

THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER

Consenting to God's Action in the Forge of the Missionary

1. Place of Centering Prayer in Claretian Formation

Claretian formation seeks to shape missionaries who are inwardly free, spiritually grounded, affectively integrated, and apostolically available. This kind of formation cannot be sustained only through activity, study, discipline, or external fidelity. It also requires deep interior spaces in which the person learns to stand before God without self-defence, performance, or restless effort. Centering Prayer serves this formative need by educating the heart in consent rather than control, receptivity rather than spiritual activism, and trust rather than self-production.

Within the Forge of the Missionary, Centering Prayer belongs to the deep interior forge where the most hidden transformation takes place. In many formative practices, the formandus is actively reflecting, speaking, discerning, examining, or offering himself explicitly. In Centering Prayer, however, the emphasis shifts. The person learns to be present before God with fewer supports, fewer words, fewer strategies, and less dependence on conscious effort. This does not make the prayer passive in a superficial sense. It makes it radically receptive. The formandus begins to discover that God can act in him more deeply than his thoughts, emotions, or spiritual techniques can reach.

In the imagery of the Forge, God's indwelling Presence is the Fire that purifies, softens, and reshapes the inner person. Consent is the Hammer, not because the formandus forces himself into change, but because each humble return to consent allows grace to continue its hidden work. Interior stillness is the Anvil upon which the deeper self is gradually freed from false supports, defensive patterns, and ego-driven striving. The formandus is the iron, often resistant, heavy, and marked by accumulated tensions, yet capable of transformation in the hands of the Master Smith. The Holy Spirit is that Master Smith, acting often beyond conscious effort and beneath the surface of ordinary awareness.

Centering Prayer therefore has a particular relevance in Claretian life. The Claretian vocation is apostolic, missionary, and often intense. It involves preaching, service, mobility, planning, responsibility, and availability to urgent needs. Such a life, while generous, can easily become overactive, fragmented, and subtly dependent on visible results. Without a contemplative grounding, zeal can become anxious, preaching can become self-driven, and mission can become an arena of proving rather than a place of offering. Centering Prayer helps protect the missionary from these distortions by anchoring his identity in God rather than in performance.

At the same time, it is important to locate Centering Prayer correctly within the whole life of prayer. It does not replace vocal prayer, meditation on the Word, Eucharistic Adoration, the liturgy, Marian prayer, or apostolic service. It is not a superior method that makes other practices unnecessary. Rather, it deepens the contemplative ground from which all these other practices may flow more freely and more truthfully. It helps create a deeper interior space in which the formandus can hear the Word with greater receptivity, adore with greater simplicity, discern with greater freedom, and act with greater rootedness.

For this reason, Centering Prayer has a legitimate and fruitful place in Claretian formation. It trains the formandus to live from being before doing, from communion before action, and from surrendered presence before apostolic expenditure. In this way, it contributes to the formation of a missionary who is not merely active for God, but inwardly available to God.

2. Spiritual and Formative Meaning of Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is best understood as a method of consenting to God's presence and action within. It is not a technique designed to create special states of consciousness, emotional peace, or spiritual experience. Its purpose is simpler and deeper. It trains the person to let go, with humility and patience, of the constant tendency to grasp, manage, think, evaluate, produce, and control. By doing

so, it creates an interior climate in which grace may work more freely at levels deeper than discursive thought, emotional fluctuation, or imagination.

This consent has great formative significance. Much of human and spiritual immaturity is rooted in subtle forms of control. A person may control through activity, through thought, through explanation, through planning, through anxiety, through religious effort, or even through apparently generous service. He may approach God with sincerity and still remain defended, managing prayer as another task to be done well. Centering Prayer gently challenges this pattern. It teaches the formandus to come before God without needing to produce results, without clinging to ideas, and without measuring the value of prayer by how it feels.

