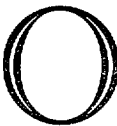


# FINDING GRACE AT THE CENTRE

By THOMAS E. CLARKE

 ONE OF the exercises of interiority which has come into favour in the past few years in the United States has been termed the 'centring prayer'. Like other recent approaches to prayer, most of which have been influenced by Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation or other currents of eastern spirituality, it directs the focus of mind and spirit inward, toward the self, the centre, the still-point. Non-discursive in character, these approaches yield not a new rational understanding so much as a certain stillness, peace, joy, freedom, awareness.<sup>1</sup>

Such exercises may or may not constitute prayer. It is well known that some of them are being used for such worldly purposes as winning hockey games and earning a faster dollar. They become prayer when they are drawn into a faith-response to life. They will be more fruitful for the christian in prayer to the degree that they are supported by christian faith in its doctrinal expression. The present article seeks to provide, for those christians who are or may be attracted to such centring exercises, the support of understanding their own practice of them in the context of the mystery of grace. More specifically, our theme is *the centre*; that is, the place of meeting of the human spirit and the divine Spirit, and, in that meeting, the place where the christian at prayer meets the whole of reality, divine and human, persons and things, time and space, nature and history, evil and good.

Some years ago Georges Poulet brilliantly investigated the traditional symbol of God as the sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere (*Deus est sphaera cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam*).<sup>2</sup> The stimulating material offered by this study provides a starting point for the present reflection. As the point, the centre of the circle or sphere, defines every point within the sphere and on its circumference, so God, in knowledge and

<sup>1</sup> Cf Basil Pennington, o.c.s.o., 'Centering Prayer – Prayer of Quiet', in *Reviews for Religious* 35 (Sept. 1976), pp 651–62.

<sup>2</sup> Poulet, Georges: *Les métamorphoses du cercle* (Paris, 1961).

creative power that are without limit, defines and begets the whole of reality. 'The centre is the father of the circle', wrote Plotinus. So God fathers the reality of the universe. He is the still-point of the turning world. The circumference for this still-point nowhere to be found symbolizes the limitlessness of God's presence to the reality he has begotten. The infinitesimal point – infinity of concentration – and the unlocatable circumference – infinity of extension: these contrasting facets of the symbol suggest the incomprehensibility of God's relationship to the world, at once infinitely beyond and infinitely within his creation, or, in Augustine's phrase, *intimius intimo meo, altius altissimo meo*.

The relationship expressed in the symbol is one of presence by creative knowledge and creative power, which in God are one. All the reality within the sphere, being born from God, is from him, towards him, in him, who is always effecting it by his knowledge and knowing it in his effecting of it. As Poulet writes:

The position occupied by the central point of the circle represents not only the unity and fixity of the divine duration, but the multiplicity of simultaneous relationships that it has with the peripheral and mobile duration of creatures. Eternity is not simply the pivot around which time turns; it is also the point at which, as the rays of the circle, the events of past and future converge and are united in the consciousness of God.<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as it is material, the universe is known and powered by God precisely in time and in space. He is therefore present simultaneously, as centre and as circumference, to every point of time and likewise to every point of space. The creation, however, does not lose its character of successiveness and diffusion by being thus known and powered.

Especially since the Renaissance, Poulet notes, this symbol has been dynamically understood. There is at once a radiation of all created reality from the divine centre and a return to that centre. The origin of the universe is its destiny. Within a christian perspective, this radiation-return imaging of creation finds its peak in Incarnation (and indwelling), where God's coming to us is identical with our going to him. It is only in the mind that movement out from and back to the centre are distinguished.

There is more. Because each human being is created according

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p vii.

to God's image, it verifies the maxim, to the degree of its likeness to God. So of the human spirit, the person, made in God's image, we may and must say that it is a sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. This means that all that we have said of God may be said of the human person. Wherever there is a human being, then, there is a sphere of knowledge and power possessed of a certain infinitude, capable of intensively and extensively unlimited relationships with the whole of creation, and with the Creator, the divine centre, himself.

