

It is relatively rare to encounter a resource for Catholic schools that might be described as touching into the very core of the mission of Catholic schools. I believe *Children Love to Meditate* is such a resource. Teaching children to meditate invites children into allowing the spiritual dimension of their lives to be enriched and deepened. Our cultural environment is awash with noise. Many people are terrified by silence. The addictions of social media can seduce us into states of anxiety about missing the latest fad or breaking news. Here is a book which gently leads children into a journey of discovering the presence of the God of love through practices of meditation.

The book by two very experienced educators, Ernie Christie and Dr Cathy Day from the diocese of Townsville, Queensland, explores the topic of meditation for children by sharing their own wisdoms and the wisdoms of an array of international leaders in fostering children's meditation.

The impulse for practices of meditation described in this book finds its genesis in the scriptures and early Christian sages. The traditions of Christian meditation have recently been revived and promoted through the works of John Main, Fr. Laurence Freeman and world networks such as World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM). Ernie Christie and Cathy Day have synthesised the essence of reflective practices and actualised them in simple yet profound approaches to children's meditation.

I congratulate Ernie Christie and Cathy Day for producing such an invaluable resource for Catholic schools and wider Christian Communities. I would hope that this book be extensively used as a helpful resource into leading children, their teachers and parents into the silence of the heart of God, their own humanity and the wonders of creation.

Dr Kevin Treston, international consultant

In current literature about children and meditation the pioneering work of Ernie Christie and Cathy Day stands supreme. While so many of us adults struggle with the practice of meditation, Christie and Day convince us through their love of meditation and their wide teaching-experiences, that 'children love meditation' – the title of their new book. They see the potential for a divine flourishing in every child, the unimaginable harvest

hidden in the springtime of their precious souls, and they have the clearest vision of how to protect and nourish that potential – meditation.

They recognise and honour the deceptive depth, the capacity for an inner stillness, the divine simplicity and astonishing clarity of children. These authors are true teachers, humble lovers of possibility, and courageous mid-wives of what is already waiting for the touch of love, bringing to birth an infinitely powerful and young beauty that will change the world. This promise is being fulfilled across the planet according to the first-hand reports of impressive educationalists as revealed in Part II of *Children Love to Meditate*.

There are sublime reflections in this book. Among the many wise observations the authors make about their subject are: the refusal to acknowledge measurable ‘progress’; the divine beauty of children’s hearts; their deep unselfconscious, natural experience of grace and beauty – and therefore of God.

The vision, wonder and amazement in the authors’ hearts and minds will touch, and be caught by, your hearts and minds too.

Fr Daniel O’Leary, priest, author and speaker

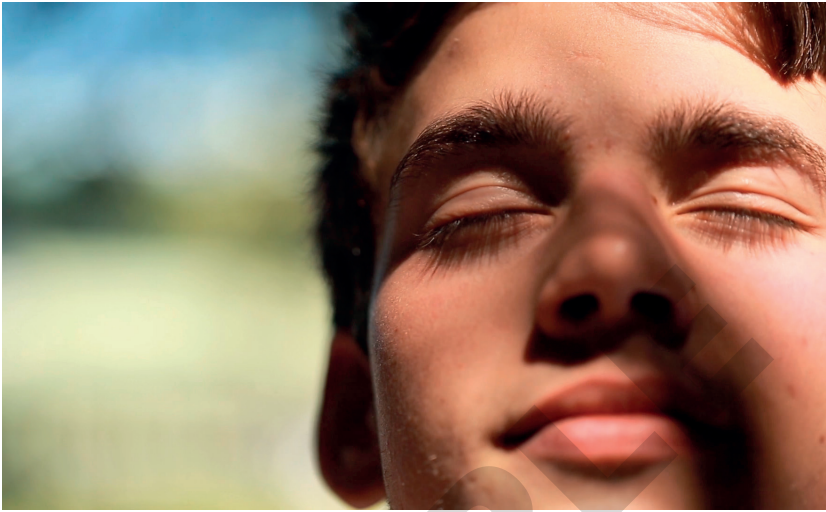
WE PROGRESS BY STOPPING

*Bringing meditation to children in
Townsville Catholic schools*

ERNIE CHRISTIE AND DR CATHY DAY

Every week in classrooms across the Diocese of Townsville, a diocese covering a vast area of north-eastern Australia, children come together to meditate. Bringing this to fruition has been a real labour of love for us both; here we share the story of this life-giving initiative.