For this reason, Centering Prayer has a purifying function. It gradually exposes attachments, self-protective tendencies, compulsive mental activity, and unconscious emotional patterns. This exposure is often indirect. During the prayer period itself, the person may simply notice distraction, resistance, boredom, sleepiness, impatience, or agitation. Outside the prayer period, however, deeper material may surface in the form of increased self-awareness, emotional sensitivity, unexpected vulnerability, or sharper recognition of one's inner restlessness. All of this can become formative material if it is received with humility and integrated through discernment and accompaniment.

Centering Prayer also has an important healing value. It helps weaken the inner compulsion always to do, solve, prove, or fix. In missionary life, this is particularly important. Many apostolic persons live with a silent pressure to remain useful, effective, available, and productive. Over time, this can create burnout, fatigue, hidden resentment, or a split between external generosity and internal depletion. Centering Prayer begins to heal this by training the person to rest in God without needing to justify his existence through work or visible fruit.

It also develops affective stability and patience. The repeated practice of gently returning to the sacred word teaches the heart not to react harshly to distraction, not to panic over interior noise, and not to demand immediate clarity. The formandus learns to remain, to return, and to trust. This has effects beyond prayer. He becomes less reactive, less governed by impulse, and more capable of living with hidden processes of growth without forcing them.

At a deeper level, Centering Prayer helps anchor missionary identity in God rather than in results. It teaches that the most important truths about oneself are received, not manufactured. The formandus slowly discovers that his deepest identity is not created by competence, apostolic success, or emotional intensity. It is received in relationship with the God who dwells within and acts in hidden ways. In this sense, Centering Prayer forms a contemplative missionary: one who can enter action boldly because he has first learned how to stand humbly in consent before God.

3. Core Principles of the Method (Doctrinal and Formative Clarifications)

To practice Centering Prayer fruitfully and safely in Claretian formation, certain doctrinal and formative principles must remain clear. Without them, the method can be misunderstood, absolutized, or detached from its Christian purpose.

3.1. Centering Prayer Is Consent, Not Emptiness

Centering Prayer is a loving openness to the living God who already dwells within the baptized person. It is not an attempt to create blankness, void, or mental emptiness for its own sake. The heart of the prayer is consent. The formandus is not trying to annihilate thought, erase personality, or disappear into impersonal silence. He is quietly consenting to the presence and action of the Triune God.

This point matters greatly. The aim is not absence, but surrender. Silence is not an end in itself. It is the relational space in which one ceases clinging and becomes more available to God. In Christian understanding, interior silence is meaningful because it is inhabited by grace. The formandus is not

turning inward to be enclosed in himself, but to become available to the God who is nearer to him than he is to himself.

3.2. It Is Not Self-Hypnosis, Technique, or Altered Consciousness

Centering Prayer should never be confused with self-induced trance, auto-suggestion, altered consciousness, or a psychological technique for unusual inner states. The method is intentionally simple, but its simplicity should not be misunderstood as a mechanism for producing spiritual effects. It remains relational, theocentric, and grounded in faith.

The sacred word is not a device to manipulate consciousness. The posture is not a technique of mystical control. The silence is not a search for altered experience. The formandus does not pray in order to “enter a state.” He prays in order to consent to God. This protects the method from confusion and keeps it within Christian sobriety.

3.3. It Does Not Replace Other Forms of Prayer

Centering Prayer is one form of contemplative practice within a wider Christian ecology of prayer. It does not replace meditation on Scripture, Eucharistic Adoration, the liturgy, vocal prayer, the Rosary, Marian devotion, the Examen, or apostolic action. Each of these has its own formative value and theological place.

Centering Prayer deepens other forms of prayer by purifying intention, reducing attachment to spiritual performance, and enlarging the interior space in which one can receive. But it should always remain integrated within the broader life of faith. When isolated or exaggerated, it can become unbalanced. When rightly situated, it becomes a deepening practice that strengthens the contemplative quality of the whole vocation.

3.4. Its Fruits Are Measured in Life, Not During Prayer

The true fruits of Centering Prayer are not measured by what happens during the prayer period itself. They are not measured by calmness, silence, insight, emotional sweetness, or mystical feeling. They are measured in life: in patience, humility, inner freedom, emotional steadiness, simplicity, trust, reduced reactivity, and greater charity.

