

Contemplative Prayer Forms

A Guide for Discussion

Michael J. Cunningham, OFS, D.Min.

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These descriptions are offered not as a ranking but as an introduction — a doorway into each practice. The tradition has given us many doors. We need all of them. What matters is not which form we choose but whether we show up, consistently, with openness and intention.

Centering Prayer

ORIGINS

Developed in the 1970s by Trappist monks Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, and William Meninger at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. Drawn from the 14th-century anonymous classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* and shaped by the contemplative inheritance of John Cassian and the Desert Fathers.

WHAT IT IS

A method of silent prayer that moves beyond words, thoughts, and images. The practitioner sits in silence — typically twenty minutes, twice daily — using a sacred word or gentle breath as a symbol of consent to God's presence and action within. When thoughts arise, one returns gently to the word. Not an emptying of the mind but a resting in God.

KEY INSIGHT

Centering Prayer trains interior receptivity. It cultivates the disposition of relinquishment — releasing our own agendas so that we may receive what God is already doing. This is the deepest form of the Pause.

RESOURCES

- Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (Continuum, 1986) — the foundational text
- Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cowley, 2004)
- M. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer* (Doubleday, 1980)
- Ira Proff, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Julian Press, 1957) — a modern rendering of the anonymous 14th-century classic that underlies much of this tradition, making apophatic prayer accessible to contemporary practitioners
- contemplativeoutreach.org — schedules, training, groups

Lectio Divina

ORIGINS

"Divine Reading" — a practice traceable to Origen in the 3rd century and formalized by St. Benedict in his Rule (6th century). Guigo II, a 12th-century Carthusian monk, articulated the classic four movements in *The Ladder of Monks*.

WHAT IT IS

A contemplative approach to Scripture unfolding in four movements: Lectio (slow, attentive reading), Meditatio (rumination — allowing a word or phrase to resonate), Oratio (prayer arising from what has been received), and Contemplatio (resting in God beyond words). Not study. Not analysis. A listening.

KEY INSIGHT

Lectio teaches us to read differently — to let the text read us; we pay attention and reflect.

RESOURCES

- Guigo II, The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations (Cistercian Publications)
- Michael Casey, Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina (Triumph, 1996)
- Thelma Hall, Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina (Paulist, 1988)
- Dan Riley, OFM, Franciscan Lectio Divina — a Franciscan adaptation attentive to creation, encounter, and the ordinary as Scripture, shaped by the charism of Francis

Imaginative Prayer (Ignatian Contemplation)

ORIGINS

Rooted in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1548). A practice central to Jesuit spirituality and widely taught through directed retreats, spiritual direction, and the Nineteenth Annotation retreat for daily life.

WHAT IT IS

The practitioner enters a Gospel scene using all the senses — seeing, hearing, smelling, touching the moment as if present. One does not observe from the outside but participates from within. After the prayer, one reflects on the movements of consolation and desolation that arose.

KEY INSIGHT

Imaginative prayer trusts that God communicates through the sanctified imagination. It is relational, embodied, and deeply personal. Where Centering Prayer empties, Ignatian prayer fills — and both are needed.

RESOURCES

- David Fleming, Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation of the Spiritual Exercises (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996)
- Timothy Gallagher, The Discernment of Spirits (Crossroad, 2005)
- Margaret Silf, Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality (Loyola, 1999)
- loyolapress.com — Ignatian spirituality resources and prayer guides

Visio Divina

ORIGINS

"Divine Seeing" — an adaptation of Lectio Divina applied to visual images. While visual contemplation has deep roots in the Christian iconographic tradition, Visio Divina as a named practice emerged in contemporary contemplative communities in the late 20th century.

WHAT IT IS

The practitioner gazes at an image — icon, photograph, artwork, a scene from nature — slowly and without agenda. What draws your eye? What do you want to look away from? What feeling arises? One moves through noticing, dwelling, receiving, and resting — the same four movements as Lectio, now through the portal of sight.

KEY INSIGHT

We live in an age saturated with images we consume rather than contemplate. Visio Divina teaches us to truly see — to let an image become a thin place. It informs Sacred Noticing's first movement: not glancing, but beholding.

RESOURCES

- Christine Valters Paintner, *Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice* (Sorin Books, 2013)
- Jan Richardson, *Sacred Journeys: A Woman's Book of Daily Prayer* (Upper Room, 1995)

The Welcome Prayer

ORIGINS

Developed by Mary Mrozowski and refined within the Contemplative Outreach community as a complement to Centering Prayer. Rooted in the 17th-century teaching of Jean-Pierre de Caussade on abandonment to divine providence.

WHAT IT IS

A three-movement practice for moments of emotional charge. First: Feel and sink into the feeling in the body, without analyzing it. Second: Welcome — say inwardly, “Welcome, anger. Welcome, fear. Welcome, grief,” as a gesture of consent rather than approval. Third: Let go — surrender the feeling and the desire beneath it into God's hands.

KEY INSIGHT

The Welcome Prayer does not fight what arises. It meets emotion with radical non-resistance — a posture of interior freedom. It is among the most powerful practices for breaking the automatic grip of reactivity in the midst of daily life.

RESOURCES

- Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (Paulist, 1999)
- contemplativeoutreach.org — free Welcome Prayer guide and audio.

Silent Prayer / Christian Meditation

ORIGINS

Rooted in the Desert Fathers and Mothers (3rd–5th centuries), the hesychast tradition of Eastern Christianity, and the practice of John Main (1926–1982), a Benedictine monk who recovered the tradition of the mantra in Christian prayer through the teachings of John Cassian.

