to pray secretly, let him just go in and pray not in a loud voice but with tears and fervor of heart.⁹

Over time this individual way of praying in secret became somewhat formalized in a process that became known as *lectio divina*.

Basil Pennington, a contemporary Cistercian and colleague of Thomas Keating, describes this process:

Lectio . . . means the reception of the revelation. . . . For us today, our personal time with the Word of Life, with the Sacred Scriptures, is of primary importance. But we also receive this word through the ministry of others, through their reading, and above all through the Liturgy of the Word. . . .

Again, with *meditatio*. . . . In the early monastic tradition, meditation involved primarily a repetition of the word of revelation. . . . The word . . . was quietly repeated over and over again, even with the lips. . . . In time, the repetition would tend to interiorize and simplify the word, as its meaning was assimilated. . . . The Fathers liked to use the image of the cow or other “clean animals who chew the cud.” . . . As we assimilate them [the words of revelation] through meditation, our whole being comes to respond to them. . . .

Next . . . we turn to *oratio*, to prayer, to response. When God, the loving Creator and Redeemer so reveals Himself, and we really hear that revelation, that Word of Life, we respond with confident assent, with expressed need, with gratitude, with love. This response is prayer. . . .

Our response grows. It is constantly nourished by illuminating grace. There are moments and seasons of special light. And it is at these times,

⁹ As quoted in Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 65-66.

which eventually become all times, that the Reality becomes so real to us that a word or a movement of the heart can no longer adequately respond to it. Our whole being must say "yes." This is *contemplatio*.¹⁰

Lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio—these are the four steps or stages of *lectio divina*, as traditionally understood.

Thomas Keating warns us against treating these four steps in a sequential, mechanical fashion.

[Monks] would start reading the Scripture [*lectio*] and when something struck them, they would stop, reflect on the text, and then pray over it, asking God for the good things they read about. They would move from discursive meditation [*meditatio*] to affective prayer or aspirations of the will [*oratio*], then to repeating the same aspiration over and over again, and finally they would experience resting in God [*contemplatio*]. This was the goal of the whole process. . . . They would also read very slowly, the whole process of *Lectio* taking at times a couple of hours.¹¹

So one description of this understanding of "contemplation" is "resting in God." Keating also gives another one-sentence description: "Contemplative prayer is a process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union."¹²

When Keating and those who work with him introduced contemplative prayer to contemporary laity, they did not start with the full process of *lectio divina*.¹³ They knew that two hours was more than most people could or would give. So they eliminated the first three moves and went directly to *contemplatio*. Interestingly, as the centering-prayer movement¹⁴ has evolved, many of those who have developed a faithful practice of centering prayer have also begun to seek the roots of contemplation in *lectio*. There are now workshops in *lectio divina* that complement those in centering prayer. It is as if the Spirit moves the one praying to recapitulate the process. Here is Keating's observation:

¹⁰ M. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1982), 30-32.

¹¹ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 47.

¹² Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 4.

¹³ Keating makes a clear distinction between *lectio divina* and centering prayer. See his article in this issue.

¹⁴ I draw attention to the difference between "contemplation" and "centering prayer" further down. The distinction is Thomas Keating's, and it is important to his work and those praying in this way.

I am convinced that one can begin Lectio at any one of the four stages—reading, reflecting, responding, or resting. In fact, some are better off beginning with resting in God [*contemplatio*] precisely because of our cultural conditioning. Lectio is a dynamic process; that's why we emphasize its nature as relationship. The relationship quality of Centering Prayer implies all four levels. If one does not have the first three stages of Lectio worked into one's psyche, Centering Prayer will gently attract the practitioner to go back and fill in the space. Centering Prayer will lead one back to the earlier stages of Lectio because they are an integral part of the whole organic process.¹⁵

What is the distinction between contemplative prayer on the one hand and centering prayer on the other? And why do Thomas Keating and those who work with him emphasize the distinction? Keating calls centering prayer both a prayer and a method. In doing so he emphasizes that the method is in the service of one's relationship to God. Centering prayer is not a technique. It is a way of preparing for the gift of contemplation.¹⁶ He reserves the word "contemplation" itself for the stage of prayer that is a "pure gift of the Spirit."¹⁷ Centering prayer focuses on what the one praying does; contemplation focuses on what God does. John of the Cross calls contemplation "a loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love."¹⁸

