

Fr John Main and Contemplative Prayer for Lay People

Reflection by Peter Ng

Because we are commemorating the centenary of the birth of John Main, I thought it would be useful for us all as meditators to understand and appreciate the significance of what we are doing when we meditate. Fr Bede Griffiths, if he were alive today, would be 120 years old. Fr John Main, if he were alive today, would be a hundred years old. Fr Bede Griffiths was 20 years older than Fr John Main. They were both Benedictine monks. Fr Bede Griffiths spent half his time in India before he died and he founded a Christian ashram in India where he recommended the practice of meditation based on what John Main taught. Fr Bede Griffiths gave the John Main seminar in 1991. Even though he's 20 years older than John Main, he said that in his opinion, John Main is the best spiritual guide for the church today. Now, coming from a person like Fr Bede, that is very significant, the best spiritual guide for the church today. In other words, what Bede Griffiths felt was that John Main's work in introducing meditation is very significant for the renewal of the church.

So I decided that this evening I would go back to the seminar, and extracted a very short excerpt from the lecture that Fr Bede Griffiths gave with the title: Fr John Main and Contemplative Prayer for Lay People. But before we listen to what Fr Bede Griffiths has to say, I think you will find on reflection, after listening to Fr Bede, that basically John Main's contribution to the church was really threefold, along three dimensions.

I think the first dimension was that he recovered this method of meditation using a mantra to go beyond thoughts and words and images. He recovered this tradition of meditation using a mantra which was actually lost in the church. As Fr Bede will share with us, this was a tradition of prayer that existed very early on in the church, in the third and fourth centuries, but after the third or fourth century, over the years because of the westernisation of Christianity, the way of meditation using a mantra was lost until it was recovered by John Main in the 1990s. So that is very significant, recovering a way of meditation which had existed in the earliest times of the church. Can you imagine how many generations of Christians missed out on learning this important way of prayer.

I think the second important contribution which John made was not only that he recovered this way of meditation using a mantra, this very simple way of using a mantra, but he recovered it not just for people in monasteries but he introduced it to lay people, and our community, WCCM, is known as a lay community basically. Most meditators are lay people. Now this is a very unusual thing. What we are doing tonight meeting as 30, 40 people online, we are a very small minority in the Catholic church, but we represent lay people. So not only was the tradition of Christian meditation missing in the monasteries until John Main recovered it, but it was not available to lay people. So the fact that we can meet tonight as a group, as lay people, we have benefited from the work that John Main did in introducing meditation to lay people. In the past, when you talked about meditation and contemplative prayer, it was thought that this should be reserved for monks and nuns in the monasteries and in the convents, not for lay people. So this was a very big change which John Main made. That is the work of our community, WCCM – meditation for lay people. So that's a second important contribution.

I think the third contribution is also very important because when John Main recovered this way of meditation he learnt it from a Hindu Swami, but later he discovered that this same method of meditation using a mantra was practised by the very earliest Christian monks. By this way of recovering the mantra, he has established a link between what we practise as Christian meditators with people of other religions who also practise meditation using a mantra or other means. So he has brought into focus the common ground, the common ground that we share with people of other religions or even people with no religion, but who nonetheless wish to meditate. Now this common ground is very important for the world today because religion is full of strife and even violence and people go to war over religion, when actually religion should be a unifying force in the world.

And at the end of the day, every religion believes in an ultimate reality that we call God. Although each religion wishes to express that faith in a different way, at the end of the day, there's only one God, there's only one reality. So it's a matter of considerable importance that we practise a way of prayer, a way of meditation that brings us into the common ground with people of other religions. And that was the reason why Fr Bede Griffiths went to India to establish a Christian ashram, to say that you can meditate as a Christian in an ashram in India. So let's listen now to Fr Bede Griffiths as he talks about contemplative prayer for lay people.

