

## The Spiritual Network of Contemplative Outreach Limited

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This history and evolution of the Contemplative Outreach organization demonstrates to me remarkable ways in which God orchestrates lives if we put ourselves in God's hands. My life has been transformed through my experience and commitment to live a contemplative life in the marketplace with the support of this wonderful community without walls. I have seen Contemplative Outreach grow and expand from 1983 to the present in amazing ways. Many people have shaped this network – some of them have been with us from the beginning, other have recently joined us, and still others have made their contributions and moved on. Each has been essential to the ongoing process of growth and transformation. The image of a group sculpting clay lends itself to the organic way in which Contemplative Outreach was formed. Often, while one area was being defined and refined, another was being shaped.

Father Thomas Keating has been the spiritual animator and wisdom figure of this project from the beginning. His guidance and formation, along with his published works and videotape series, provide the main content for our workshops, retreats and ongoing programs. Our experience has not followed a recipe or a prescribed set of how-tos; rather, we have tried to listen, to wait upon the movements of the Holy Spirit, and to consent. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton mentions a way of waiting on God that seems to fit the way Contemplative Outreach approached its growth.

The best way to prepare ourselves for the possible vocation of sharing contemplation with others is not to study how to talk and reason about contemplation, but withdraw ourselves as much as we can from talk and argument and retire into the silence and humility of heart in which God will purify our love of all its human imperfections. Then in His own time

He will set our hand to the work He wants us to do, and we will find ourselves doing it without being quite able to realize how we got there, or how it all started.<sup>1</sup>

An image that comes to mind when I think of the many faces of Contemplative Outreach is that of a mosaic picturing the face of Christ, a mosaic made up of hundreds of pieces of stones. Some stones are ordinary and others precious. Some are smooth and others rough. They are various colors: bright blue, red, yellow, dull green, warm purple, shiny black, and gold. As individual stones we can do little with them. Together, however, each is indispensable and makes a unique contribution to portray the face of Christ.

Members of Contemplative Outreach come from every walk of life. We are women and men interested in living a contemplative life in contemporary society. We touch people of all faiths and all denominations, and we recognize that there is unity in prayer. We are united in our goal to renew the contemplative dimension of the gospel in daily life through the practice of Centering Prayer and *lectio divina*. In the words of our vision statement (26 April 1998),

Contemplative Outreach is a spiritual network of individuals and small faith communities committed to living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel in everyday life through the practice of Centering Prayer. The contemplative dimension of the Gospel manifests itself in an ever-deepening union with the living Christ and the practical caring for others that flows from that relationship.

Our purpose is to share the method of Centering Prayer and its immediate conceptual background. We also encourage the practice of *Lectio Divina*, particularly its movement into Contemplative Prayer, which a regular and established practice of Centering Prayer facilitates.

We identify with the Christian Contemplative heritage. While we are formed by our respective denominations, we are united in our common search for God and the experience of the living Christ through Centering Prayer. We affirm our solidarity with the contemplative dimension of other religions and sacred traditions with the needs and rights of the whole human family, and with all creation.

How did this movement of the Holy Spirit come about? Why did it happen at this particular time? Two important events happened in the second half of the twentieth century, each seeming to move monastic life out of the cloister and into the world: Vatican II in the West, and the exile of the Dalai Lama in the East. The doors of inter-religious dialogue opened for the first time, and the contemplative values of silence,

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 273.

simplicity and solitude were shared with ordinary people who were seeking a deeper relationship with themselves, with other persons, and, most importantly with God. Like a weaving, Contemplative Outreach came together with different textures, threads, fabric and yarn in various colors. Three, however, are basic.

The first thread was a hidden treasure buried at St Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, in the early 1970s, where Fathers Basil Pennington, William Meninger and Abbot Thomas Fr Keating lived as contemplative monks. Vatican II opened doors for them that initiated a dialogue with other contemplative monks from the East and West. Through the dialogue they became interested in sharing the monastic treasures of contemplative prayer with individuals seeking silence and the fruit of silence. The monks did not have much experience in teaching contemplative prayer. Their way of life was total immersion in prayer in the words of St Paul, 'To pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5.17). It was not easy for them to translate their lived experience into a model for lay use outside the cloister.

