Meditation and Reflection

Teacher Background

Meditation is a form of mental prayer, involving an extended reflective thought on the presence and activity of God. It is a practice developed by the monastic tradition, which requires stillness of body in order for the mind to be active and fully focused on God. Christian meditation is generally understood to involve discursive reasoning, traditionally using the lectio divina - the prayerful reading and meditative reflection upon sacred Scripture, the Christian classics, or other types of spiritual writing. Three well-known styles of meditation have emerged from the Benedictine, Ignatian and Augustinian monastic traditions.

Benedictine meditation focuses on the concept of lectio or, as Benedict called it, “listening with the ear of one’s heart”. In it, one listens to, or reads over, or reflects on a Scriptural passage, pausing to sit with any word that presents itself and allowing it to speak to one of God or the works of God.

Ignatian meditation involves reflecting on a passage of Scripture, especially the words or actions of a Biblical character and then imagining that one has the opportunity to have some time alone with the character in order to seek further explanation of the character’s words or actions. What would one ask? The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola (known as “The Examen”) can be used as a guide in fostering or teaching about the mental prayer of meditation. Caroline Berger and Maureen Burton have adapted and modified the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola for school students. Their publication, Kids Connect, contains a variety of activities based on these spiritual exercises to assist students to become more reflective and spiritual. The adapted Examen has been used in this module to introduce students to this form of interior prayer prayed by many Christians.

Augustinian meditation involves inserting into a passage one’s own name- for example, where God or Jesus addresses Israel, the crowd, or an individual, one replaces them with oneself in order to ask what God is saying to us.

Contemplation, on the other hand, is the simple awareness of and focus upon, the presence of God. It is prayer without words or images. Contemplation is not a method of prayer to be chosen at will, like meditation. It is a gift from God into which one is drawn. Contemplation in the Christian tradition more closely resembles what is generally understood as meditation in Eastern religions such as Buddhism.

Beth Nolen (1999) suggests that contemplative prayer has among its characteristics:

- Faith and trust in the presence of God.
- An inner awareness of God.
- An awareness of the word of God.
- A relationship with God in our hearts.
- An act of commitment to God.
- A response to the presence of God.

And that it involves:

- Taking time to be alone with God.
- Turning our eyes and heart towards Jesus.
- Dwelling in God’s love and grace.
- Silence. (Beth Nolen 1999: 83)
Centering prayer is a special method of contemplation in which the person simply attends to the presence of God within - at the centre of one's being. A mantra or short phrase is sometimes repeated to keep one's attention centred. An example is the Jesus Prayer, which requests, 'Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me, a sinner' when repeated in a mantra.

Mantras, which assist centering prayer, involve the repetition of a particular phrase or word as part of one's breathing pattern. Repetition is essential, as it aids the rhythmical nature of this kind of prayer and of the breathing itself while assisting one to maintain focus. Over a period of time, however, the words become less important in themselves when a place of inner silence and stillness is reached. This takes constant practice and adequate time given for the mantra. The Rosary has been used within the Catholic tradition as a form of contemplative Mantra, as well for meditation on the lives of Jesus and Mary.

The Rosary

It is usually suggested that the rosary began as a practice by the laity to imitate the monastic Office (Breviary or Liturgy of the Hours), by which monks prayed the 150 Psalms. The laity, many of whom could not read, substituted 50 or 150 Ave Marias for the Psalms. Sometimes a cord with counters on it was used to keep an accurate count.

The first clear historical reference to the rosary, however, is from the life of St. Dominic (+1221), the founder of the Order of Preachers or Dominicans. He preached a form of the rosary in France at the time that the Albigensian heresy was devastating the faith there. Tradition has it that the Blessed Mother herself asked for the practice as an antidote for heresy and sin. One of Dominic's future disciples, Alain de Roche, began to establish Rosary Confraternities to promote the praying of the rosary. The form of the rosary we have today is believed to date from his time. Over the centuries the saints and popes have highly recommended the rosary, the greatest prayer in the Church after the Mass and Liturgy of the Hours. Not surprisingly, its most active promoters have been Dominicans.

Rosary means a crown of roses, a spiritual bouquet given to the Blessed Mother. It is sometimes called the Dominican Rosary, to distinguish it from other rosary-like prayers (e.g. Franciscan Rosary of the Seven Joys, Servite Rosary of the Seven Sorrows). It is also, in a general sense, a form of chaplet or corona (also referring to a crown), of which there are many varieties in the Church. Finally, in English it has been called "Our Lady's Psalter" or "the beads." This last derives from an Old English word for prayers (bede) and to request (biddan or bid).