

# *Los Pequeños Pepper*

Newsletter of Los Pequeños de Cristo  
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## **The Catholic Side of Salvation**

*“Catholicism isn’t about me...” ?!*

By Dr. Jeff Mirus

## **Upcoming Election Alert**

*Progressive funding flows into NM*

By Jose Vasquez

## **Mutants or Mutations: Gregor Mendel and Genetics**

*Someone has been breeding nonsense.*

By Marie P. Loehr

## **Whatever Became of Modesty?**

*And is there a way to promote it again?*

By Alan Peter

## **More Remarkable Albuquerque-Catholic Bulletins**

**&**

## **The Danger of Centering Prayer**

By Rev. John D. Dreher

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*We are an Archdiocesan-wide Catholic lay organization committed to a charitable defense of the Catholic Faith by means of education, communication, and prayer. We are devoted to the Roman Catholic Magisterium, the Holy Father, and to the bishops and clergy in union with him. Our members believe what the Church believes and we promote what the Church teaches. To this end, we believe that no individual, whether cleric or lay person, has the right to alter the substance of the gospel message or moral truths which have been inerrantly and infallibly held by the Catholic Church since Her founding.*

# The Catholic Side of Salvation

By Dr. Jeff Mirus

If non-Catholics can be saved, why does it matter if we become Catholic or remain Catholic, or try to convert others to Catholicism? After following our discussion here on the possibility of salvation for non-Catholics, one of our readers suggested that it would be very useful to address that question. I agree. If a person can be saved regardless of the religion (or no religion) in which he finds himself, why should we cling to our Faith and attempt to share it with others?

There is, of course, a Catch-22 here, because once you understand the value of Catholicism, the question is closed. It may be all very well for someone else to remain non-Catholic, but once one knows what Catholicism is, it is clear that to reject it is to turn one's back on God and His Providence. So those who understand their Faith—but who just once in a while wish it could be otherwise—have eliminated by their own conscious knowledge whatever “hope” for escape they might otherwise have had! If you're a good Catholic who is tempted by a questionable way to make money, by a romantic dalliance to which you have no right, by a wish that various charitable causes would simply leave you alone (ahem), or by the prospect of lying abed on Sunday morning after having partied all through Saturday evening and Saturday night—well, sorry, but as the saying goes, you're hoist with your own petard.

In plain English, you're blown up by your own bomb, and you know it. Ultimately you don't mind unless you're really in a personal crisis, because you already understand that the Catholic Church offers the fullness of what God the Father has made available in Christ for our salvation and that, in consequence, the Church is far and away the easiest and most certain road to eternal happiness. Finally, in knowing that, you also know two other things. First, you know that if you turn your back on the Church, you're rejecting God and the Good you know, which makes salvation impossible in any context. Second, you know that you have an incomparably valuable and wonderful gift which, if you really care about anybody but yourself, you'll want to share with others.

Now while this is the whole answer in brief, there are much richer ways of expressing it. One of the problems that prevents us from expressing this richness is our preoccupation with the question of personal salvation. I'm reminded of the evangelical Christians who used to walk up to me at college and ask me whether I was saved. Indeed, ever since sectarian divisions arose in the 16th century, even Catholics have thought more about their Faith in terms of salvation than they did before. As recently as the first half of the twentieth century, this preoccupation with the question of salvation too often took center stage in ordinary Catholic life. Thus it has often been said, including by theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger, that there was a strong cultural tendency among Catholics at that time to live the Faith *prescriptively*: Just give me the rules; tell me the minimum set of things I have to do to get to Heaven; oh, and let me know what it takes to make Purgatory, too.

Yet this almost exclusive focus on the question of salvation actually looks at the Faith from the wrong end, defining it too much in terms of one ego-centric result. I don't mean to say that personal salvation is unimportant. Certainly Our Lord talked about it. But thinking about religion primarily in terms of personal salvation is an essentially Protestant idea. A religious scholar named Paul Hacker actually turned this problem into an extraordinarily perceptive book about the Protestant Reformation entitled *The Ego in Faith*. The serious Protestant wants to know if a man has accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior. In broad terms, the purpose of religion for Protestants is to gain salvation. The essential and far richer purpose for Catholics, however, has always been to give glory to God.

Now as soon as we say this, we grasp instantly that it is true, but how often do we forget! And once we remember that it is true, we suddenly start looking at religion from the right end again; we turn the whole thing right side up. At its very core, Catholicism *isn't about me*, or at least not primarily. It's about God. And secondarily, it's about my relationship with God, and yours, and every human person's.

