



Contemplative Outreach Ireland

*Silence Solitude Simplicity Service*



# Newsletter

*Summer 2014*

*July 2014*

Dear Friend of Contemplative Outreach.

During our Core Team meeting at the end of June we spent some time on the theme for our Summer Newsletter. The emphasis on our Christmas and Easter letters is always a reflection on the message of the season. Our Summer letter this year includes reflections on praying Centering Prayer – How this way of prayer has become an integral part of individuals lives, the fruits overflowing into both the workplace and personal lives.

It has been a wonderful year of gentle growth for Contemplative Outreach Ireland. As a Core Team we host 8 day retreats, weekend retreats, day retreats, Saturday Centering Prayer Gatherings, Introductory Workshops into the method of Centering Prayer, also offering support to individuals and groups who are interested in praying Centering Prayer and leading a Contemplative way of life. We, on the Core team, consider it a real privilege to serve individuals and groups on their Spiritual journey and look forward to another year of growth in this Contemplative way of prayer.

We hope you find our newsletter enriching and get the time to enjoy reading it.

Wishing you every Blessing.

Kathleen, John, Sr. Mary, Rev Alan, Niamh, Fr. Tom, Sr M. Dolores and Eileen.

[The Core Team of Contemplative Outreach Ireland.](#)



*Strawberries and ice cream*

## **Letter for Contemplative Outreach Ireland**

Contemplative Outreach Ireland has had an amazing journey of serving seekers interested in deepening their relationship with God through Centering Prayer. A small and dedicated core group started back in 2004 at St. Aiden's Monastery in Ferns, CO Wexford under the saintly and able bodied guidance of Sr. Marie Dolores. As a visionary she was ahead of her time.

In 2007 this local group was joined by Sr. Fionnuala, who had come back to Ireland from the United States, where she too had served the Centering Prayer movement , resulting in the formation of Contemplative Outreach Ireland .

Ten years later we see a burgeoning movement all over Ireland; lay people and religious serving the hunger for a deeper relationship with God. This is an exciting time for renewal in Ireland and by the grace of God there are people to serve and energy to serve.

In deep gratitude, Patricia and Robert Johnson

[St Benedict's Monastery Snowmass](#)

## A TRANSFIGURED LIFE - Pat and Bob Johnson By M Dolores

Pat and Bob are among my best friends, but strange to say, I only know them from the inside, and what I have to say is more about the present than the distant past.



*Fr Thomas Keating blessing Pat and Bob*

I met them both for the first time in 1999, when Bishop Comiskey sent me to Snowmass with his secretary Fr. Tommy Brennan to participate in a Post-Intensive Retreat. When I went to check in with Pat she asked me straight out "Well honey, how's the practice?"

"Practice of what" I asked? Well CP of course! I had no trouble speaking about that and the result was "You're ok to go ahead with the Retreat, your defences are down" During the Retreat we never said another word.

I didn't see Bob straight away. Then one day he brought Sarah to the Retreat Centre and gently settled her on a table at the front of the kitchen. I watched and wondered. Then someone whispered "That's Bob, Pat's husband, and their daughter Sarah. You can say hello to her" So I did, and got the most wonderful smile which brought tears to my eyes. (Sarah was then in her twenties, and had been disabled as a result of a fall when she was a baby)

Back in Ireland I asked Fr. Tom if we could invite Pat to lead a Retreat in Ireland. Answer: But Pat and Bob don't travel abroad on

account of Sarah. She can't take the aeroplane!

Years passed by. Then we got news that Sarah was very ill. We prayed a lot for her and the family. Then in Feb 2004 she died. She was buried in the Lama Community. The man who was ready to lower the body in the grave said to Bob "Give her to me". That man was hard to get on with. Bob had many struggles in their relationship. Nevertheless he gave the man the body of his dead child. From then on their relationship changed utterly and became as Jesus wants all relationships to be: Live in love with each other.

A while after that Fr. Tom reminded me that maybe we could invite Pat and Bob to give a Retreat in Ireland. They came, and the first Retreat was at Orlagh. It was a huge success. From then on they came annually and opened Heaven for us just by what they were.

In 2007 the big question came: could we not form a team and have weekends in Ferns? and afternoon meetings on the 1st Saturday of every month? In fear and trembling we said yes, we could. From then on Pat and Bob seemed to be Irish!

During all those years even though I was with Pat, we spoke little of ourselves. Our conversations were about how to help other people, or about the Kingdom of God. I was used to the Great Silence having entered the Convent the same year as Bob and Pat got married. I marvelled at how little they would talk about themselves, especially after having lead such a varied and interesting life and reared 9 children.... and being American!!

