

# A Deeper Communion

**The practice of meditation is at the heart of Christian belief and yet somehow it has been lost in mainstream Christian practice. Cynthia Bourgeault, internationally known retreat leader and teacher, talks to Michael Fitzsimons about her mission to spread the recovery of the Christian contemplative path.**

Karl Rahner, one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, once said that in this century Christianity would either recover its mystical bent or die. So, in that context, there seems quite a lot on the line as a random little group gathers at Pa Maria retreat centre in Wellington one autumn Sunday for an intimate conversation with Dr Cynthia Bourgeault.

Cynthia divides her time between solitude in a New England hermitage and travelling globally to promote contemplative prayer practices. She is an academic, an Episcopalian priest, a highly respected author, a mother and grandmother and, as I learn in the course of the afternoon, a keen sailor even or especially in the fog.

Right now, she is an alert presence in the room, small, bird-like, very engaging. She is delighted to be among fellow travelers on the meditation road, some more seasoned than others. She herself has been practicing centering prayer for more than 25 years.

Her wish is to have a conversation rather than give an address but in reality she is the one we are here to listen to. And in that recognisably American way she can talk very well indeed in long flowing sentences, without a scrap of paper to rely on. She is steeped in her topic, relishing any questions that come her way.

Cynthia Bourgeault is a champion of meditation – not as an ephemeral and esoteric activity for the chosen but as the incomparable source of life for us all. According to Cynthia, meditation is “the real formative ground of Christian orthodoxy” with the capacity to “reconnect us to those wellsprings of grace, clear vision and compassionate love so needed in the Church and in the world.”

Crucially, she says, it is a practice for ordinary and busy people living in the world today. The pressing challenge is to recover this vital mystical tradition that has been kept alive over the centuries by monasticism but has somehow been lost in mainstream Christian practice. What is at stake is nothing less than transforming union with God, life as it is meant to be lived, the fullness of life as described and exemplified by Jesus.

“It [the contemplative path] was there in abundance in the early Church but even from the beginning, with the Greek and the scholastic models, trying to format religious experience in philosophical modes has never really captured the whole thing. Particularly from the Renaissance on, with more and more emphasis on rationality and science and objective reason, there is less and less of a place for that other wide span of awareness that comes from mysticism, from beauty, from poetry.”

So what is meditation and contemplation all about?

“I would describe it, as my teacher Thomas Keating likes to say, as a way to take a brief vacation from yourself. It’s the capacity to position yourself in a whole different system of perception.”

“For me it’s very much like seeing in the dark. At first when you go out at night you don’t see anything. You think it’s completely dark but as you sit quietly for a while you begin to notice that you can see. There’s shape and coherence and pattern that you would have missed if you had put on a torch. In that way it gives us a space to make contact with a deeper way of knowing which lies within us and is a kind of dynamic knowing that’s shared between us and the infinite. It’s a relational channel.”

And let’s try the big question, who or what is God?

“ It’s a pity that when we start talking about God, the only kind of language and image system turns God into an ‘other’ – a being, an invisible other, an old man in the sky. I first became aware of what I would call ‘the divine’ as a relational field of a characteristic energy and intensity such that I knew I was in God. I sensed even as a child that putting language on it didn’t work, that what you had to do was just go deeper into finding that place where the universe takes on a coherence that’s palpable and just dwell there. You name it God if you want but I would prefer not to turn it into a philosophical model of the author of everything but just to understand as TS Eliot says in one place, ‘we must be still and still moving into another intensity for a further union, a deeper communion.’

“God is really the experience of moving into that other intensity for the further union and the deeper communion. It’s not like going into an altered state of consciousness, it’s just being able to live in a vibrational field that is so much more alive and engaging and vibrant than when you are living out of your mind.”

So for Cynthia Bourgeault the key to living, and the key to a compassionate life, is the awakening to this deeper presence within. One of the methods for doing this is the practice of centering prayer, which she has passionately promoted for many years.

“Beneath the surface of each of us there is a deeper and vastly more authentic self but its presence is usually veiled by the clamour of the smaller ‘I’ with its insatiable needs and demands.”

