*Consenting to the* Divine Presence

We began teaching Centering Prayer using the sacred word as the symbol of consent to God’s presence and action because most retreatants were used to hearing the word of God in scripture and in the liturgy. We thought they would find the use of a sacred word congenial

to their cultural background and religious training. Later we continued to present the prayer in essentially the same way but referred to the other symbols of breath and glance as options that

some might be more attracted to. Some people prefer the sacred breath as their symbol or have tended to move toward the breath as symbol as their practice matures. The breath is what the term “spirit” means in the biblical languages; a symbol of life that is always present. Just noticing the breath is a very gentle, subtle and hardly noticeable practice as we use it.

It is not, as in the Eastern traditions, a practice of following the breath physically or counting the breaths, which are concentrative procedures. In the long run we will tend to lose whatever symbol we choose as we grow into the primary experience of Centering Prayer which is complete self-surrender. Consenting to the presence and action of God is the essence of the practice of Centering Prayer.

Jesus exhorts us in Matthew 6:6 to “go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees in secret, will reward you.” It seems to be a call to hide from our ordinary self-awareness. In any case, you are not thinking of yourself in a prayer that does not have any conceptual content.

I believe that contemplation is an innate capacity of human nature, available to everyone just by being born. We already have it; we just don’t think so. We can’t, of course, acquire pure contemplation by *trying* to get it. That kind of effort is just another ego trip. Some people may say, “just relax, do nothing, and it will arise of itself.” But it is not that simple. No doubt God

works on our psyche in different ways, at different times and on different occasions. The Spirit is softening us up in every way, of which inner purification is one of the most obvious.

To have a state of no thought at all is not the goal. The presence of God is so clear to faith that it doesn’t matter how we are inclined to interpret it at any particular moment. In Centering Prayer we do not think about anything deliberately, not even about our felt experience of God or our felt absence of God. It doesn’t matter. We need to be just as relaxed and at peace with thoughts going by as without thoughts going by. God is just as much in thoughts as in complete silence.

External silence leads to interior silence and interior silence into the letting go of interior dialogue. Then follows a sense of stillness, even though there is always present some attentiveness to God’s presence. As soon as we understand something, we have to be detached from our understanding in order to keep abreast of the exquisite delicacies of the divine action. When we think about our understanding or notice our feelings rather than just being with whatever state we are in, we muddy the waters so that the divine light cannot penetrate to the bottom of our being.

The language of the mystics speaks of waking up and of staying awake. Prayer in secret is not a state of suspended animation. It is rather the habit of disregarding particular perceptions and surrendering to the divine presence just as it presents itself. In this perspective, the absence of God is also God.