God is pure being, without beginning or end, the one whose essence is existence, the only one who can truthfully call Himself “I am who am” (Ex 3:14). He is so awesomely beyond and above us that our only appropriate response is: “Glory!” He is also the Creator of everything else that exists, all of which depends completely and utterly upon Him. Again, “Glory be to God!” And He is a Trinity of burning love, by His very nature impelled to share Himself in love with others, whom He has created simply to be loved, to know what it means to be in love. Once again, “Glory!”

Finally, to draw us into this ecstasy of love, He makes Himself present to us through the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. And after Jesus Christ came into the world, taught us everything we needed to know about the Father, es-

tablished His Church and prepared for His final act of obedience to the Father's will, what does He say to the Father about His purpose and the purpose of His disciples? He says it is all for the glory of God. Read Saint John's Gospel:

I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do; and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made. I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word. Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee; for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me. I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them. (Jn 17:4-10)

To give glory to God, we must keep His every word, insofar as we know it; and if we are so blessed as to know all His words through His only begotten Son, then we must embrace and live in the very Word of God Himself. This is not a demand so much as a gift. Remember that the central task of the Word in history is to reconcile us to the Father or, as I said above, to bring us into an ecstatic union of love with Him. To conceive of this as a burden, or to weigh it up in terms of a series of requirements, is to miss the point entirely. But we cannot be caught up in an ecstasy of infinite love merely by offering our own natural and finite love. Thus a central feature of God's plan is that He should actually share His Divine life with us, not only loving us but enabling us to love Him back with His own supernatural love, now made our own through grace.

At last we are getting somewhere in answering our question of why we should become Catholic, or remain Catholic, or bring others to Catholicism. To respond to God as He so ardently wishes, by drawing into a union of love with Him, we need all the assistance we can get: All the knowledge of Himself that He has provided; all the guidance He has given as to the attitudes and behaviors we need to modify in order to love properly; and as large a share in His very life—that is, as much grace—as we can pack in. These things come to man through Christ and His Holy Spirit operating in and through the Catholic Church—the Church Christ founded and committed to Peter and the Twelve, the leaders of the Church of whom He said so very clearly: “He who hears you hears me” (Lk 10:16).

The Catholic Church is a veritable engine of unity with God. Her structures and sacred hierarchy, her Faith and securely infallible teaching, her sacramental life of grace, and her very members—sinners in flux, with all their faults—are also Christ's mystical body, the locus of his presence on earth, and the ultimate source and font of every grace to all, even those outside her visible borders. To enjoy the gift of God's saving love fully, to draw into the fullest possible union with Him, and so to glorify Him to the best of our ability as He wishes to be glorified, we must participate as vigorously in the Church as we know how, and we must share this immense gift with others as much as we can. For indeed it would be churlish on our part, and more than worthy of condemnation, to be willfully satisfied with anything less than all that God has offered—as if to spurn our Lover's gifts.

This same criterion of willful satisfaction applies equally to all persons, and the Church's teaching on salvation both within and outside of the Church's sacramental system depends on this very thing: We must not turn away from whatever Good we know, and we must always seek earnestly to know more of the Good, and ultimately know the Author of all that is good. Because Catholics have the opportunity to participate more richly than anyone else in this knowledge and in the grace to grow into union with the only One who can truly be called “good” (Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19), Catholics possess incomparable blessings—blessings on which they are bound, so to speak, to capitalize. Remember the parable of the talents (Mt 25)!

So far we have been considering this matter from the personal point of view, which is valid enough, but it is also necessary to broaden it to its full scope, and ultimately to the new heavens and the new earth promised to us by Christ Himself (2 Pet 3). For Our Lord came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, which even now through the Church grows like the proverbial mustard seed in the hearts of men. This Kingdom has, inescapably, a social dimension, an outflowing to others of the love we share with God. Indeed, since the Church worships and grows as a community, its individual members are part of a community of love, a community which extends itself to all in every need, both natural and supernatural.

The reign of God has already begun in Christ: “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28). It is made present each time we share the love of God that we have received, glorifying Him by keeping His words, by living in Christ—that is, by doing His will. Those of us in the West are beginning again to see, with the decline of Christian influence, what we once took for granted: The enormous decline in genuine care for one another and the immense misguidedness of human efforts to make things better. In other places which are becoming heavily Christian for the first time, people can see this from the opposite side: How much more mutual help there is, and how much better-directed human effort becomes, under the

influence of Christ!

The Kingdom of God struggles against the darkness, of course, and appears often to be intermingled with it. But insofar as Catholics become better and more numerous, and insofar as they invest the social order with Catholic teaching and the love of Christ, so does the Kingdom of God penetrate the world more widely and deeply in both its natural and supernatural dimensions. For grace, while it does not replace nature, always perfects it.

