Foundations of Prayer
St. Dominic's Catholic Church
Tuesday, May 19, 2015, 7:30 PM, Church Nave

Christian Meditation

What is Christian Meditation?

The words “meditation” and “contemplation” are often used to refer to an ancient form of silent prayer. Other terms include: Prayer of the Heart, Pure Prayer, Simple Prayer and Recollection. These are modern names based on historical practices meant to deepen our relationship with the living Christ. Christian Meditation is derived from ancient contemplative Christian practices of silence, stillness and simplicity and attempts to provide a form of prayer that is accessible to the lay community.

Why Practice Christian Meditation?

Our Pastor’s Corner, Fr. Michael Hurley, O.P., April 26, 2015

“In this age of constant noise, media and activity that bombard us on a daily basis, we do well to consider how we take the time to listen to the voice of Christ in our lives. If Christ is the Good Shepherd, then he calls to us. But if we cannot hear him, he is not our Shepherd.”

Elijah’s flight to Horeb, 1 Kings, Ch. 19: 11-13

Then the LORD said [to Elijah], "Go outside and stand on the mountain before the LORD; the LORD will be passing by." A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD - but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake - but the LORD was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake there was fire - but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound.
When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went and stood at the entrance of the cave. A voice said to him, "Elijah, why are you here?"

**The story of Martha and Mary, Luke 10:39-42**

As they continued their journey he entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him.

She had a sister named Mary (who) sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak.

Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me."

The Lord said to her in reply, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things.

There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

**The Christian Contemplative Tradition**

Though it has acquired other meanings and connotations in recent centuries, the word contemplation had a specific meaning for the first 16 centuries of the Christian era. For St. Gregory the Great, contemplation was both the fruit of reflecting on the Word of God in scripture and a precious gift of God. He referred to contemplation as "resting in God." In this "resting," the mind and heart are not so much seeking God, as beginning to experience what they have been seeking. This state is not the suspension of activity but reverent attention to the living God.

In this traditional understanding, contemplation, or contemplative prayer, is not something that can be achieved through will, but rather is God’s gift. It is the availing of one’s heart
and mind - one's whole being - to God. Contemplative prayer is a process that, over time, transforms our lives by helping us to grow in our relationship with God and bring Christ into the world.

Christian Contemplatives and Contemplative Practices Throughout History

Contemplative prayer is by no means a modern addition to Christianity. Contemplative Christian prayer has representatives in every age. A form of contemplative prayer was first practiced and taught by the Desert Fathers of Egypt, Palestine and Syria including Evagrius, St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great in the West, and Pseudo-Dionysius and the Hesychasts in the East.

In the Middle Ages, St. Bernard of Clarivaux, William of St. Thierry and Guigo the Carthusian represent the Christian contemplative tradition, as well as the Rhineland mystics, including St. Hildegard, St. Mechtilde, Meister Eckhart, Ruysbroek and Tauler. Later, the author of The Imitation of Christ and the English mystics of the 14th century such as the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, and Julian of Norwich became part of the Christian contemplative heritage.

After the Reformation, the Carmelites of St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and St. Therese of Lisieux; the French school of spiritual writers, including St. Francis de Sales, St. Jane de Chantal and Cardinal Berulle; the Jesuits, including fathers De Caussade, Lallemont and Surin; the Benedictines, like Dom Augustine Baker and Dom John Chapman, and modern Cistercians such as Dom Vital Lehodey and Thomas Merton, all cultivated practices in their lives that they believed led to the spiritual gift of contemplation.

Modern Contemplative Practices

In the 20th and 21st centuries, initiatives have been taken by various religious orders,
notably by the Jesuits and Discalced Carmelites, to renew the contemplative orientation of their founders and to share their spirituality with laypeople. In addition, monks such as Fathers John Main, OSB and Thomas Keating, OCSO have pioneered efforts to bring contemplative prayer practices out of the monastery and into our everyday lives.

What Contemplative Prayer Is and Is Not

We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. In the Christian tradition Contemplative Prayer is considered to be the pure gift of God. It is the mind and heart attentive to God, who is greater than thoughts, words, and emotions. Through grace we avail ourselves to God whom we know by faith is within us. Filled with His presence, we are better able to be Christ for others.

1. It is not a technique but a way of cultivating a deeper relationship with God.
2. It is not a relaxation exercise but it may be quite refreshing.
3. It is not a form of self-hypnosis but a way to quiet the mind while maintaining its alertness.
4. It is not a charismatic gift but a path of transformation.
5. It is not a psychological experience but an exercise of faith, hope and selfless love.
6. It is not limited to the “felt” presence of God but is rather a deepening of faith in God’s abiding presence.
7. It is not reflective or spontaneous prayer, but simply resting in God.
A Way to Deepen Our Relationship with God

How to Practice Christian Meditation

*A Simple Way to Pray, by Fred McEnroe, St. Dominic’s Christian Meditation Group*

In Matthew 6:6-8, we find Jesus instructing his disciples on how to pray,

“... when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (New American Bible).

