

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Curriculum Series | Monograph #1 Fall 2017 | Published by Institute for Catholic Education

Christian Meditation

by Mary Theresa Coene and Paul Tratnyek

Discover, Commit, Begin and Keep on Beginning

“The prayer of Christian Meditation is being introduced into a number of our Ontario Catholic schools, and those engaging with the practice are embracing it with excitement and joy. It is captivating the hearts of many students and teachers, and rippling into family prayer and even community prayer groups. Students and staff describe the meditation time as an opportunity, in the midst of their, day for them to be with God, and when the meditation is over, many students and teachers identify that they have felt God’s loving presence.”

Christian Meditation in Ontario Catholic Schools

An introduction to the tradition of Christian meditation and contemplative prayer for students is just one of many ways that Catholic schools embrace the vision of the graduate as one who is expected to be a discerning believer. While quite distinct from mindfulness, such practices certainly contribute to a holistic Catholic education that encourages an understanding of human life as an integration of body, mind and spirit. The bishops of Ontario have expressed support for Christian meditation as a form of prayer, and provide encouragement to school boards engaged in or considering such programs to be attentive to the development of appropriate supports and formation opportunities to ensure a deep understanding of how such practices are firmly rooted within our Catholic tradition.

Christian Meditation is Christian!

So, what exactly is Christian Meditation?

Certainly, the word meditation is not exclusively Christian, and connecting the word ‘Christian’ to

meditation can cause confusion or misunderstanding. As a result, it is necessary to articulate that Christian Meditation is not mindfulness; Christian Meditation is pure prayer of the heart, not a mind activity. In addition, while it is true that the practice of meditation exists in all the major religions, Christian Meditation is linked specifically to our own tradition. What makes Christian Meditation Christian is our

faith and love. There are also historical, theological, scriptural and communal aspects to the Christian identity of meditation.² Thus, Catholic educators can be certain that the prayer of Christian Meditation is authentic prayer and rightfully ours to discover, embrace and share.

“I think of meditation as simply just resting in the arms of our loving saviour. I think of an image of Jesus hugging the children. To me, meditation provides a time for them to be hugged and to be one with their God.” – Most Reverend Gerard Bergie Bishop of Saint Catharines

A Practical Understanding of Christian Meditation

Christian Meditation is silent prayer with a mantra. It is experiential, and inclusive as all are welcome and invited to participate in this prayer. Christian meditation requires commitment and dedication, 'one must be clear of the practice and then begin — and keep on beginning.'³



Through the silence of the meditation, we encounter God and grow in relationship and love.

"Meditation is simply the gentle and gradual change of direction. The change of heart that comes is to stop thinking of yourself and to be open to God, to the wonder of God, to the glory of God and to the love of God."⁴

Where does 'Christian Meditation' come from?

Christian Meditation dates back to the 3rd and 4th centuries with the early Desert Mothers and Fathers.⁵ In the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and other Middle East areas, they sought a simpler way of focusing their attention on God's presence in all that surrounded them. St. John Cassian of the 4th century stressed repeating a formula or mantra during meditation and insisted this practice led to the silence of 'pure prayer.' That is, praying without words or images.

In Christianity this tradition of

meditation became marginalized and even forgotten. Fr. John Main OSB was a Benedictine monk who rediscovered John Cassian's writings. In 1977, the Archbishop of Montreal invited him to teach lay people Christian meditation. His former student, Fr. Laurence Freeman OSB, first taught Christian Meditation to children in Montreal.⁶ In recent times, a great recovery of the contemplative dimension of Christian faith has been happening and this can be rooted in Christian Meditation.

What does Christian Meditation Look Like and how do you Meditate?