I didn't talk as much to Bob, but we got to know and appreciate each other through silent communication, until the day at the end of a Retreat in Orlagh, when from the top of the steps at the front door Bob pronounced the wonderful words:

"M.Dolores, you have no false self, it's gone"

I'm not so sure it was gone before he said that, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth I really felt a freedom I had never felt before. I know I owe it to Bob.

The last paragraph is going to be about the wonderful witness of 60 yrs of Marriage in faithfulness. I discovered it in March 2013, when several members of the Johnson family came together in the hermitages in Ferns for a few days. Jan Eric and their son Shane, Patrick, Leslie and Jennifer and Jenny (friend) Pat and Bob were in Theodelinde hermitage as usual and it became the centre of love, of welcome, of mutual service. Conversations with the younger Johnsons were meaningful and so interesting. No such thing as contradicting each other! We spoke about

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Divine Office, Latin hymns, folklore, writers, Church, artists, food....

As for food there was immediate service for everyone: hot cereal or cold, boiled eggs or scrambled, toast or brown bread. In that hermitage nothing was impossible! nothing was any bother. A thought: what an example for Religious Communities! What a pity the Johnsons could not stay for ever!

So, after 60 years of being together here was eternal youth, love, fun, consideration for each other and willingness to pray. Jesus did not have to be invited, He was right there in our midst.

Ad multos annos, Pat and Bob, 'our forever friends'.

## **“Presence in the Silence” by Niamh Brennan**

I had been working as a hospital chaplain for just a few months, when one morning I visited a patient (let's call her Joan) who was due to have complicated cardiac surgery later that morning. The moment I entered her private room I realised that she was consumed by anxiety. She sat on the edge of her bed facing the window, wearing a hospital gown and looking very vulnerable and alone. I gently asked if I could sit with Joan as she awaited her call to theatre and in a very nervous tone she agreed. We spoke just a little about how she was feeling but I quickly realised this was only making her more anxious. I decided to be with her in the silence and she seemed relieved by this. Every now and again one of us spoke but for our time together very little was actually said. After some time the nurse entered the room to tell Joan the porter was waiting for her to bring her to theatre. I took my leave having wished Joan well and promising to remember her.

As this was a Friday leading into a bank holiday weekend, I didn't get to see Joan until the following Tuesday. On entering her room

she instantly recognised me, her face lit up and she expressed how glad she was to see me. I suppose I was initially a bit surprised by this as our encounter had been such a silent one. She invited me to sit and having explained how well the procedure had gone for her she went on to tell me how she had hoped to see me again to tell me how much I had helped her before her surgery. She had my complete attention as I was always open to feedback and to learning how best I could accompany those to whom I minister. She said, "I really hoped to see you again Niamh. I just wondered after the surgery what was it about you that helped me so much last Friday. I thought and I thought. I could just remember you sitting there in that chair in your red jacket. You said very little. In fact I realised that if you said anything I was so anxious that I would have asked you to leave. No, I realise after thinking about it for a long time – it was your presence. You were completely present to me and that helped me more than you can imagine. Thank you Niamh. I just wanted to tell you that."

During the following week I reflected on this encounter. Aside from the fact that I became more deeply aware in the process of how important real presence was when accompanying a patient in pain, having heard this first hand from the patient herself, I wondered how this ability to be truly present had developed in me. Of course the skills of attending to another were an integral part of my chaplaincy training (Clinical Pastoral Education) and through my C.P.E. experience at the Mater hospital I received much practice in this area. However I believed the presence I was now offering to patients was more than a learned skill and came from a deeper place – a contemplative space. I came to understand that my ability to be completely present to another was a fruit of my faithfulness to spending time each day opening myself to the presence and action of God through the practice of Centering Prayer. Through my twice-daily commitment to this relationship, a relationship beyond words, beyond thoughts, in a spirit of total receptivity I had developed the gift of being able to sit with a suffering other in that same spirit of surrender and receptivity to them at exactly where they were at in that moment.

As Thomas Keating explains, “In Centering Prayer ... little by little, we enter into prayer without intentionality except to consent... and consent becomes surrender ... and surrender becomes total receptivity... and, as the process continues, total receptivity becomes effortless, peaceful.... It is free and has nothing to attain, to get, or desire ... So, no thinking, no reflection, no desire, no words, no thing ... just receptivity and consent.”

(Thomas Keating, ‘Centering Prayer’ segment, Heartfulness: Transformation in Christ)

It is in this same spirit of receptivity and consent that I believe I now accompany the patients I minister to each day. I am keenly aware that when I sit with patients in this way a space of truth and freedom opens up, a space where the Divine enters in a profound way and where transformation comes about through His healing presence and action. I believe this is the greatest gift I can offer to those I accompany as a healthcare chaplain. I will always be grateful to Joan for her feedback that day which helped me to realise this gift and to commit myself to share this gift freely with those I serve.