'The soul is a kind of centre', says Giordano Bruno. 'It is', adds Poulet, 'a centre, not only, as the mystics believe, because God has in it his chosen abode, but because this place of divine dwelling is also the convergence of all cosmic phenomena'.<sup>4</sup> This place, he goes on to say, can be *any* place. Wherever the soul situates itself in the universe becomes a centre-point for viewing and relating to the relationship of God and the universe.

For us moderns, this kind of spiritual reflection, in which metaphysical and mathematical modes of abstraction are joined for the nourishment of the spirit, is at once attractive and yet somehow out of reach. We are children of subjectivity, and need to invest even traditional symbols with the resonances of an experience of human life that is vastly different from that of ancient and medieval humans. Our journey to the centre, and our abiding there, remains an enchanting symbol, but the language in which we describe it will be different from that of our ancestors.

When, as a modern christian, I yield to the attraction of journeying to the centre of my being, my faith tells me that this centre is both my own human self, the image of God that I am, and the Self of God, the holy Spirit, given precisely to be the selfing of myself, bestowed in order to give me (back) to myself by being given to me as the Self of Father and Son. Without a pantheistic identifying of Creator and creature, without denying that the self-gift of God is totally gift, grace, I as a christian affirm (and as a praying christian I act on the affirmation of) this unfathomable mystery of the holy Spirit dwelling within my spirit, as the divine Self selfing my human self: and hence as transforming centre of my centre.

This mystery means that my innate capacity as God's image to contain the whole of reality, created and uncreated, in knowledge and in power, and hence to be unlimited centre and circumference

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p xxii.

of an infinite sphere, has been restored and transfigured by being drawn within the divine centre and centring. When I make the journey to the Centre, then, I am where I can touch and be present to all that is, including God himself. Let me explore some of the facets of this presence.

First, when I am at the Centre I am present to my own *personal history*. Physiologists and psychologists can tell me how the self that I am today is the self that I have become out of every instant of my human existence. From the particular night that I was conceived by parents who loved each other and so loved me into existence, I have been and become a self, a subject, a person, touched and shaped by a myriad of influences, all of which are present to me when I am present to myself, at the Centre. The sickness at five weeks that almost ended my pilgrimage, the impact of losing my mother at nine, the successes and setbacks of childhood and adolescence, and all the rest, have been recorded in me in the way in which the rings of a tree are shaped by each year's sun and storms, or the way in which earth's tremors are recorded on a seismograph. To the degree that I am at the centre of my self, the divine Self delivers into my hands, for sharing and for future 'selfing', this selfing history that is mine.

Similarly, at the Centre I am present to myself in space, in my extension into the successive folds and layers of my humanity. From marrow to skin and hair, from deepest unconscious to sensate awareness, the Spirit who knows and shapes me through and through offers me myself for stewarding and for simple cherishing. The wonderful reality that I am is most experienced as wonderful when I am at the Centre. Here is where I can most fruitfully be in touch with my various gifts. This is the place, for example, where the fact that I know enough Greek to read the New Testament in the original, and enough Hebrew to be able to look up precious words in a dictionary, is gratefully drawn into the reality of my life with God. To the degree that I am at the Centre, my ability to compose and to write, bestowed through the educative processes of many years, is met and enjoyed by me in an inner sanctuary, where it is cherished as ikon, not worshipped as idol.

The Centre is the place, too, where I can most creatively meet the behaviour, attitudes, options, awarenesses and responses which constitute my moral, spiritual and religious life. The 'consciousness examen' heals, reshapes, intensifies, to the degree that it takes place at the Centre. It is here that the Artist, using no other clay than

that which I bring from my earthly struggle to live humanly, patiently, refashions me in the image of Jesus Christ.

Because I am not a monad but a cell, the journey to the Centre is the way that I walk in order to find other persons, other cells, other centres. The vistas opened up by this interpersonal aspect of centring prayer are immense. Saying something about this here will help, perhaps, to dissipate the objection that centring is an egocentric and narcissistic project. As love of myself is the base from which I can love others, so being at my own centre, at this juncture of the divine Centre and my own deepest self, means being at the heart of communion with other human beings. Who are they, and what is the import of my being with them at the centre?

