

A Reflection on Mindfulness

Rediscovering the Christian Tradition
of Meditation and Contemplation

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COUNCIL FOR CATECHETICS OF THE
IRISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

Published 2018 by Veritas Publications
7-8 Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1, Ireland
publications@veritas.ie
www.veritas.ie

ISBN 978 1 84730 873 3

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Designed by Heather Costello, Veritas Publications
Printed in the Republic of Ireland by Walsh Colour Print, Co. Kerry

Printed on paper made from the wood pulp of managed forests. For every tree felled, at least one tree is planted, thereby renewing natural resources.

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Introduction

Mindfulness is the buzzword of the moment. It seems to be everywhere. From psychology to education, from psychotherapy to the worlds of business and management, the ‘mindful way of doing things’ is the prescribed way of achieving success. On television, we see images of children in classrooms engaged in ‘mindful’ recollection. People who are busy and stressed are advised to take time out to refocus in mindful silence. Those searching for well-being are told that mindful living is the key.

Clearly, a more mindful way of living life, slowing down and making sure we don’t let ourselves simply be overwhelmed by a hectic pace of life, are all good things. But many have asked: is the contemporary secular practice of mindfulness compatible with the Christian tradition? Should Christians promote mindfulness? Is it safe to teach mindfulness to children? The Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference has produced this short document to help schools, as well as anyone else interested, to evaluate the contemporary practice of mindfulness. In doing so, it hopes to help people appreciate various spiritual and meditative practices found in the Christian tradition that form a Christian mindfulness, as it were, and to understand what distinguishes the Christian practices of prayer, meditation and contemplation from the secular practice of mindfulness.



What is Mindfulness?

**To be mindful
is to be aware
of what is
happening
now**

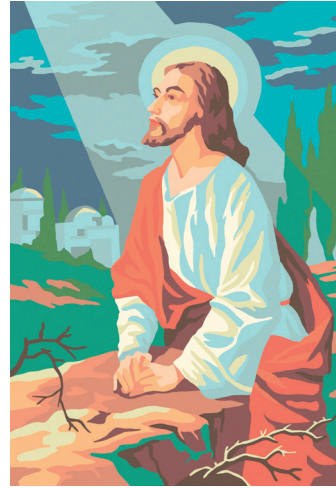
Mindfulness involves paying attention to whatever comes into one's awareness in the present moment. This may be a thought, emotion or body sensation. To be mindful is to be aware of what is happening now. Practitioners are advised simply to become aware of whatever is currently in awareness, to follow it, as it were, until something else emerges, but without trying to hold onto it or change the content of awareness in any way. It was Jon Kabat-Zinn who, arising from his own interest in Buddhist meditation and mindfulness, developed the secular mindfulness-based stress-reduction programme (MBSR) for use in hospitals and other health settings. He defines the practice of mindfulness meditation as 'paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment non-judgementally'.

Over many years his mindfulness method – moment to moment non-judgemental awareness – has been the subject of discussion and it is noted that mindfulness can affect the function and structure of the brain and can lead to physical and psychological effects. While the practice is widely used today to reduce stress and anxiety, at the same time there is a growing awareness that mindfulness cannot and should not be treated as a panacea that can cure all of the ills of modern society. Teachers working with young children, in particular, should be careful not to promote mindfulness as the sole coping mechanism for helping children deal with a myriad of difficulties they may face in their family, social or school lives. Children can have specific emotional or mental health challenges that require appropriate therapeutic interventions.

A Long Christian Tradition

Because of the spread of mindfulness in secular society and because of its origins in Buddhist practice, some today mistakenly believe that all meditative and reflective living practices are based on Eastern traditions. The reality, however, is that elements of mindful-like meditative practices go back thousands of years and all of the major world religions have meditative traditions.

Christians see all human persons as ‘children of God’ who have the innate capacity to be open to and live out of the awareness of who we truly are. According to the Christian faith, human beings are not only created and loved by God but, as the human spirit is transformed by the Holy Spirit, we also participate in God’s own life and are destined for union in and with God. When we are truly present to ourselves, to our own spirit, we are simultaneously present to God. In his teachings, Jesus promoted the practice of taking time out for silent, interior prayer:



And when you pray, go into your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

In your prayers do not babble like the Gentiles do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. (Mt 6:5–7)

The Gospels recount many occasions when Jesus ‘withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed’. Sayings, such as ‘I and the Father are One,’ as well as indicating his divine identity, also suggest that he was familiar with prayer as a form of silent

We are called to be contemplatives even in the midst of action, and to grow in holiness by responsibly and generously carrying out our proper mission

communion with his father. Jesus proposed we base our life on loving God with all our heart, soul and mind; and neighbour as yourself. It is on this basis that his teaching on prayer includes moments of interiority and silence, calmness and attentiveness to the present moment.