To the surprise of many visitors to schools across the diocese, children from as young as three and up to eighteen happily involve themselves in times of regular silent prayer. Children have this opportunity because Christian meditation was introduced to all Townsville diocesan Catholic schools in 2005 and is now an accepted and regular element of prayer in our schools. The practice of meditation was introduced to all students as a means



of bringing about personal growth for social and spiritual transformation. Many schools have also adopted Christian meditation as an element of staff prayer, and at least once a week, interested staff members gather for meditation before school.

As a result of this active fostering of Christian meditation within Catholic schools, there has been within the Townsville Diocese a renewal of interest in the contemplative tradition of the Church, and particularly in forms of contemplative prayer such as the labyrinth, *Lectio Divina* and the Rosary.

Beginning the journey

Every new initiative in schools needs passionate people who want to make a difference in the lives of children. In the case of the meditation initiative in the Townsville Diocese, we both

passionately believe in the beauty, relevance and spiritual richness of the contemplative life. Yet this life has for so long been hidden from non-monastic Christians.

This changed when Fr John Main recognised the hunger in lay Christians for a deeper and perhaps more mystical experience of the Christian tradition. Through Fr John Main's persistent and prayerful effort, thousands of people around the world now enjoy meditation as a silent prayer practice. This international community of love continues to grow in depth and outreach. Children in Townsville now join with children in other parts of the world to enrich this community through their effortless and sincere practice of meditation.

The Townsville initiative has taken root because it was carefully planned and nurtured from the outset. As longstanding educators and leaders in the Catholic education system in Townsville, we had many insights into the way our schools worked and the willingness of principals and teachers to be open to the new. We were encouraged by the support of Bishop Michael Putney, who not only became a patron of the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) but spent many hours meditating with children in schools until his untimely death in 2014. The combination of our experience in schools, leadership roles and capacity to garner the support of the bishop, priests and principals was key to the ultimate success of the initiative, which has become a sustainable and normalised part of the prayer life of our Catholic schools.

The journey began with a visit from Fr Laurence Freeman in 2001, at the invitation of Bishop Michael Putney, to introduce

people in Townsville to Christian meditation. Fr Laurence captured the imagination of many people. It was infectious in the best sense of the word. Fr Laurence is an exceptional teacher, and it was his faithful witness to the vision of Fr John Main that people found so compelling. This initial meeting was followed by Ernie's participation in the annual John Main Seminar in 2004, held in Vermont, USA. After several conversations with Fr Laurence at the seminar, Ernie was convinced that children should be given the opportunity to learn to meditate. On his return to Australia, Ernie introduced his eldest son to meditation and began many conversations within the diocese, ultimately gathering the support and momentum required to begin a pilot program with a group of interested teachers from several schools in Townsville.

At the heart of this initial formation process for the pilot group was Fr John Main's teaching on the practice of Christian meditation with an emphasis on stillness of body, simplicity of approach and silence of mind. Fr John Main's writings provided access to a great treasure – a treasure that is not buried in a field but rather lies within each person. He did not say meditation was the only way or that it replaced other forms of prayer. However, he believed it was central to the human journey and the religious vision of life. In leading the listener up to the threshold of silence, Fr John Main's teaching allows one to see meditation as a way of love, which holds the key to right understanding and right action. His vision of love is completely lacking in sentimentality, being born of a deep awareness that God is love. To know and experience this love requires a taming of the ego,

which is often responsible for a possessive and controlling kind of love.

In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est – God is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI invites and wants all people to experience love in a way that allows and reveals the light of God entering into the reality of the world. Christian meditation opens everyone to the possibility of a deepening awareness of God as love – an awareness constantly available in the very midst of everyday life, with all its possibilities of highs and lows. In the shared moments of meditation, the light of Christ does enter the world through the silence and stillness of each person.

Never having met Fr John Main in person, Townsville Catholic schoolteachers have come to know him by reading what others have said about him, reading his own prophetic words and listening to his voice on the recordings he made as he taught the practice of Christian meditation. Fr Laurence Freeman has continued to share John Main's vision, inspiring so many to come to love what he 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 is essential in any approach to teaching children Christian meditation. This is not another curriculum fad; it is a gift to all students.