They are those whom I name, in a special sense, my dear ones – my parents, brothers, family, jesuit and other friends, more intimately known. What nourishment for the spirit there is, for example, in remembering how my father and mother were for one another and for me and my brothers in the days of long ago, or in holding communion with a dear one who happens to be on another continent.

Beyond this circle of intimates, there are all the persons who have, in however fleeting a fashion, touched my life in a personal way: the doctor who removed an abscess a few years ago, that strange science teacher of my high school days, the persons I have corresponded with without ever having met face to face. There are some famous people whom I have been privileged to meet in a more or less passing way: Dorothy Day (first when I was a high school student), Mother Teresa (about five years ago), Karl Rahner. And several times I have visited the grave of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who is buried in the cemetery of my old novitiate. All these help to comprise 'those whom you have given me',<sup>5</sup> and in some fashion I will, in the day of judgment, have to render an account for this accumulation of gifts. They, too, can be met throughout life at the Centre.

Even beyond this wider circle of those whom I can name as fellow pilgrims, there are the four billion contemporaries who share the planet with me at this moment. I have seen some of their faces on the television screen, or brushed past them in airports or sat next to them on buses or trains. All of us, however unequally, are nourished at the breasts of the same Mother Earth. We live together in statistical tables, within the bowels of the same computers. Some of them harvest the grain and the grapes of my daily Eucharist.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jn 17, 11.

Quite starkly, some of them die, or are doomed to an early death, because the dark principalities and powers of contemporary economic and political life provide me with necessities and even superfluities at the price of their very survival. Whoever they are, and whatever may be the tragic aspects of their relationship to me, it is at the Centre that I am in closest touch with them.

Then there is the caravan of humanity of preceding ages. Because the Centre is a point simultaneously present to all instants of human duration, I can meet there the celebrated and the anonymous, the saints and the sinners, stretching back to humanity's origins. Somewhere, in the late tenth century for example, somewhere in northern Europe, a man and woman came together in some beautiful or dismal or violent way, and their joining formed one link in the chain of life which eventually came to me. Who are they, and what is my kinship with them? It is at the Centre that I know, insofar as I can know.

Next, there is the great cloud of witnesses, the saints, celebrated or not, who by their deeper presence to the Centre are present to every pilgrim centre, including mine. I bear the name of a few of them, and have special links with others by the fact that I share a special ethnic, national, religious heritage, or because at some point of my journey God brought them across my path. Worthy of special marvel is the way in which one woman, Mary of Nazareth, came to be part of this community of the centre, for me and for millions of others.

It need hardly be said that the human presence which, more than any other, I find at the Centre, is Jesus himself – and first of all in his own pilgrim story. However little of that history I have access to by ordinary channels, there is a real sense in which I can appropriate every detail of it when I am at the Centre. This is true of all human relationships. Even before there is an explicit knowledge of the life-history of a loved one, we take hold of it by taking hold of the loved one, for they carry their history within them as we carry ours. So what takes place at the Centre is the mingling and sharing of these two personal histories, Jesus's and mine. His being now the risen Lord, present in the hiddenness of his glory, introduces no dualism into my communion with him at the Centre. For precisely because we are at the central point simultaneously present to all duration, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are one in this personal encounter.

And finally, through Jesus, I am at the Centre present to God

as Father, Son, Spirit. It is interesting that the medieval symbol of the infinite sphere received a trinitarian interpretation, in which Son and Spirit were imaged as going forth from the Father, as ripples from a generating point. There are undoubtedly various ways of conceiving theologically how the triune God is met at the Centre. A christocentric view such as that of Emile Mersch would speak of a certain mediation of the humanity of the Word, so that it is through the Son, and, indeed, through his body which is the Church, that we have our relationship with the Father and the Spirit. A different theology would make the Spirit, not the Son, the point of entry, so to speak, into trinitarian life. Such theological refinements make little difference, perhaps, especially to the degree that presence to the Trinity at the Centre takes place without the mediation of intellectual or imaginative forms. The point to be made is that the Centre is where I find the life of my action, the exemplar of my witness, the unfathomable source of my very existence: Spirit, Son, Father.