This matter of extending the Kingdom of God brings me to a final point. God wishes to be glorified by entering into a union of love with you and me, and He also wishes to be glorified by this union with every soul. It is for this reason that He has made His Church a font of grace, and for this reason He has also given it a missionary charge: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). This is a clarion call to make converts, insofar as we are able, for the glory of God, a process of glorification which also includes that other little result, personal salvation.

But there is a deeper mode of participation in Christ’s work than missionary work. St. Paul put it this way: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). By an almost incredible act of condescension, God makes us partners with Christ in doing exactly what Christ Himself claimed His supreme sacrifice would do: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn 12:32). This is, if you will, a stunning amplification of the parable of the talents. Indeed, to whom much has been given, from him much will be expected. We Catholics are privileged—yes, *privileged*—to become so intimately united with Christ that we can enhance in our own lives His very sufferings for the good of the Church. Note that the other side of this rare coin is the supremely high calling to help extend Christ’s salvific power.

We possess, then, by virtue of being Catholic, a share in the spiritual responsibility for all of our brothers and sisters, both within and outside the visible borders of the Catholic Church. We are called to make reparation for sin, to win forgiveness, and to increase the flow of grace available to all those who, in whatsoever condition, are or should be struggling to know and follow the good that must ultimately lead to God through Christ. By our own holiness, which is a deep union with God through the effective appropriation of grace, we are invited—no, we are actually expected—to strengthen and increase the mysterious ways in which the Holy Spirit, flowing out from Christ and His Church, touches the hearts of each and every person in the continuous drama of bringing all of them closer to their Father in Heaven.

Above all we are called to do this by our intense glorification of Christ in the Church, by which we offer everything we have to Him and with Him to the Father for the sake of souls. How was it that Saint Paul described God’s method? To his saints, said the Apostle, “God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). It is Christ we proclaim, Paul continued, “warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ” (Col 1:28).

Being Catholic is our glory, the glory due to God, and an incomparable potential gift to every man, woman and child whom God calls son, daughter and friend. Here we find glory upon glory. Ultimately, that is why we are to become Catholic, to remain Catholic, and to do all we can to draw others to embrace Catholicism. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam. To the greater glory of God!* ✠

*Jeffrey Mirus is the President of [CatholicCulture.org](http://CatholicCulture.org). Readers can subscribe to the Catholic Culture newsletter and support Catholic Culture’s work through that website.*

# Upcoming Election Alert

By Jose Vasquez

During the 2008 election cycle, seven conservative New Mexico legislators were defeated primarily as the result of money and manipulative tactics flowing into the state from one source, the homosexual lobby. As these legislators were replaced, members of New Mexico's liberal wing bragged that homosexual marriages would be taking place on the steps of the state capitol by Valentine's Day, 2009.

Now it's been revealed that 19 New Mexico legislators had been targeted for removal. In a revealing publication entitled "The Blueprint: How the Democrats Won Colorado (And Why Republicans Everywhere Should Care)," authors Adam Schrager and Rob Witwer pull back the curtain on "the Gang of Four" and their manipulation of our state's election. And 2008 was just the beginning.

The book outlines the effective means by which 3 homosexual billionaires, lead by Tim Gill, and one billionaire heiress with a homosexual brother, managed to "buy" the Colorado legislature, turning it from a red state to a blue state in a few short years. "The Blueprint" outlines a plan to duplicate the effort in New Mexico.

The publication is a "must read" for anyone interested in ethical elections and a state government ruled by the will of the people, not by the homosexual lobby. New Mexico is on target, like Colorado, for purchase by "The Gang of Four," the super-wealthy homosexuals with a "progressive" agenda for our state.

We would urge everyone to read "The Blueprint" - and then ask and examine the source of your candidate's funding. (A new favorite tactic utilized by the "Gang of Four" is to create non-profit organizations who are not required to reveal their contributors.)

This much is known for sure about the upcoming election: Mr. Tim Gill has already contributed \$100,000.00 to the New Mexico Democratic Party. ⚡

*Jose Vasquez publishes the New Mexico Watchman, which can be subscribed at: [www.nmwatchman.com](http://www.nmwatchman.com)*

# Mutants or Mutations: Gregor Mendel and Genetics

By Marie P. Loehr

*Even the very hairs on your heads are all numbered . . .* – Matthew 10:30

Most commentaries take the above quote from Matthew to mean that God is concerned about our individual lives and persons down to the very smallest detail. So He is. But this meaning develops exponentially when we examine genetics down to the DNA of all living things. DNA reveals that there is no cell in any organic living creature that does not bear that particular creature's individual stamp, a biological bar code, so to speak. We are each as unique as individual snowflakes. We are each numbered and identifiable down to the very cells of the very hairs on our heads.

