Christian Meditation with Children
Rediscovering our Contemplative Roots

Adapted from the Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk Catholic District School Board

Forward by Tony Cosentino
Christian Meditation: Rediscovering our Christian Contemplative Roots

The practice of what is popularly known as “Christian Meditation” is a form of contemplative prayer that is meeting a growing need among Christians for inner silence and tranquility. This form of prayer is increasingly practiced among students and staff at Catholic schools in Canada and the US. Its effects are being manifested in greater calmness, attentiveness and compassion among students and staff alike.

So what is Christian Meditation, and what do we seek to accomplish by teaching it in our Catholic schools?

Meeting God in the silence of the heart

Simply put, Christian Meditation (CM) is about standing the quiet of the heart and meeting God there. It involves descending beneath the noise of our chattering minds, our aches, pains and emotions to a place of deep encounter with God, dwelling within. St. Teresa of Avila expresses this beautifully in her spiritual classic, The Way of Perfection:

“However quietly we speak, he is so near that he will hear us. We need no wings to go in search of him, but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon him present within us.” (Ch. 28)

Contemplative prayer to help us live as Jesus’ disciples

The practice of Christian meditation taught by Fr. John Main is a pathway to contemplation which involves a repeated mantra, such as Maranatha (Come Lord or Come, Lord Jesus). Some practitioners of Christian meditation use a biblical word or phrase in its place. The key here is that this form of prayer is directed toward God in Christ, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

The end goal of Christian meditation is to better enable us to live as followers of Jesus, to glorify God by our love for God and neighbour. It is therefore a form of prayer that everyone, young and old, can practice, not just those living in cloisters and monasteries.

The difference between Meditation and Contemplation

Meditation in the classic Christian sense, is prayerful reflection on God’s word (the Bible), with the help of the Holy Spirit. This prayerful reflection on God’s word is prayer itself, and it leads us further into prayer.

There are some non-Christian forms of meditation that involve relaxing the body and allowing the mind to quiet, to arrive at a place of deeper or non-judgmental self-awareness, or communion with a kind of universal consciousness or “mind”. Christians who practice contemplative prayer (and Christian meditation) may employ some of the mind and body quieting techniques familiar to Eastern forms of meditation, to enter a state of interior stillness, but the focus is always on meeting God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²

Prayer is a Gift

Our relaxation of body and quieting of mind is not a guarantee that we will encounter God according to our own ideas and plans. Prayer is a gift that is given to us as God, who knows what’s best, sees fit. That said, our God is a generous giver, and is eager to come to meet those who seek Him with a sincere heart.
What can Christian Meditation teach us?

CM can teach us that:
- God has a personal relationship with me
- God is sustaining me at each moment with infinite love
- I matter to God – God is present to me always
- There is a center within me where I can find peace and joy
- I can carry this peace and joy with me and into my relationships everywhere.

The experience of Christian Meditation as a form of contemplative prayer teaches us that we are precious in God’s eyes.

Anchoring our Identity and Well-Being

Learning these things is of vital importance to young people in Catholic schools. They are future shapers of our families, communities and society. They need an anchor for their own sense of identity and well-being amid the constantly shifting sounds, images and messages that saturate popular culture. Without this anchor, they are adrift without a point of reference to remind them of who they truly are.

For Christians, this point of reference is the person of Jesus Christ. He is the light that shines in our darkness (Jn 1, 5), who dwells in our hearts, rooting and grounding us in his love. This is what we as Catholic parents, pastors and educators seek to help our children discover, echoing the desire of St. Paul for the first Christians at Ephesus:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph 3: 16-19)

Prayer reminds us of who we are

All true Christian prayer reminds us that we belong to God in Christ. The sacraments – especially the Eucharist – are the heart of our prayer life. They strengthen, heal and nourish us in our walk of faith, to live as followers of Jesus. Other forms of prayer can support us in our walk of faith that rests on the foundation of the sacraments. The practice of Christian meditation is one such prayer form that can help support us in this walk. It can help us find our center where our hearts are in constant dialogue with God, to help us grow in faith, hope and love.

