

# Christian Meditation with Children: A Gift for Life



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The author's book, published by Veritas, elaborates in detail on the themes touched on in this article

Since November 2012, *Christian Meditation Ireland* has reached out to primary schools all over Ireland to offer free in-service on teaching meditation to children. While meditation has become very popular in secular society, its focus on meditation as a secular practice is on the pragmatic benefits that arise for those who meditate. Our project goes deeper and stresses also the rich inner fruits, the spiritual fruits that flow from it. Our program distinguishes clearly between the secular practice of meditation and meditation as a contemplative, spiritual practice; it teaches the difference between secular mindfulness and Christian meditation without in any way denigrating the former. In fact we see the growing popularity of mindfulness as an opportunity to speak about the deep spiritual fruits of meditation. As Fr Laurence Freeman, Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation, says: 'the successful mindfulness movement has opened a door in education – and many other social institutions – towards a deeper and richer

understanding of the spiritual dimension of the human and of all forms of human activity. Mindfulness itself, avoiding any spiritual language or interpretation, did not go through the door it opened.'<sup>1</sup>

Children love to meditate. Writing in the early 1990s, Madeline Simon described children as 'born contemplatives', suggesting that they take to meditation 'like ducks to water' because 'they have not reached the stage of logical thought and are able, in their simplicity, to catch and hold God by love'.<sup>2</sup> John Main, who recovered the ancient practice and promoted it as one very much suited to the ordinary lay person, suggested that meditation opens the human heart as naturally as sunlight generates the opening of a flower. My doctoral research confirms that children experienced such heart-awareness as they sat in the stillness and silence of meditation. My book, *Meditation with Children: A Resource for Teachers and Parents*, published by Veritas, describes in the words of the children themselves what it feels like for a child to meditate and explains how they experience the

fruits of meditation at a very deep level. While this short article may help to give the reader a flavour of the children's experience, the book gives many examples of how the children gave expression to their spiritual experience as a result of meditation.

The in-service training for school staffs normally takes place in a single two-hour session, usually after school as part of Croke Park hours. It begins with a reflection on the spread of mindfulness meditation in the Western world as a secular practice, before moving on to consideration of meditation as a faith-based practice and, in particular, the practice of meditation (contemplation, really) in the Christian tradition. There is a rich tradition of meditation in the Christian Churches, the written record of which brings us as far back as the Desert Fathers. In modern times, each of the last three popes has stressed the importance of contemplation. Saint Pope John Paul II spoke about the need to develop in children an attitude of attention in order to nourish their inner amazement in the face of creation. He noted that for all



human beings ‘a real and profound interior silence ... is the first prerequisite for listening.’<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, speaking on World Communications Day 2012, said: ‘The great patristic tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us ... to facilitate authentic listening, there must also be moments of silence and of non-verbal reception.’<sup>4</sup> And Pope Francis has written that ‘we are all called to be contemplatives even in the midst of action,’ and he reminds us that ‘trust-

centred and recognises the deep connectivity between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit which promotes the harmonious integration of body, mind and spirit. The intention in Christian meditation is to become grounded in God and the Christian tradition teaches that one of the deep fruits of Christian contemplative practice is that it leads to a more authentic, more compassionate, Christ-centred way of being in the world. In the words of John Main: ‘The discipline of meditation ... places that one demand on us absolutely: that we must leave self

*waiting*’. It captures beautifully and remarkably-well that sense of waiting in unknowing. Although effortless, meditation is not a passive activity, but a dynamic one. The underlying dynamic is receptive and participative. It is not about mastery but mystery; not about mastering a technique but allowing oneself to be vulnerable to the mystery in which we live and move and have our being.

Within the Christian tradition, meditation is not intended to replace other kinds of prayer but is understood as adding a depth of meaning to all prayer. It facilitates the movement from mental to receptive prayer, with a view to building a personal relationship of communion with Christ which informs how we live our lives. Of course, children would not have the capacity to express the fruits of meditation in this way. But my recent research into meditation with children demonstrates that they are well able, nonetheless, to give

metaphorical expression to its fruits in their lives. The four fruits as expressed by the children in their conversations with me were as follows: ‘meditation helps you to be yourself’; ‘meditation helps you to feel the goodness inside’; ‘meditation brings you closer to God’; and ‘meditation makes you a kinder person.’<sup>7</sup>

There isn’t sufficient space in this short article to do justice to what the children said but a few examples will give a flavour of what they experienced. Julia (12) said ‘You are not talking when you’re meditating, so it takes you more inside.’ Helena (7) observed that ‘When meditation is deep in you, you feel like you are somewhere you’ve always wanted

## ‘What makes Christian meditation distinctive is that it is Christ-centred.’



filled prayer is a response of a heart open to encountering God face to face, where all is peaceful and the quiet voice of the Lord can be heard in the midst of silence.’<sup>5</sup>

