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Prayer for Beginners:

What is the Best Practice for Newcomers to Mystical Christianity?

By Carl McColman

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I have a little experience of Zen sitting meditation and have tried to practice with the Jesus Prayer. There are differences between Centering Prayer (Keating) and Christian Meditation (Main). What do you suggest I start with?

Over the years I have done several of the meditation weekend programs offered by the local Shambhala Center. Shambhala training, for those who don't know it, is essentially a program for learning Buddhist meditation practices but without a lot of Buddhist doctrine. It's built on the idea that, for many people especially in places like America, learning a spiritual practice (in this case, meditation) is more beneficial, and often more easy to accept, than getting caught up in propositional doctrines, teachings and dogmas.

So each level of the Shambhala training involves a different exercise in meditation practice, and so the participant eventually learns a variety of approaches to meditation. The person who completes Shambhala training might not know anything about the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path, but at least he or she knows how to meditate (and hopefully is actually doing so).

I have long felt that Christianity needs its own equivalent to Shambhala training: a curriculum that focusses on *spiritual practice* rather than on religious doctrine. Thus, this reader's question: What is a good spiritual practice for someone just beginning to embrace Christian mysticism?

What complicates this question is two facts — one cultural, one doctrinal — that separates Christianity from most other forms of spiritual practice.

First, the cultural issue: Christianity does not have a tradition of teaching specific "methods" of contemplation. Even the methods my reader mentions: Centering Prayer and the John Main method of Christian Meditation — are both very much shaped by eastern practices (Centering Prayer is based the spirituality of *The Cloud of Unknowing* but through a method similar to transcendental meditation, while John Main's form of meditation is based on the Hindu practice of mantra recitation).

This leads us to the doctrinal issue: for Christian contemplation — even when influenced by eastern practices — really is different from other forms of meditation, for a very simple reason: Christian spirituality is fundamentally *relational* — it is built on the desire for *intimacy with God*. At its core, Christian mysticism is not a program for attentiveness, or mindfulness, or dismantling the ego, or raising consciousness, even though I would argue that eventually Christian mystical practices support us in all of the above.

But the core, the foundation, of Christian mysticism is building a relationship with God through prayer. We embrace the mystical life not to enhance ourselves, but to respond to God's call. Whatever blessings or transformation mysticism gives us is a consequence of deepening intimacy with God — and not the other way around.

So: if Christian mysticism is based on establishing or deepening a relationship with God, and historically there is no particular method or technique of Christian prayer or meditation, then what advice do we give to the beginner?

Let's begin by quoting one of the great mystics, Teresa of Ávila, from *The Interior Castle*:

The important thing is not to think much but to love much; and so do that which best stirs you to love.

So. We lead with love. Which means, that as important as a disciplined practice like Centering Prayer or Christian Meditation might be, they need the foundation of love in order to be beneficial.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

You could paraphrase it like this: "If I practice Christian Meditation so that my mantra becomes the perfect center of my attention, but do not have love, I am just a bamboo flute playing the same four notes over and over again. And if I practice Centering Prayer to the point where all thoughts and distractions drop away and I rest in pure silence, but do not have love, I am nothing but a quiet ego."

So a beginner needs to begin with love. But what does *that* entail? Well, Jesus mandated four dimensions of love: love for God (Mark 12:30), love for neighbor, love for self (Mark 12:31), and love for enemies (Matthew 5:44). G.K. Chesterton once quipped that we are instructed to love our neighbors as well as our enemies because they are often the same! But all joking aside, I think love your neighbors/love your enemies is a way of saying "love without distinction or duality." We are called to *be* love: and to share that love with others, regardless of whether the "other" person loves us back or not. Even the person who actively wishes us harm deserves love — even if we have to express that love in ways that are safe and respectful of all our other love commitments (i.e., it's not wise to passively let an enemy hurt you, that just inhibits your capacity to love others).

It's hard to love your enemies; it's even a challenge merely to pray for those who dislike you. So let's not start there. Let's start with learning to love God — and ourselves. Back to Teresa of Ávila, who recommends in her book *The Way of Perfection* a simple approach to prayer: that whenever we pray, even in the humblest of ways (like reciting the Lord's Prayer or thanksgiving before a meal), combine the words of the prayer with an inner sense of love and adoration for God.