An encounter and its role in the New Evangelization

Christian Meditation is one pathway that can help lead us to a personal encounter with Christ. This encounter, rooted in Baptism and renewed in the sacraments, has the power to transform our lives. Together with God’s word and the sacraments, it can help impel us forward to share the Good News of Jesus by our words and the example of our actions. This is the essence of the New Evangelization.
Helping us live as disciples of Jesus

The regular practice of prayer, be it Christian meditation, the Rosary, Divine Mercy Chaplet, or simple dialogue with God, supports our Baptismal union with Christ. True prayer affirms us as God’s daughters and sons, who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to boldly approach our Creator for our own needs, those of loved ones, our communities and entire human family.

... you have received a spirit of adoption [through Baptism]. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God… (Rom 8:15)

Christian Meditation can remind us that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves (to borrow from St. Augustine), to help guide our feet along the path of faith as disciples of Jesus. Given the positive fruits in the lives of many who practice it on a regular basis, it may be a form of prayer worthy of practice alongside other traditional prayer forms in our Catholic schools.

(1) For further information, see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation, October 15, 1989.

The Fruits of Christian Meditation - Benefits for Children and Adults

- Research shows overwhelming evidence that 80-90% of children have experienced the presence of God. This confirms that children have the capacity for contemplation and that they are capable of experiencing the presence of God in simple ways.
- Children can meditate and like to meditate! Meditation deepens children’s personal relationship with God. It can initiate deep faith conversations that bring children closer to God.
- We are bombarded with an ever-expanding fast-paced world that demands immediacy. We run on the treadmill of busyness. However, meditation provides an antidote to balance this fast-paced, often non-reflective digital era.
- Meditation improves the ability to maintain single-focused attention, even in the face of internal and external distractions. This has implications for students with inattention challenges like ADHD.
- Meditation can improve problem-solving and decision-making skills (e.g., issues from the playground between students are quickly diffused during meditation).
- Patience is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. “Patience is a fruit of meditation, not a skill we work at developing.” (Laurence Freeman)
- Meditation leads to increased self-knowledge and self-acceptance.
- Meditation increases the desire to build community with others. Children are more considerate and loving. They are kinder to friends and more compassionate.
• Children learn to sit still for longer periods. They are calm, relaxed and more ready to learn.

• Children who engage in Christian Meditation at school often share their faith with their parents. They bring home their meditative practice and teach it to their parents. For families who do not go to mass, Christian Meditation helps bridge faith between home and school in a simple and experiential way.

• Meditation is having a positive response in local communities. It is a public witness of who we are as Christians. There have been cases of inquiries and new registrations of students because of the positive sense of community that it helps build.

• Meditation reduces stress and increases children’s sense of wellbeing and harmony. Dr. Shanida Nataraja explores extraordinary research that shows practices such as meditation are not only helpful in reducing stress, they may actually be crucial for good health and optimal brain functioning. For example:
  o The frontal cortex of the brain contains the circuitry responsible for screening incoming information for relevant thoughts and images. This becomes especially significant during meditation.
  o By giving the mind a single focus, meditation uses innate neural circuitry to filter out external noises and internal thoughts.
  o Using a mantra to focus attention during meditation triggers activity in the attention-association area in the prefrontal cortex of the brain.
  o Long-term meditation is shown to increase the activity in the mid-brain where sensory information travels from the body’s sensory organs to the forebrain.
  o Long-term meditation increases activity in the limbic system, thus improving emotional outlook and motivation.
  o During meditation, the thalamus (the gateway for sensory inputs traveling into the cerebral cortex) gets triggered to refocus attention inwards. Distracting thoughts are reduced and attention becomes stronger and stronger until attention can be effortlessly sustained.
  o Meditation has been shown to decrease cortisol levels. Cortisol is a hormone released during periods of stress, so a decrease in cortisol levels reflects a decrease in a person’s stress. Cortisol has also been known to suppress the immune system. Both heart rate and blood pressure rise during periods of stress, so it is not surprising that meditation can lead to notable reductions in the risk of cardiovascular disease.