With two thousand years of experience, the Christian tradition has a deep vein of spirituality that encourages us to focus on living the present moment in God, taking time out for meditation, and developing a lifestyle of contemplation in action. This long Christian tradition has some elements that are also found in mindfulness. Indeed, some believe that the spread of mindfulness, although it is a secular practice, is to be welcomed because it has the potential to reawaken the Christian faithful to the ever ancient, ever new contemplative path that is distinctively part of the Christian tradition.



The theme of stillness before the Lord, for instance, is found in Scripture. An essential difference, however, between secular mindfulness and Christian meditation and spiritual practices, is that the Christian tradition regards meditation and various spiritual practices linked to living the present moment as expressions of prayer. Like secular mindfulness, they involve a certain ‘emptying’ of ourselves of stresses, distractions, busyness. But in Christian meditation and prayer, such ‘emptying’ is in order both to allow ourselves be filled with the presence of the personal God who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, has communicated himself to us in Jesus Christ, and to love our neighbour in compassionate thoughtfulness and care.

As we shall see below, there are many approaches to prayer and living a fulfilled life. It is important to recognise, however, as Pope Francis reminds us in his recent letter on holiness, that we need to be careful not to be seduced by deceptive ideas that would actually take us away from a Christian notion of salvation, human fulfilment and holiness. In particular, in our day, we need to remember that Christian faith is not limited to prayer or mindful practices. Nor should a peaceful Christian life be reduced to prayer practices or somehow helping us to avoid the day-to-day toils of life or indeed as something we can achieve merely by our own personal effort. It's not techniques, stillness or personal efforts that matter most in the Christian life, but rather the depth of our love as a response to God's immense love for us. We always need to let God's tenderness touch our lives.

We need moments of silence, prayer and meditation

We need moments of silence, prayer and meditation. But, as Pope Francis writes:

It is not healthy to love silence while fleeing interaction with others, to want peace and quiet while avoiding activity, to seek prayer while disdaining service. Everything can be accepted and integrated into our life in this world, and become a part of our path to holiness. We are called to be contemplatives even in the midst of action, and to grow in holiness by responsibly and generously carrying out our proper mission. (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 26)



Prayer, Silence and Meditation

A classic definition of prayer is ‘the raising of one’s mind and heart to God’. The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of three main expressions of prayer: vocal, meditative and contemplative.

On the one hand, we ‘say’ our prayers such as the ‘Our Father,’ the ‘Hail Mary,’ ‘Glory be to the Father’. We vocalise our needs, intercessions and petitions in prayers said on various occasion. It is good to have times of external expressions of prayer as we are body and not just inner spirit.

The Christian tradition also promotes ‘meditation’. This denotes discursive, mental reflection on a text such as a passage from Scripture or a spiritual writing. It involves thinking about the meaning of a text and its implications for our lives.

Silence is God’s first language

Another form of prayer is ‘contemplation’. It traditionally refers to non-discursive, silent prayer – what the Catechism calls ‘a gaze of faith’ and ‘silent love’. Such contemplation can be helped by mantra-like repetition of phrases such as ‘Come, Lord Jesus,’ or ‘Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner’ (the ‘Jesus prayer’) or ‘I love you, Lord, with all my heart’.

Spending time in silent, recollected moments of prayer is warmly encouraged by the Church. It is good to place ourselves silently in God’s loving presence. Saint John of the Cross reminds us: ‘Silence is God’s first language’. Times of prayer can be preceded by simple practices of calming oneself, being attentive to one’s breathing, slowing down, closing one’s eyes, thinking about where you are, etc.

While the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in the world's religions (and so we can learn from certain aspects of their traditions), nevertheless, we need to remember that there are many diverse practices in Catholic spirituality to assist those who want to engage in prayer: *Lectio Divina*, Centering Prayer, the Practice of the Presence of God, the Rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, the Jesus Prayer, Eucharistic Adoration.

When prayed mindfully, that is, with the attention of the heart lovingly dwelling on God's immense love for us, all of these practices may become ways by which Divine Grace can lead us into encounter with God. In the deep stillness and silence that exists behind the noise of our distracting thoughts, we can experience the peace found, for instance, in a line such as Psalm 46: 'Be still and know that I am God'. Pope Francis points out that 'trust-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'.