This principle is essential in formation. Otherwise, the formandus may become preoccupied with experience and begin to evaluate prayer by subjective sensation. Centering Prayer is often hidden in its action. One may feel little, or even feel more distracted than before, and still be undergoing genuine purification. The question is not, “What did I feel in prayer?” but, “What kind of person am I slowly becoming through this prayer?”

4. Practical Guidelines for Formandi

The Method in Four Movements

I. Choosing a Sacred Word

Formative Meaning

The sacred word is a simple symbol of the formandus’ intention to consent to God’s presence and action. It is not magical, and it is not used as a continuous repetition. Its purpose is humble and precise. It serves as a reminder of the person’s fundamental movement of surrender. Whenever he becomes aware that he is engaged with thoughts, feelings, memories, or inner commentary, he returns gently to the sacred word as an expression of renewed consent.

This simplicity is itself formative. The sacred word teaches the person to come back to God without complication. It reduces the tendency to manage prayer intellectually. It trains the heart in straightforward openness rather than in spiritual performance. Over time, this helps the formandus develop a simpler interior life, less crowded by self-analysis and subtle striving.

Guidelines

The word should be chosen prayerfully, with quiet discernment. It should resonate gently rather than dramatically. The point is not to choose the most impressive or emotionally charged word, but one that helps express simple and stable consent.

Possible examples include:

Names: Jesus, Lord, Abba, Maria

Qualities: Love, Mercy, Trust, Peace

Once chosen, the word should ordinarily remain stable for the prayer period and generally for a longer period of practice. Frequent changing can become a subtle form of restlessness or experimentation. Stability helps simplicity.

Alternative: Sacred Gaze

Some formandi may find it more natural to express consent not through a word but through a simple inward gaze toward God. This may be especially true for those whose prayer is less verbal and more affective. The same principles apply. The gaze is not forced or imagined dramatically. It is simply a quiet symbol of receptive presence.

Formative Fruit: This first movement forms clarity of intention, simplicity of heart, and detachment from control. It helps the formandus begin prayer not from self-assertion, but from surrendered availability.

II. Settling into Prayer

Practice

The formandus sits in a relatively comfortable and stable posture, with the back straight and the body at ease. Eyes are closed, and the sacred word is introduced gently, without force, almost like placing a feather on cotton. This image is helpful because it protects the person from aggression toward himself. The sacred word is not imposed. It is received and used lightly.

The settling phase matters more than many realize. It is the moment of crossing from outer activity into inner consent. The body, mind, and emotions are rarely quiet immediately. The person may arrive carrying concerns, fatigue, agitation, expectations, or residue from the day. This is normal. Settling into prayer means allowing oneself to arrive gradually before God without violence and without demanding immediate silence.

Practical Safeguards

The prayer should ordinarily not be done immediately after heavy meals, since bodily heaviness may lead to avoidable drowsiness. If sleep occurs, it need not be treated dramatically. One simply resumes briefly upon waking, if possible. At the same time, the practice should not be used in ways that disrupt healthy sleep rhythms or burden the body unnecessarily. Prudence matters.

The environment should support recollection: quiet, stable, and free from unnecessary disturbance. The body should be respected, because bodily discomfort can easily become a distraction. Yet comfort should not become indulgence. The aim is dignified stability, not self-enclosure.

Formative Fruit: This movement forms body-spirit integration, emotional grounding, and readiness to receive rather than produce. It teaches the person to enter prayer in a gathered way and helps reduce the tendency to approach God with interior haste.

III. Relating to Thoughts

Understanding “Thoughts”

In Centering Prayer, the term *thoughts* include far more than verbal thinking. It includes sensations, feelings, images, memories, reflections, planning, fantasies, and inner commentary. Anything that captures the attention and draws the person into active engagement belongs to this category. Thoughts are not enemies. They are part of ordinary human consciousness.

This point is crucial because many beginners become discouraged when they notice an abundance of inner activity. They imagine they are failing because they are not “empty” or still. In fact, the surfacing of thoughts is normal and expected. The prayer is not about preventing them from arising. It is about changing one’s relationship to them.