Reflection by Fr Bede Griffiths OSB

FR JOHN MAIN AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER FOR LAY PEOPLE

For the last four or three centuries, contemplative prayer has been considered the work of monks and nuns, very chosen people living a very particular way of life and having nothing to do with the lay person, people working in the world. The person who was responsible for bringing contemplative life to the lay people was Fr John Main and it was a wonderful achievement, great gift of God for the church. And he found this method of meditation, as you know, in the *Conferences* of Cassian, the monk of the fifth century who visited the Fathers of the Desert in their solitude, and described their way of life and prayer. Cassian spoke of pure prayer as a way of meditation by using a short word or verse to repeat it continually as a way of avoiding distractions and attaining purity of heart. He gives as an example: 'God come to my aid, Lord make haste to help me.' That's the earliest mantra.

And then gradually the Jesus Prayer evolved round about the fifth or sixth century probably, and in the Eastern church, as you know, that is one of the traditional mantras, the way of prayer to repeat constantly: 'Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.' That is the typical Christian mantra. This is a prayer without ceasing which was taken up in the west in a little book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which has had a tremendous influence on so many people today. He says, just take one word, 'God' or 'Love' and focus on the one word. As a whole, it's a beautiful presentation of contemplative prayer and this is the tradition of pure prayer which Fr John discovered and to which he devoted his life in spreading it throughout the church, thus opening the way of contemplative prayer to lay people as well as monks.

And this is really a very significant movement to see what we're celebrating today. This prayer has been considered the work of monks and nuns and a few chosen people and Fr John has opened it up to all of you, to all of us, you see. And it's really a breakthrough and I think it's a new movement

in the church. Fr John has made it possible for the lay person, the ordinary Christian, to share in this deep life of prayer, the inner prayer of the spirit which has often been confined to monks and to nuns.

The value of this method is that it simplifies prayer and reduces it to its fundamental ground in the depths of the soul. See, the problem with the Divine Office, which many devout Catholics used to recite is that it has all these Psalms, it takes a long time, and not many people are really able to enter into it. It's not suited to lay life, but the mantra is perfectly suited to everybody. It's simple, reducing prayer to its basics. It releases one from the endless distractions of the mind and integrates the whole person in its deepest centre. It can be described quite simply as a practice of the presence of God.

In the same way, lectio divina, meditating on the sacred scriptures, could lead to true contemplation. But again, it was not properly contemplative in so far as it was a method of meditation with words and thoughts which could easily be distracting, and as you know pure prayer is prayer beyond words, beyond thoughts. The fundamental insight of Fr John was that this pure prayer of meditation could be shared with people outside the monastery. Meditation groups are springing up everywhere in Europe, America, Asia, Australia, and South Africa. Most of you will probably know the story of how this came to pass. Fr John was a monk at Ealing Abbey in England. A small group of lay people began to come to the monastery to meditate, but this grew spontaneously into a regular movement of the Spirit, drawing more and more people to meditate with a mantra as Fr John taught them and to begin the regular practice of meditation in their homes.

It was apparently quite dramatic. As the little group gathered and began to meditate, more people began to come, then began to meditate in their homes, and they felt that the Holy Spirit was driving them and it was extraordinary. That initiated what we're sharing today, this discovery of a way of prayer with a mantra. This led to Fr John being invited to open a house of prayer in Montreal in Canada where monks and lay people could live together and share their way of meditation with others. And this has led in turn to the growth of meditation groups under the guidance of Fr Laurence who accompanied Fr John to Montreal, and has now spread to hundreds of groups throughout the world. Fr John's prayer centred on meditation with a mantra could be practised by anyone who was prepared to give up half an hour every morning and evening to single-hearted devotion to God alone in the midst of the distractions of daily life, and that I think is what all of you are trying to do to give up that half-hour morning and evening to God alone.

And of course you withdraw from ordinary life and you're enriched by it to go back to daily life with more meaning, with more understanding, and more purpose. This meant that a way of praying leading to the experience of God in love is always the discovery of God in love, which is the end of our meditation.

It was the genius of Fr John which found a simple and direct method of meditation which could bring this message effectively into the daily life of lay people. We had no method of meditation in the monastery, and when people came I had no method to give them. It was when I found Fr John's method of prayer with the mantra that I found I could have something simple, direct and clear and positive which people could take and use, and that I think is what all of you have discovered. It's a real way of entering into this big prayer. It is the value of a specific method of meditation rooted in

the Christian tradition and leading to the transformation of Christian life, which is a gift of Fr John to the church. I think we must go back to that, you know, that we owe this to him, and so often that one man can change life for thousands of millions who are trying to discover a new way of living out the fullness of Christian contemplative life in the church.

