

"Lord, Lord, teach us to pray!"

Pathways to Holiness: Christian Meditation as a path for all



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What is Holiness? What is prayer?

Holiness has long been thought to be the business of saints, priests, religious, the Pope (the word "holy" is included in his title after all) and those special people among us who display a unique capacity for beyond-average patience, understanding, knowledge, wisdom, love, compassion, forgiveness and resiliency, to name just a few. For the rest of us, holiness remains a state of being that, through God's grace, we will achieve upon entering God's eternal banquet when we die. Holiness in our modern, media-influenced understanding has been reduced to public and private morality, when it is really much more than that.

In the biblical sense of holiness (deriving from the Hebrew word "qadosh", Greek, "hagios") the basic definition is to be "set apart" or "dedicated" to God. To be holy is to know we belong to God. A church building is holiness in space; Sunday is holiness in time: these are set apart from other buildings and other days of the week. This sense of holiness precedes morality. Given our baptismal call as Catholics to transform the world around us and to build God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven," we are to infuse the world with holiness. We begin our days, classes and meals with prayer, we have rituals to signify various life events to mark our growth as a people living a reality that is more than the world dictates, a reality that is in tune with God's time and meaning.

Prayer is our profound means of attaining this state of holiness. Prayer is connecting with God, communicating our deepest longing, hopes, dreams, fears, praise, adoration and presence, though God knows these before we do. There are many ways to pray and preferences for prayer as there are people yearning for this connection.

In the Gospel of Luke, we are reminded that we are to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." Scholarly interpretations of this passage usually conclude that we should love God with every fiber of our being and our neighbour as we love ourselves. It is common to apply a "one size fits all" to human beings and their spiritual lives. We know from experience this is not effective, useful or respectful of our various personalities, characters, histories and life circumstances. The above scripture passage alludes to four distinct ways towards holiness--heart, strength, mind and neighbour--and each of us is naturally inclined to prefer one over the others. Through much of recorded history, many observers of humanity in different cultures have noted that there are four distinct dispositions or temperaments that seemed to describe how people behave differently. For example, as far back as the fifth century B.C., Hippocrates, the father of medicine, described four different temperaments based on his conclusion of careful observation and recording of human behaviour. Even in religion, Hindu wisdom hypothesizes four central--but quite different--religious preferences. Today, models such as the Myers-Briggs, the Enneagram, the five love languages (Gary Chapman) or the True Colours personality theory among many others identify different personalities which affect how we learn, communicate and interact with others and the world. It makes sense that we should have this same diversity with our spiritualities. These various paths are not intended to reduce or label a complex world into oversimplified categories. These are meant to help us understand ourselves better and recognize the areas of growth so we can better achieve balance in our relationship with God, with ourselves, with others and with the created world.*

**Taken from 4 Ways to Become Holy: Spiritual Pathways by Roger O'Brien. U.S. Catholic, March, 1996.*

**"Praying always means that, without neglecting your ordinary occupations, you treat God as you treat the friends who love you and whom you love. God is ever near you, even within you."
(St. Alphonsus de Liguori)**

Christian Meditation as a Path for All.

Christian Meditation in Catholic Schools.

The Catholic faith professes that each person is a unique, unrepeated person; they are created in the image and likeness of God, thus have a dignity that is divinely theirs that no one and no circumstance can remove; they have meaning and purpose for their place and time in the world and in God's plan for its salvation; and, they are more than the world would dictate or outline for them. To be fully alive, therefore, is to be fully aware of all that constrains and stifles their development and they are called to overcome these obstacles to achieve new possibilities through God's grace. The ONTARIO CATHOLIC SCHOOL GRADUATE EXPECTATIONS indicate that the graduate is expected to be 1) a discerning believer formed in the Catholic Faith community who celebrates the signs and sacred mystery of God's presence through word, sacrament, prayer, forgiveness, reflection and moral living; and 2) a reflective, creative and holistic thinker who solves problems and makes responsible decisions with an informed moral conscience for the common good.¹ Christian meditation, being a prayer practice open for all students regardless of creed or circumstance, allows them to deepen their understanding of what it means to be called into relationship with God and helps them understand the role of silence and mystery in their development as reflective, creative and holistic individuals.

R. M. Jacobs, a Professor of Villanova University, outlines five graces foundational to spiritual leadership, which he understands to be vital to the Catholic educator.² These are:

- understanding the nature of the soul and spiritual experience;
- adopting a contemplative stance;
- exhibiting a magnanimous spirit;
- possessing interpersonal sensitivity; and
- acting with courage.

Christian meditation helps nurture the role of the Catholic educator in witnessing to the students that in silence before God, all are called as one body to live lives rooted in Christ. It is in the silence that God speaks to us and we grow more fully in that relationship.

Benefits of Christian Meditation

The practice of Christian meditation has grown in recent years due to a rediscovery of its effectiveness for the life of the Christian and its many benefits, some of which are:

- Christian meditation leads to increased self-knowledge and self-acceptance, "silences the voices of anxiety, doubt, self-criticism and fear"³;
- Christian meditation increases the desire to build community with others;
- Christian meditation deepens one's personal relationship with God, for adults and children alike;
- Christian meditation reduces stress and helps nurture an overall well-being of mind, body and spirit.⁴

Educators who lead students in this prayer practice "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;
- able to be still for longer periods of time."⁵

"Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God.' But when we pray, do we speak from the height of our pride and will, or 'out of the depths' of a humble and contrite heart? He who humbles himself will be exalted; humility is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that 'we do not know how to pray as we ought,' are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer. 'Man is a beggar before God'" (2259).

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.⁶

Mindfulness

- * rooted in Buddhist practice
- * learned technique
- * mind activity
- * attention is on the self (time limited)
- * focus on the present
- * measurable results focus (self-regulation, calming)
- * way of preparing for meditation by calming the mind and harmonizing mind and body
- * 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

How to do Christian Meditation⁷

1. Sit still, feet flat on floor, back straight, hands on lap.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Become aware of your breathing, not changing its pattern but how it flows in and out of your body as you clear your mind from distractions.
4. Silently, interiorly, begin saying your sacred word or mantra, "Ma-ra-na-tha" in four equal syllables. This can be done in time with your breathing.
5. If thoughts come, use the sacred word or mantra to return to the silence.
6. Maintain this stillness for the entire period of meditation.

Christian Meditation

- * Rooted in Christian tradition
- * surrender - contemplation is not the result of a well-honed technique but of God's grace
- * "pure prayer" of the heart
- * attention is to let oneself decrease so Christ can increase within the person (John 3:30)
- * focus on the present - experiencing God as the "I AM"
- * faithfulness and trust
- * produces mindfulness - makes one more aware, mindful of themselves in the present moment
- * benefits include reducing stress, self-regulation, increases self-knowledge, acceptance, sense of well-being, harmony, meaning and purpose for one's life, calmness, enhancement of learning
- * fruits of the Spirit: "but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22)
- * transformational

Bibliography

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3. *Jackie Trotzman, "To Meditate or Not to Meditate Why Some Don't Practice Meditation." The Guided Life (blog).*
4. *Paul Tratnyek and Mary Theresa Coene, "Christian Meditation for Students." Institute for Catholic Education, Monograph Series, Fall 2016.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*