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## Centering Prayer at [Well.com](http://Well.com) By Rev Alan Lorimer.

Well.com is a united, Christian, fresh expression of church at Carlisle Circus, North Belfast.

In June 2012 I was commissioned by the Methodist Church in Ireland to pioneer this project. I was later joined by Breige O Hare, a spiritual director from the Catholic tradition, to model Christian unity in the fragmented community around Carlisle Circus. The centre was officially opened on 29th Oct 2013.

Well.com is a psycho-spiritual centre and Centering Prayer has become an important part of our Christ-centred way of life.



The vision of well.com is 'to restore hope and wellbeing in broken people'. This is seen in 3 streams flowing from and into the well.

Firstly there is a Spirituality Stream. At well.com we facilitate a daily Celtic rhythm of prayer at 12.30pm (weekdays) and this is followed by a 20 minute period of Centering Prayer. This spirituality stream also involves individual and group spiritual direction and formation. Individual Spiritual Direction is provided by Breige and I lead Methodist spiritual bands which include a period of Centering Prayer and lectio divina reading of scripture. There is also a Centering Prayer support group in the centre.

Secondly there is a Psychological Stream, which takes serious the human soul and the struggles of many people in Northern Ireland and in North Belfast specifically, with mental health problems.

The final stream of well.com is a Community Stream. At well.com we aim to model a united Christian community. We aim to foster close relations and to work in partnership with all church denominations and local community groups.

Our mission at [well.com](http://well.com) is to be a peace-making, reconciling centre which can help people reconcile as individuals within themselves through psychotherapy and spiritual direction with others through relationship building; and to God through Jesus Christ.

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## **Kilavullen Experience – The Work of the Holy Spirit**

By Kathleen Ormond

The first Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop Weekend facilitated by COI took place in the Nano Nagle Centre at the end of March 2014 and was facilitated by Niamh Brennan and myself, Kathleen Ormond of COI. I believe the whole experience from start to finish was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Niamh and I prepared a timetable without knowing how many retreatants would be familiar with this kind of prayer or completely new to it. The schedule we prepared had a lot of prayer in it. It was also a silent retreat with no talking from Friday evening after the first prayer period until lunch time on Sunday, except during the conferences.

We arrived in Kilavullen and were shown around the beautiful retreat centre. It is in a lovely part of county Cork, surrounded by fields and trees, with great walkways along the banks of the Blackwater. They run an organic farm there and the first things I saw as I arrived were two asses and a flock of free range hens. I felt at home straight away. The Prayer Room is special and, with comfortable chairs arranged in a semi-circle around the tabernacle, is perfect for Centering Prayer. We had the conferences in another room and were served great food by the staff in friendly silence. We felt very welcome there.

Most of the group were new to Centering Prayer, although some were familiar with other methods of meditation. The prayer periods involved two twenty minute sits separated by a five minute meditative walk. People were free to leave after one twenty minute prayer period as we felt this was a gruelling schedule for beginners. As it turned out, everyone remained for all nine prayer periods.



One of our group was a priest and he kindly offered to say Mass so there was no need to travel to the local church for Sunday Eucharist. We were able to remain in the silence, “Gods first language”. By Mass time on Saturday evening we had been together in silence for nearly twenty four hours... praying ...sleeping...praying...dining ... praying ... learning ... praying. The retreat took on a life of its own. It flowed. The Holy Spirit was leading us. As facilitators, we did not know how things would go. Our attitude was; “God You got us into this, now get us through it!” He did. And it was that very reliance on God which allowed the Holy Spirit to work.

We were eleven individuals, men and women, from different age groups, different walks of life, different parts of the country, strangers to each other (except one married couple and Niamh and I) brought together by God to a lovely spot in rural Cork to get to know Him better. Prompted by Him, we gave to each other and received gratefully from each other. The Holy Spirit at work!

Somewhere in the silence, exterior and interior, when we let go of our everyday preoccupations and plans, even for moments at a time, God gave us a wonderful gift.

As we were saying our goodbyes, one lovely lady announced “I am as happy as God!” When someone said they never heard that saying before, it must be a Cork one, she answered “I never said that before”. “What marvels the Lord worked for us, indeed we were glad”

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## My First Ever Silent Retreat

By Dorothy Sutton

The long winding driveway that cuts through forest paths; the large emerald green lawn; the warm welcome at reception; a browse through the gift shop; an en suite room all to myself; the respectful circle of silence in chapel; the tranquillity of the prayer garden; a seat warmed by the sun; shady forest paths; a zig-zag hill path that leads to majestic views over the Mournes. These are just some of the peaceful memories that come floating into my mind as I think back to my first ever silent retreat in the Tobar Mhuire Retreat Centre, Crossgar, March 2014.