The Simplicity of Fr John's Teaching

Reflection by Peter Ng

Before we meditate, I'd like to highlight one important point which Fr Bede made, which is that Fr John Main recovered and introduced a method of meditation, a simple method. How simple it is we will discover when we listen to John Main's instruction on meditation before our meditation. But this is a very key point, that he offered a way of meditation which is simple.

Simple does not mean easy. Simple is actually quite demanding, but because it is simple, anyone can do it. A child can do it, a person who has dementia can also meditate. That is the simplicity of it and therefore when we now listen to John Main's instruction on meditation, let's listen very carefully to what he has to say and begin to appreciate the simplicity of the method that John Main recovered for us. Listen very carefully to these words of Fr John as he gives us the instruction on how to meditate, and then let's meditate together for 20 minutes.

How to Meditate by Fr John Main OSB

Meditation is openness to a reality that we can only discover, only encounter in the depths of our own being and so we have to learn to be silent and to be profoundly silent. We have to devote time, energy and perhaps love. And the first thing you have to understand about meditating is that you have to devote the time to it and it's necessary to meditate every morning and every evening. The minimum amount of time probably is about 20 minutes and I recommend you gently as you can to extend that to about a half an hour.

Now let me just repeat to you what is to be done in that time. Sit down, spend a couple of moments to sit comfortably, and the one essential rule of posture is to have your spine upright. And then close your eyes and begin to recite interiorly in silence your word, and the word I recommend you to recite is maranatha. And you recite it something like this: ma-ra-na-tha. And the art of meditating is to learn to recite your word from the beginning of your meditation to the end – maranatha. You sound it silently in your own heart. and it's the sounding of the word interiorly that opens up for us levels of awareness that are not possible outside this depth of silence – ma-ra-na-tha.

Heavenly Father, open my heart to the silent presence of the spirit of your son. Lead me into that mysterious silence where your love is revealed to all who call. Maranatha. Maranatha, come Lord Jesus.

MEDITATION

The Significance of the Mantra

Reflection by Peter Ng

Quotation from John Cassian's, *Tenth Conference on Prayer*. Cassian writes,

The mind should unceasingly cling to the mantra until strengthened by continual use of it. It casts off and rejects the rich and ample matter of all kinds of thought and restricts itself to the poverty of the single verse. Those who realise this poverty, arrive with ready ease at the first of the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are they who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5:3).'

We have just heard this quotation from the *Conferences* of John Cassian. Now I want to reflect with you on the significance of the mantra because, as Fr Beat Griffiths pointed out, the simple method of meditation that John Main recovered was the method of the mantra. And at first, when you are introduced to meditation using a mantra, you say it's rather strange, it sounds like magic. It is not magic. In order to explain to you, I wanted to take that quotation.

Perhaps what I could say is this. Yesterday was Corpus Christi. We celebrated the feast of Corpus Christi. So what is the feast of Corpus Christi? It's the feast of the blessed sacrament. What is the blessed sacrament? The blessed sacrament according to our Catholic faith is the real presence of Jesus under the sign of bread and wine. That is the blessed sacrament: the real presence of Jesus under the sign of bread and wine. That is the meaning of sacrament.

Sacrament means an external sign of an internal reality, an exterior sign of an interior reality. So what is the external sign? That external sign is the consecrated host and the consecrated wine. We call that the body and blood of Christ, but it's an external sign. What is the interior significance of it? The interior significance of it is the presence of Christ under the sign of bread and wine. So in other words, that's the way to understand the meaning of sacrament. We have the ritual, the sacrament, because to us it is an exterior sign of an interior reality, the reality of the presence of Christ.

I think we should understand the mantra in the same way. The mantra is a sacrament. When we say the mantra in our meditation, when we recite the mantra as faithfully as we can, it is an expression of our faith, an exterior expression of our faith. Our faith in what? Our faith in the indwelling presence of Christ within us.

