

COMPASSIONATE CONTEMPLATION

*A guide for using Compassion
Practice and Centering Prayer*



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, church and spiritual leaders have engaged their communities in unprecedented ways, and it's apparent now that there will never be a return to "normal" or pre-pandemic church rhythms. While it might be tempting to long for the good old days, I believe the possibilities for Church on this side are more significant than we imagine. These opportunities have nothing to do with streaming your services on YouTube, rebranding, or changing your church's website. The pandemic has compelled everyone, religious or otherwise, to consider the contents of a meaningful life and what internal and communal resources are necessary to weather the complexities of human life amid climate catastrophe and an ongoing global pandemic. The Christian wisdom tradition offers us countless contemplation practices to navigate our crises and ground us both individually and communally. This guide will use two simple contemplative practices, Compassion Practice and Centering Prayer, which can be companions for cultivating compassion and connection for individuals and groups. The Compassion Practice, developed by Frank Rogers Jr., offers a grounding practice, rooted in the idea that "compassion is the heartbeat of humanity." This spiritual exercise creates a space to root oneself in inherent belovedness, and as a result, experience daily life from this space. He writes, "We are most fully human when we see someone in the truth of his or her experience and are moved to respond with kindness." This guide will also introduce the path of Centering Prayer, developed by Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington in the 20th-century, and has its roots in the 14th-century classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. While Compassion Practice is a grounding practice, Centering Prayer can be a beneficial counterpart of spiritual exercise as an apophatic approach (knowing of God through negation) by resting in sacred presence in silence. I hope this guide can serve as a signpost for individuals and groups to tread a well-worn path for compassionate contemplation and a life of love and presence.

INTRODUCING

COMPASSION PRACTICE



“Compassion is being moved in one’s depths by the pain or bliss of another and responding in ways that intend to ease their suffering and promote their flourishing.”

Frank Rogers Jr.

Compassionate contemplation might be holy work, but there’s no need for spiritual practices to be regulated to the walls of a church or monastery. Kester Brewin coined the phrase “pirate theology” to refer to a radical release from the shackles of Christianity’s many orthodoxies, new and old. We need revolutionary democratization of Christian spiritual paths that have largely gone unutilized in Western Christianity. You don’t need experience or a degree to start. You don’t need an app and there’s no subscription fee. You can practice alone or with a group. There’s no destination and you can’t win or lose. There’s no such thing as a bad practice. It’s just practice. Mary Oliver writes, “You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.” You already have everything you need to begin.



The creator of Compassion Practice, Frank Roger's Jr. writes, "Compassion is simply being moved in our depths by another's experience and responding in ways that intend either to ease the suffering or to promote the flourishing within that person. The compassionate heart is soft and tender...the compassionate heart beats freely, supple enough to take in another's pain and to respond with acts of kindness, goodwill, healing, and justice." Compassion Practice is exercising the muscles of our compacity for acts of goodwill and justice. This isn't muscular spirituality that implies your worth is tied to your actions (or your practice). Rather, the practice excavates the internal caverns of our belovedness for us to live with greater ease from this boundless expanse rather than the small self of ego. Accepting that you are accepted just as you are is a good place to start.

The Principle

The Compassion Practice is simple enough with its underpinning idea that deep within you is a compassionate center and that you are capable of receiving and giving compassion because you are worthy of compassion. In short, we are moved by compassion and respond with compassion.

The Practice

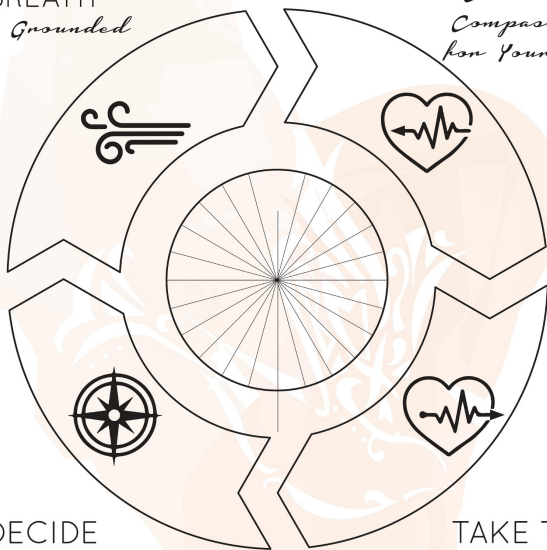
1. Breathe.
2. Sit in the presence of the sacred.
3. Remember receiving compassion.
4. Welcome interior movements.



The Compassion Practice

CATCH YOUR
BREATH
Get Grounded

TAKE YOUR
PULSE
*Cultivate
Compassion
for Yourself*



DECIDE
WHAT
TO DO
*Discern
Compassionate
Action*

TAKE THE
OTHER'S
PULSE
*Cultivate
Compassion
for Another*

The practice begins by settling into a seating position and becoming aware of your breath. As you simply notice your breath, let it ground you into a deeper awareness of your willingness to invite the sacred or divine love, however you currently experience the divine. Next, interiorly enter a moment in which you experienced compassion, peace, or love. Notice how it felt when someone extended love and compassion to you. Next, become aware of interior movements and what thoughts or emotions arise within you. Welcome whatever comes. There are no wrong responses. Simply notice and invite what you're thinking or feeling.