Earlier I posed the question of the relation between this way of praying and Anglicanism. As a branch of the church with its roots in the Reformation, in the beginning Anglicanism reacted against all things Roman. Henry VIII not only closed monasteries; he confiscated monastic lands. But in earlier days, England was fertile ground for contemplation. The fourteenth century was particularly fruitful. In fact, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a fourteenth-century work by an anonymous monk, is the proximate source of centering prayer. Consider this passage:

Thought cannot comprehend God. And so, I prefer to abandon all I can know, choosing rather to love him whom I cannot know. Though we cannot know him we can love him. By love he may be touched and embraced, never by thought. Of course, we do well at times to ponder God's majesty or kindness for the insight these meditations may bring.

¹⁵ Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 124.

¹⁶ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 4.

¹⁷ Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 11.

¹⁸ *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979, 2nd ed.), 318.

But in the real contemplative work you must set all this aside and cover it with a cloud of forgetting. Then let your loving desire, gracious and devout, step bravely and joyfully beyond it. . . .

So whenever you feel drawn by grace to this contemplative work and are determined to do it, simply raise your heart to God with a gentle stirring of love. . . . A naked intent toward God, the desire for him alone, is enough.

If you want to gather all your desire into one simple word that the mind can easily retain, choose a short word rather than a long one. A one-syllable word such as "God" or "love" is best. But choose one that is meaningful to you. . . . Use it to beat upon the cloud of darkness above you and to subdue all distractions.¹⁹

Nothing like this passage occurs in Anglicanism after the Reformation, although there are traces of the contemplative spirit in such writers as Richard Hooker, George Herbert, and Thomas Traherne. And from the formative years of Anglicanism there has been an Anglo-Catholic movement that has had within it the seeds of contemplation. But it is in *The Book of Common Prayer* itself that those seeds are most deeply planted. Thomas Cranmer edited and combined the Benedictine monastic offices into morning and evening prayer. In this way prayerful attending to the reading of scripture has been retained in principle, and this has kept alive the spirit of *lectio divina*. (We notice it in particular in the Collect for Proper 28. It refers to the Holy Scriptures and asks that we might "read, mark, learn, and *inwardly digest* them."²⁰ My emphasis.) One point of this article is to encourage congregations to offer the office publicly and to exhort individuals to pray it wherever they are.

In offering centering-prayer workshops in Episcopal congregations I have found it useful to begin with the section on prayer and worship in *The Book of Common Prayer* (pages 856-57). It gives the group some common language and grounds us in our own tradition. While the word "contemplation" is not used in this section, seven different kinds of prayer are listed—from thanksgiving to petition. Two kinds, in particular, help us make the connection to contemplation. Adoration is described as "the lifting up of the heart and mind to God, asking nothing but to enjoy God's presence." Praise: "We praise God not to obtain anything, but because God's being draws praise from us." Both adoration and praise emphasize God's action in prayer and minimize the activity of the one praying. It is also helpful to have the Catechism state that there is a wordless way of praying, that all Christian prayer is Trinitarian, and that prayer is always

¹⁹ William Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Image, 1973), 54-56.

²⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), 236.

responding to God. (We do not initiate this relationship.) This last point is consistent with the Catechism's emphasis on the biblical theme of covenant. ("A relationship initiated by God to which a body of people respond in faith."²¹) Our contemporary form of Anglicanism has a basis for fostering contemplation.

I began this section with a quotation from Thomas Merton that points to the need for the revival of a spirit of contemplation so that religion might regain its inner consistency and supernatural truth. That followed a quotation from Wade Clark Roof that described contemporary public worship as cut off from the inner feelings and meanings that gave such worship life to begin with. But worship that is truly alive—whether it is corporate or private—has the effect of transforming the worshiper who, in turn, is called to be God's servant in transforming the world.