Practice

Whenever the formandus notices that he is engaged with a thought, he returns very gently to the sacred word. He does not scold himself. He does not struggle. He does not analyse why the thought came or whether it is spiritually meaningful. He simply returns, with minimal effort and without inner violence.

This repeated return is one of the most formative dimensions of the method. It teaches non-resistance, patience, and freedom from compulsion. Instead of being dragged into every movement of the mind, the person learns to release and return. Over time, this has effects beyond prayer. The formandus becomes less entangled in mental overactivity, less governed by immediate emotional reactions, and more trusting of God’s action beyond his awareness.

At times, the sacred word itself may become very subtle or even seem to disappear. This is normal. One does not force it back anxiously. It remains available whenever needed, but it need not be held in a rigid manner.

Formative Fruit: This movement forms emotional regulation, freedom from compulsive thinking, and trust in God’s action beyond awareness. It gradually weakens the ego’s need to master the inner world through analysis or control.

IV. Closing in Silence

Practice

At the end of the prayer period, usually about twenty minutes, the formandus remains in silence for two or three additional minutes. Eyes remain closed. This brief closing is important because it allows gentle re-entry into ordinary awareness. Without it, the person may end prayer abruptly and lose some of the integrative fruit of the practice.

If the prayer is done in a group, a leader may slowly recite the **Our Father** while others listen attentively. This can serve as a natural bridge between silent consent and explicit communal prayer. The shift should remain calm and unforced.

Formative Meaning

This closing period helps transfer contemplative presence into ordinary life. It teaches the person not to separate prayer sharply from action, as though silence belonged to one world and mission to another. Instead, it allows the quiet receptivity of prayer to begin shaping the next movement of the day.

Formative Fruit: This final movement forms integration, continuity between prayer and action, and a more unified inner rhythm. It helps the formandus carry something of contemplative presence into study, community life, ministry, and decision-making.

5. Recommended Practice in Formation

For Centering Prayer to become truly formative, it must be practiced with enough regularity to shape the inner life. Occasional use may be helpful, but it rarely forms stable dispositions. Like other formative disciplines, its fruits emerge more through fidelity than intensity.

Normative Rhythm

Duration: 20 minutes

Frequency: **Daily** is recommended where possible. At least **4 to 5 times per week** should be considered a realistic minimum if the practice is to become established.

Regularity is especially important because Centering Prayer works slowly and often invisibly. Its formative strength lies in repetition. The repeated act of consenting, returning, and remaining slowly reshapes the person's habitual way of standing before God.

Stages of Formation

Centering Prayer is especially recommended during **Novitiate**, where the emphasis on purification, interior grounding, and healing makes it particularly suitable. It is also highly valuable during **Post-Novitiate**, when the person must learn to preserve contemplative rootedness amid study, pastoral exposure, responsibility, and increasing activity.

In earlier stages, it may be introduced gradually with clear guidance and without pressure. What matters is not imposing uniformity too early, but helping the formandus discover whether this practice can serve his growth in a healthy and integrated way.

6. Practical Exercises

From Consent to Transformation

Exercise 1: Fruits Review (Weekly)

Once a week, the formandus reflects not on the immediate experience of prayer, but on its fruits in daily life. He may ask:

- Where did I experience greater patience this week?
- Where was I less reactive?
- Where did I notice increased interior freedom?
- Where did I act with less anxiety or self-assertion?

This exercise is important because it trains the person to evaluate the prayer rightly. The real action of Centering Prayer often becomes visible outside the prayer period. The formandus begins to notice subtle shifts in tone, response, emotional steadiness, and interior freedom.

Key Insight: The fruits appear outside prayer. This insight protects the practice from self-absorption and keeps it rooted in life.

Exercise 2: Resistance Awareness

At regular moments, especially if the practice begins to feel difficult or avoided, the formandus reflects gently:

- When do I avoid Centering Prayer?
- What feelings arise before or after it?
- Do I feel boredom, fear, impatience, emptiness, irritation, or fatigue?
- What might God be touching beneath this resistance?