Gregor Mendel laid the foundation for modern genetics in 1866 in his paper, "Experiments in Plant Hybridization," published in *Proceedings of the Natural History Society of Brünn*.

It's not surprising that Mendel, the son of a farmer, whose farm had been in the family for 130 years, might be interested in plant breeding and development. What is surprising is that his physics professor on the secondary level suggested he should consider the monastic life. Mendel took this advice. In short, he was an Augustinian priest and monk, who later became the abbot of his monastery, St. Thomas, at Brno in the Austro-Hungarian empire.

He studied at the university in Vienna after his ordination, and returned to the abbey as a teacher, primarily of physics. But he was encouraged by both his university professors and his fellow monastics to study variation in plants. Modern genetics had its initial development in a monastery garden, no less.

So much for the canard that the Church frowns on science or discourages intellectual knowledge and growth.

Disappearing after his death, his work was not re-discovered until the opening of the 20th century. His experiments could be tested, and most important of all, be duplicated in their effects and results. Such replication is essential to proving the validity of a scientific hypothesis.

He had also developed a large sampling by using the common pea as his subject, producing numerous generations of peas exemplifying the transmission of specific traits over a long period of time.

Although he did not provide the name of genes to what he called units, nevertheless he was soon recognized by his 20th century successors in biology and genetics as the father of that science in fact.

What he observed and noted in his experiments can be summed up in two primary laws.

- 1] the principle of segregation
- 2] the principle of independent assortment

Later researchers, working with many different species—plant and animal—developed the concept of units or factors as "genes." Using increasingly sophisticated instrumentation, later the new generation of geneticists discovered cell division, the number of chromosomes passed on to each offspring from its maternal and paternal progenitors, the DNA helix, and RNA. In our era we have seen the mapping of the entire human genome.

Beyond the simple biological reality and practicality, in examining the gene, and how physical traits are passed from one generation to the next, we also encounter the intersection of spirit and matter.

The in-forming spirit expresses itself and its personal essence in the genetic traits that stimulate each creature's development and behavior. These traits are not only physical, as in eye color, hair color, height or dexterity. Animal breeders have bred for characteristics we might term "interior," as well. These are intangibles such as intelligence, temperament, empathy, and such. In humans, this is a matter of aesthetic gifts and talents, what might be called spiritual traits, beyond mere physical or material characteristics.

Our genes are the palette the in-forming spirit uses to create a whole person, and a full personality. It is entirely fitting that the Father of Genetics should also be a spiritual "father," a priest ordained to transmit the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ to His people.

The question remains whether we can assign the concepts of mutant and mutation to Mendel's discoveries!

Mutation simply means change, and in genetics a permanent change in the specific traits passed to the next generation. Blue lobsters are a true color mutation, that is, one that is permanent and transmissible over many generations, adding new combinations and possibilities to the genetic pool of lobsters, although—according to Mendelian law—independent of meatiness and flavor.

Mutations can be advanced through selective breeding, chemicals, radiation, or viruses. They can also be caused by glitches in the process of DNA replication, during its transmission in breeding and conception. Some mutations will be beneficial, others not so. Although the word “mutant”, used as noun or adjective, simply means the product of mutation, sci-fi and Hollywood B-movies have made it a pejorative.

Fictional mutants, like Godzilla, and the giant ants in “Them”, are invariably a hazard to human life and civilization.

In the furor over the cloning of Dolly the Sheep a few years ago, bizarre understandings of the nature of human clones, should such be possible or permissible, abounded. Some ministers assumed clones would have no souls. Other intellectuals thought they would all be identical, impersonal even. This was nonsense, and Mendel would have shaken his head at such ideas. That which is transmissibly human cannot even begin development unless the principle of life informs it, and triggers such growth and life and development.

Where there is cell division, there is life. Where there is life, there informing individual spirit, our essence, is at work. And the Holy Spirit is present as well, brooding over the waters of ALL Genesis and genesis. This is true, whether we speak of plants and their limited vegetative souls, animals with their simply sentient souls, as Aquinas describes them in his *Summa*, or humans made in the image and likeness of God Himself. Now, and forever.

Amen. ☞

**Mutations of an organism’s DNA are counter-productive — except in the business of fiction.** “There have been a few arguable cases of information-gaining mutations, but for evolution to be true, there would need to be *billions* of them. The fact is, we don’t observe this in nature, but rather, we see the opposite—organisms losing information. Organisms are changing, but the change is in the wrong direction!” - Bodie Hodge, “Are mutations part of the ‘engine’ of evolution?”

# Whatever Became of Modesty?

By Alan Peter

When did it become acceptable for teenage boys to wear “sagger” jeans and a black T-shirt promoting beer or rock ‘n roll, to church? When did grown men start wearing shorts and sandals to church? When did women start wearing *décolletage* and nearly exposing *derrière* in church?

