

Below is **Fr. John Dreher's** response to a number of letters critical of his article "The Dangers of Centering Prayer" published in the November 1997 issue of *This Rock*. His response (below) was published in *This Rock* in February 1998. To view the letters as well you can go to the Catholic Answers website—<http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/1998/9802ltrs.asp>

*In the spirit of dialogue, especially with those who have had some involvement with centering prayer, let me highlight the crucial issue: Is centering prayer traditional Catholic contemplative prayer or is it New Age in Christian dress—or, at least, heavily influenced by the New Age? Some correspondents make reference to the "method" of centering prayer, so I will begin my response in that area. But first let me say that I believe in contemplative prayer. I practice it every day, and I am reasonably well read in Catholic mystical theology.*

*1. Method. The guidelines for centering prayer bear similarities to traditional contemplation, enough to package it as Catholic contemplation, but are essentially different.*

*Guideline 1: "Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within." The "sacred word" has an indispensable place within centering prayer (and in Transcendental Meditation, where it is called a "mantra") but is not the heart of the Catholic contemplative tradition. Centering prayer uses the "sacred word" as a focusing device for psychic energies. In Catholic contemplation, when I say or think "Jesus," I intend to relate in a personal way to Jesus. I do not say "love, peace, mercy, silence, stillness, calm, faith, trust," though centering prayer commends them as "sacred words," because these qualities or attributes are not persons. The rosary and the Jesus Prayer, though they undeniably have a calming effect, have a personal and relational content that is primary.*

*Guideline 2: "Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within." What is the nature of "God's presence and action within"? I reiterate two points I made in the article about the indwelling of God: that it does not reduce his transcendence or make him accessible by any technique or method, and that we are not to go to God deep within but from deep within.*

*Guideline 3: "When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word." Distractions are a problem not only in contemplative prayer but in daily life as well. A good spiritual director, in Catholic tradition, might offer one of, say, ten different ways to deal with it, depending on the situation. Guideline 3 is a means of deepening the focus of psychic energies and is a hypnotic technique.*

*What about centering prayer's fruitfulness in dissipating stress and bringing peace? Many report this outcome. I do not dispute the effect, just the cause. The medieval Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck said there is a form of peace that is purely natural: "When a man is bare and imageless in his senses and empty and idle in his higher powers, he enters into a rest through mere nature . . . without the grace of God. These people err gravely. They immerse themselves in an absolute silence that is purely natural, and a false liberty of spirit is born from this. Having drawn the body in upon itself, they are mute, unmoving. . . . They mistake these types of simplicity for those which are reached through God. In reality they have lost God" (John Ruysbroeck, Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage).*

*Guideline 4: "At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes." I am not aware of such an instruction in the Catholic contemplative tradition. It is, however, a common place for emerging from a hypnotic state. The examples of St. Teresa, St. Bernadette, the children of Fatima, Padre Pio, and many others who have experienced states of "trance" are not the same, for these are not "acquired contemplation" (accomplished by human effort) but "infused contemplation" in which God has taken the full initiative.*

2. New Age? The similarities between centering prayer and Transcendental Meditation are striking. "As an ex-TM mediator," says Fr. Finbarr Flanagan, O.F.M., "I find it hard to see any differences between centering prayer and Transcendental Meditation." Frs. Keating, Menninger, and Pennington authored centering prayer at a time when St. Joseph Abbey had received several retreats involving Eastern religions, including Transcendental Meditation. I cited Fr. Pennington's praise for the Hindu guru and author of Transcendental Meditation. This involvement in eclecticism has continued. Fr. Pennington has not just attended an e.s.t (Erhard Sensitivity Training) session but has served on its board. Frs. Keating and Pennington gave endorsements, appearing on the dust jacket, for *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey in Christian Hermeticism*. The tarot is a deck of cards used in fortune telling. Fr. Keating calls the book "the greatest contribution to date toward the rediscovery and renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition." Fr. Pennington says it is "without doubt the most extraordinary work I have ever read." Amity House, the publisher, is heavily New Age. The Library of Congress has classified the book under "occult sciences" and "cartomancy."