

WORLD & NATION

Centering prayer becomes a favorite for many

By Ed Langlois
Catholic News Service

PORTLAND, Ore. — For the past 30 years or so, a revolution in Christianity has taken place in silence.

Centering prayer, the rediscovery of an ancient monastic practice, has become one of the favored prayer forms among Catholic religious and laity alike.

On any given day at 3:30 a.m., a dozen or so monks and lay people gather in a simple room at Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist-Abbey near the small farming town of Lafayette. They sit in silence in chairs, on pillows or on squat benches made just for centering prayer.

In their minds, they begin to repeat a sacred word — "Jesus," or "peace" or "love," for example. That, they find, slows them down, deepens their breathing and clears a place in them for the Lord. Then they go about their day refreshed.

This scene is repeated all over the nation.

"The great battle in the early stages of contemplative prayer is with thoughts," wrote Trappist Father Thomas Keating, a monk who over the past 25 years has helped revive broader Catholic interest in centering prayer.

"It is unrealistic to aim at having no thoughts," said the Snowmass, Colo., monk. "When we speak of developing interior silence, we are speaking of a relative degree of silence. By interior silence, we refer primarily to a state in which we do not become attached to the thoughts as they go by."

The group of early Christian monks known as the Desert Fathers described a similar kind of prayer. In the 14th century, an anonymous English mystic set down the prayer in detail in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

During 20 years of operating a retreat house near their monastery in Mount Angel, Oregon's Benedictine Sisters have noted a surge in interest in centering prayer.

It is odd, Benedictine Sister Antoinette Traeger told the *Catholic Sentinel*, Portland's archdiocesan newspaper, to speak of the "appeal" of contemplative prayer as if it were a health fad, as opposed to a way to encounter the Almighty.

"A lot of people come here and say, 'Slow me down. I need to deal with the pressures of my life. I want to learn to take time and get in touch and know that God is with me. I need to be more quiet to do that,'" she said.

Centering prayer, said the nun, requires the will to let go of concerns for a time — maybe 20 minutes a day. Those who practice the prayer even try to let go of their notions of God, lest those human-made images cloud God's real presence.

"I'll sit or walk and put myself in a state in which I can just rest in the belief and sometimes even the experience that God loves me," Sister Antoinette said. "People can emerge with the feeling that all is well, a feeling we can lose sight of in our busy lives."

For Catholics, she added, centering prayer tends to deepen the experience of Mass and other communal prayer.

The work of Father Keating and some of his fellow Trappists sparked the formation of Contemplative Outreach, a nationwide group that works on the assumption that the world could be healed in part if more people practiced contemplation.

The Oregon chapter has started centering prayer sessions at the federal prison in Sheridan and at Oregon State Penitentiary.

The Oregon group also is trying to integrate centering prayer with 12-step pro-

grams, bringing new depth to the recovery movement's spirituality.

"All of us suffer with our experience of the human condition of alienation and isolation from God and one another," said Bill Ryan, area coordinator for Oregon Contemplative Outreach. "Contemplative prayer is a healing of the human condition and brings us into unitive life in God and therefore with one another."

In the Christian tradition, "we think about God with the prayer of the mind, we

speak to God with the prayer of the lips, but we open to and experience God with the heart, the biblical term for the center of our being," he said.

"Contemplative prayer, contrary to popular belief, doesn't take us apart from community of active life," Ryan said, "but brings us more fully into the life of compassionate service in a way that we are able to release from the dictates of the selfish self and act from the love of Christ instead."

Bishops ordained

Pope John Paul II ordains Msgr. Timothy P. Broglio an archbishop March 19 in St. Peter's Basilica. Archbishop Broglio, a native of Cleveland, was appointed nuncio to the Dominican Republic and apostolic delegate in Puerto Rico. He was among nine new bishops, including two from North America, the pope ordained.



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