

## **We progress by stopping - Meister Eckhart**

### **Teaching Christian Meditation to Children**

Ernie Christie & Dr Cathy Day

The world teaches children a set of values, but are these values conducive to the making of a better world? Western culture invites excitement not silence, activity not stillness. Students are therefore often over-stimulated and restless. It is vital that education responds to such social challenges by presenting and teaching an alternative way of being. In this article we invite you to consider a new learning and a new imagination for society that locates the teaching of stillness and silence within each person at the heart of education.



Almost everything that students experience in the world today inhibits their journey inward towards stillness and silence. The world suggests the solution to this restlessness lies outside of oneself in the pursuit of a bigger and more exciting life. This way of living creates pressures that force our students to compartmentalise their lives too rigidly. As a result they may lose a sense of their own personal wholeness and a capacity to engage fully with the world as balanced human beings. It may seem a paradox that children can be still and silent and enjoy it. But like many adults, children yearn also for the experience of an interior world that helps buffer the hustle and bustle of a hurried world. All 31 Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Townsville have introduced the practice of meditation to all students as a means of bringing about personal growth for social transformation – which is a fancy way of saying that Christian Meditation is prayer of the heart.

Children aged 5 – 18 are embracing this form of prayer. Young children have a great openness to the presence of God in their lives and a real readiness for prayer. They yearn to experience the divine and through the stillness and silence that this experiential form of prayer offers, we let “God do the work of God” without interpretation or analysis.

We have learned, as many of you already may know, that if children are taught when they are young to be still so that their hearts can be opened to the movement of the Spirit, the presence of Jesus, and the embrace of God the Father, they will have a gift which will continue to bring them great blessings throughout their lives.

We believe it is important that even the smallest children learn to be still and not just to be quiet. Being still is very different from being quiet. It is in their stillness that God can speak to their hearts and they can discover the love of God for each of them personally.

Origen, on prayer says: "In prayer we do not seek to get benefits from God, but to become like God. Praying itself is good. It calms the mind, reduces sin and promotes good deeds" The type of prayer Origen is referring to is at the centre of the purpose of Christian Meditation.

Pope Benedict XVI gives another perspective on this form of prayer.

It is a fundamental task to teach people how to pray and how to learn to do so personally, better and better. Many seek meditation elsewhere because they think that they will not be able to find a spiritual dimension in Christianity. We must show them once again, not only that this spiritual dimension exists but that it is the source of all things. To this end, we must increase the number of these schools of prayer, for praying together, where it is possible to learn personal prayer in all its dimensions: as silent listening to God, as a listening that penetrates his word, penetrates his silence, sounds the depths of his action in history and in one's own person.

(Pope Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI*, Meeting with the Bishops of Switzerland, 9 November 2006)

Why did we want to begin this journey? Put simply, we wanted to give our students and our staff an opportunity to experience the magnificent vision that John Main gave to so many people around the world in rediscovering the ancient roots of Christian Meditation.

Our journey actually began a couple years earlier with a visit from Fr Laurence Freeman, OSB. Fr Laurence was invited to the diocese by Bishop Michael Putney to introduce people in Townsville to Christian Meditation. He captured the imagination of many people. It was infectious in the best sense of the word. Initially we embraced the World Community for Christian Meditation on a personal level. Fr Laurence is an exceptional teacher and it is his faithful witness to the vision of John Main that is so compelling.

Teachers of the likes of Fr. Laurence and Dom. John Main are people who can strengthen us with their words and through their witness enable us to hear what life and the Holy Spirit have long wanted to teach us. Their words and example don't drive us to more achievement, but to more trust. *Let go, trust in God, trust in life and what it teaches you.* These are John Main's words. With regards our Townville initiative, we believe we simply put our trust in God and saw what God wanted us to see – that children could meditate and should be given the opportunity to experience God through meditation. And now we are sharing our experience so that others might trust in God too.

### **What was so compelling about John Main's vision for us in Townsville?**

Through his teachings on the practice of Christian Meditation with an emphasis on stillness of body, simplicity of approach and silence of mind, we join with millions around the world in this pure prayer - we are part of the community of love that has



emerged and continued to grow both in depth and outreach. John Main has given us access to a great treasure - a treasure that is not buried in a field but rather, lies within each of us. He did not say meditation was the only way or that it replaced other forms of prayer. But he believed it was central to the human journey and the religious vision of life, leading the listener up to the threshold of silence... His teaching allows us to see meditation as a way of love. Love holds the key to right understanding and right action. His

vision of love was completely lacking in the sentimentality – which John Main termed mawkishness – with which the ego tries to possess and control love. Pope Benedict's first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)* exhorts us to experience love and in this way to let the light of God to enter into the world. Christian Meditation is a way we can experience God as love.

Never having met John Main in person, we have come to know him by reading what others have said about him, reading his own words and listening to his voice on the recordings he made as he taught the practice of Christian Meditation. We have especially come to know him through the work of Fr Laurence. More importantly we have come to love what Fr John gave himself to unreservedly – the tradition and practice of Christian Meditation – the prayer of the heart – a doorway to a contemplative appreciation of having life to the full. This personal response, we believe, is essential in our approach to teaching children Christian Meditation. This is not another curriculum fad; it is a gift to us and to our students. And it is our witness that is so important, as Pope Paul VI reminds us in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* which states, "Today's world thirsts for authenticity and especially in regard to young people it is said they have a horror of the artificial or false and they are searching above all for truth and honesty" (n.76), and that people today "prefer witnesses to teachers" (n.41) . Written in 1965, these words still resonate with regard to today's youth.