Many of the ancient desert fathers and mothers took Jesus quite literally when he advised against praying with “many words.” In fact, they suggest using as few words as possible.

Here’s how: Pick a word or very short phrase that is personally and religiously meaningful to you. Possibilities could include “Jesus,” “Holy Mary,” “Lord have mercy,” “Peace,” “Abba,” or the ancient Christian phrase, “Mara-natha” (come Lord Jesus). Sit comfortably, close the eyes and allow the body to relax. Feel the rhythm of your breath (inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale). Begin to slowly repeat the selected word or phrase silently in your mind. Gently focus on the repetition of the word—don’t think about the meaning of your word or phrase, just continue to repeat it. If you find your mind wanders just gently come back to repeating your word or phrase. Continue as long as seems right to you. (Perhaps 20 to 30 minutes)

We begin sitting in the presence of the Lord and by use of a few words we attest to the Word that we are indeed present to his Presence.
Choosing the Word or Phrase for Meditation

The word or phrase used during meditation may also be referred to as the mantra. The term “mantra” is sometimes associated with Eastern prayer practices but its common definition is “a sound, word, or phrase that is repeated by someone who is praying or meditating.” Merriam-Webster 2015

The word recommended by Fr. John Main is the ancient Aramaic prayer “Maranatha” which means “Come Lord.” This lovely, rhythmic word can be found in 1 Corinthians 16:22.

What to Expect During Meditation

1. During the meditation period, various kinds of thoughts may arise:
   a. Ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memory.
   b. Thoughts and feelings that give rise to attractions or aversions.
   c. Insights and psychological breakthroughs.
   d. Self-reflections such as, “How am I doing?” or, “This peace is just great!”
   e. Thoughts and feelings that arise from the unloading of the unconscious.
   f. When engaged with any of these thoughts gently return to the word.
   g. “Thoughts” is an umbrella term for every perception, including body sensations, sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, plans, reflections, concepts, commentaries, and spiritual experiences.
   h. Thoughts are an inevitable, integral and normal part of meditation.
   i. When engaged with your thoughts, gently return to the word.
   j. Gently returning to the word provides for a minimum of distraction.
   k. During the course of meditation, the word may become vague or disappear.

2. During meditation we avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations, or aiming at some specific goal such as:
   a. Repeating the word uninterrupted.
   b. Having no thoughts.
c. Making the mind a blank.

d. Feeling peaceful or consoled.

e. Achieving a spiritual experience.

Practice 1: 10-minute meditation period.
Discussion 1: What was your experience?

Some Practical Points

1. An appropriate time for meditation is 20 minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning and the other in the late afternoon or early evening. With practice the time may be extended to 30 minutes.

2. A timer, preferably one that does not have a loud or alarming sound, may indicate the end of meditation.

3. Possible physical symptoms during the prayer:
   a. We may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in various parts of the body or a generalized sense of restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of physical and emotional knots in the body.
   b. We may notice heaviness or lightness in our extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness.
   c. In all cases we pay no attention and gently return to the word.

4. The principal fruits of meditation are experienced in daily life and not during the prayer period.

5. We take our place before God with reverence and be ready to meet Him as He chooses to reveal Himself on that day, in that moment. We do not pray in order to provoke any particular experience but to simply be with the Lord and let God act in our lives.

Practice 2: 10-minute meditation period.
Discussion 2: What was your experience?
The Next Step

1. Start with 5 minutes a day and slowly and gradually work up to one or (ideally) two 20-30 minute periods of meditation daily.

2. Prepare by reading the Word of God in Scripture especially the Gospels.

3. Read the works of the great saints of prayer. See pages 3 to 4 of this handout for a list and peruse the resources provided below.

4. Attend the St. Dominic’s Christian Meditation Group. All are welcome.
   a. It encourages the members of the group to persevere in their individual practice of prayer.
   b. It provides an opportunity for further input on a regular basis through the recorded talks and group discussion.
   c. It offers an opportunity to support and share the spiritual journey.

Resources

St. Dominic’s Christian Meditation Group (English)
Wednesdays 7:00 PM to 8:00 PM, Aquinas Room
Contact: Teresa Au at au.teresal@gmail.com

St. Dominic’s Christian Meditation Group (Spanish)
Sundays 3:00 PM to 4:00 PM, Siena Room
Contact: Alfredo E Neira at aeneira@yahoo.com

Join us for **Silent Night**
An Evening for Silent Prayer and Adoration
St. Dominic’s Church Nave
June 17, 2015, 7:30 PM to 8:30 PM

Christian Meditation as taught by Fr. John Main, OSB
World Community for Christian Meditation
http://www.wccm.org

Centering Prayer as taught by Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO
Contemplative Outreach
http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/christian-contemplative-tradition

Centering Prayer in the tradition of Fr. Thomas Keating
Mercy Center, Burlingame, CA
http://www.mercy-center.org/ProgramsMC/CenteringPrayer.html