• Meditation has been associated with a number of subjective psychological effects. Regular meditators report some or all of the following:
  o a boost in energy levels – an increase in productivity, creativity and physical stamina;
  o increased self-acceptance and a gradual release from the tendency to attribute self-blame;
  o a greater ability to express emotions (both positive and negative);
  o fewer bouts of irritability or emotional or behavioural outbursts; and/or
  o an improved and expanded sense of identity.
### Christian Meditation with Children

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<th>Feels Like . . .</th>
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| Children and adults sitting completely still gathered in a prayer circle or community with their: | - discipline  
- hard work to avoid distractions  
- lots of effort and hard work in the beginning, but an easy form of prayer with more practice  
- a special form of prayer  
- a special time with Jesus  
- calming to be in the presence of the Spirit and Christ | - *Open Our Hearts* playing on a CD at the start and children joining in singing  
- a few deep breaths at the start  
- **continued silence** while repeating the mantra  
- ‘*ma-ra-na-tha*’ in your mind  
- *We Call on You* playing on CD at the conclusion and children joining in singing  
- For some classes, there may be a soft singing of the songs at the start and conclusion |

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<th>DOES NOT Look Like</th>
<th>DOES NOT Feel Like</th>
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| Children and adults sitting around just anywhere with their:                     | - a visualization of a beach or other scene  
- wasted time                                                                                               | - noises from movements and fidgeting  
- whispering voices or talking  
- **continued loud deep breathing**  
- throat-clearing noises  
- repetition of the mantra out loud                                                                 |
Practical Guidelines

Preparing Children for Stillness

- Before beginning, you may wish to try some slow relaxation exercises - stretching, breathing, gentle rolling, etc.
- Remind children of the starting position (hands on laps, straight back, breathing naturally). Ask a child at the start to model the position.
- Have words to the songs Open Our Hearts and We Call on You visible for children to join in singing.
- Explain / review why we use the mantra.
- If children are fidgeting, they are not meditating. Teach them to keep coming back to the mantra when their mind strays. It may be helpful to remind them to practise by saying “maranatha” in their heads. This strategy will also benefit the children who are sitting quietly, but are not really engaging with the process.
- Remind children that meditation is a gift to them and that we need to respect others’ rights to enjoy it by being still and not distracting others.
- A worthwhile debriefing activity is to have children share the things they feel interfere with being able to meditate. Discuss how moving about, looking around, making noises and fidgeting with items is distracting and makes meditation harder work and less enjoyable.
- Guide the children to focus inwardly and on God, not on what others are doing.
- Place children who have difficulty settling near good role models, or change where they meditate (e.g., sit on a chair instead of on the floor).
- Discuss why we meditate and also the benefits. Emphasize that meditation is a great life skill and they need to try their best so they can experience the benefits.
- Allow students to take ownership by taking turns to do special jobs (e.g., setting up the prayer space, bringing in a sacred object for the prayer space from home, saying a prayer, setting up the CD, blowing out the prayer candle).
- Make Christian Meditation a very special part of the day and establish a daily routine. Pick a time with minimal interruptions and one that will benefit children the most in your busy schedule (e.g., every day after recess to help calm children and diffuse conflicts that occurred on the playground, before instruction, as a natural break between lessons in a 100-minute block, etc.).

Not Comfortable With Silence?

- For children who are struggling to close their eyes, encourage them to look at the candle to help them maintain some stillness and quiet.
- In lieu of that, some children might initially need some specific modification with the intent of eventually drawing them back into the full circle (e.g., sit in the circle and turn facing outward, wear headphones, or find a personal spot in the classroom for that child).
- Incorporate the songs from the CD at the start and end. You can also try singing without the CD sometimes.
• If the children are restless during the first days of meditation, do not stop the meditation to attend to these issues. Wait until afterwards to gently respond to any questions or concerns the children may have and allow them to tell you what would help them maintain the quiet.

• If a child is unable to participate due to behavioural or other needs and chooses to remove himself/herself from the meditation, then let the child leave the circle. Provide time and encouragement for the child to join in when ready to meditate.

Other Ideas

• If children claim they are tired or nodding off, remind them that sleeping is not meditating, as meditation is hard work. It is a discipline.

• With respect to children not engaging fully in the process, try not to intervene as it interrupts the experience for members of the group. Modelling meditation as their teacher will help signal student expectations during this time. Sometimes it may be necessary to intervene depending on the particular behaviour. If children are quiet, but not engaged, discuss this during debriefing.

Questions young people may raise:

**Can we lie down while we meditate?**
**Response:** When we lie down, our bodies may feel it is time to rest or sleep. That is why we sit upright, so that we can stay alert, repeat the mantra, and pay attention to God’s presence.

**Why do I have to keep my eyes closed?**
**Response:** Keeping our eyes lightly closed helps us to keep from being distracted by things around us.

**Why do we have to be so still?**
**Response:** When our bodies are still, it helps our minds to be still too, so that we can pay attention to saying the mantra.