WHAT IT IS

Sitting in silence, repeating a sacred word (mantra) continuously — not to concentrate on it but to let it gradually still the mind and open the heart to God's presence. John Main recommended the Aramaic word Maranatha ("Come, Lord"). The practice is typically twenty to thirty minutes, twice daily.

KEY INSIGHT

Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer share deep common ground. Both cultivate interior silence as the ground of encounter. The World Community for Christian Meditation, founded by Laurence Freeman after John Main's death, has spread the practice globally.

RESOURCES

- John Main, *Word into Silence* (Canterbury Press, 1980)
- Laurence Freeman, *Christian Meditation: Your Daily Practice* (Medio Media, 1994)
- Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford University Press, 2006) — a luminous guide to contemplative silence, widely used in spiritual direction and retreat settings
- wccm.org — World Community for Christian Meditation, global resources and groups

Eucharistic Adoration

ORIGINS

Rooted in the Catholic tradition of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Formal adoration outside Mass developed through the medieval period, with the feast of Corpus Christi established in 1264 reflecting this emerging tradition.

WHAT IT IS

A period of silent prayer before the exposed Blessed Sacrament — either during formal Exposition or simply in the presence of the tabernacle. There is no fixed method. The practitioner comes, and stays, and is present.

KEY INSIGHT

Eucharistic Adoration is perhaps the most incarnational of all Catholic contemplative practices. It roots the interior journey in the physical, the particular, the here. God is not encountered in the abstract but in this bread, this moment, this church on this Tuesday afternoon.

RESOURCES

- Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (Post-Synodal Exhortation, 2007)
- Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth* (Doubleday, 1999)
- adorationlocator.org — find Perpetual Adoration chapels

A Drifting Prayer (Peregrinatio)

ORIGINS

Rooted in the Celtic practice of peregrinatio pro amore Dei — *wandering for the love of God*. In the year 891, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records three Irish monks who set out to sea in a boat without oars, wishing to be pilgrims for the love of God, and caring not where. The tradition of Brendan and Columba: pilgrimage with the destination removed, trusting the steering to Someone else.

WHAT IT IS

A walk, or a stillness, without agenda, destination, or purpose — not even the purpose of prayer. The practitioner makes one decision only: the boundary. Thirty minutes, a garden, the road home taken slowly, an unscheduled hour. That boundary is the coracle — the little boat that holds you. Then the oars are shipped — the phone, the errand, the outcome — and one simply drifts, following what gently draws. If something arrests you, stop there; you need not name it or turn it into a lesson. If nothing does, the drifting itself was the prayer, and it was enough. There is no step two.

KEY INSIGHT

Where other forms train attention, a Drifting Prayer relinquishes steering altogether. It consecrates the hours the other practices cannot reach — the in-between, the unplanned, the drifting seasons of life we did not choose. Being led is a form of prayer; perhaps the oldest one.

RESOURCES

- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, entry for the year 891
- The Voyage of St. Brendan (Navigatio Sancti Brendani, 9th century)
- Michael J. Cunningham, OFS, “The Boat Without Oars” — a Spiritual Break reflection, spiritualbreak.com

Sacred Noticing

ORIGINS

Developed by Michael J. Cunningham, OFS, D.Min., through years of contemplative practice, retreat leadership, and formation work in the Franciscan and Centering Prayer traditions. Rooted in the patristic concept of *prosoche* (attentiveness of the heart), the Franciscan charism, Celtic spirituality, and the contemplative inheritance of Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton, and Richard Rohr. A foundational intellectual source is Evagrius Ponticus (345–399 CE), the fourth-century desert theologian whose practice of *nepsis* — watchfulness, or the guarding of the heart — informs Sacred Noticing’s core logic: the practitioner learns to observe the movement of thought, emotion, and impulse without being consumed by it, and from that witnessing, genuine choice becomes possible. Published in *The Practice of Sacred Noticing* (Contemplative Company, 2026).

WHAT IT IS

A three-movement contemplative practice for transforming the spiritual footprint — the lasting presence we leave in every encounter. Its core rhythm is Notice · Pause · Respond. Not three sequential steps but one integrated disposition, practiced not in a chapel on a schedule but in the ordinary moments of every day.

Notice: Bringing conscious, non-judgmental attention to what is present — in oneself and in the encounter — without immediate categorization or judgment.

Pause: Creating sacred space between stimulus and response. A moment of relinquishment, of interior freedom. The Pause is not a technique. It is permission.

Respond: Acting from wisdom rather than reactivity. The response that arises from a contemplative stance shapes not just what is said but what remains — the trace of who we have been in this moment.

KEY INSIGHT

Sacred Noticing is not a replacement for any practice already present in your life. It is a companion. Centering Prayer gives us the interior silence. Sacred Noticing asks: what do we do with it when we walk back out the door? Other practices form the interior life. Sacred Noticing carries that formation into the texture of daily encounter.

RESOURCES

- Michael J. Cunningham, OFS, *The Practice of Sacred Noticing* (Contemplative Company, 2026) — ISBN 979-8-9990388-3-8
- spiritualbreak.com — weekly contemplative reflections since 2016
- Sacred Noticing Tuesday — monthly Zoom gatherings (contact via spiritualbreak.com)

A Note for these practices

These practices are not in competition. They are, each in their own way, doors into the same house. Some of us need the silence of Centering Prayer. Some need the embodied presence of Adoration. Some need the structured engagement of Lectio. Some need an hour with the oars shipped, letting the current decide. Some need a practice that travels with them through the day, into the meeting, into the conversation that catches them off guard.

The question worth asking at your gathering is not which practice is best. It is: which door have I actually walked through lately? Which one am I avoiding? What would it mean to open it?

We need all the doors we can get.

NOTICE · PAUSE · RESPOND