In the second chapter I looked briefly at the three theological principles on which Centering Prayer is based: its source is Trinitarian, its focus is Christological, and its effects are ecclesial, that is, it bonds us with everyone else in the Mystical Body of Christ and indeed with the whole human family. In this chapter I would like to return to these principles in more detail, to see how they move from theology into the deepening experience of God’s presence and action in our lives. The spiritual journey is our movement into this transcendent reality and the gradual assimilation of it over the course of a lifetime.

The source of Centering Prayer is the Trinity, God’s life within us, begun in baptism or whenever we entered into the state of grace. The doctrine of the Divine Indwelling of the Most Holy Trinity is the most important of all the principles of the spiritual life. It means that God’s own life is being communicated to us, but beyond the level of our ordinary faculties because of what might be called, to use a modern scientific analogy, its high frequency. It is so high in fact, that only pure faith can access the divine presence in its full actuality.

The doctrine of the Trinity affirms three relationships in the one God, whom tradition calls the Father, the Son (the Eternal Word of the Father), and the Holy Spirit. This is the principal mystery of the Christian faith.

“Father” in this context, encompasses every human relationship that is beautiful, good, and true, but it especially evokes the sense of parenting, of sourcing. The doctrine of the Trinity has been developed in many different theological models over the centuries. Drawing on these models, we can affirm that the Father is the ground of all potentiality. The actualization of that potentiality within the Trinity is the Word. The Word is the Father coming to full expression of all that the Father is. In a sense the Father is nothing until he speaks the Word. He knows who he is only in the Son, only in his interior Word. The Spirit is the common bond of love that flows between the Father and the Son in total self-giving love. In other words, the emptying of the Father — the actualization of all that is contained in infinite potentiality — is expressed totally in the Eternal Word expressed within the Trinity. The Father pours himself into the Son. One might almost say that there is nothing left of Him. The traditional theological doctrine of circumcision teaches that the Father lives in the Son, not in himself. The Son in turn, in confronting this immense goodness that has been handed over completely and freely to him, gives himself back to the Father in a kind of embrace, or what certain Fathers of the Church have called “the most sweet kiss” of the Father and the Son. The Spirit, then, is the love of the Father and the Son, their common heart, so to speak. In the Trinity, there is no self. Everything is self-surrender. Everything is gift. Everything is love. Hence St. John the Evangelist affirms unconditionally, “God is love.”

With the same movement that the Father manifests himself in the Eternal Word, all creation comes into being in and through the Word. Thus the Word is the creative source of everything that exists (see the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel), expressing itself in different ways throughout the different levels of creation. Creation consists of various manifestations of infinite reality without in any way exhausting that reality.

The emptying of the Word in becoming incarnate is the visible expression of what the Father is doing all the time in expressing his interior Word. When that manifestation takes place in creation, it has to be expressed by some form of emptying. Divine love, when it enters creation, has to be
crucified because there is no way in which that love can be fully expressed in created terms without the Father in some sense dying. In creating, God in some way ceases to be God. At least, God ceases to be God in the way he was before creation. God must become totally involved in creation because each creature expresses something of the beauty, the goodness, and the truth of the Eternal Word who is the absolute fullness of God’s expression. Jesus Christ is the fullest manifestation of this extraordinary love that we call unconditional or divine love. This is the heart of the Christian mystery — mystery, not in the sense of an intellectual puzzle, but in the sense of wonder and awe, communicating a delight that is inexpressible and that demands as the only adequate response our total surrender. The Trinitarian relationships, of their very nature, invite us into the stream of divine love that is unconditional and totally self-surrendered. This boundless love emerges from the Father into the Son, and through the Son is communicated to all creation. The invitation is given to every human being to enter into the stream of divine love, or at least to venture a big toe into the river of eternal life. As we let go of our false self, we move into this stream of love that is always flowing and bestowing endless gifts of grace. The more we receive, the more we can give. And as we give, we open the space to receive still more.

When that immense project is translated into creation and, specifically, into human life, we run into difficulties because we arrive at full reflective self-consciousness without the intimate experience of God’s presence and unconditional love. That is one of the points I have emphasized in the Spiritual Journey video tapes and in the book Invitation to Love: we come to full reflective self-consciousness without the experience of intimacy with God and without consciously sharing in the divine life. When we sit in contemplative prayer letting go of our usual flow of thoughts and feelings, which reinforce our false selves, then our hearts are opened by our intentionality to the divine Spirit who is already present. Thus we begin to find out who God is. The divine life is in fact going on within us twenty-four hours a day. Unfortunately we have habits of refusal and opposition that make this access extremely difficult without a disciplined and regular practice of prayer.