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Christian meditation and contemplation provide depth of meaning to all prayer. They facilitate building a personal relationship with Christ. They are intended to be a movement beyond mental activity about one's relationship with the Divine, to communion with the Divine, through Christ.

Saint Pope John Paul II spoke directly of the need to develop in children an attitude of attention which would nourish their innate amazement in the face of creation. He noted that children needed to 'be led to a real and profound interior silence which is the first prerequisite for listening'.

Pope Benedict XVI spoke about the importance of creating time for contemplation in our lives observing that ‘inward and outward silence are necessary if we are to be able to hear [the] word [of God]’. He went on to note that:



Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us. Silence has the capacity to open a space in our inner being, a space in which God can dwell, which can ensure that his Word remains within us, and that love for him is rooted in our minds and hearts, and animates our lives. (General Audience, 7 Mar 2012)

In addition to the spiritual fruits that arise for Christians, both individually and as community, spending set periods of time in meditation and contemplation also provides us with an opportunity for dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other traditions and to learn from them as they learn from us. As well as resulting in greater self-awareness and heart-awareness, meditation and contemplation practised in a whole-school context also has the capacity to build a community of self-presence.

Living the Present Moment

We know that Jesus taught his disciples to dwell in the present moment and live it well, not worrying about tomorrow, but trusting in the loving providence of the Father: ‘Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.’ (Mt 6:34)

We can learn from the direct example of Jesus of how attentive he was to each person, circumstance and moment of his life journey. He invited his followers to be attentive to the world around them. For instance, he said, ‘Look at the birds of the air’ and ‘consider the lilies of the field,’ and ‘if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you? ... Therefore do not worry.’ (Mt 6:25–30)

Following on from Jesus’ teachings, St Paul advised: ‘set your mind on things above’ (Col 3:2) and ‘renew your mind’ (Rm 12:2). Indeed, St Paul advocated a contemplative outlook on life. At this point, we can recall the words of St Pope John Paul II:

We need first of all to foster, in ourselves and in others, a contemplative outlook. Such an outlook arises from faith in the God of life, who has created every individual as a ‘wonder’ (cf. Ps 139:14). It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image (cf. Gen



Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own

1:27; Ps 8:5). This outlook does not give in to discouragement when confronted by those who are sick, suffering, outcast or at death's door. Instead, in all these situations it feels challenged to find meaning, and precisely in these circumstances it is open to perceiving in the face of every person a call to encounter, dialogue and solidarity. (*Evangelium Vitae*, 83)



**Each moment
is all we need,
not more**

Over the centuries, many of the saints, mystics and great teachers of prayer have given witness to the power of the sacramental present moment as a portal to the presence of God who grounds everything in his peace. Our lives are to be a continual renewing of our mind, looking to Jesus (Heb 12:2). Among those who promoted attentiveness to the present moment, we can think of Meister Eckhart (thirteenth/fourteenth century), the anonymous author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing,' St Catherine of Siena (fourteenth century), Julian of Norwich (late fourteenth, early fifteenth century), St Teresa of Ávila (sixteenth century) and Jean-Pierre de Caussade (eighteenth century).

In modern times, saints and teachers such as St Thérèse of Lisieux, Dom John Main, Thomas Merton, Abbot Thomas Keating, Pope St John Paul II, Chiara Lubich and St Mother Teresa have all insisted that this contemplative attentiveness to the present moment must be taught once again and so preached and taught the importance of the practising attentiveness to the present moment as a presence of God. In a work that became a classic, Jean-Pierre de Caussade wrote about 'the sacrament of the present moment'. Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to advise, 'Each moment is all we need, not more'.

Preparation for Prayer

In short, on the basis of the previous considerations, we can say that it is a fundamental Christian insight that every person, deep inside, has a longing for the infinite. We are made by God and in his image and so, at our core, we encounter the still, quiet, gentle presence of God who is creating us from one moment to the next.

At the heart of all reality and behind every heartbeat and every breath is the life of the Trinity. Saint Paul captures it perfectly: 'There is one God, the Father, from whom all things come and for whom we exist; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we exist'. (1 Cor 8:6)

For the Christian who lives by faith, then, any practice that stills the body and quietens the busy mind is a doorway to the mystery of the Trinity at the heart of all things. Mindfulness is not prayer but it is a context in which prayer can occur. It is a paradox that while mindfulness can open the door to contemplative prayer, faith and surrender to God also lead to mindfulness.

