

Small pockets of quietness

A pilot programme of Christian meditation will begin in schools in Britain this year. As **Victoria Combe** reports, it follows the success of a similar project in Australia where participating Catholic schools report improved levels of concentration in lessons as well as spiritual awareness

A class of six-year-old girls and boys sit on the floor around a candle and a simple chime. Grubby-kneed from playtime, one boy strikes the chime three times and the children sit in silence, eyes closed. The teacher reminds them to let go of their thoughts by focusing on the mantra “Maranatha”, spoken in four equal syllables. This Aramaic word translates as “the Lord is Coming” or “Come, Lord”. The stillness is extraordinary. After six minutes, a minute for each year of their age, the teacher strikes the chime. The children, calm and refreshed, begin their maths lesson.

This is the scene at 8.45 a.m. in the morning at Ryan Catholic College in Townsville Catholic Diocese, Queensland, Australia, where all 32 Catholic schools have pioneered a programme of daily Christian meditation. The diocese-wide programme, introduced in 2006, includes 12,000 children aged between five and 18. The teachers and pupils shared their experience in a film shown at a seminar in December 2010 in Regent’s College, London, where some 200 diocesan directors of education, teachers, students and school chaplains gathered.

Run by Meditatio, the outreach of the World Community for Christian Meditation, the seminar included presentations by Townsville’s diocesan director of Catholic education, Cathy Day, and the director of religious education,



A brief period of meditation can leave children calm and refreshed. Photo: Townsville Catholic Education Office

One maths teacher in Townsville Diocese even uses meditation in the middle of his class. The other resources needed are inexpensive. Dr Day cited that the diocese-wide programme cost AU\$120,000 a year (£50,000) which pays for a retreat for 150 teachers for three days and for replacing them in the classrooms.

Ernie Christie. “We have seen a renaissance of religious vibrancy in the last four years,” Dr Day began. They spoke at five other workshops in Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Midlands and their enthusiasm led to 65 schools agreeing to be part of a pilot programme in the UK introducing meditation to the classroom.

For me, the penny began to drop when Laurence Freeman OSB, director of the World Community for Christian Meditation, led the audience in 20 minutes of meditation. It was identical to the classroom routine for the six-year-olds except we stayed in our chairs. I wrestled with thoughts about shopping lists and train times but batted them away with the rhythmic, prayerful mantra.

“The saying of the word is an act of faith, we are not thinking about its meaning,” instructed Fr Laurence. Through this search for emptiness and nothingness, I did indeed find something intoxicatingly pure.

Meditation does, however, need silence and time, both of which are hard to find in a school day, and this concern was raised by more than one teacher at the seminar. Christie claimed that meditation “makes time” as the lesson becomes more fruitful.

“Is there prejudice against meditation as something New Age and alternative?” I asked Fr Laurence in the tea break. Is it haunted by the clichéd image of a hippy in the lotus position chanting “Om”? “Less so than 30 years ago,” he said. “It is part of our work to remove that impression and reinstate the place of contemplative prayer.”

The tradition is rooted in the Desert Fathers, in the teachings of Cassian and in his own spiritual director, the late John Main OSB, who opened the first Christian meditation centre at Ealing Abbey in 1975. There is nothing alternative about Meditatio. Among the patrons of the World Community is Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, as well as the Dalai Lama.

“Meditation”, said Fr Laurence, “is a prayer of the heart where the Spirit prays within us. Children are more ready to embrace meditation, as they come without hang-ups about the terminology.” The Community’s mission, he explained, is to give children an experience of God which they will retain. The Bishop of Townsville, Michael Putney, another patron, believes that the spiritual experience is what stays with a child: “Young children have a great openness to the presence of God. If they are taught when they are young to be still so that their hearts can be open to the movement of the Spirit, they will have a gift which will continue to bring them great blessings throughout their lives.”

One selling point for British schools is the inclusivity of meditation. It is a practice common to most religions and can be described as “quiet thinking” for non-believers. About half of the pupils in Townsville Diocese’s schools are non-Catholic and all take part in meditation.

Attending the seminar was Angela Suthakaran, a 15-year-old Hindu and student of Trinity Church of England School in Lewisham, south-east London. She said she meditated at the temple,



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focusing on a precious object rather than a word. She had come with the deputy headmaster, Matt Lillie, to investigate how meditation could be used in their school.

"We have 500 students of 40 or 50 nationalities and we are on a journey to develop the Christian character of the school. We want to introduce meditation and make it inclusive," said Mr Lillie.

Echoing similar concerns was Dominic Dring, chaplain of Cardinal Newman Catholic comprehensive in Hove, Sussex, who sees meditation as potentially a "key resource" for his 2,200-strong school. "We desperately need to enrich the prayerfulness of our school and we need something universal that non-Christian teachers will be happy to lead."

The witness from Townsville has sparked a pilot programme in Sydney's Catholic schools and Dr Day is confident it will catch on in the UK where she detected a "hunger and eagerness" during her December visit. She explained that meditation worked as well for teenagers as for young children. At Townsville's St Ignatius Park, the teenage boys have started their own meditation group with the slogan "Real Men Meditate". A short film quoted one of the students: "Meditation is time to escape," he said. "It's a process. You are not doing nothing, you are doing something while doing nothing, if that makes sense." Dr Day said she has seen a "flourishing" in the teachers' spiritual lives.

The impact of meditation on mental health is being researched by Dr Jonathan Campion, a consultant psychiatrist seconded to the Department of Health, who shared his findings on the effect on concentration and stress and anger management in some of the Australian schools. He found 57 per cent of the students and teachers who responded described it as "relaxing", 61 per cent "calming" and nearly half reported "improved concentration". He has not attempted to measure the spiritual benefits of specifically Christian meditation.

Charles and Patricia Posnett of Meditatio are coordinating the outreach for children's meditation in the UK and say there are "little pockets" where teachers are leading meditation but nothing coordinated. I gave Charles Posnett the challenge of teaching it to my extremely active and boisterous four-year-old son. We sat on the floor in the Meditatio Centre in Kensington, west London. Caspar tried to sit still but our quiet was interspersed with: "How much longer?" and a giggle, and "Why have you still got your eyes closed?" and a nudge. The three minutes ended with him spinning on his bottom chiming: "I'm not old enough." But he has, intriguingly, memorised the mantra "Maranatha".

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