The nature of this prayer is to prepare and to participate. Preparation requires one to remove noise and distractions and be still. Participation happens when you keep the silence and stillness and clear your mind of your thoughts using a mantra when necessary. Fr. Freeman tells us "...the mind races from one thought to another. We meditate to calm the mind and to bring the mind onto the heart. The real stillness is the stillness within."⁶ The 3 S's — *Silence, Stillness and Simplicity*, best describe Christian Meditation as taught by Fr. Main.⁷ To begin:

1. Sit still and upright with your back straight.
2. Place both your feet flat on the floor or legs crossed if sitting on the floor.
3. Place your hands in your lap facing either upwards or downwards.

4. Close your eyes lightly.
5. Be aware of your normal breathing pattern for a minute or two as you clear your mind.
6. Silently, interiorly, begin to say your sacred prayer word of mantra "ma-ra-na-tha" in four equal syllables.
7. Listen to the sound of your sacred word as you say it, slowly, intently and continuously.
8. If thoughts come, keep returning to simply saying the word.
9. Maintain this stillness for the entire period of the meditation.⁸

It is important to remain faithful to the simplicity of it as described here, and to maintain it as a daily practice. Understanding the beauty of the prayer of Christian Meditation comes through personal dedication and commitment to its practice. It can also result from the witness of its journey in the life of the classroom.

Why use a Sacred Word or Mantra?

Fr. Main recommended using the word 'maranatha' as the sacred prayer word or mantra. It is an Aramaic word Jesus spoke meaning, 'Come Lord' found in the Scriptures.⁹ Because it is in a foreign language it tends not to conjure up images during meditation as we sit in stillness and silence allowing the Spirit who dwells within to speak in our hearts.¹⁰

Thoughts for Getting Started

Christian Meditation is not meant to replace any form of prayer that already exists within our Catholic schools. Rather, it is an invitation to more for Catholic educators and students alike. As educators, we are called to ‘knowing’ before teaching. Consider allowing yourself a little time to personally experience Christian Meditation, commit a time of day — early morning or evening or both — and meditate. Allow yourself some time to read, learn and absorb the prayer practice. Next, when ready, introduce Christian Meditation to your staff and/ or administration, then to your classroom and watch the beauty of the Spirit at work. Overall, be authentic, be patient and be committed to the prayer practice, ever aware that all things are possible with God.

What are the Benefits of Christian Meditation?

Recent years have seen a growing interest and participation of Catholic teachers, principals and senior administrators across the province learning about, experiencing and teaching Christian Meditation with Children. In general,

- Meditation leads to increased self-knowledge and self-acceptance
- Meditation increases the desire to build community with others
- Meditation deepens one’s personal relationship with God, adults and children alike

- Meditation reduces stress and increases one’s sense of well-being and harmony

Educators report that Christian meditation enables children to be:

- Still and silent, and experience God in the silence
- More considerate and loving
- More caring and thoughtful of others
- Kinder to friends
- Eager in anticipation of their meditation times
- Calmer and more relaxed
- Still for longer periods

Brain Research Dr. Shanida Nataraja in her book, *The Blissful Brain: Neuroscience and proof of the power of meditation*¹¹ reveals the scientific evidence that proves meditative practices benefit our health. More research is emerging on the positive impact meditation has on well-being. What we are seeing in the sciences is empirical evidence emerging that parallels what the early Desert Fathers and Mothers knew through intuition and experience.

Christian Meditation and Mindfulness

Meditation can be found in all of the world’s major religions. Below is a table drawing the similarities and differences between mindfulness practice and Christian meditation (see chart below).

Why should we consider introducing Christian Meditation to Students?

While the potential benefits seem promising, and many of the first hand accounts of those practicing Christian meditation are compelling, many questions or concerns remain. Educators naturally raise the fundamental question, “but why?” There is so much to deal with on a daily basis, and so many demands in an already crowded school day, it could be hard to imagine adding more to the classroom routine, especially when the school and classroom already pray together.