The full practice can last twenty minutes, but it's not necessary to be rigged with the timeframe. I recommend five minutes as a good place to start.



The Compassion Practice is a great exercise for grounding ourselves in the experience of love so that we can live from the generosity of this expanse. It's practice for compassionate action in all that we do in our lives, giving us greater freedom to respond with kindness and create a world that reflects the sacred in all.

INTRODUCING

CENTERING PRAYER



“Resist no thought; Retain no thought; React to no thought; Return to the sacred word.”

Cynthia Bourgeault

Centering Prayer can serve as a helpful companion to Compassion Practice or as a standalone spiritual practice. While Centering Prayer is simple in its approach, it can be challenging. But don't let its seemingly esoteric aspects scare you away. Again, it's *only practice* and the stakes could not be lower so give yourself some grace if you don't have experience in meditation or sitting in silence. There are now countless books dedicated to the practice of

Centering Prayer, its background, and its roots in the mystical work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but I'm simply going to introduce the practice and offer an approach to get started with it.



The Principle

Centering Prayer is a practice created by Thomas Keating to help the development of contemplation by resting our heart, mind, and body in the divine presence. It presents an updated form of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and allows for it to become a practice. Centering Prayer is not a method in the conventional sense, but as Basil Pennington puts it, “Centering Prayer is an opening — putting aside of the debris that stands in the way of our being totally present to the present God so that God can be present to us.” It is this approach that makes Centering Prayer more of an open invitation than a formal technique. To begin, all you need is a desire to sit in God’s loving presence and during your practice, honor your intention.



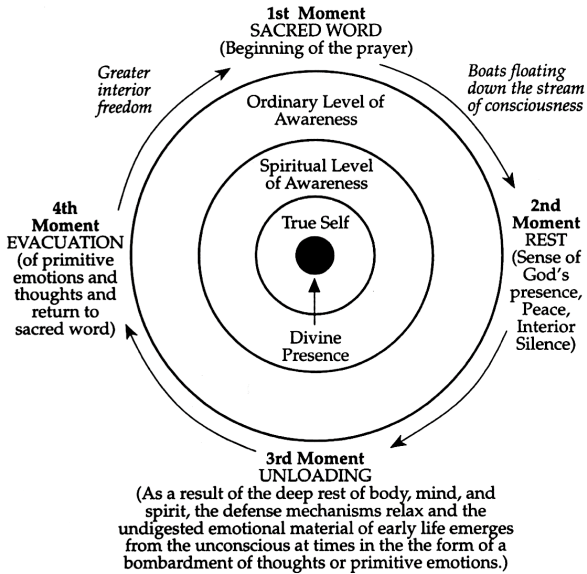
The Practice

Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly by noticing your breath, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your intention to God's presence and action within you. When you become aware of thoughts, return gently to your sacred word. At the end of your prayer period, remain in silence with your eyes closed for a couple of minutes.



THE FOUR "MOMENTS" OF CENTERING PRAYER

(Representing the psychological dynamics of several years of practice,
but which can also be experienced in a single prayer period.)



Centering Prayer revolves around a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to God's presence within, and this is simply your sincere desire to rest in the divine presence. The sacred word should be simple (one or two syllables) and represent your desire in Centering Prayer. Some examples are Jesus, Love, Peace, Shalom, Selah, Be. Once you choose a sacred word, there's no need to change it. You can choose whatever sitting position is comfortable, preferably upright in a chair, cushion, or on the floor. As you close your eyes, with ease, let go of what is going on around and within us. Introduce your sacred word gently as if you were dropping a feather to the floor. Whenever, you notice any thought or series of thoughts, return gently to the sacred word. "Thoughts" is an umbrella term for anything you notice like feelings, plans, images, memories, reflections, judgments, and commentaries. Thoughts are a necessary part of Centering Prayer

because the goal is not to have zero thoughts. Remember, as Cynthia Bourgeault says, “Resist no thought; Retain no thought; React to no thought; Return to the sacred word.” That’s it. There’s an aspect of “doing nothing” in Centering Prayer because the only doing is your continual intention to rest in the divine presence. This is the only activity you initiate during Centering Prayer. During the course of prayer, your sacred word may become vague or even disappear, or you may find yourself gently returning every few seconds. At the end of your prayer period, if you have time, sit in silence for a couple of minutes before you move on with your day. The typical length of Centering Prayer is twenty minutes, but I would start with five or ten and work your way up. Centering Prayer can be done alone or in groups. The hope for Centering Prayer is that its effect over time is integrated into your daily life, not necessarily during the time of Centering Prayer practice.



I hope this brief guide can serve in the effort of pirating spiritual practices for everyone amid our difficult times. May Compassion Practice ground you in the center of love that dwells within you. May you live a little more deeply from this place in your world. May Centering Prayer offer you a path into unexplored territories of your interior and into the cloud of unknowing. May you rest in the divine presence where there is nothing to be done and no one to impress. And always, may you remember you are loved.