Meditation traditions differ in their intention. Meditation as a secular practice is understood as a technique for quieting the mind and promoting the well-being of the person who meditates. In other words, for many people today the initial motivation for taking up meditation centres on its physical, psychological and emotional benefits. But however one begins meditation, if one is faithful to the practice, one’s awareness of the spiritual dimension of the human person awakens and deepens, and the motivation for persevering in meditation can ultimately become a spiritual one. What makes Christian meditation distinctive is that it is Christ-

behind so completely, leave our thoughts, our analyses, our feelings behind so completely, as to be totally at the disposition of the Other.’<sup>6</sup>

However, while intention is important and impactful, it should also be effortless. In Christian meditation, one holds fast to the intention to be in communion with God in the silence but one lets go of all effort to make it happen. Christian meditation is not about doing or achieving, but simply about being. Letting go of all effort while holding on to the intention enables us to wait in unknowing, receptively, without striving, without expectation of a self-conscious experience, having faith that something vital is happening at a very deep level of consciousness as grace does its work. The Irish word for contemplation is *rinnfheithreamh*, which translates literally as ‘*waiting at the edge*’ or ‘*at the edge of*



to be since you were small.' And Pamela (11) said 'I think meditation brings out the real me, and I don't have to pretend to be someone else ... When I meditate, I can be myself and I accept myself for who I am.' Very many children spoke of becoming intensely aware in meditation of their own inherent goodness and of feeling a strong sense that they are unconditionally loved. For example, Sophie (8) noted, 'Meditation helps me to be more aware of the goodness inside me.' Jack (11) said, 'When I'm angry I don't feel the goodness inside, but when I meditate, then I do feel the goodness in me.' And Lucy (10) said, 'When you're not doing meditation, you sort of ... have a snap inside you. As if you are always getting ready to snap. But when you do meditation, the goodness comes out. The bad feelings disappear and the goodness flows in.' But as well as making them aware of the goodness within themselves, meditation also helped children to become more keenly aware of the innate goodness in others, and to relate better with those around them.

Many children described meditation as bringing them closer to God. Natalie (11) said, 'I take a few minutes, not to talk to God, but to be with him, to feel closer to him.' Ella (9) said, 'When I meditate it feels like me and God are connected ... I



can feel his love.' Many children felt their sense of being connected to God in meditation was

strengthened by the fact that the whole school meditated together. Adrian (11) captured this well: 'It feels like everyone is one. We're all together and still it feels ... as if everyone is where you are now. And God is in the presence.' As well as nourishing their spirituality – helping them to discover their true-self, who they really are in God – many also spoke of how they experienced meditation as a form of guidance, nudging them in the direction of acting responsibly and doing the right thing. Sophie (8) found meditation made her a kinder person: 'When I let go of the things that are bothering me, it's like I've become a kinder person.' Derek (9) felt that meditation 'releases kindness in you ... and makes you feel more open-minded.' Meditation seems to give the children



access to an inner wisdom, an inner truth and they allow themselves to be guided by it. Jason (12) used a very rich metaphor to describe his understanding: 'Meditation is like a map and the destination is who you really are.' I was stunned by his response, by his capacity to express so succinctly the deep spiritual fruit of meditation.

The in-service we offer covers all of these factors as well as practical experience of meditation and a set of simple lessons for introducing children to meditation. The resources we provide include a CD which can be used by the teachers to get started every time their class and school meditates. Schools will find the application form for the project on the 'Meditation & Children' page of our website, [www.christianmeditation.ie](http://www.christianmeditation.ie). When an application is received, the school is assigned a facilitator who will contact the principal to arrange a suitable time for in-service for any time during the school year. There is no charge for the in-service; while a donation to support the work of the project is invited and welcomed, it is not necessary. Many schools make a contribution of €100-€150, but there are many smaller schools who are unable to make any contribution. Every school which takes up the practice is asked to purchase a

Starter Pack of resources (€45) which is then available to those who join the staff of the school over the following years.

Experience has shown us that the commitment of the school principal to the project is vital to its success. Many schools also appoint one or two teachers to work with the principal over time, to animate the project within the school community so that the practice remains vibrant and alive.

#### Further Reading

- Christie, Ernie. *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children*. Singapore: Medio Media, 2008.
- Keating, Noel. *Meditation with Children: A Resource for Teachers and Parents*. Dublin: Veritas, 2017.
- Main, John. *In Times of Anxiety*. London: The World Community for Christian Meditation, 2009.
- Simon, Madeleine. *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Noel Keating, *Meditation with Children: A Resource for Teachers and Parents* (Dublin: Veritas, 2017), 9.
- <sup>2</sup> Madeleine Simon, *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> He was addressing participants of the National Congress of the Italian Association of Catholic Teachers on 6 December 1984.
- <sup>4</sup> See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20120307\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20120307_en.html)
- <sup>5</sup> Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today's world, *Gaudete et Exsultate: Rejoice and be Glad*, Dublin: Veritas, 2018, n.26 and n.149
- <sup>6</sup> John Main, *In Times of Anxiety* (London: The World Community for Christian Meditation, 2009), 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Keating, *Meditation with Children: A Resource for Teachers and Parents*.



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