The source of Centering Prayer, then, is not some aspiration, expectation, or far off ideal, but rather its source is the transcendent reality of the divine life present within us right now in the measure of our faith. This marvelous gift is given in baptism and even in the desire for God. The latter, I venture to say, applies to many people who do not name God in the same way that Christians do, but who have the desire to enter into union with the Ultimate Reality.

When we are sitting in Centering Prayer, we may seem to be doing nothing, but we are doing perhaps the most important of all functions, which is to become who we are, the unique manifestation of the Word of God that the Spirit designed us to be.

The Trinitarian life is not a strategy, a program, or some kind of box into which we fit. It is rather an activity of grace that enables us to experience ever increasing interior freedom, even to the point that St. Augustine describes, “One has the freedom not to sin,” that is, not to function out of the false self in any way at all. This is the freedom of the children of God.

The source of Centering Prayer is the Trinitarian life. Thus in this prayer we are trying to touch base, so to speak, with a life that is objectively — that is, really — present within us and that we access through faith, hope, and divine love. The exercise of these three theological virtues is precisely the transforming dynamism used by the Spirit to awaken in us the deeper levels of divine awareness. Paul says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1). It is the invincible conviction that we are united to God before we can feel it or know it in any other way except through self-surrender. This is what opens the heart to what Paul calls the inpouring of divine
love. “Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Thus the source of Centering Prayer, as a preparation for the contemplative life, is the Trinitarian life itself, which is going on inside us and is manifested by our desire for God, to seek the truth, and to pray.

The focus of Centering Prayer is Christological. The attraction of grace may have many different forms and aspects, but in the context of the Christian life it is focused on Jesus Christ. This means that as we sit in faith, opening to the fullness of the presence of God within us, we share the dynamic of the Paschal mystery. In other words, when we stop acting out of our false self and the emotional programs for happiness by deliberately entering into silence and solitude during the time of Centering Prayer, we are immersing ourselves in a special way in the Paschal mystery. The Paschal mystery is Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection, the most comprehensive manifestation of who God is, as far as this can be expressed in human terms. The emptying of Jesus is the visible symbol or sign — indeed the actualization in creation — of the infinite emptying of the Ultimate Reality — Infinite Goodness throwing itself away in love.

In the midst of a community praying together in Centering Prayer is the Risen Christ. He is not visible to our eyes, imagination, or senses, but on the spiritual level we intuit the presence of the divine when it is strongly present, as we sometimes do in a sacred shrine and, at times, in our own hearts. The deep conviction of presence beyond words or thoughts that awakens the desire for God is the divine life going on within us, letting a spark of insight or bliss drop into our starving faculties to awaken the fire of divine love when it seems to be going out.

We are living in a world that rejects love and that affirms selfishness as the ultimate value. The pressure from society is constantly insinuating itself through our upbringing, education, and culture. Society as a whole is saturated with the non-God.

First we have to affirm our interior freedom to be who we are or who we want to be in the face of all worldly enticements, including the worldly enticements associated with the spiritual journey. We bring the false self with us into the spiritual journey and into our relationship with God. Perhaps for many years our relationship with God might be termed co-dependent because we deal with God in the magical way that is characteristic of children. An important fruit of contemplative prayer is to be purified of our childish ideas about God. As our idea of God expands, there is no word, no way, no gesture, that can articulate it anymore. Hence we fall into silence, the place we should have been in the first place.

God’s first language is silence. There is no word in the Trinity except the Eternal Word, and that one Word contains everything. As St. John of the Cross writes: “It was said once, and said in absolute silence. And it is only in silence that we hear it.”

We have to climb up to this kind of silence. This language is not taught in the Berlitz repertoire. We have to teach ourselves. The primary teaching of Centering Prayer is basically very simple and can be expressed in two words: “Do it!” It will then do you. But it requires doing it every day. That is extremely important when we consider the other influences that are bearing down upon us. At times in our lives we have to make choices and set up priorities. Once we are dealing with Christ as the primary focus of our prayer, there is no longer a question of simply choosing between good and evil. There is a question of choosing between good, better, and best. The exercises or methods that we used in the beginning may have to be set aside for better tools, and finally for the best tools when we have moved as far as our human faculties can move us with the help of grace. Then without doing anything, silence does everything in us.
There is another important aspect to the fact of Christ as the focus of Centering Prayer. Our intention in sitting down is to open to the presence of Christ, remembering that the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus reveal the mystery of the Trinity more than any other event. We are assimilating the presence of Christ in Centering Prayer, regardless of what we feel and of what thoughts go by, as long as our intention is to identify with that presence.