In other words: pray, and love God. Make that your practice. It doesn't matter if you read prayers out of a book (like the Psalms or the Liturgy of the Hours) or if you pray using your own words. But pray. Talk to God. And cultivate a loving heart while you do that.

But what about meditation?

Yes, silence is important too. Yes, methods such as using the Jesus Prayer and reciting a prayer word are excellent for learn to “be still and know God.” But the question was specifically what would I recommend for *beginners* — and I believe learning to pray and the love should come first, and only then does it make sense to talk about what’s the best way to embrace interior silence.

Because, in a Christian context, methods like Centering Prayer matter not because there’s anything particularly special about the *method* but rather because of where the method takes us: into silence, a silence that we believe is given to us through the love of God. We are silent before God because even silence itself is a way to praise God, love God, and respond to God’s pre-existing love for us.

Silence is essential to the mystical and contemplative life. But it must be a silence grounded in love.

Okay, I can hear people say now, “But you still haven’t answered the question!?” In other words, what method do I recommend for beginners — assuming the beginner is already at work cultivating a daily practice and a heart centered on love. What then?

Let me finish this by quoting from a book called *The Philokalia and the Inner Life*. This is a commentary on *The Philokalia*, the massive five-volume anthology of mystical writings collected for Orthodox Christians (but really for all Christians). The author of the commentary makes this interesting observation:

The *Philokalia* is not a uniform collection of texts that have been edited so as to be in complete agreement with each other, but rather they provide a variety of views around a central concern with the purification, illumination and perfection of the Christian soul.

In other words, part of the power of a collection of mystical writings like the *Philokalia* comes precisely from the fact that it does not just present “one” way to become a mystic or a contemplative. There are a “variety of views” and a variety of practices and exercises. What works for me, as a 50-something, married, American, college-educated Catholic layperson, might not be helpful to somebody whose life circumstances or personality is different from mine. And this is a good thing.

There’s no one way to fall in love. There’s no one way to write a poem. Likewise, there are many ways to embrace contemplative practice and the mystical life.

I think both the John Main method of Christian meditation, and Centering Prayer, are excellent methods of entering into silent prayer. Frankly, I would recommend either one, based on this factor: do you know someone who can teach you, or direct you in one of the methods? Is there a group dedicated to one of these methods that meets at your church or another church near you?

Christian mysticism is relational — and that means not only does it focus on relating to God, but also that it encourages us humans to build community, friendships, and other loving relationships. So when it comes to practices like prayer and meditation, what matters the most is if you have access to friends or mentors who can teach you and support you on your ongoing, day-in-day-out practice.

So if there is a Centering Prayer group at your church, go with that. On the other hand, if there's a Christian meditation group that meets in your neighborhood, that might be your best bet. If you are lucky enough to have both types of groups meeting in your community, visit them both and decide which one you are more likely to commit to, and go with that one.

Silence is silence. Prayer is prayer. Love is love. There are different tools available to us, spiritually speaking, to help us grow in love, to become regular people of prayer, and to begin to explore the mysteries of silence. The right "tools" for a beginner are the ones that he or she is most likely to use — and keep using.

Hope this is helpful!

Some of the resources and authors mentioned in this post:

- Centering Prayer — learn more about it at the [Contemplative Outreach](#) website
- John Main's method of Christian meditation — learn more about it at the [World Community for Christian Meditation](#) website
- Anonymous, *[The Cloud of Unknowing](#)*
- Teresa of Ávila, *[The Interior Castle](#)* and *[The Way of Perfection](#)*
- G. K. Chesterton is the author of many books; for starters, check out *[Orthodoxy](#)* or *[The Everlasting Man](#)*
- [The Psalms](#) (check out the translation by Robert Alter)
- [The Liturgy of the Hours](#)
- Christopher C.H. Cook, *[The Philokalia and the Inner Life](#)*
- [The Philokalia](#)

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1 thought on “Prayer for Beginners: What is the Best Practice for Newcomers to Mystical Christianity?”