But it is the witness of teachers that is so important, as Pope Paul VI states in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: '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. They prefer witnesses to teachers.⁷⁴ Written in 1965, this statement still powerfully resonates for teachers, who not only provide opportunities for children to grow spiritually but also demonstrate the way of spiritual growth through their own lives.

Why did this amazing journey in Townsville take root? Initially we both simply wanted to give our students and staff an opportunity to experience the magnificent vision that Fr John Main had already given to so many people around the world in rediscovering the ancient roots of Christian meditation. It was not long before our pilot group of teachers shared our view that Christian meditation, and a strong focus on the contemplative Christian foundation, would bring rich opportunities to greatly assist students in their personal identity formation as Christian persons.

As spiritual teachers, both Fr Laurence Freeman and Fr John Main quickly became highly respected and admired in their ability to strengthen those newly minted Townsville Christian meditation teachers. Through their words and through their witness, Fr Laurence and Fr John enable others to hear what life and the Holy Spirit has long wanted to teach all people – that trust is the key to knowing God. Their words and example focused the pilot teachers not on notions of more achievement but on more trust: Let go, trust in God, trust in life and what it teaches you. These are Fr John Main's words. It was clear they held a simple but powerful belief that putting trust in God would enable all teachers to see what God wants them to see – that children can meditate and should be given the opportunity to experience God through meditation.

Establishing the model

School principals are important people who must be consulted, convinced and included whenever a new initiative is to be successfully introduced into schools. Townsville Catholic School principals are not an exception to this rule, and Ernie spent quality time with the principals who had indicated interest in the Christian meditation pilot program and would perhaps become the early adopters of the expanded program.

The principals nominated exceptional teachers as participants in the pilot, and throughout the eighteen months of the initial program, principals were informed and supportive of the program. These carefully chosen teachers attended a retreat where they meditated right from the start. An Essential Teaching program, which was the work of the WCCM, provided the training material. Experienced members of WCCM were invited to do the initial teaching. The emphasis was on an immersion experience for the teachers with the goal of deepening their knowledge of meditation practice and its place in the Christian tradition.

The pilot teachers quickly gained confidence in their own practice and were keen to begin introducing it to their classes. They became a highly professional network of colleagues who shared their observations and ideas, providing the impetus and foundation for our decision to ‘go the whole hog’ and introduce the practice to all 13,000 students across the diocese.

Fr Laurence Freeman together with Bishop Michael Putney launched the system-wide Christian meditation prayer practice in

June 2006. Many foundation elements were still to be designed and implemented, but it was important for the whole of the teaching workforce to experience and catch some of the fire within the pilot group at this stage.

Ernie wrote a book, which captured much of the work of the pilot program, called *Coming home: a guide to teaching Christian meditation to children*. The reflections of the pilot teachers made a solid contribution to this book. Through our leadership roles and influence in the Catholic Education Office, we were able to provide much-needed resources to allow for the continuing support of our project and eventually for a successful embedding of Christian meditation in all the schools. A great deal of effort went into the development of resources for teachers along with budget allocations to support teacher formation programs and assist principals in introducing meditation in a sustainable way to all classes in each school. Along with personal championing of the teachers and leadership of the school, this structural support at a diocesan level was critical and remains critical today; without this, the project would surely have withered on the vine.

Responses to the concept

It was one thing for both of us to be enthusiastic about the new meditation project. It was another thing entirely to expect that our teachers would feel the same level of enthusiasm. Adding something extra to a teacher's workload today is asking for criticism given the already burdensome nature of the teacher's work. Therefore, we

felt it was important to say something convincing to staff about the importance of providing this experience for students.

The Townsville 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 and one that is taken seriously. It is inspired by the vision Jesus presented: that he had come so that we may have life and have it abundantly. The notion of abundance includes spiritual depth, which must be nurtured in a world that devalues the spiritual life a religious tradition offers.