Christ's passion, as I understand it, is our own human misery. He has taken upon himself all the consequences of the human condition, the chief of which is the feeling of alienation from God. That is the emotion he felt most poignantly on the cross when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is also at the heart of our own experience of the purification of the unconscious. The false self is invited to dissolve through the gradual process in which we come to know the dark side of our personality and our incredible possibilities for evil. But to experience this in the context of a loving God, in the context of being fathered and mothered by the divine life going on within us, is precisely what enables us to face that dark side and our capacity for evil without being blown away.

The metaphor of the spiral staircase that we developed in Chapter 8 emphasizes that as we go down in humility we experience a corresponding level of inner resurrection. The fullness of divine life of course is not permanently established until we come to the bottom of the pile of our emotional junk. The undigested emotional material of a lifetime has to be processed by the Divine Therapist before we can access the fullness of liberation from the false self. As Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me," that is, without accepting what he has accepted. He has entered into and accepted the human condition just as it is for our salvation.

Redemption, in this light, is not a cloak over our sins, but the inner transformation of our attitudes and motivation into the mind and heart of Christ. This process secretly goes on during periods of Centering Prayer. One is sitting, so to speak, on the cross with Christ, identifying with him and relinquishing the obstacles in us that hinder the free flow of divine love.

Normally the signs of resurrection are experienced more in daily life than during prayer itself. Our best criteria for judging whether our faith experience is really bearing fruit is in the growth of our desire for God — not a particular desire for this or that experience, but a general loving hunger for God. This is the most certain sign that the divine life is becoming healthy, strong, and powerful within us.

When we are doing Centering Prayer in a group, we access the contact that each of us has already made with the divine presence within us. This is our special gift to the group. The presence of Christ becomes more powerful because of our respective contributions to the interior silence of the assembled community. The intensity of that reservoir of interior silence enriches everybody at a deeper level than they might be able to reach alone.

The third theological principle on which Centering Prayer is based is that Centering Prayer is ecclesial in its effects — ecclesial in the sense of the original meaning of the word, which indicates a social dimension, function, or reality. Once we begin the spiritual journey, there is no longer merely private prayer. Our prayer becomes a participation in the groanings of the Spirit for all the intentions and needs of the human family. This does not mean that we do not pray for our loved ones at other times. But it does mean that during the periods of Centering Prayer we enter into a sense of oneness with everyone else who is experiencing grace, and with the whole human family. At times we may actually feel this bonding. This bonding is the heart and soul of a Christian community. Without it one wonders how effective a gathering of Christians really is. Gathered to participate intentionally in the Paschal mystery, the Centering Prayer meeting becomes a liturgy without words, a celebration of each one's union with Christ and of our
gratitude for participating in the inner life of the Trinity. Every little drop of that experience is of almost inconceivable value and vastly transcends the assembled community itself. In other words, the divine energy that is accessed by each one’s participation in Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection becomes a kind of universal prayer for the needs of the whole human family. It has a radiation that is truly apostolic, apostolic in the sense of transmitting the grace of Christ into this world.

It also means that our personal creative energies are being awakened. Most of us are probably not using our full potential precisely because we have been sitting on it. Once we have fully identified with the Paschal mystery and are willing to take the aches and pains of purification that are the way to inner resurrection, we may experience in various ways a further call to some kind of ministry. I hesitate to use the word “ministry” because the word is so hackneyed that people think in terms only of concrete activities that are well known. All I can say is that the ministries and the charisms that are announced by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 are only examples of what the Spirit can do once we have identified with this process. Our prayer is certain to have an effect on others and to force us to express this love in daily life. We do not have to think about it too much because, when the time comes, we will know what we are supposed to do or it may happen spontaneously. It may also change several times in our lifetimes, especially if we begin this journey early enough.

The process of bonding throws light on what we mean by the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. The latter is not a club to which virtuous people belong after having paid their dues by way of asceticism, suffering, or austere penances. Still less is it something we access only by physical death. It is, rather, a participation in the divine life that is eternal and that has no past or future because it is entirely present. By becoming present to the present, we become present to everyone in the past and in the future and become their friend. Thereafter we are never alone. I recommend that when you pray alone you think of inviting relatives and friends who have passed on to come and join you. I don’t know what precisely they are doing up there, but they are certainly interested in prayer and in you. The Communion of Saints includes not only those who are canonized, but also your old friends, parents, and ancestors. They are all together now in the love of God. Through contemplative prayer, we are moving into a realm of reality that influences the past and the future perhaps more than anything else we could do.