We have still not exhausted the possibilities of finding the whole of reality at the Centre. There is no space for a detailed account of the other encounters which can take place; but a summary of some of these may suggest what riches are available for one who knows how to journey to the Centre.

1. The public history of humanity, the unfolding of age upon age, the rise and fall of cultures and civilizations. What perspectives can be gained on one's personal life, and on the struggles of the Church and of humanity today, by being in touch with the flow of human history at the centre of our being!

2. The riches of diverse cultures, the arts and sciences and techniques as they have been developed in human history, from the striking of the first flint to the development of the most sophisticated computer, from scratchings on the walls of prehistoric caves to the latest Picasso. In our museums we cherish each tiny witness to the glories of creation as they are crystallized in the story of human endeavours. Yet the treasures of the past, the heritage of history, is fully available for our creation of a human future only when they are brought to the deepest heart of our humanity, to the Centre. In fact, only the habit of journeying to the Centre can keep us from desecrating our heritage. Compare, for example, the availability of the music of Bach and Beethoven for even the wealthiest and most cultured groups in, say, the seventeenth century, with their instant availability for millions today. We should not too quickly

assume that this wider diffusion is proportionately enriching. The very facility of access brings a danger of trivialization, as when, for example, Bach and Beethoven become background music for work or entertainment, or the Mona Lisa is commercially exploited. Our artistic heritage is best cherished, it seems to me, when it is carried with us in our journey to the Centre.

3. The theological understanding of our faith, and of life in the light of faith. It is the deficiency of much theologizing, both professional and popular, that it is conducted at the more superficial levels of human discourse. Bringing theology to the centre is like dipping a fabric in a liquid which restores and transfigures its inherent beauty. This is the place where the great doctors of the Church carried on their pondering of the mystery. Only to the degree that theology takes place in the stillness of the Centre will it be capable of nourishing the Church.

4. Liturgical celebration. A few decades ago, Jacques Maritain and others engaged in a lively debate on liturgy and contemplation. This concern needs to be perennial. Being at the centre in liturgical celebration does not mean disengagement of sense and sensibility from the ritual action. On the contrary, the more one is at the still-point, the more he or she is capable of deep participation and communion with fellow worshippers. The journey inward takes place through interiorization, not through departure.

At this point there is need to note that, for purposes of analysis, I have been bracketing a most basic aspect of human life: sin and liberation from sin. The journey to the Centre, however, takes place not within paradise but within a world of darkness and light, death and life, a world in which – so great is the mystery – God struggles with hostile forces and conquers them. While it is not possible to develop this aspect of our theme, it is clear how much it will affect the journey to the Centre and what happens there. Grace and sin are correlatives, and the deeper our experience of the divine Centre the deeper will be our experience of the evil of the world.

One specific corollary of this needs to be mentioned, in view of current concerns regarding justice, peace and poverty. It would be a distortion of the meaning of this symbol of centring to conceive that movement to the Centre brings with it, or even is compatible with, a disengagement from the human struggle for peace, justice and other embattled public values. The quality and intensity of contemplation is in direct, not in inverse, proportion to the quality and intensity of our action on behalf of justice and peace, and vice



versa. We are far enough into the polarities of the Church's engagement in today's struggle for human dignity to know that refusal or inability to journey to the Centre is, however well-intentioned may be engagement in social ministries, a betrayal of the brother or sister. The opposite is also true: apparent journeys to the Centre, which yield no fruit of compassion and justice, are thereby revealed to be eccentric wanderings and sham, the kind denounced by Amos and Isaiah and by Jesus himself.