The business of centering prayer is to get to the real self, to get beyond the upheaval and flood of distraction that passes for living. It involves letting go of thoughts, restraining the wandering of the mind, and allowing an interior re-arrangement that is rooted in the heart and opens the heart.

According to Cynthia, what Jesus was bringing to the world was not a new moral system but a radically new way of seeing the world. He was the master of “unitive consciousness, off

the charts at the time". His constant reference to the kingdom of heaven was his pet phrase for describing a transformed consciousness, she says.

"The kingdom of heaven is here now. It's not a reference to a pie-in-the-sky gated community in the next world. Jesus saw without separation – there was no separation between himself and God or between himself and his neighbour. The vine and the branch are inseparable."

This view of the world of course got Jesus into a lot of trouble but it was the heart of his message. This radically different way of seeing was the key to his life of courage, compassion and radical service. It did not just involve the mind but also the heart – the organ of spiritual perception.

And so it is with us, says Cynthia. Meditation is not an exercise in self-absorption but the very heart-beat of living as a fully integrated human being and a Christian. Among other things, the fruit of meditation is the bringing of a heightened awareness to everyday living and an appreciation of the nobility of doing any job well. Meditation wakes us up to life and it drives out fear.

"I can really say it has given me my life. I didn't have a life before, I had a personal history in time that I was always anxious about. To really understand, as it says in Ephesians, how broad and high and long and deep is the love of Christ and so be filled with the very nature of God is the invitation to really take a deep breath and live."

"I sense very strongly that human beings are a kind of evolutionary tipping point, between the divine and finite. We are very much called to mediate between those two worlds in a compassionate and accountable way and the failure to do so has caused so much of the blight and real danger for our planet."

And what does she make of the upsurge of interest in meditation which is a feature of our time?

"It's very significant. I think what causes people to be interested in it is the same thing that caused me to be interested – that the church that I'd experienced was overly preachy, wordy, verbose, authoritarian and structured. In meditation I had my first taste of the pure intimacy that lives inside me and all things as a relational field. And to learn some practices that would allow me to be responsive to life rather than reactive, to begin to experience the witnessing power within me – these things are extremely powerful and I think people hunger for it."

"I hungered for real practice that actually changes something and I think many people do and leave the church because they don't find it. They find words describing something but not the reality itself."

If Cynthia Bourgeault has her criticisms of church practice, she is not about to give up on it just yet.

“I don’t have too much investment in maintaining dinosaurs. But I am convinced that the life the church has carried within it will continue to live and it will seek its form. I think a lot of the old models, particularly the ones with the liturgical traditions that I have loved so much, have been so tied to colonial and patriarchal models that it’s going to be extraordinarily difficult for them to get untied. I’d be happy to see them do it though and it’s not so far a stretch.

“I am old enough at this moment to remember the hope that came flooding through Roman Catholicism when John XXII called the Second Vatican Council and in a few years he could pull together and articulate a new vision of humanity, and excitement coursed through that. So it’s not like you have to have long tedious Church Councils forever to get one inch of gain.”

The church, she says, is always in dialogue with its time and “what the early fathers of the church brought us was a sustainable animal. And it has been a noble viaduct of continued transmission. While it has been more honoured in the breach than the observance, it’s been at least a stable force that the great visionaries could kick off of. Imagine Meister Eckhart or Julian of Norwich or Saint Teresa of Avila or Francis if they didn’t have that baseline of the church to improvise against?

“So I would want to speak with loving respect for what we have received but I would also say that in each generation there is a dynamism between the eternal and the historical and the now. Now we have to find our own dynamism in a way which is both respectful but free and bold.”

Finding our own dynamism in the here and now is the challenge that excites Cynthia Bourgeault.

“I can’t think of a better generation to be born into unless it’s the next one! With the return of meditational practices and the discovery of a new way of working with ancient texts, I think we are going to see a different Christian story that holds water, not radically different but different enough so it’s not the old wineskin anymore. And I think we are going to see a rebirth of vitality within that, a recovery of vision and of joy.”