I would like to share with you an experience I had as a young man because something similar has repeated itself from time to time when I have been sitting in a group doing Centering Prayer, especially with those who are experienced in it and when the silence is deep. As a young college student, recent in my conversion (I had already made up my mind to enter the Trappist order over the strong opposition of my parents), I made a surreptitious trip to the monastery in Valley Falls, Rhode Island, to spend Easter there while pretending that I was staying on campus. Early Easter morning I was in the chapel of the guest quarters attending a private mass. As the celebrant raised the host, all of a sudden without knowing what happened, I was completely identified with Christ present in the host. That insight penetrated the whole of my being and lingered in various degrees of intensity for three days. During this time I hardly spoke to anyone because of the fear of losing the sharpness of that overwhelming grace. It left me with the kind of conviction for which you are willing to die rather than deny that it happened. That moment of absolute certitude, of course, was a special grace for a desperate young man trying to become a Trappist during World War II, when there was little hope of going anywhere except into the armed services.

If you take time to reflect, you may remember that there were certain moments of special grace in your life that ori-
entated you with great power toward the Ultimate Mystery. Some people misinterpret such an experience as arriving at their final goal, or at least as something to hang on to for dear life. That is not the purpose of special graces. They are given in order to introduce us, by briefly lifting a corner of the veil, to the mystery that is actually going on all the time. That mystery is the fact that the Trinity is leading the divine life within us and that the consent of faith — like turning on the switch in a building that has been electrically wired — illuminates our darkness with the divine light. Faith that the divine light is present within us — a conviction, not necessarily an experience — is the primary foundation of Centering Prayer.

In a Centering Prayer community we become one not just with the people in the room and all those truly seeking God; we also become one with everything that God has created: with nature, with art, with relationship with the service of others. This bonding effect gives us an inner desire to form community and to be faithful to it, even if with only one other person.

This bonding may lead in several directions. It gives us a sense of reverence for the tradition, for example, an eagerness to find out where Centering Prayer comes from. If I had started sharing the classics of the Fathers when I started teaching Centering Prayer, few would have paid much attention. We began with a practice that would reduce people’s preconceived ideas about the tradition so that they would have a chance to see it from a new perspective. We used psychological paradigms because that is the language that seems most congenial in our time, at least for people in the West. Once the Centering Prayer practice had gotten established, then the effects of the bonding process began to appear. To some, it suggested a live-in community; to others, retreats of varying intensity to deepen their experience. It also suggested some kind of administrative apparatus designed to help people in their practice and to empower them to empower others. This led to a network or support system called Contemplative Outreach, which provides places and times for ordinary people leading ordinary lives to deepen their practice of contemplative prayer and this growth in the spiritual journey.

Bonding has the dimension of opening us to the possibility of sharing our spiritual experiences with others, not only for the sake of companionship but also for the sake of mutual encouragement. Private experience is not the last word on reality. It is an important factor; we need to follow our own inspirations, but we also need the prudence and humility to submit our experiences to others who are on the same path so that those of us who might be experiencing mere side effects of the process can be guided by those who are more mature in the journey. The contemplative community thus becomes a safeguard against exaggerations like experiences that go to people’s heads or that are interpreted in childish ways. Without a lot of purification our ways of relating to God continue to be influenced by the false self. Bonding involves a willingness to let go of our own preferences and conveniences and to sacrifice them when circumstances or our primary duties require it.

This brings me to the final point: prayer cannot stand alone without action emerging from it. Contemplative prayer without action stagnates, and action without contemplative prayer leads to burn-out or running around in circles. Contemplative prayer sifts our contemplative vision and our ideas about what we should be doing. It enables us to blend the two and to bring the spirit of our contemplative commitment into daily life. The Trinity is always present within us. Our focus on God is not just for the time of prayer but for the whole day. The presence of God is going to accompany us into daily life whether in other forms of prayer, in our relationships, or in our workplace. Without trying to, but just by being in God as you go about your daily functions, you exercise a kind of apostolate. In your very joking you may be pouring grace into the
atmosphere and into other people. All our activities need to come out of this center. Centering Prayer tends not only to access our spiritual nature, but to express the true self. We are coming from an inner freedom that more and more, without our thinking about it, expresses the mind of Christ in our particular daily lives through the welling up and flowing over of the fruits of the Spirit and the Beatitudes.

Thus, as we journey more deeply inward toward the source of Centering Prayer, which is the Trinitarian life within us, its effects lead us powerfully outward, toward the bonding that we call the Communion of Saints: the capacity to relate to one another with the unconditional love with which Christ relates to us.