Father William Meninger was guest master at St Joseph's Abbey and had studied the fourteenth-century classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, describing a lifestyle for deepening one's relationship with God through contemplation. He extracted from *The Cloud of Unknowing* a method of silent prayer that could be taught in a couple of hours. The method, called 'The Prayer of the Cloud', had four simple guidelines. Meninger began to experiment at first by teaching priests who came to the monastery for retreats. It was understood that this prayer could not be learned from reading or studying; rather, it needed to be practiced in a methodical way. Meninger encouraged the retreatants to practice at least twice a day for 20 minutes each time. This was not to take the place of other kinds of prayer; it simply offered a method by which to practice silent prayer, a way of listening to God beyond words, thoughts, images or perceptions. As more people heard of this method, they wanted to try it.

At the same time, Father Basil Pennington was being invited to give retreats to priests and Sisters in their home monasteries and convents, and he also taught 'The Prayer of the Cloud'. While Pennington was giving a retreat at the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and Women, someone suggested to him that the name of the prayer should be changed from 'The Prayer of the Cloud' to 'Centering Prayer' because it put into a simple method something to which Thomas Merton had made allusions in a letter to Abdul Aziz, a Sufi Scholar when he asked Merton how he prayed. Merton responded:

Now you ask about my method of meditation. Simply speaking, I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on the presence of God and to His will and to His love. That is to say, it is centered on Faith by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say that this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet (Mohammad) as being before God as if you saw him. But it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God. To my mind, this would be a form of idolatry. On the contrary it is a manner of adoring Him as all. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize the nothingness and silence. If I am still present myself, I recognize this as an obstacle. If He wills, He can then make the nothingness into total clarity. If He does not will, then the nothingness seems to itself to be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer. It is not thinking about anything but the direct seeking of the face of the invisible which cannot be found unless we are lost in Him who is invisible.<sup>2</sup>

This method facilitates going into the center of one's being in order to be present to the presence of God within. From then on 'The Prayer of the Cloud' was known as Centering Prayer.

Thomas Keating, as Spencer's abbot, encouraged the work. In 1977 he helped to develop a workshop for training teachers of Centering Prayer. Several people were trained at St Joseph's Abbey and began to teach Centering Prayer to others. When Fr Keating retired as abbot in September 1981, the retreats were discontinued. The people who had been trained at St Joseph's kept on teaching Centering Prayer. Fr. Keating moved to St Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, to enjoy retirement as a monk. Shortly after his arrival in Snowmass, he was invited to give a Centering Prayer workshop in the neighboring town of Basalt, and 80 people showed up on a cold winter night to learn Centering Prayer. This was a confirmation for Fr Keating that the Spirit had something in mind.

The second thread started back in August 1983 when Fr Keating gave the first 'intensive' Centering Prayer retreat at the Lama Foundation in San Cristobal, New Mexico. This retreat emphasized extended periods of Centering Prayer. Fr Keating also offered two presentations each day on the conceptual background in the Christian contemplative tradition, in concert with contemporary psychology and the spiritual disciplines of other world religions. I was one of 12 who were invited to attend this retreat. Among other retreatants at the Lama Foundation retreat who continued to work with us were Father Carl Arico, Father William Sheehan, David Frenette, Carl Shelton and Mary Mrozowki (who died in

2. Quoted in M. Basil Pennington, OCSO *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 160-61.

1993). Patricia Johnson and Mary Ann Matheson, both members of the Lama Foundation community at that time, served the retreat and are currently serving Centering Prayer retreats at St. Benedict Monastery.

This retreat was a heart-opening experience, and several of us made personal commitments to a daily practice of Centering Prayer; others began to teach Centering Prayer. The Lama Foundation offered another intensive Centering Prayer retreat the following year. Among its participants was Gustave Reininger, who had met Fr Keating and his friend Edward Bednar previously in New York where they had talked about the possibility of a contemplative network. While back in New York, Bednar wrote a grant proposal and received funds to start up parish-based programs in New York City that offered introductions to Centering Prayer. Bednar called his proposal 'Contemplative Outreach', and thus the name was born. Bednar's image of this network was of a group of seekers united in their common search for a deep relationship with God through Centering Prayer in dialogue with world religions. Fr Keating, Reininger and Bednar organized several in-city Centering Prayer retreats. This activity marked the beginning of the Contemplative Outreach Centering Prayer Program. At the same time Bednar was serving Contemplative Outreach as its first executive director. Early in 1985 Bednar left this position, and Mary Mrozowski succeeded him.

Meanwhile, efforts were made in Colorado to establish a live-in community. The experiment disbanded early in 1985, but two of the members, David Frenette and Bob Bartel, moved east, joined Mary Mrozowski, and began again. During those early years the live-in community took a prominent role in the growth of Contemplative Outreach because it provided a consistent and established place to hold ongoing workshops and retreats of various lengths. Mrozowski, Frenette and Bartel staffed weekend retreats, weekend introductions to Centering Prayer, and ten-day intensive retreats. The community at first lived in West Cornwall, Connecticut, and eventually settled in Warwick, New York, where it existed for ten years as Chrysalis House. Cathy McCarthy joined the community in 1988. Chrysalis House closed in 1996, but McCarthy carries on the work of Contemplative Outreach at St Andrew's Retreat House in Walden, New York, where she hosts people from our worldwide Contemplative Outreach network.