Do you not know, St Paul says. that your body is a shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19)? The spirit of Christ dwells within us. So when we meditate, we are giving our attention to this presence of Christ within us. You might even say we are worshipping the presence of Christ within us just as the receiving of the bread and wine is a sacrament. So when we say our mantra as faithfully as we can, we are giving all our attention to this presence of Christ within us. Very important. It's very important for us to understand as Catholics and as Christians that Christ is not only present in the blessed sacrament. He is even more present in your heart, in the indwelling Holy Spirit. You understand? That is the significance of the mantra. That's why we have to approach our meditation and our attitude to the mantra in the same way as we reverence the blessed sacrament.

So every time you sit down to meditate and you say the mantra, why do you give all your

attention to it? It's because you want to express your faith that Christ dwells within me. In my meditation, I want to give my attention, as much of my attention as possible, to his presence within me, and I do that by being as still as possible. By bringing my body to that attention, and by saying the mantra as faithfully as possible we are bringing our mind to that same degree of attention. So body and mind united in attention to the presence of Christ within us, it's the same thing as bowing down worshipping the blessed sacrament in church. So as meditators, we have to understand this. If you learn to practise this faithfully over a long period of time, you will begin to understand that the work of meditation is the work of love.

Why is this a work of love? In other words, we meditate to express our love for God, to reciprocate the love of God. God loves us first. We want to love God in turn. StJohn says, it is God who loves us first (1 Jn 4:19) and what we do when we pray is, we want to respond to the love of God. Now, when we say we love somebody, what does it mean? I think that love has got two aspects.

The first aspect is commitment. When you love somebody, you are committed to that person, you are undivided in your love for that person. It is a commitment, and the commitment that we make in our meditation is to meditate morning and evening. It's a commitment of time. And during the meditation, our commitment is to the mantra, to let go of our thoughts and ideas as much as possible and just to devote ourselves to the mantra. In other words, we are committing ourselves to saying the mantra faithfully.

The second aspect of love in addition to commitment is attention. When you love somebody, you give your attention to that person. Not only do you show up for your meeting, but during your meeting you try to give all your attention to the person that you love. And that's what we do when we say our mantra – we are doing our very best to give our attention. We want our attention to be undivided so that during the time of meditation, by saying the mantra as faithfully as possible, letting go of all thoughts, we are concentrating all our attention on the person who we love, and that is the Lord present within us.

I want to share with you out of my own experience over the years that this is the significance of the mantra. It is a sacrament, and it is an expression of love.

Now let's go to the verse because the verse is going to talk about how to do it. What I say is theory. Now we've got to get down to what the verse teaches us about how to say the mantra. What John Cassian is quoting is actually the words of the old monk Abbot Isaac. Abbot Isaac was responding to an appeal by the young monk Germanus who says: can you please teach me how to meditate? Teach me. You say to just say this verse. But how do I say this verse? So the old monk says, since you are so zealous about it, I will now explain to you how – when you use a word, a sacred word or a verse in your meditation, this is the way you should say it.

So he says 'the mind should unceasingly cling' to the mantra. 'Cling' to the mantra. Now you all know how difficult it is during your meditation, how quite often the mantra escapes you. Because you try to say it as best as you can, but quite often you get distracted, and then when you get distracted you try to come back. So in other words, we must understand how to cling to the mantra and that's why it's important when you say the mantra to learn to say it clearly and attentively – ma-ra-na-tha. Say it clearly, say it attentively, say it continuously. That's how you cling to the mantra. You don't want the mantra to escape because the mantra helps us to let go of distractions. The mind

should unceasingly cling to the mantra 'until strengthened by continual use of it, (if you say the mantra continuously) 'it casts off and rejects the rich and ample matter of all kinds of thought'.

In other words, he's just saying that the continuous recitation of the mantra is the way to go beyond all thoughts, all ideas, all images. It 'casts off and rejects the rich and ample matter of all kinds of thought and it restricts itself to the poverty of the single verse'. In other words, throughout your time of meditation, you do your very best to restrict yourself to just saying this word over and over again. Now that is not easy, right? It sounds very simple, but it's not easy because very often during our meditation we get distracted, we stop saying the mantra, but the important thing is not to get discouraged. The moment we realise that we have stopped saying the mantra, don't get discouraged, just come back and start saying it again. But at least you understand what this monk is trying to teach us. Now, that's why it's important over time you must learn how to say the mantra.