Maybe no one ever taught these Catholics how to dress for Mass? There is a wonderful scene in Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Mary Magdalene is watching her Savior’s crucifixion. She doesn’t yet understand *why*, but she does understand *what*. Therefore, she instinctively covers her head, because she personally knows *Who*. If the Mass is the un-bloody re-presentation of the Sacrifice on Calvary, then nothing has changed in 2000 years. That makes a St. Padre Pio completely understandable - as an *alter Christus*, he took Our Lord’s suffering upon himself and for his congregation, in reparation for sins and to assist the Poor Souls in Purgatory.

If the congregation wants to “actively participate” in the Mass, they might ask for supernatural help to make the same total commitment of this good and holy priest. If they are unable to make so great a sacrifice, they can at least attempt the same humility - humility before the Creator that recognizes the greatness of the Gift, and our own sinfulness. Humility that, like Mary Magdalene, says I want to cover my sinfulness with modesty and devotion.

Some times, I will ride the city bus along the original East/West thoroughfare here in Albuquerque, Central Avenue. Occasionally a prostitute will get on the bus. Although most definitely dressed immodestly, she rarely revels in her attire, but rather seeks to cover herself as best she can from roving eyes. Her conscience still burns with shame, and no pride in her lifestyle or mode of dress wells up in her heart. Modesty remains a goal, albeit unattainable just then.

How, then, do Catholic men and women not know what this poor girl feels in her heart? After the fall in the Garden of Eden, we read that “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig-leaves together and made themselves coverings [Gen. 3,7]. But these *coverings* were not acceptable to God, for it is written the “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and *clothed* them [Gen. 3,21]. Is this age in some way more enlightened than Adam and Eve? If so, maybe the parents can explain it to me? If not, maybe the priests of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe can teach modesty from the pulpit? If not, maybe the Archbishop can make modesty a condition for Confirmation? ❧

# More Remarkable Albuquerque-Catholic Bulletins

From the July 11, 2010 bulletin of Risen Savior:

## Catholic Questions You've Always Wanted To Ask...

*“Posted on your bulletin board: Catholic Renewal Center offering retreats which include Centering Prayer, Labyrinth and other meditation experiences. Are these not New Age practices?”*

The best answer is “no,” in and of themselves they are not. When used correctly, these are Spirituality practices. We all are called to engage in “centering prayer” as we prepare ourselves for Mass. We lay the problems and cares of the world at the feet of God and endeavor to put ourselves into His presence. Those who enter into prayer seeking themselves and the fulfillment of their own desires, instead of seeking God and his will, are not entering into what the Church would call “prayer.” As for Labyrinths as a form of prayer: many of Europe’s great Cathedrals were built in the Middle-ages with prayer labyrinths embedded in their floors. Unlike a maze which can take one in many directions, the labyrinth has only one path on which one cannot get lost, serving as a powerful symbol of our journey toward God. Much like the Stations of the Cross includes walking from station to station, the labyrinth employs one’s body, mind and spirit in the quest for God.

**Thank you for asking questions. We enjoy the opportunity to serve you, So please keep them coming!**

**Just drop them in the box in the lobby and we’ll answer them as quickly as we can!**

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## The Danger of Centering Prayer

By Rev. John D. Dreher

In the mid-seventies, Trappist Abbot Thomas Keating asked the monks, “Could we put the Christian tradition into a form that would be accessible to people ... who have been instructed in an Eastern technique and might be inspired to return to their Christian roots if they knew there was something similar in the Christian tradition?” (*Intimacy with God*, 15). Frs. William Menniger and M. Basil Pennington took up the challenge, and centering prayer is the result. In a few short years it has spread all over the world.

Centering prayer originated in St. Joseph’s Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. During the twenty years (1961-1981) when Keating was abbot, St. Joseph’s held dialogues with Buddhist and Hindu representatives, and a Zen master gave a week-long retreat to the monks. A former Trappist monk who had become a Transcendental Meditation teacher also gave a session to the monks.

Many people assume centering prayer is compatible with Catholic tradition, but in fact the techniques of centering prayer are neither Christian nor prayer. They are at the level of human faculties and as such are an operation of man, not of God. The deception and dangers can be grave.

Centering prayer differs from Christian prayer in that the intent of the technique is to bring the practitioner to the center of his own being. There he is, supposedly, to experience the presence of the God who indwells him. Christian prayer, on the contrary, centers upon God in a relational way, as someone apart from oneself. The Christian knows a God who is personal, yet who, as Creator, infinitely transcends his creature. God is wholly other than man. It is also crucial to Christian prayer that God engages man’s whole being in response, not just his interior life. In the view of centering prayer, the immanence of God somehow makes the transcendence of God available to human techniques and experience.