This exercise is valuable because resistance often reveals where deeper purification is needed. The person may discover subtle fear of surrender, discomfort with stillness, need for control, or pain that begins to surface when the usual distractions are set aside.

Insights arising from this exercise can be brought to accompaniment. They often become important material for growth.

Exercise 3: Integration with Apostolic Life

Once a week, the formandus reflects on the relation between contemplative consent and missionary action. He may ask:

- How does my missionary activity change when I pray from consent rather than effort?
- Where do I still act from self-assertion?
- When do I try to prove myself through work?
- Where is my zeal rooted in communion, and where is it still rooted in anxiety or image?

This exercise is especially fitting in Claretian formation because it connects the deepest interior prayer with apostolic identity. It prevents Centering Prayer from remaining private and helps the person discover how contemplative surrender reshapes mission.

Exercise 4: Body Awareness in Prayer (Especially Helpful in Early Stages)

After prayer, the formandus takes a brief moment to notice bodily sensations such as tension, calm, heaviness, ease, fatigue, or agitation. He does not analyse them at length. He simply notices them with respect and honesty.

This exercise strengthens embodied awareness and helps the formandus recognize that the body participates in prayer. It can also reveal patterns. For example, certain tensions may consistently accompany anxiety, resistance, or over-effort. Simple bodily awareness can therefore support more truthful self-knowledge and gentler prayer.

Exercise 5: Return Without Harshness

At the end of a week, the formandus reflects on how he returns to the sacred word during prayer. Does he return gently, or with inner irritation? Does he become annoyed by distraction? Does he secretly expect himself to pray “well”?

This exercise reveals the person's deeper attitude toward himself before God. It helps expose perfectionism, spiritual ambition, or self-judgment. The repeated act of gentle return can become a school of humility and self-acceptance under grace.

Exercise 6: Silence and Daily Transitions

The formandus chooses one transition point each day, such as before study, before community prayer, before ministry, or before sleep. He remains still for one minute in silent consent, using the sacred word very lightly if helpful.

This practice helps extend the contemplative attitude of Centering Prayer into daily life. It teaches that consent to God is not confined to formal prayer periods. Missionary life itself can be lived from a centre of surrendered presence.

7. Role of Formators

Formators play a decisive role in ensuring that Centering Prayer remains balanced, integrated, and fruitfully interpreted. Their task is not to control the prayer experience of the formandus, but to guard its place within the whole formative process.

First, they must ensure that Centering Prayer is integrated and not isolated. It should remain connected to the wider life of prayer, community, study, sacramental life, apostolic experience, and accompaniment. If it becomes detached from these, it can be misunderstood as a self-contained spiritual technique.

Second, formators should prevent absolutizing the method. Some formandi may discover Centering Prayer as a deeply helpful practice and become tempted to treat it as the central or highest form of prayer for everyone. This needs gentle correction. The method is valuable, but it is one path within a wider ecclesial and spiritual tradition.

Third, they should normalize dryness, resistance, emotional surfacing, and the apparent lack of visible results. Beginners especially may feel discouraged because the prayer seems uneventful or difficult. Formators should help them understand that these reactions are often part of the process and not signs of failure.

They should also discourage comparison of experiences. Comparison quickly distorts contemplative practice. One person may feel peace, another agitation. One may seem naturally inclined toward silence, another may struggle greatly. None of this provides a simple measure of grace. What matters is fidelity, honesty, and growth in life.

Finally, formators must never evaluate Centering Prayer by subjective spiritual experience alone. Its true measure remains growth in freedom, humility, charity, patience, emotional steadiness, and apostolic rootedness.

8. Accompaniment Guidelines

Centering Prayer often becomes most fruitful when its effects are occasionally interpreted through accompaniment. Not every prayer period needs discussion, but the wider patterns emerging through the practice deserve attention.

A first area to explore is how the formandus relates to control and surrender. Since Centering Prayer is built around consent, it often reveals subtle struggles with letting go. Some may resist silence because they fear losing control. Others may try to perform the method well and become frustrated by their own lack of mastery. Such dynamics can reveal important aspects of the person's inner structure.