So as I said earlier on, say the mantra clearly, say it continuously. Say it clearly, say it continuously. Say it as an expression of faith. In other words, as you say, it comes from your heart. It's like saying, 'I love you' to somebody. So the mantra should be said as an expression of our faith. Our faith in what? Our faith in Christ. Our love for what? Our love for Christ. So let the saying of the mantra, the interior sounding of the mantra, be a heartfelt expression of your faith and of your love. That's the way to say it. Not in a dramatic way, but just quietly in the interior silence of your heart. That's the way the mantra should be said. And as you sound the mantra, in order to hold onto the mantra, listen to the mantra as you sound it. During our meditation, we sound the mantra, maranatha, and you notice that after you say maranatha, it is as though the mantra is echoing away in your heart. At that point, listen to it. Listen, give your hearing attention to the sound of the mantra as it echoes away in your heart. That's what I mean when I say listen to the mantra as you sound it. So that is how we cling on to the mantra.

The last verse is, 'those who realise this poverty arrive with ready ease as the first of the Beatitudes. Now you know what the Beatitudes are. The Beatitudes are the eight blessings – the Beatitudes, the eight blessings, the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus. The first of the Beatitudes is 'Blessed are they who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3)'. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? To be poor in spirit is to feel our total dependence on God. We are poor. We are utterly poor and the mantra is the poverty of the single verse. By saying the mantra, we express our total dependence on God. We live and move by God's grace.

That is how we become poor in spirit, that we are totally available to God. We are totally dependent on God, and that's why Jesus says that is the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is the presence of God, the presence of Christ within us. So it is that poverty of spirit, the poverty of the mantra, that leads us to the presence of the Lord within us. This is quite an important teaching in my opinion. I've thought about it for a long time and it is through many years of practice with the mantra that I've come to understand how important it is, how significant it is. And I wanted to share this with you tonight.

Before I end, I like to bring up John Main's instruction on how to meditate that we heard just now. John Main spoke about how to meditate.

The first line, I want you to pay attention to the first line. 'Meditation is openness to a reality that we can only discover and encounter in the depths of our own being.' So what John Main is just

saying is that the depths of our own being, when you go within to the depths of your being, then you encounter a reality, openness to a reality. The reality that John Main is talking about here is the reality of the presence of God, the presence of the Spirit within us. So meditation is how we can come to encounter, to experience the reality of the presence of God within us. That's the first line.

In the last line, you see the importance of the mantra. 'It is the sounding of the word interiorly that opens up for us levels of awareness that are not possible outside this depth of silence.' So what John Main is saying is that as you go deep within ourselves through the practice of meditation, it opens up levels of awareness, and you come to experience certain things that are only possible in the depths of the silence. Now, what are those levels of awareness that we will come to experience as we practise meditation?

That is what I hope to share with you in future sessions, we don't have time tonight. The levels of awareness that John Main is talking about is first of all, coming to experience the presence of God within us, coming to know from our own experience that the spirit of Christ dwells within us. That's one level of awareness. Number two, is for us to experience who we truly are, to realise we are not our body and we are not our mind. The reality of our being is actually our spirit. That is a very important level of awareness for every human being, for each of us to come to the experience of our true reality that we are spirit. So that is a second level of awareness. Another level of awareness is to discover that only in that depth of silence can we find true peace and joy. It's only in that interior silence that we can find peace and joy. And finding peace and joy is the purpose of our meditation. So those are levels of awareness that you will gradually come to experience the longer you meditate. I will share that more with you in future sessions when I have the opportunity.

I think tonight it's sufficient for you all to appreciate, number one, the gift which John Main gave to each of us by bringing us all to meditation as lay people, and secondly, for us to understand better the quotation from John Cassian, how significant the mantra is and how important it is for us to be faithful to it during our time of meditation.