**Why do we say ‘maranatha’?**
**Response:** The word ‘maranatha’ is from the language that Jesus spoke, and it was considered a special word. It means “Come Lord Jesus”.

**What if someone makes a noise and I have to see what’s going on?**
**Response:** There will always be noises of some sort, so you just have to keep your eyes closed even if you are curious to see what’s going on. What’s going on will usually just end up being a distraction.

**What should I do if someone (or something) distracts me?**
**Response:** Keep saying the mantra; really listen to it inside your heart, and try not to give the distraction any of your attention.

**What if I can’t help making noises or moving around while we’re in the meditation circle?**
**Response:** Well, see if you can remember that you are a friend to the others in the circle, and friends help each other. When we meditate together, it is important that each person be still and quiet, not just for themselves, but for the others too.
How to Do Christian Meditation

Meditation is not something we do solely in our head. It involves the whole person - body, mind and spirit. Meditation can be described as living in the present moment. It is only in the present moment that we can find what we are looking for. The only place we will find God is here and now. Meditation is letting go of the past and future and coming into the reality of the present moment that is also called the kingdom of God, which is within us. The Spirit prays within us, but we have to do our work.

We need to get rid of our distractions. The early Desert Fathers suggested you take a single word, a mantra, prayer word, sacred word. During meditation you repeat this word through the entire meditation, letting go of the past, future, and your imagination.

It is recommended to use “maranatha”. It is the oldest Christian mantra. Say it in four syllables of equal length: ma-ra-na-tha. You say your word faithfully with attention and love. Saying it with attention means you are taking attention away from yourself.

The mind races from one thought to another. We meditate to calm the mind and to bring the mind into the heart. The real stillness is the stillness within. *(The above is adapted from a talk by Fr. Laurence Freeman, OSB.)*

1. Sit still and upright with your back straight. This helps you stay alert and awake.
2. Place both your feet flat on the floor.
3. Place your hands on 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 relax.
6. Silently, interiorly, begin to say your single word.
7. Listen to the sound of your mantra as you say it, gently and continuously.
8. Do not think or imagine anything – spiritual or otherwise.
9. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation; keep returning to simply saying the word.
10. Maintain this stillness for the entire period of the meditation.

*(Adapted from the Canadian Christian Meditation Community).* [http://www.wccm-canada.ca/]
Christian Meditation with Children – Debriefing Questions

Open-Ended Questions

1. How did you feel while you were participating in Christian Meditation?
2. How do you feel after you meditate?
3. What do you like about meditating?
4. What do you find challenging about Christian Meditation?
5. What do you find easy about Christian Meditation?
6. What do you find helpful about Christian Meditation?
7. What does Christian Meditation mean to you?
8. When do you feel is the best time for our class to meditate?
9. What could you tell others about Christian Meditation?

Guiding Questions

1. How does Christian Meditation help you learn more about yourself?
2. How does Christian Meditation help you learn more about your faith?
3. How does Christian Meditation help your relationship with God?
4. How does Christian Meditation help your relationships with your family and friends?
5. How does Christian Meditation help you with your school work or other activities?
6. How does Christian Meditation reduce stress or make you feel better?
7. How has Christian Meditation helped or changed your class?
8. How has Christian Meditation helped or changed your school community?
9. How does repeating the mantra help you meditate?
Role of the Principal: Introducing Christian Meditation with Children

Context: Pope Benedict XVI (2006) reminds us in his address to a meeting of Bishops in Switzerland, that it is a fundamental task of pastoral care to teach people how to pray and how to learn to do so personally, better and better. We must show people once again not only that this spiritual dimension exists, but that it is the source of all things.