After our first evening meal on the Friday night, I was put at ease. I realised for one thing that I wasn't the only Protestant on retreat! As I looked around, there were people of all ages and from very different backgrounds and even countries. God had

brought us all to be together, mainly in silence, but also at times to learn from one another, and maybe most of all, just to 'be' together in each other's presence for this weekend.

This weekend was challenging in some ways. I found the mealtimes hard when we were all eating together but not able to converse with each other! But for the most, I found the imposed silence a gift. It was a gift to be able to walk the beautiful grounds uninterrupted and to be able to just sit and be, with nobody asking anything of you, knowing also that all God wanted from me was that I would just relax and 'be' in His Presence. What a gift.

But I found a greater personal challenge – that of being able to STAY in the present moment, even during my periods of Centering prayer. I

am a worrier by nature and so as a result, I tend to spend my time either in the 'what ifs' of the past or in the usually non-existent worries of the future. I needed to learn how to live in the now. My chat with Alan helped me to see that we can practise this in everyday life by 'mindful' eating, 'mindful' walking, taking the Eucharist 'mindfully' etc. God can only be found in the here and now. Yes, He was there with us in the past and He goes before us into the future, but He is the 'I Am' of the present moment. I also found I

was being very critical of myself after each period of Centering Prayer.

This weekend, for me, was all about spending time with God and deepening my relationship with Him. The format of the weekend, which had quite obviously been very thoughtfully laid out, allowed me to do just that. I look forward to my next 'weekend away with God' and would warmly recommend it to anyone who hasn't ventured there yet!

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## **Happily Resting in Bright Darkness: A Personal Reflection** by Anne McClean

The line from Psalm 42... "as a deer yearns for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God" probably best describes how I feel each time I come to pray. It is a personal intuitive sense of need and want that in over 10 years I cannot seem to resist. I never liked and still don't like the ticking sound of clocks and remembering back to times of preparation for study and exams I always took the clock down from the wall and hid it away until I finished...I don't think I ever bought a clock in my life. However, what I described earlier as this need and want is probably the best internal clock I have ever had the good fortune to acquire, as it reminds me twice daily to stop and to refill the internal reservoir of solitude and silence in prayer. I don't need any external ticking clock...God is ticking away within and without.

Back in 2007 when I took a sabbatical from work and commenced my spiritual learning journey with the Jesuits, one of the first things I learned, that should have been obvious but wasn't, was that God always speaks first, that my need and want to pray is a response to him. Prior to this revelation I always thought that the initiative in prayer was mine, that back in 2003 when I felt that something was missing in my life, that it was I perhaps who was seeking out God. I learned however that the reason I wanted to pray at all, was that God had spoken to me personally and I wanted to speak in return. I wanted to respond and be in this relationship.

You could almost say that God seduced me. So...when a seduction such as that comes daily, one imagines that it will be exciting, that there should be a felt sense of the presence of God, that in times of unknowing or indecision that God would sweep me quickly along over the hump and all would be well! Usually not so I'm afraid. I have learned down through the years, painfully at times, that as I sit in the silence of my prayer, that God is close, but infinitely far away and incomprehensible at the same time. I recall all too briefly at the beginning of my spiritual journey, that felt sense of God's closeness and presence. I can't recall really when that changed, yet on the other hand, I too have changed through a process of self-discovery. And so, something else called faith and grace has filled up the space where I needed a felt experience and I have come to learn that God is as Thomas Keating says... "*so close...closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself.*"

My Ignatian training tells me that I should ask God for my deepest heart's desire and I often desire to feel that felt sense of presence again. However, my extensive reading of Fr. Thomas Keating works on centering prayer and more importantly my own experience of contemplative prayer, tells me to set aside that desire and in faith to trust that God is in charge and therefore leave myself open



to his presence and action within me. Using the imagery of John of the Cross, James Finlay, in *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* says; " there is a path to walk with no light except the one that burns in your heart...we find ourselves in a solitary silence that skirts the edge of the abyss that is our own nothingness and the plenitude of God."

I don't consider resting in bright darkness a crisis to be overcome. Instead I see it as part of the ordinary course of my spiritual journey, a journey in faith rather than human understanding, progressing towards a deeper union with God by going deeper in faith into this God, a God who is totally unknowing and incomprehensible Love.

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**Weekend of Prayer, Friendship and Reflection  
St Aidan's Monastery. November 2013**



Denis Gleeson, Eileen Foley, Lesley Kavanagh, John Ormond,  
Niamh Brennan, Kathleen Ormond, Sr Fionnuala Quinn, Sr Rose Murphy