Fr Laurence suggests that teaching children to pray opens up a way of hope and wisdom in a world that can be ‘a cultural nightmare’. This nightmare refers not only to the way childhood is defined today but also to the prevailing secularised worldview. In his book *A brief history of everything*, the great American psychologist, philosopher and contemplative Ken Wilbur contends that the worldview from the Enlightenment that permeates the fabric of secular society, 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 a cultivating of the inner ‘I’ that sees everything as being saturated with God. This is in harmony with a healthier worldview that invites the individual to even deeper living within communities that gather to celebrate their spirit and life.

Jesus himself would turn the secular worldview upside down, jolting people into radical questioning. We take this questioning seriously, asking the profound questions about what children really need from adults to flourish in today's world. And as we have asked, we have found an answer in the contemplative approach.

Teaching children Christian meditation can be considered 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 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 God's love for each of them personally. Our Townsville experience demonstrates that teachers are confident in what they are offering their students because they are rekindling an ancient tradition that has stood the test of time. Teachers accept that children come ready-equipped for their spiritual journey. The challenge is to build on the spiritual competence each child is endowed with from birth.

Staff formation is part of the redemptive process because in learning to meditate and learning about the fullness of the tradition of Christian meditation, teachers are invited to ask how they actually pray themselves as adults, to ask how authentic their spiritual life is, how they tend it and how they prioritise it. This encourages reflection on the unimpeachable authority of the

child, on what it means to be human, and about how each person truly respects and loves self and others as God intends.

We both acknowledge the generosity of the teachers who have showed enthusiasm in degrees from mild (but willing to try) through to exuberant. They become strong exponents, taking on Christian meditation as part of their everyday classroom life. This response was gratifying in several ways because the introduction of Christian meditation was never just about the children. The planning and resourcing of teacher formation was and remains a critical element of the Townsville approach. While respecting a teacher's freedom to simply take on the task of teaching children to meditate, they are constantly given opportunities to become more aware of their spiritual selves and encouraged to become more willing and able to live up to the noble calling of the teacher – who imitates Christ, the only Teacher. In their constant role of abundant life nurturers, teachers reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behaviour.

The experience of Christian meditation has presented a wonderful opportunity for our teachers to dig deep into the Christian tradition, to read and ponder the mystics – retrieving the ancient wisdom of Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhardt, 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 Townsville teachers and a freshness and enthusiasm for the Christian tradition where it perhaps was becoming stale and losing its impact, particularly on one's prayer life.

This response, of course, is bigger than our little diocese. Professor Gary Bouma in his book, *Australian Soul*, states that Australians are seeking wonderment and inner journeying, and are 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.

As Australians, we have in recent times acknowledged the ancient and awe-inspiring spiritual practices of our fellow Indigenous Australians. The land itself is spiritual, and our relationship to country is profound. With our national spiritual psyche, our reclaiming of the Church's ancient contemplative tradition and, most importantly, our witnessing of students so confident and so easy in their own practice of Christian meditation, we now want to encourage the idea that every student in a Catholic school in Australia should get the opportunity to become a meditator in the Christian tradition.

Reflections on a decade of learning

We have come to know that children at every age level have a great openness to the presence of God in their lives and a real readiness for prayer. They yearn to experience the divine; through the stillness and silence that this experiential form of prayer offers, children know God is present within them and within their fellow

classmates. In silent meditation, teachers simply let 'God do the work of God' without interpretation or analysis.

We have learnt 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 that will continue to bring them great blessings throughout their lives. We have meditated with our students in senior secondary schools who demonstrate great reverence, acceptance of the divine inspiration for their lives and a great and lasting love of silent meditation. The power of meditation in helping to bring inner peace, control impulses and encourage a positive sense of self are all experiences of the God-giftedness of each young person in our care. But this must be nurtured and even sponsored by our own adult witness and in our prayerful encounters with young people.

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. We remain passionate about seeing the Christian meditation movement grow and reach new, fertile soil. Many Christians seek meditation elsewhere because they think that they will not be able to find this 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.⁵

We are proud that we have introduced our teachers to this 'incarnate' way of prayer. In turn, they have connected powerfully to the work of John Cassian and Fr John Main and have increased teacher interest in the Christian mystical tradition and contemplative prayer. In a hectic, busy world, our Townsville Catholic schoolteachers continue to take these words and the words of Meister Eckhardt to heart: 'We progress by stopping.'