



Saints of the 21st-century



We often wonder what will happen when our children grow up. I wonder if Robert will be a doctor or if Mary will train to be a nurse or whether they will both become teachers?

But have we ever imagined that our children will become saints?

It seems rather unlikely, but we are often told to expect the unexpected when the Holy Spirit is at work and there is plenty of evidence of extraordinary things happening all around us.

When we were asked to talk at St Joseph's Catholic Primary School in Aberdeen a few weeks ago, this certainly seemed to be an element of the unexpected. An initial contact through Fr. Chris Brannan; who had attended a talk by Father Laurence Freeman O.S.B. in May 2011; suddenly burst into action when Caren Tominey, the head teacher at St Joseph's was encouraged to talk to some fellow head teachers who were already practising Christian Meditation in their schools.

The first head teacher she talked to was Clare-Marie Burchall, who is head teacher at St Mary's Catholic Primary School in Swindon; where they now have regular times of meditation for the whole school and find it very beneficial for children and teachers alike. So much so that they are introducing a labyrinth into their school prayer garden and have asked a local artist to work with the children in creating, through art, their own personal labyrinth which acts to deepen contemplation and the profound silence that is now commonplace in the school meditation sessions.

Imagine Caren's surprise when it transpired that Clare-Marie actually came from Aberdeen and had been a pupil at The Convent of the Sacred Heart which was next door to St Josephs. She also has a strong connection to Pluscarden Abbey where Bishop Hugh was Abbot prior to his becoming Bishop of Aberdeen. Both her parents were oblates and her father, John Slevin, was a former Head teacher of St Peter's School in Aberdeen!

As Fr. Chris Brannan commented "this seems to be unfolding in a most extraordinary way".

But more surprises were still to come. in that there was a sudden cancellation by the speaker who was due to talk to all the teachers at St Joseph's the following Monday and so we were invited by Orla Fowler – the Deputy Head Teacher - to re-organise our lives and come and talk at their in-service training day just four days later.

Such a Spirit-led opportunity was too good to miss, so by Sunday afternoon we were on a flight to Aberdeen and to add to our delight the Right Rev Hugh Gilbert – Bishop of Aberdeen - was there to meet us on the Monday morning to give the day his blessing at the 8:30 am Mass in the school chapel.



Naturally some of the teachers were a little apprehensive about introducing Christian Meditation to the children, but having listened attentively, all agreed that it would certainly add a new dimension of spirituality and prayer to the life of the school.

In discussion the teachers particularly stressed that it would be a valuable "gift for life" as far as the children were concerned and it would prove to be a great "equaliser" for all the pupils who could participate on equal footing, without the usual stress of grades or measurement. Indeed, our experience is that all children are good at Christian Meditation, especially at an early age, and it is a wonderful way for them to build a personal relationship with God.

The comments from the teachers after the session were interesting too: –

"I feel it would be hugely beneficial and look forward to implementing it with my class"

"I feel that the longer period of meditation was fantastic - I didn't expect to get out of it what I did!"

"The 20 min meditation was more powerful than any words. I need to do that more!"

"The CD will be very handy to start off - the music is great and having timed periods of silence will enable me to meditate with the children".

The encouraging thing is that nearly all the teachers were determined to introduce periods of meditation into their own lives as they could see the benefit of having time to just "be" rather than dashing around "doing" all the time.

Bishop Hugh Gilbert, O.S.B. summed it up as follows: –

"When you pray, go into your room, shut the door pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:6).

Traditionally, this "room" has been understood as the inner room of the heart, where we return from external distraction, recollect ourselves and prepare to meet our God. Children are far from being the slowest to respond to this call to the heart, to constant prayer.

The teaching staff of St Joseph's Primary School, Aberdeen, were inspired by the November in-service day on Christian Meditation given by Charles and Patricia Posnett.

Our Catholic schools are already providing a superlative education. With this further deepening of their life of prayer, may not many of our young people find themselves becoming what Pope Benedict called them to be: the Saints of the 21st century?"

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