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Some Guidelines for Mindfulness and Meditation in Catholic Schools

In the light of all of the above, the following are guidelines to assist the practice of Christian mindfulness as expressed in silent prayer and meditation in a school/classroom:

It is hoped that in a Catholic school, teachers and students will be familiar with and be able to distinguish between secular mindfulness and Christian meditation and contemplation. Some believe mindfulness to be a valuable daily discipline which promotes well-being. However, it is important that teachers and students in a Catholic school would also appreciate the long tradition of Christian contemplation and Christian meditative practices. It is helpful to appreciate what the Christian tradition says about the rich, inner, spiritual fruits of Christian meditation and contemplation.



In particular, in a Catholic school, children and young people ought to be familiar with some of the concepts relating to prayer, meditation and meditative practices outlined above, in an age and stage appropriate way. They have a right to know and understand the rich heritage of prayer that can, with God's help, bring them closer to God; remembering always that Christians believe that, ultimately, it is only God who can bring us real and lasting peace.

Engagement with the Christian meditative practices can and should happen through the regular religious education lesson; again in an age and stage appropriate way. For example, the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (2015) clearly states that:

Education to and for prayer is at the heart of this Religious Education curriculum. The ultimate goal is to teach children how to develop their relationship with God through prayer, so that they are drawn into the very life of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Trinity).



At every level of the curriculum, primary school pupils in a Catholic school are invited not only to pray together but also to come to a rich understanding of what prayer seeks to do in their faith lives and in the life of the community. Teachers are encouraged to use opportunities for meditation and prayers in their teaching of the curriculum. The *Veritas Grow in Love* programme offers many templates of prayer/meditation moments suitable for children at each level of the primary school experience.

When children are praying together or alone silently as part of the school day or as part of their religious education classes, or when children are joined together for the celebration of Eucharist, or other sacraments, it is important to remind them of the need to be wholly present to the particular moment of prayer and worship. This can be done very simply by reminding children to be still, and to become deeply aware of themselves coming into the presence of God present with us. Such reminders can greatly add to their personal experience of prayer, of worship and of the sacraments.

School staff might consider how they could introduce Christian meditative practices into their daily engagement with one another, such as at staff meetings. A short reading of a Scripture text or some other spiritual passage, followed by a period of silent reflection, can be one way. Schools may wish to consider introducing a form of Christian meditation on a whole-school basis. Teachers might also consider beginning and ending the day with vocal prayers and also a brief period of silent meditation and prayer.



Conclusion

Secular mindfulness has drawn the attention of many to the need to be attentive to the present moment, the spiritual dimension of our lives and the need to make time in our busy schedule for spirituality. That is a good thing. But while secular mindfulness and Christian meditation might seem to share many characteristics, they are fundamentally distinctive.

Both practices speak of dwelling in the present moment, but the Christian practice does so with the intention of opening our heart to God's presence. From a Christian perspective, prayer, holiness and salvation are not simply the results of our techniques but rather the outcome of God's gift to us, the God who loves us first, the God who calls each of us uniquely by name: 'It is he who first seeks us'.

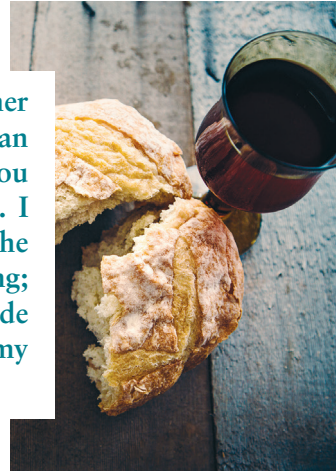
In Christian meditation, the focus is on the spiritual fruits of the practice and a deeper union with God

While both practices point to the practical benefits of meditation on the practitioner, in terms of physical, psychological, emotional and mental well-being, in the Christian tradition these are seen as incidental, albeit very welcome, by-products of the practice. In Christian meditation, the focus is on the spiritual fruits of the practice and a deeper union with God. In his letter to the Galatians, St Paul describes the fruits of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Saint Augustine writes that God is ‘deeper than my inmost being and higher than my greatest height’. God is in us and with us, but he transcends us in his mystery. Teaching Christian meditative practices will always involve going ‘inside’ ourselves in prayer but realising that such prayer draws us ‘upwards’ into God, who is so much greater than any of us, and ‘outwards’ towards our neighbour, as the sacrament of God we encounter day by day in all our relationships. Jesus, the great teacher of prayer left us his New Commandment that is at the root of Christian prayer:

Love one another as I have loved you

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (Jn 15:12–17).





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