

Christian Meditation

*On the glorious splendor of thy majesty, and on thy wondrous works, I will meditate.
~ Psalm 145:5*

THERE is something in the human soul that desires meditation. The busy and cluttered life that we live in society, at work, and in our homes is sometimes a reflection of the chaos and confusion in our souls. We get caught up in the world and lose sight of the meaning of life and the purpose that God had in creating us. The practice of meditation helps us rediscover that inner peace where we are alone with God.

It is clear that we are in search of answers to what is most troubling. A glance at any bookstore reveals this; the number of self-help books is staggering. Many devote some pages to the benefits of meditation of some sort.

Because this interior restlessness is a universal experience, most religions encourage the practice of meditation, and even people who are not believers use meditation in their search for inner peace.

The Church respects the great spiritual masters of other religions who have taught the mystery of meditation, but at the same time recognizes the fundamental difference between their disciplines and Christian meditation. The essential difference is Jesus Christ, who is both the path and goal of Christian life and prayer. While some aspects and techniques of meditation may be shared between Christians and those of other faiths, the centrality of Christ and the gift of faith set Christian meditation apart from all others.

"Meditation is above all a quest" (CCC 2705). It involves concentrating our thoughts, imaginations, emotions, desires, and will on the words, stories, and events that fill the Scriptures and the holy writ-



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ings and faith-filled lives of God's saints. Meditation is quiet time spent in the conscious presence of God, as well as the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints. For example, by contemplating Jesus' words, such as, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father; but by me" (Jn 14:6), or by "sitting with him" on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, it becomes the experience itself. By conversing with him walking along the Jordan, we tell him what we think, feel, and desire, and we listen to him as he responds. We come to know what he would say if he were physically there. We tell him how we have failed to measure up, how we would like to change, and eventually we ask his help to bolster our resolution to be better — more like him.

Spiritual reading, works of the Fathers of the Church, the Psalms — any holy readings are endless sources of material to guide meditation. However, the Word of God in Scripture is the most powerful tool for meditative prayer. It is there that God the Father speaks to his children and calls them into communion with him. It is there that the mysteries of God are laid bare and his love and mercy are made known. The reading of Scripture in prayer not only teaches us to pray but also teaches us how to listen to the voice of God which, as the story of Elijah tells us, is sometimes only a "still small voice" (1 Kgs 19:12).

Lectio divina is a special kind of meditation on the words of Scripture. It is a Latin term that means "divine reading." *Lectio divina* has been esteemed by the Church for centuries as a form of prayer that yields

many spiritual fruits. All of us have favorite passages in Scripture that we return to time and time again. *Lectio divina* is the practice of sustained reading of the Holy Scriptures in prayer, perhaps focusing on a particular passage, that enables the mind and heart to be drawn into the mysteries of God. Holding onto each word and allowing the mystery behind the words to be unveiled transforms this reading of Scripture into prayer. Christ is the Word made Flesh (see Jn 1:14), and so the reading of Scripture draws us into a profound meditation on the mysteries of Christ. The knowledge of Christ gained through this type of prayer is of “*surpassing worth*” (Phil 3:8) but, like all forms of Christian prayer, the purpose of *lectio divina* is not only knowledge but also union with Christ. “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*” (Heb 4:12). *Lectio divina* attests, more strongly than any other form of prayer, to the power of God’s Word to pierce into the mystery of the human soul and draw it into communion with Christ.

Various methods to guide us in the practice of meditation have been developed within the Church’s Tradition. Some of the oldest traditions are the Benedictine, Carmelite, Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit schools of spirituality, all of which have been approved by the Church for their faithfulness to the apostolic Tradition. The Church venerates these traditions because of the long history of spiritual fruit that they have produced for the faithful. The Church is also open to the new movements of the Holy Spirit, who continues to inspire men and women toward an ever-greater diversity and richness of meditation.

One of the most common and revered meditations in the Church is the rosary. In this meditation, the Christian strives to reflect more deeply upon the saving events (mysteries) of the life of Christ and his chosen Mother. The rosary is beautifully organized around these

mysteries, and meditating on them is sustained by the repetition of memorized prayers. The familiarity of these prayers allows the mind to rest from processing the meaning of words and from the energy it takes to formulate them. The words of the recited prayers help keep the mind focused in prayer while freeing it to meditate on the mystery. The constant invoking of Mary’s intercession in the rosary bears witness to her unique relation to Christ and to the power that has been entrusted to her in drawing humanity to Christ through her divine maternity. Fostering a relationship with her can only draw one into a closer union with Christ and increase the spiritual fruits of meditation.

Spiritual writers, whether old or new, and their methods of meditation are only guides. Our true source and strength for meditation comes from the Holy Spirit, who reveals to us the mystery of Christ, strengthens our will to follow him, and draws us into a deeper communion with him. Therefore, developing and fostering a relationship with the Holy Spirit is vital for meditation in our prayer life.

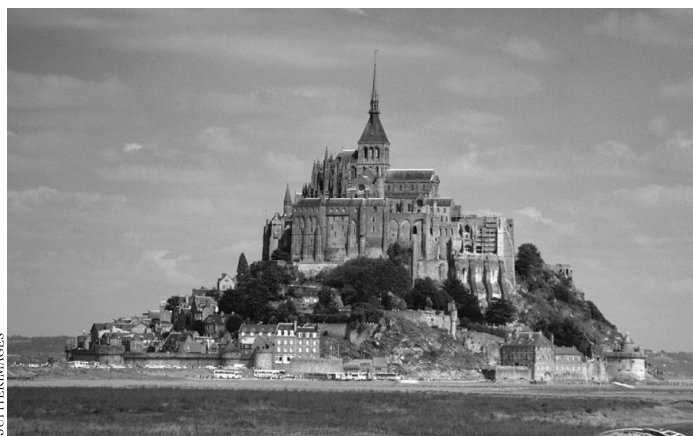
In meditation, we live in the spiritual presence of the Heavenly. We seek to penetrate the mind and heart of God and his holy ones, examine our lives, tell God of our joys or sorrows, praise and thank him, sincerely express our failings, ask forgiveness, tell him what and how we intend to amend our thoughts and acts to conform to his will, and ask his grace to be more constantly aware of him in our lives. Briefly: think, imagine, speak, listen, express emotions, resolve, and ultimately prolong, through practice, living in union with God.

Meditation can only take place within the mystery of faith. The Christian, out of his love for Christ, desires to go deeper into the life of Christ. While both

the spiritual benefits of meditation and the deeper communion it forms with Christ are gifts from God, it does require significant mental energy on our part. Our imagination, emotions, and will all converge together with the mind in focusing on the mysteries of Christ.

(CCC 1177, 2650-2654, 2663, 2683-2684, 2705-2708)

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The Benedictine Abbey Church of Mount St. Michel in Normandy, France; construction begun in 1017 and completed in 1520, from a community of monks occupying the site since 708