In order to give herself to full-time community work, Mrozowski resigned the position of executive director in July 1986, and I held that position until 1999 when I was elected President. My co-workers and I shared an office space and held our board meetings at the Merton Center at Columbia University in New York from 1985 to 1986. Some of Thomas Merton's original handwritten journals lined the shelves of our meeting

space. It was interesting to occasionally read a few pages; it gave us a sense of Merton's presence among us.

The board supported Fr Keating's work and helped to develop materials and a basic delivery system for the introductory workshops. We offered Centering Prayer workshops when invited to do so. Once, we were invited to give a seven-week course at St Francis Assisi Church on 31st Street in New York. Our format was simple: a 20-minute lecture on one of the aspects of Centering Prayer, a 20-minute period of Centering Prayer, and group sharing. Invitations to present more workshops were extended to us by word of mouth. Our little board of directors was the nucleus of the movement, which meant we did all the work. We did not advertise what we were doing, and we were constantly busy giving free workshops. *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating was published early in 1986 by Amity House, and we used this book as our main resource from which we developed lecture outlines and the basic essentials for the introductory workshops and follow-up sessions for ongoing Centering Prayer groups. We still use the outlines today, although in a somewhat refined version.

The third thread of our weaving began in April 1986 when Contemplative Outreach became a New York corporation, and the name 'Contemplative Outreach Limited' was born. This corporation was founded to serve as an information and resource center for the spiritual network of Contemplative Outreach. At the end of 1986 we moved to the Shalom Center in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, the Mother House of the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace. In 1987, however, we moved again because the Sisters needed space to expand their programs. I took my file box, telephone answering machine, and portable typewriter and I set up the office on a dining-room table in my home in Butler, New Jersey. In February 1988 the office outgrew its table, and we moved into my 100-year old one-car garage (277sq. ft). In 1997 we moved into a professional space in a renovated mill building in the downtown area of Butler. We now have 2000 square feet of space, 6 good-sized rooms and 10 workstations. We have seven full-time employees, two part time employees, and five volunteers. Today our office is the international headquarters for the network.

Although we held regular meetings since 1984, the first official board of directors was named in 1986 when the organization was incorporated. Our board included Thomas Keating, president; Carl Arico, vice president; and Gustave Reininger, treasurer. Mary Mrozowski and I served as directors. This network has been a grassroots movement from the beginning and continues to grow from the bottom up.

Patricia Johnson and Mary Ann Matheson have staffed intensive

retreats at St Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, since 1987. These retreats draw seekers from all over the world. Perhaps we are offering a silent space for many caught up in the busyness of the modern world. Merton says it well:

We are more alienated and estranged from the inner ground of meaning and of love than we have ever been. The result is evident. We are living through the greatest crisis in the history of man; and this crisis is centered precisely in a world that has made a fetish out of action and has lost (or perhaps never had) the sense of contemplation.<sup>3</sup>

Interest in Centering Prayer appeared in many areas of the United States. For example, Father William Sheehan taught Centering Prayer in the Florida area from 1983 onward. He worked with volunteers interested in supporting the Centering Prayer movement and offered workshops and retreats. Many Centering Prayer groups were established in Florida, and they became one of the first Contemplative Outreach chapters. Similarly, other chapters appeared from grassroots movements, generally through the inspiration of one individual with an open heart and a willingness to share the experience with others.

Francis Stafford, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Denver, Colorado, invited Fr Keating to offer parish programs on Centering Prayer as a follow-up to their renewal program to all the parishes in the Denver archdiocese in 1987. Sister Bernadette Teasdale was hired by the Archdiocese to coordinate the programs. This was the first diocesan-wide systematic approach to teaching Centering Prayer. For a period of time 'The Center for Contemplative Living' shared space with 'Christ-Centered Ministries', an Episcopal contemplative community founded by Canon David Morgan. Today, Sister Bernadette serves as a coordinator and faculty member for Contemplative Outreach. She directs the Center for Contemplative Living in Denver in a building renovated by volunteers, where many of the Contemplative Outreach programs, workshops and retreats are offered. Sister Bernadette has a volunteer staff of well over 60 persons committed to Centering Prayer who run the center. The center is self-sustaining and is located in Denver.