Centering prayer is essentially a form of self-hypnosis. It makes use of a “mantra,” a word repeated over and over to focus the mind while striving by one’s will to go deep within oneself. The effects are a hypnotic-like state: concentration upon one thing, disengagement from other stimuli, a high degree of openness to suggestion, a psychological and physiological condition that externally resembles sleep but in which consciousness is interiorized and the mind subject to suggestion. After reading a published description of centering prayer, a psychology professor said, “Your question is, is this hypnosis? Sure it is.” He said the state can be verified physiologically by the drop in blood pressure, respiratory rate, lactic acid level in the blood, and the galvanic conductivity of the skin. Abbot Keating relates that, when they began doing the centering prayer workshops in the guest house, some of the monks and guests “complained that it was spooky seeing people walking around the guest house like ‘zombies.’” They recognized the symptoms but could not diagnose the illness.

In order to see clearly that centering prayer departs from Catholic tradition, let us review the differences between Christian spirituality and that of Eastern religions. These differences flow, above all, from their concepts of God, of man, and of their relationship. In light of this contrast, we should be able to see more clearly from which of these centering prayer draws its approach and techniques.

In Catholic teaching, all men are creatures, called out of nothingness to know God. All men are also sinners, cut off from God and destined to death. A Christian is one whose life has been reconstituted in Christ. He is no longer in the place and stance of a sinner, that is, apart from God, acting as if he were the ultimate source, measure, and goal of his own behavior. He is in Christ. Henceforth, his life is supposed to originate in Christ and to be directed to God the Father. I say “supposed to” for it is a possibility that must be acted upon. It is not automatic. The grace of baptism must be incarnated in obedience, and, even after baptism, the Christian can choose to conform to Christ or to his fallen nature, that is, to sin.

Eastern religions, in contrast, lack revelation of God as a personal Creator who radically transcends his creatures. Though possessing many praiseworthy elements, they nonetheless seek God as if he were part of the universe, rather than its Creator. This is because they are monistic, seeing all reality as one. Thus, God is a dimension, though hidden, of the same reality of which man is a part. The goal therefore is to peel away the exterior world to get to the spiritual reality beneath it. God is conceived of as an impersonal state of being. In contrast, for Christians, God is the Real, and the whole of the universe exists by God’s free choice; creation is a second, contingent reality and, in Christian thought, did not need to exist. Moreover, this contingent universe is the result of a God who is vastly more than mere being; he is a loving Father.

These differing conceptions of God issue in different approaches to God. In the East, human means are necessarily relied upon to come to God. The goal is not to seek God as an Other, but to achieve an altered state of consciousness. Where a Christian seeks dialogue and interaction with God and, with his help, the “restoration of all things in Christ,” by a certain “participation in the divine nature” (2 Peter 4:4), the East seeks God in the self and seeks escape from the distractions of the outer world. The “experience of God” is essentially achieved by psychological and physiological technique rather than by encounter.

The confusion of technique over encounter arises from a misunderstanding of the indwelling of God. The fact that God indwells us does not mean that we can capture him by techniques. Nor does it mean that we are identical with him in our deepest self. Rather, God indwells us by grace which does not blend human and divine natures. On the contrary, it perfects and empowers our limited human faculties, so that we can relate to him. We can no more manipulate this indwelling of grace by psychological techniques than we can manipulate our existence.

Analogously, children do not come to know the parents who gave them existence by going dead inside themselves or back to the moment of their conception. They come to know their parents by interaction with them. As children use the faculties given them at conception to grow and become like their parents, so we use the faculties given us by the indwelling Spirit to interact with God and to put on Jesus Christ. As children speak to their parents, so we speak to God by the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells us.

This is what the Catholic tradition means by the term “sanctifying grace.” Sanctifying grace is the grace of union with God. By it, we are given a share in the very holiness of God. Sanctifying grace is God’s communication of himself to man. As such, it cannot be experienced by human faculties. However, Sanctifying grace gives us the “faculties” to relate to God. By it, we are given a new and additional “divine nature” and are made “sons and daughters” of God. With childlike simplicity, we can say “our Father.” By incarnating this grace through acts of obedience to God (what the Church calls “actual graces”) we are progressively converted from our sinful nature and “put on Jesus Christ,” participating in the life of Jesus Christ as members of his Body. In the religion of Christ, the Incarnate Lord, there is no disengagement from the external, but rather a dedication of one’s life and the world to God. The goal is not merely a deep inner peace but a sanctification of body, mind, and heart - indeed, of the whole world.