- As you would for any new program in the school, introduce the concept to the various stakeholders within your community before you begin Christian Meditation with Children (CMWC).
- Start by introducing the program to your staff by way of a staff meeting. Begin by asking if anyone has any prior knowledge or experience with Christian Meditation. Draw on the experience from your lead teacher and view the Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board (BHNCSDB) Christian Meditation video found at www.wccm-canada.ca under ‘Meditation with Children’.
- After introducing Christian Meditation to your staff, invite those staff interested to begin the prayer process with their class.
- Send home a letter (see sample below) and introduce it to your parent council. It is easier to introduce meditation to children when other adults in the community are supportive.
- To set the tone for its importance and to help staff and parents feel more comfortable with Christian Meditation, begin using the practice regularly to open staff meetings and council meetings (e.g., begin with two minutes of Christian Meditation and increase over time).
- Have a discussion with the staff involved around the consistency of the experience in your building (e.g., timing, setting, resources, prayer centre, etc.). Take the pulse of what is working well and offer suggestions / support to your staff so they can make adjustments that will enhance the routine and experience for students.
- Encourage staff to share their experience with their colleagues (e.g., formally at a staff meeting or bring it up in conversation in the staff room).
- Invite interested teachers to visit the lead teacher’s classroom to experience CMWC. Principals should be willing to cover a class for this to occur.
- Participate in classroom meditations regularly. Let the students see your willingness to be with them as they pray. Ask them questions to demonstrate your heightened interest in the experience. If possible, be a part of the debriefing process.
- Check in with staff regularly to see how the experience of CMWC is going. Celebrate and encourage the practice.
- Invite Resource Teachers from the Christian Meditation Community to offer Workshops, retreats and presentations at staff meetings.
Response to Parent or Community Inquiries:

- A misconception exists that meditation is Eastern, Oriental or Buddhist. It is a universal spiritual practice. Historically, it is a Christian tradition that dates back as far as the Desert Fathers and Mothers meditating in the fourth and fifth centuries.

- It does not replace other forms of prayer or reading scripture or sacraments. It can, however, offer clarity to reading scriptures more richly and gratefully.

- Students will not experience altered states of consciousness. They are fully alert and enter the present moment. What they do is discover the presence of God within them.

- Christian Meditation aligns with the Ontario Religious Education Curriculum (For Grades 1 through 8, it falls under one of the six Curricular Strands - PRAYING. In Secondary, it falls under one of the five Course Expectations - Prayer and Sacramental Life.) www.iceont.ca/ontario_catholic_curriculum.aspx

- Meditation is experiential. We need to experience meditation to start to understand it. Invite parents to ask their children about their personal experiences with Christian Meditation and to try to meditate with their children at home (their children make excellent teachers!).

Songs

Open Our Hearts
Words & Music: Michael Mangan

Jesus, open our ears to hear your voice,
Open our eyes to see your face,
Open our mouths to speak your words,
Open our hearts to your love,
Open our hearts to your love.

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We Call on You
Words & Music: Michael Mangan

We call on you, O God,
And on Jesus Christ your Son,
Through the power of the Spirit,
Who makes us truly one.
We ask you bless us,
And lead us in your ways,
As you guide us on our journey
Every day.

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Useful Resources Related to Christian Meditation with Children

Websites
www.wccm.org – The World Community for Christian Meditation International Centre
www.wccm-canada.ca – Canadian Community of The World Community for Christian Meditation.
www.wccmmeditation.org – Outreach of The World Community for Christian Meditation
www.theschoolofmeditation.org – The School of Meditation – includes helpful PDF documents and tips for practicing CMWC
www.cominghome.org.au – Coming Home website focused on Christian Meditation for children and young people

Blog – www.wccm-eb.ca

Publications
Ryan, Gregory. My Happy Heart – A picture book and CD to facilitate CMWC in the classroom.

Book and DVD
Battagin, Jeannie. A Child’s Way: How to Teach and Practice Christian Meditation with Children.
Simon, Madeline RSCJ. Born Contemplative
Posnett, Charles & Patty. Meditation with Children
Meditatio: Journal on Education
Meditation and Education
Freeman, Laurence. Meditation with Children
Freeman, Laurence. Your Daily Practice: A practical little manual on meditation.
Harris, Paul. Silence, Stillness and Simplicity – Daily readings from John Main

DVDs
Christian Meditation with Children – An Introduction
Christian Meditation – A Spiritual Practice for Our Modern Times (Townsville, Australia)
The School Journey – The story of Christian Meditation in UK Primary Schools

CDs
Freeman, Laurence & Cathy Day. Meditation with Children
Meditatio. Time for Prayer. MP3 on CD. Periods of silence with opening and closing chimes and music. Sheet music and lyrics for songs.
Freeman, Laurence. Like a Child.

For descriptions, prices and ordering information please see www.wccm-canada.ca
Or contact; Canadian Christian Meditation Community Bookstore.
P.O. Box 52, Station NDG, Montreal, QC. H4A 3P4
Tel: 514-485-7928. Email: christianmeditation@bellnet.ca
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