It became apparent that we had to train individuals to offer the introductory workshop to Centering Prayer, and Fr. Keating appointed a faculty made up of people who had been teaching Centering Prayer since the early years. Over the years the faculty trained and commissioned some 850 individuals to give introductory workshops and follow-up sessions on Centering Prayer. Many programs have been

3. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1973), p. 179.

designed and developed, such as the 'Post-Intensive Retreat', 'Formation for Contemplative Service', 'Advanced Retreat', 'The Contemplative Outreach Study Program in the Christian Contemplative Tradition', 'The Living Flame' (a seven-month course) and 'Contemplative Living' (a nine-month course). We also offer practices that bring the fruit of Centering Prayer into daily life: 'The Practice of Contemplative Service: Intention and Attention'. One recent development has been the design of introductory workshops and retreats that feature *lectio divina*. Longer retreats for persons with 10 or more years experience in the Centering Prayer, such as the 21-day retreat and the 40-day retreat, are being designed.

Interest in the method of Centering Prayer has spread beyond the boundaries of the United States to Australia, Bahamas, Brazil, Canada, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, England, France, Guam, Ireland, Italy, Northern Ireland, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Nicaragua, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Spain and Switzerland. Specialized outreach has bloomed: the Hispanic outreach, *Extension Contemplativa Internacional*, a flourishing prison outreach, and a course in the contemplative dimensions of the 12-step program that is in its second year. In 1996 Contemplative Outreach received a grant from Trinity Episcopal Church in New York to offer nationwide programs for the Episcopal Church. Our programs were well received and continue to grow within the Anglican communion.

In July of 2002 Contemplative Outreach and the Center for Action and Contemplation, co-sponsored a conference: *Healing our Violence through the Journey of Centering Prayer* featuring Frs. Thomas Keating and Richard Rohr along with several workshop presenters. There were 1100 people in attendance. We have also ventured into cyberspace, creating a website on the Internet at [www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org). Our newsletter has reached a circulation of 56,000 copies. We have 111 active chapters throughout the world. The weaving together of the Contemplative Outreach network is an ever-growing, work-in-progress in the artistic hands of the Spirit of God.

The volunteer nature of our network relies on the gift of time, talent and treasure of many people starting with the leadership groups and filtering down to the individuals that offer service in various capacities. The generosity is overwhelming and most inspiring. I believe it is the fruit of their commitment to the Centering Prayer practice.

Thomas Merton said it well in his book *Contemplative Prayer*:

If we pray 'in the Spirit' we are not certainly running away from life, negating visible reality in order to 'see God'. For 'the Spirit of the Lord has

filled the whole earth'. Prayer doesn't blind us to the world, it transforms our vision of the world, makes us see it and all men in the light of God.<sup>4</sup>

We are living up to our purpose to renew the contemplative dimension of the gospel in everyday life. The emphasis is on in every day life. A commitment to live a contemplative life in contemporary society is a way of listening to the Spirit in silent prayer as a means to discover how to live ordinary life with extraordinary love.

In my role as President, I have had the pleasure of working closely with Fr Thomas Keating. He has been my teacher, my mentor and my dear friend. We have had the opportunity to pray and work together over this labor of love called Contemplative Outreach. Through Fr Keating's example, I believe that I have begun to learn how to follow the inspiration of the Spirit waiting, listening and watching for our next movement. As we continue to grow and share our vision with people seeking the values of silence, solitude, and simplicity, I wonder what the twenty-first century will have in store for Contemplative Outreach. In any case, I trust we will continue to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and, day by day, to move gently into the mystery of the cloud of unknowing.<sup>5</sup>

4. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1971), p. 112.

5. About Contemplative Outreach Limited: Established in 1984 as a partnership between laity and monastics, Contemplative Outreach is committed to renewing the contemplative dimension of the gospel for those in active life. Contemplative Outreach affirms the Christian contemplative tradition from which Centering Prayer is drawn, and recognizes this tradition as a common ground for Christian unity. Its primary focus is to present the method of Centering Prayer and to offer practices that bring its fruits into daily life. Also encouraged is the dynamic process of *lectio divina* – scripturally based prayer – particularly its transition into contemplative prayer. Contemplative Outreach offers introductory workshops, intensive prayer retreats, and contemplative formation. For more information, please call 973-838-3384 or fax 973-492-5795; email address is [office@coutreach.org](mailto:office@coutreach.org). We may also be contacted over the Internet at [www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org). Or write to: Contemplative Outreach, Ltd, 10 Park Place, Suite 2B, PO Box 737, Butler, NJ 07405, USA.