Centering prayer claims for itself the experience of God, while setting aside external realities and overcoming the “otherness” of God. It takes these characteristics not from Christian tradition but from Hinduism, through the medium of Transcendental Meditation. TM is Hinduism adapted by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a Hindu guru, for use in a Western cultural setting. Fr. Pennington, one of the authors of centering prayer and an ardent supporter of TM, says, “Mahesh Yogi, employing the terminology of the ancient Vedic tradition, speaks of this [practice of TM] ‘to plunge into deep, deep rest for fifteen or twenty minutes twice a day’ as experiencing the Absolute. The Christian knows by faith that this Absolute is our God of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. When he goes to his deepest self, he finds in himself an image and participation of God, and he finds God himself.”

Fr. Pennington approves a Christian’s participation in TM, despite the fact that the introductory ceremony to TM, the Puja, involves worship of a dead Hindu guru and that the mantras given those being initiated are in fact the names of Hindu gods. For a Christian knowingly to participate in TM is a violation of the Second Commandment against false worship.

What is to be said of this claim? Archimandrite Sophrony of Mount Athos and an authority in Orthodox spirituality, speaks from his own personal story. He was for years involved in Eastern religions, before he returned to the Orthodox faith of his youth. I quote him at length, for he speaks with clarity and power:

“In advising against being carried away by artificial practices such as Transcendental Meditation I am but repeating the age-old message of the Church.... The way of the Fathers requires firm faith and long patience, whereas our contemporaries want to seize every spiritual gift, including even direct contemplation of the Absolute God, by force and speedily, and will often draw a parallel between prayer in the Name of Jesus and yoga or Transcendental Meditation and the like. I must stress the danger of such errors.... He is deluded who endeavors to divest himself mentally of all that is transitory and relative in order to cross some invisible threshold, to realize his eternal origin, his identity with the Source of all that exists, in order to return and merge with him, the nameless transpersonal Absolute. Such exercises have enabled many to rise to suprarational contemplation of being, to experience a certain mystical trepidation, to know the state of silence of mind, when mind goes beyond the boundaries of time and space. In such like states man may feel the peacefulness of being withdrawn from the continually changing phenomena of the visible world, may even have a certain experience of eternity. But the God of Truth, the Living God, is not in all this.

“It is man’s own beauty, created in the image of God, that is contemplated and seen as divinity, whereas he himself still continues within the confines of his creatureliness. This is a vastly important concern. The tragedy of the matter lies in the fact that man sees a mirage which, in his longing for eternal life, he mistakes for a genuine oasis. This impersonal form of ascetics leads finally to an assertion of the divine principle in the very nature of man. Man is then drawn to the idea of self-deification—the cause of the original Fall. The man who is blinded by the imaginary majesty of what he contemplates has in fact set his foot on the path to self-destruction. He has discarded the revelation of a personal God.... The movement into the depths of his own being is nothing else but attraction towards the non-being from which we were called by the will of the Creator” (*His Life is Mine*, 115-116).

In short, true prayer goes to God from the center of one’s being, not in the center of one’s being. In authentic contemplation, our faculties are brought to God, not disengaged as they are in TM. Christianity seeks to redeem and restore man and the world in Christ. To seek escape from rather than to redeem the world is to set oneself against the mission of Christ. That is why even the Jesus Prayer and the rosary (often cited as Christian “mantras”) are deeply charged with basic Christian theological content; they are used to relate in an interactive and personal way to the Lord and to the Virgin Mary. For a similar reason, Catholic spiritual writers consistently insist a person must have a moral life and spiritual maturity before entering upon a life dedicated to contemplation. A person who seeks contemplation must first steep his mind in the word of God, conform his behavior to the moral law, submit his body to the spirit by asceticism, subjugate his will in humility to the will of God, and take on a heart given over to the love of God and neighbor. These means are incarnational and redemptive.

The book often claimed as a precedent for centering prayer is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by an unknown fourteenth-century English author. But the claim is in vain, for *The Cloud of Unknowing* clearly repudiates the emphasis given in centering prayer to techniques: “I am trying to make clear with words what experience teaches more convincingly, that techniques and methods are ultimately useless for awakening contemplative love.” *The Cloud* must be seen in its historic context. Though its emphasis is on the “negative way,” we must remember that it presupposes its reader is well grounded in the “positive way” to God by means of the word of God, creation, and sacramental means. When this prerequisite is met, a book like this can help prayer to go beyond creatures to the Uncreated God. But to see *The Cloud* as pointing us to technique (as centering prayer does) is profoundly to misread the text.

Some of those who promote centering prayer employ questionable practices. For example, I first experienced centering prayer during a retreat whose announced topic and method had nothing to do with it. Without explanation, the director conducted us into centering prayer. At first I followed the instructions, but, not liking the feel of it, I made the decision to ignore the instructions. The retreat master, even by secular standards, acted unethically in not giving us an understanding and choice in the matter.