As Catholic educators, we recognize the need for encounter and relationship with God in our

MINDFULNESS	CHRISTIAN MEDITATION
Rooted in Buddhist practice.	Rooted in our Christian Tradition.
Technique.	Surrender — contemplation is not the result of a well-honed technique but of grace.
Mind activity.	“Pure prayer” of the heart.
Attention is on self (time limited).	Attention is coming off yourself (leaving the self behind).
Focus on the present.	Focus on the present.
Measurable results focus (self-regulation, calming).	Faithfulness and trust focus.
Way of preparing for meditation by calming the mind and body.	Produces mindfulness — makes you more aware, mindful.
Benefits include reducing stress, self-regulation, increased self knowledge and acceptance, increases sense of well-being and harmony, increases the desire to build community with others, calmness, enhances learning.	Benefits include reducing stress, self-regulation, increased self knowledge and acceptance, increases sense of well-being and harmony, increases the desire to build community with others, calmness, enhances learning.
Transactional.	Fruits — “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22)
	Transformational.

own lives and we know that our students are seeking relationship with God as well. Meditation is not intended to replace sacraments, and other forms of prayer, but rather can help enhance their experience. In the midst of busy days and busy lives that deal with so much and yearn to feel God’s loving presence, the richness of Christian meditation can help students and staff to enter into a deeper awareness of Christ’s presence that constantly surrounds us when seeing with the eyes of the heart. To practice Christian Meditation in a classroom allows all to encounter God and foster relationship with God, who dwells within. As said in John’s Gospel ‘Abide in me as I abide in you.’¹³

Seen in this light, the practice of Christian meditation is, in fact, not about doing more, but being more. It is an opportunity to find stillness and peace, resting in the presence of our loving saviour. In addition, the ‘more’ of Christian meditation is a way of further building inclusive, Christ-centred community.

“Meditation is like giving a hug to yourself and getting in touch with the awesomeness of God’s love.” – Grade 2 student

Christian Meditation — In the Words of Students

“Christian Meditation is the best thing to do to calm down. I like it a lot when I am frustrated. It gives me time to talk to God.”

“You spend time talking to God and Jesus. Meditation is awesome.”

“I like it because it’s not noisy.”

“Christian Meditation helps me listen to what God has to say to me.”

“Christian Meditation is a time when I can calm myself down if I had a bad day. During Christian Meditation I get to talk with God and listen to what he has to say to me. I also say the word ma-ra-na –tha to clear everything out of my mind that happened that day. Christian meditation also means that I have some silence to talk to Jesus.”

Helpful Links and Resources

1. Ontario Institute for Catholic Education: www.iceont.ca
2. The Canadian Christian Meditation Community: www.wccm-canada.ca
3. The World Community for Christian Meditation: www.wccm.org
4. Meditation APP: www.wccm.org/content/wccm-app-2-android-devices

References

- 1 Christian Meditation Experience Survey, Brant Haldimand. Norfolk Catholic District School Board. Spring 2016.
- 2 Christie, Ernie. *Coming Home. A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children*. Page 64.
- 3 www.cominghome.org.au/introduction/dsp-default-d.cfm?loadref=89
- 4 *Moment of Christ*, p122
- 5 *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* by Benedicta Ward SLG and the *Forgotten Desert Mothers* by Laura Swan OSB
- 6 Fr. Laurence Freeman is currently Executive Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation — wccm.org
- 7 *The Heart of Creation Meditation: a way of setting God free in the world by John Main*, edited by Laurence Freeman, Canterbury Press, 2007.
- 8 Adapted from the Canadian Christian Meditation Community. www.wccm-canada.ca
- 9 I Corinthians 6:22 and Revelations 22:20.
- 10 Matthew 6:6, Luke 17:20-21 and 1 Corinthians 3:16 for scriptural references to the indwelling of the Spirit.
- 11 Nataraja, Dr. Shanida, *The Blissful Neuroscience and Proof of the Power of Meditation*. Gaia Thinking Publishing, 2008
- 12 John 15:4

Published by:



Ontario Institute for Catholic Education
44 Hunt Street, Suite 2F
Hamilton, Ontario, L8R 3R1
Tel: 905-523-2469
E-mail: office@iceont.ca

© 2018, Printed in Canada