Transformation

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:2)

Contemplation is not only an end in itself but also a means to the end of the transformation of the one praying. And this, in turn, is not just an end in itself but a means to the end of the one praying being an agent of transformation in God's world. Just as there is a tension in the tradition between liturgical and individual prayer, there is also a tension between contemplation and action. Most often this is a false dichotomy: those who pray are called to action, and all who act are called to prayer so that their deeds may be grounded in God.

In the sentence from Romans quoted above Paul turns from proclaiming the gospel in the first eleven chapters to applying what he proclaims to daily life. It is the move from kerygma to ethics. It is as if he says, "God has transformed the world in Christ. Be transformed, and be agents of transformation" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-20). We begin this process in our baptisms where we are buried and united with Christ in his death and empowered by his resurrection to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-5). But there is another tension here: between what God has already done once and for all, what God continues to do, and what God calls us to do in response. On the one hand, God has conquered sin; on the other, God calls on us to complete this work by our prayer and action. We see this tension and incompleteness most clearly in Romans 7:

I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. (7:18b-19)

²¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 846.

In Romans 6:6 Paul refers to this self enslaved to sin as “our old self,” and he exhorts his readers to another way of life. But in this passage Paul never makes explicit that there is a “new self” that emerges through baptism. However, in Ephesians the author balances the old with the new:

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:22-24)

It is through our participation in the sacramental life of the church, through our personal prayer, and through our action in the world that we are to continue to move from the old to the new self. By our participation in the Eucharist, in particular, we continue our transformation. Moreover, in our day many are called to extend their participation in the Eucharist and deepen their relation with the Trinitarian God through contemplative prayer.

In describing this deepening Thomas Keating translates the Pauline language of the old and new selves into what he calls the false self and the true self. He writes that in baptism the false self is ritually put to death and the true self comes to birth.²² The true self is made in the image and likeness of God. To be sure, our participation in the Eucharist nurtures this new life in us, but Keating says that we need a daily practice of contemplation to further this growth. He writes:

We can bring our false self to liturgy and to the reception of the sacraments, but we cannot bring the false self forever to contemplative prayer because it is the nature of contemplative prayer to dissolve it.²³

How does this occur? Keating uses contemporary psychology as a handmaid to explain the false and true selves and the process of moving from the one to the other through contemplation.

For Keating “*original sin* is a way of describing the human condition, which is the universal experience of coming to full reflective self-consciousness without the certitude of personal union with God.”²⁴ The “desert places” that Frost describes in his poem, quoted above, are the consequences of such deprivation. Keating calls them “our intimate sense of incompleteness, dividedness, isolation, and guilt.”²⁵ He says that we unconsciously form our false selves to defend our being from “harm that other people have done to us knowingly or

²² Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 128.

²³ Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 98.

²⁴ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 127.

²⁵ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 127.

unknowingly at an age when we could not defend ourselves."²⁶ But beneath the defensive structure of our false selves is the true self, the self made in the image and likeness of God.

Contemplative prayer dissolves the false self by healing the emotional wounds of our unconscious. When Paul says that he can will what is right but that he cannot do it, he is bearing witness to the power of sin beneath the level of consciousness. For us to be healed, the will is necessary but not sufficient. In centering prayer we consent to God's presence and action within us; in this way we use our conscious minds to open to the Spirit who heals the wounds deep in our unconscious.

Keating compares the practice of contemplative prayer to the experience of psychotherapy. Here the Risen Christ dwelling within is the Divine Therapist, and the one praying is the patient. Times of prayer are therapeutic sessions. The patient enters into a transference relation to the Risen One, and through this relation the emotional wounds of a lifetime are healed. The false self is deconstructed. The barriers that keep us from being our true selves are removed, and we become God's loving presence in the world.²⁷ Keating writes about this transformation through prayer: "Do it [centering prayer]! It will then do you."²⁸ In both psychotherapy and contemplation it is the loving relationship that heals.

As paradoxical as it sounds and is, the one praying experiences the fruits of the Spirit not so much in the time of prayer as in her life in the world. Most often a spouse or other close friend notices differences in behavior before the one practicing this prayer does. The Spirit works from inside the psyche outward and in relation to those closest to the one praying rather than those more remote, particularly at first.²⁹

I discovered this prayer (or it discovered me) while I was on sabbatical in 1988. I came back to my home, and my wife soon mentioned the difference she noticed in me. She asked, "What are you doing differently down there," referring to my study where I prayed? She said, "You used to come out as angry as when you went in. But now you're different. You're easier to live with." I was surprised. I did not know that I was so difficult to live with before, and I was not aware of any change in my affect or behavior.