Nor is this uncommon. I know of an incident where several thousand people attending a charismatic conference were brought into centering prayer, again without explanation or choice. This incident was particularly objectionable, because the priest who was leading the session did not even bother with a Christian “mantra” but used an explicit hypnotic technique (e.g., “Imagine you are on an elevator. You begin going down, down inside yourself. The twenty-first floor, the twentieth floor,” etc.). In many Catholic schools, teachers and officials have made centering prayer part of religious exercises without parental notice, understanding, or choice. Equally questionable is the setting aside of traditional safeguards. Centering prayer is often offered to large groups, where there is no way of knowing the psychological and spiritual problems some people may have. And this can be very dangerous indeed, leading to any of the following: (1) The delusion that one has found and pleased God, when in fact he has not. God is not part of the universe. The attempt to reach God by human technique is not only futile, but objectively sinful. (2) A self-absorption which forgets that life in the Triune God is relationships and that we have been inserted into these relationships through Christ. People who come out of this type of prayer often express it as coming into a freedom they did not know that they had lost. (3) The danger of opening oneself to evil spirits. Such techniques can bring people in touch with the spiritual realm. But the spiritual realm includes not only God but human and angelic spirits. A person with a problem in a moral or psychological area can open himself to some degree of demonic influence.

A mother wrote to ask me for advice: “In the Catholic school in [name of town], Sister has been using this [centering prayer and use of the Jesus Prayer] in the religion classes. My ten-year-old daughter took to it right away. This was about two-and-a-half years ago. The things she shared with me that Jesus had told her didn’t appear to me to be imagination. They made her feel very close to Jesus. About six weeks ago, Kristy started having difficulty going to sleep. She didn’t want to stay in her own room and would lie there afraid to close her eyes, until I would let her go into her sister’s room and sleep with her. Finally she confided in me that she would see something scary if she closed her eyes. A few days ago, she confided that it laughed. Kristy had used the centering prayer on her own at bedtime for some time before this fear started.”

What happened to Kristy? The laughter is very characteristic of evil spirits. It would have taken personal contact and prayerful discernment to know for sure. From the description, I would suspect an evil spirit is harassing her. I would doubt that it has any serious hold on her, unless there was immoral behavior or a special vulnerability in her psychological state. I suspect that her use of centering prayer opened her to evil spirits and such harassments.

The past several decades have seen an explosion of groups and movements involved in spiritual and psychic pursuits. Some of these no doubt are of God; some clearly are not. The New Age Movement, which is actually as ancient as the Eastern religions from which it draws its resources, has shown a phenomenal growth. A materialistic civilization is trying to find what it threw away. I believe that the interest is more than a sociological phenomenon and that it is part of a conflict of the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness.

I see the springing up of so many spiritual and psychic movements as part of the rebellion of man and evil spirits against God. The totalitarian movements of the twentieth century managed to capture the major sectors of society, and what destruction they brought on the world! But they fell short of total possession of man. In his interior life, man remained free. Nazism and Communism had some success in penetrating the interior life of man by persuasion, by socioeconomic pressures, and even by the violence of brainwashing.

But the vulnerability of man today to manipulation is much greater than it was even a half-century ago. The moral order and faith in God have drastically declined. Man’s technology and managerial abilities have increased. Tyranny has better tools to dominate others and, more and more, a ripe situation in which to do so. The restraining influences on the work of evil spirits are being stripped away: loss of moral standards, break-up of family life, uprootedness, merely functional relationships, emptiness of meaning. In this context, what centering prayer does, at a minimum, is make respectable the false spiritualities that are rushing in to fill the spiritual void.

My hypothesis is that it is Satan’s strategy, in all these things, to strip away the physiological and psychological forces that, in our fallen state, are a fail-safe protection for the human spirit. (This is a possible interpretation of Paul’s words in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-10 about the lawless one and the force that restrains him.) Thus, he can hope

to capture the spirit of man worldwide and establish a kingdom of darkness.

The Catholic Church is the major obstacle to the Devil's plan—and the Lord of it the only hope of mankind. Hence the Church has been the special target of today, as indeed it has been since Pentecost. The rapid spread of centering prayer in the past decade into so many areas which are at the very heart of Catholic faith is, I believe, part of the Devil's strategy against the Church.

Yet none of this has escaped God's hand. As I see it, he has given us the modern world's problems right in the very heart of the Church, so that, when we get our own house in order, we will be in very good shape to bring the gospel to every nation. No Christian can read the Great Commission and fail to have hope for the future. "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. And behold I am with you always" (Matt. 28:18-20). ☞

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