Although ancient, and with links to eastern religious traditions, Christian Meditation is new and quite foreign to many people. Some people are initially sceptical of Christian Meditation, unable perhaps to see or accept that it is completely at home in the Christian tradition. It is important to make the connections for them. The Christian tradition values the skills of self-reflection and the context of solitude and silence, as pre-requisites for the potential encounter with God in the depths of our being. When this encounter with God takes place, we experience a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction in regard to the meaningfulness of life. Meditation as an experience can be personal and immediate, but also communal and historical which brings a rich source of knowledge about living in fidelity to the Gospel message. There is also a sense of belonging to the tradition of Christian experience through the ages. Our view was that Christian Meditation and a strong focus on a contemplative Christian foundation would bring rich opportunities that would assist our students in their personal identity formation as Christian persons.

It was one thing for us to be enthusiastic about our new project. It was another thing entirely to expect that our teachers would feel the same level of enthusiasm. Adding something extra to

the teacher's workload today is asking for criticism given the already burdensome nature of the teacher's work. So it was necessary to say something convincing to our staff about the importance of providing this experience for our students. Our charter or Mission for educating children states that we will teach children in all the dimensions that lead to wholeness – intellectually, physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. This is a weighty responsibility. One we take seriously. It is inspired by the vision Jesus presented that he had come so that we may have life and have it abundantly.

Fr Laurence states that teaching children to pray opens up a way of hope and wisdom in a world that is 'a cultural nightmare.' This nightmare not only refers to the way childhood is defined today but also to the prevailing worldview, one that Jesus would again turn upside down, jolting people into radical questioning. In his book, *A Brief History of Everything* (1996), the great American psychologist, philosopher and contemplative, Ken Wilbur contends that the worldview from the Enlightenment which permeates the fabric of the secular society in which we operate, the Newtonian worldview based on rational and scientific principles, has reached its limits to transform our present reality. He suggests that the task now is to transcend the rational, with the human community embracing a deeper level of consciousness, a consciousness grounded in Spirit. Contemplation is the focusing of our deepest awareness and within our Christian tradition it is, in the words of Maria Harris (1991), cultivating the inner 'I' that sees everything as being saturated with God. And this is in harmony with a healthier worldview emerging out of an expanded understanding which invites the individual to even deeper living within communities that gather to celebrate their spirit and life.

Teaching children Christian Meditation is a redemptive process. It sits within a rich tapestry of experiences that a Catholic school offers each child to assist them in their faith or spiritual journey. The faith education of a child introduces them to tradition, Church, community, Scripture, and worship as well as to personal spiritual experience that is given meaning by these contexts. Christian Meditation as pure prayer, as prayer of the heart, has the potential to awaken the child not just to the story and name of Jesus but to the mind of Christ. They can discover the love of God for each of them personally. We are confident in what we are offering our students because we are rekindling an ancient tradition that has stood the test of time. We accept that children come ready equipped for their spiritual journey. The real challenge is to build on the spiritual competence each child is endowed with. We are pleased to say that our teachers have been both generous and enthusiastic in degrees from mildly so to exuberant in taking on this initiative.

This response was gratifying in several ways because the introduction of Christian Meditation was never just about the children – it was also about our teachers. The planning and resourcing of teacher formation is a critical element of our program. This will be explained further in another session. Staff formation is part of the redemptive process because in learning to meditate and learning about the fullness of the tradition of Christian Meditation we are invited to ask how we actually pray ourselves as adults, how authentic is our own spiritual life, how do we tend it and how do we prioritise. It makes us reflect on the unimpeachable authority of the child on what it means to be human and how we truly respect and love ourselves and serve others. While respecting a teacher's freedom to simply take on the task of teaching children to meditate, it is important that teachers are constantly given opportunities to become more aware of their spiritual selves and to be encouraged to become more willing and able to live up to the noble calling of the teacher who imitates Christ the only Teacher. In this way they reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behaviour (The Catholic School, n.43).

The experience of Christian Meditation has presented a wonderful opportunity for teachers to dig deep into our Christian tradition to read and ponder the mystics – retrieving the ancient wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Hildegard, St John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila and others both ancient and contemporary. There is a genuine sense of personal spiritual renewal for many of our teachers, a freshness and enthusiasm for the Christian tradition where perhaps it was becoming stale and losing its impact, particularly on one's prayer life.

This response, of course, is bigger than our little diocese of Townsville. Professor Gary Bouma in his book *Australian Soul* states that Australians are seeking wonderment, inner journeying and simply being more deeply attentive to themselves and others. They are re-enchanting a world disenchanted by secular ideologies of materialism and corporate greed. Their experience and encounter with Christian Meditation is providing a new vitality for our spiritual and religious lives. (p.14).

Having seen so many of our own students so confident and so easy in their own practice of Christian Meditation, we can only say that we would love to think that every student in a Catholic school in Australia gets the opportunity to become a meditator in the Christian tradition. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: The work of the eyes is done... now go and do heart work.

## **Conclusion**

Many schools have adopted Christian Meditation as their staff prayer and at least once a week interested staff meet for meditation before school. The diocese of Townsville is actively fostering Christian Meditation as a particular experiential prayer experience and in turn there has been a renewal of interest in other forms of contemplative prayer, in particular the labyrinth, the saying of the rosary and Lectio Divina. We are proud of the fact that we have introduced our teachers to this 'incarnate' way of prayer and we are proud of the fact that we have introduced our teachers to the work of John Cassian and John Main and in turn there has been an increased interest in the Christian mystical tradition and the wealth of literature and prayer in this tradition. In a hectic busy world we are taking the words of Meister Eckhart to heart, "We progress by stopping".