A second area is the emotional material emerging outside prayer. Sometimes Centering Prayer does not feel especially dramatic during the prayer period, but it begins to bring deeper material to the surface afterward. Old sadness, fear, anger, vulnerability, fatigue, or longing may become more

noticeable. This should not be rushed into interpretation, but neither should it be ignored. It may be part of God's healing and purifying work.

A third area is the connection between Centering Prayer and affective maturity. Does the formandus become less reactive, more patient, more grounded, and less dependent on external confirmation? Or does he remain fragile, self-preoccupied, or subtly escapist? The practice should gradually support maturity in the whole person.

Helpful accompaniment questions may include:

- What is hardest about "doing nothing" before God?
- Where do you notice greater trust, and where do you notice resistance?
- What seems to surface in you after the prayer rather than during it?
- How does this prayer affect your mission, your relationships, and your sense of self?
- Do you feel more free, or do you feel hidden pressure to perform even here?

If intense emotional material arises consistently, accompaniment may wisely integrate psychological support. This should not be seen as a failure of prayer, but as part of an integral approach to formation. Grace may reveal what also requires human attention and healing.

9. Discernment Criteria

As with every formative practice, Centering Prayer should be discerned by its fruits in the whole person. The question is not merely whether the formandus practices it faithfully, but what kind of person he is becoming through it.

Signs of Healthy Integration

One sign is increased patience and humility. The person becomes less driven by hurry, less harsh toward himself, and more able to remain with hidden processes of growth.

Another sign is reduced compulsive activity. He no longer feels such a constant need to fill space, explain everything, or justify himself through work. His action becomes more grounded and less frantic.

A further sign is greater emotional stability. He notices his interior movements more calmly and reacts less impulsively. He is not free from struggle, but he becomes less dominated by it.

Another sign is deeper trust in God. The person slowly learns that not everything depends on his effort. He becomes more capable of surrender, less anxious about visible results, and more rooted in God's action.

A final sign is mission rooted in being rather than proving. Apostolic life becomes more transparent, more available, and less entangled with ego-driven zeal.

Warning Signs

One warning sign is isolation from other forms of prayer. If the formandus begins to neglect the Word, liturgy, Eucharistic devotion, or other essential dimensions of Christian prayer because of attachment to Centering Prayer, imbalance is present.

Another warning sign is use of prayer to avoid reality. If silence becomes a refuge from relationships, duties, decisions, or community tensions, the practice is becoming defensive rather than formative.

A third warning sign is rigid attachment to the method. If the person becomes legalistic, anxious about technique, or subtly superior because of this practice, then consent has been replaced by control in another form.

A fourth warning sign is confusion about Christian identity or doctrine. If the prayer is interpreted in ways that weaken its Christ-centred, ecclesial, and relational meaning, correction is necessary.

Discernment must always remain Christocentric, ecclesial, integral, and attentive to the full formative process.

10. Concluding Synthesis

Centering Prayer forms the Claretian missionary at a deep level, where identity is not constructed through effort, but received through surrender. In a missionary life that can easily become overactive, externally driven, or subtly dependent on results, this prayer restores the primacy of being before God.

In the Forge of the Spirit, Centering Prayer purifies hidden attachments, grounds zeal in communion, and frees the missionary for deeper availability. It teaches him that the most decisive transformations often happen where he cannot measure them, explain them, or control them. He learns to trust the quiet work of grace.

This prayer does not make the missionary passive. On the contrary, it helps purify action at its source. The missionary who has learned to consent humbly to God's transforming love can act more boldly, more freely, and more truthfully. He is less driven by self-assertion and more available to mission. He can preach with greater simplicity, serve with greater steadiness, and endure hidden processes with greater peace.

For this reason, Centering Prayer has a valuable place in the Practical Manual of Claretian Formation. It helps shape missionaries who do not live only from generosity of effort, but from contemplative depth. It forms men who are capable of action because they have first learned how to stand in surrendered presence before the God who works within them.