I began to teach this prayer in the parish I was serving. A significant minority of the parish joined me, and they began to notice changes in their lives as well. In particular, two groups were represented in significant numbers: those doing

²⁶ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 128.

²⁷ Thomas Keating, *Manifesting God* (New York: Lantern Books, 2005), 88.

²⁸ Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 153.

²⁹ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 130.

hands-on outreach and those participating in lay pastoral care (the Stephen Series). Those doing outreach needed spiritual nourishment so that they could continue their good work with God's poor. Those doing pastoral care said that they needed to deepen their own prayer lives so that they could pray more deeply with the people that they were called to serve. There was a reciprocal relationship between centering prayer and deep service: the more one was committed to service, the more one needed to pray, and vice-versa. It is not surprising that Mother Teresa and her nuns practiced contemplative prayer for an hour every day before they headed for the streets of Calcutta to minister to the dying.

Keating teaches that the goal of the Christian life is to live an ordinary life with extraordinary love. The more I practiced this prayer, the more I saw that I had spent most of my life, including all of my ordained life, with an unconscious striving to be extraordinary, fostering what I have come to call "the Tom Ward self-glorification project"—my personal version of the false self! Having access to a practice that undermines that project and makes me more aware of opportunities to serve in the present moment has been and is a great grace. I have also noticed this grace in others.

So contemplation is a means to transformation—for the one praying, for those closest to him, and, by extension, for those furthest away. It empowers the one praying to live a faithful life within the structures of the twenty-first century and to be an agent of transformation in minute particular wherever one finds one's self.

In Conclusion

Many in our day are seeking a genuine spirituality grounded in centuries of practice. *The Book of Common Prayer*, informed by the church year, offers this, providing a rhythm of worship for each day, each week, each year. It is a way of opening our lives to the presence of God. More particularly, congregations have an opportunity to renew the lives of their parishioners and their communities by publicly offering the daily office as well as the Holy Eucharist at least weekly. At first only a few may participate, but the offering itself encourages those unable to be present to pray where they are. It also provides a scripturally based context for fostering the deeper relationship with God that a contemplative practice makes possible.

Congregations might also offer instruction in private prayer. While personal prayer is always unique to one's own relation with God, the church has almost two millennia of experience, and there are many resources available. Again, many in our day are practicing one form of contemplation or another, both within and outside the church. Some are looking for a congregation that might support what they are finding in the contemplative way. Others might be open to instruction in centering prayer, that first rung on the ladder of contemplation.

Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.,³⁰ an organization founded in 1984 by Thomas Keating and others, has as its mission furthering the contemplative dimension of the gospel. Contemplative Outreach has taken the heart of monastic practice and packaged it for busy twenty-first-century laity. It offers workshops in centering prayer, designs for congregationally based support groups, and workshops in other related contemplative practices, such as *lectio divina*. Establishing a centering-prayer group in every congregation is one goal of Contemplative Outreach. For some seekers centering prayer is a way to God and to the church, one constructive answer to the hunger for spirituality in our day.

Contemplation and the local congregation need one another. In describing the powerful psychic energy that contemplative prayer releases, Keating writes that the one praying needs to be grounded in dedication to God and in service to others.³¹ The local congregation has these to offer in corporate worship and in numerous outreach opportunities. In this way contemplative prayer undergirds the many ministries of the congregation by transforming their participants, and those ministries, in turn, provide necessary outlets for action in God's world for those who are being transformed. Contemplative Outreach offers a way for local congregations to become centers for contemplation and action, for a spirituality that serves the world in God's name.

³⁰For further information, write to Contemplative Outreach, Ltd., 10 Park Place, Suite 2B, PO Box 737, Butler NJ 07405, call (973) 838-3384, e-mail office@coutreach.org, or visit their website at www.contemplativeoutreach.org.

³¹Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 15.