With this said, it is time to leave these more theoretical considerations and to speak of the way, or ways, in which the journey to the Centre may take place in prayer. I would like here to summarize what I have been saying. I have been proposing that the centre of our human existence is the point at which our personhood, created in God's image and so radically capable of encompassing all reality, is intimately joined to God himself, particularly as indwelling Spirit, and so transfigured in its character and capability of being a sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Secondly, I have said that this presence at the Centre (through the various forms of prayer now to be discussed) is not a removal from the basic struggle of earthly life, from the conflict between the powers of light and of darkness, but rather a more intense engagement in that struggle, and a healing for this deeper engagement of the sinful person that I am. And thirdly, I have tried to illustrate how by appropriate presence at this Centre we are in deepest touch with the whole of reality, created and divine.

Now I ask: How does one journey to the Centre, and how does one behave there? This question concerns prayer, approaches to prayer, methods of prayer. My first and general response is that one journeys by walking, that there are different roads for different persons, and that the same person at different times will be drawn to walk by different roads. For convenience, let me distinguish three such roads, and call them, respectively, by the names of darkness (or silence), fantasy and reflection.

The road of *darkness* is the one which is followed in the 'centring prayer' to which I referred at the beginning of this essay. It will normally make use of a *mantra*, preferably a single word, repeated or silently held in a kind of non-saying, with a frequency determined by the goal of leading one to silent presence at the Centre. Such a method has much in common with the central image of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, where the person praying is situated between the cloud of forgetting (of creatures) below, and the cloud of unknowing (of

the Creator) above, with a simple presence of the heart. Though the image is somewhat different, the prayer of centring has basically the same character. A certain silence and a certain darkness is the modality of presence at the Centre. God is not overtly addressed or listened to or felt. And the same is true of the reality of creation. If, for example, I have entered into this exercise after worrying about a friend who is sick, or recalling an experience of childhood for which I am grateful, or focussing on a facet of contemporary life which is part of my apostolic concern, what is here characteristic is that *I let them go*. I do not think of them or image them in any way. If, especially out of anxiety, they emerge in overt presence, I am quietly aware of this fact, but then, just as quietly, let go of them again. The wonder and paradox is that they thus become, if anything, more deeply present to me, because they have been 'lost' in the meeting of my centre with the Centre, who likewise, in this form of prayer, is not objectively attended to. This is, perhaps, all that needs to be said and can be said by way of describing this first, and perhaps most fruitful, way of journeying to the Centre.

The road of *fantasy*, which may be employed to lead into the road of darkness, would begin with an imaginative conjuring up of the dimension of reality which I felt drawn to bring with me to the Centre. A loving recollection of parents, in some especially dear experience; an imaginative repetition of a line from scripture or from some favourite poem; the thought of scenes of death and dying this day around the world; the graceful movement of an athlete seen on television during the Olympic games; an appropriation of the wondrous workings of the many systems which make up my bodily and psychic life. The imaging takes place, not for purposes of ordinary play, but for engaging the heart. Images and feelings are brought on the quiet journey to the Centre, and there relished, enjoyed, offered, healed and transformed.

The road of *reflection* makes use of the more rational and pragmatic facets of the spirit, and is most appropriately followed, perhaps, when there is question of what has come to be called the 'consciousness examen'. Instead of looking at the hours or days past or future as on a screen in front of me, I go with them to the Centre, and in that quiet feel their pulse, so to speak, or taste their flavour. The feelings of anger or criticism which I remember from this morning's meeting, or the repugnance which I presently feel at the prospect of having to deal with a particular person this afternoon: such are some typical companions of this kind of journey. In prospect or

retrospect, there is a rehearsal of life at the Centre. Like the road of fantasy, this road too may lead fruitfully into the road of darkness. For it seems to be especially in stillness, in silence, in darkness, that the deepest experiences of life happen.

One final word may indicate how there is question here not just of particular exercises of prayer carried out at specified moments, in the interstices of life, as it were. The traditional distinction of formal and virtual (or habitual) prayer is operative here. The hope is that special practices of centring will foster facility, and that a *quality* may emerge and grow, by which each experience of each day takes place at the Centre. We have all met persons for whom this seems to be true to a marvellous degree. And we have met, in prayer, Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to know that this is the modality of existence eternally shared by Father, Son and Spirit. The insight of the tradition that *any place* can be a centre is founded, ultimately, on the conviction of faith that the Centre who imaged us forth is both everywhere and nowhere.