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Faith Today

Just what is this 'mantra' business anyway?

By Sister Christine H. Allen, RSM

"Silence comes naturally at times of great significance in our life." Silence is natural then because "we feel we are coming into a direct contact with some truth of such meaning that words would distract us."

Those words are Father John Main's. He was speaking about meditation and how it demands familiarity with silence.

Father Main was a priest of the Benedictine religious order who died in 1982. His approach to Christian meditation has ancient roots in the church.

His path will not be chosen by all. But it is interesting to discover what meditation meant to this 20th-century man of prayer.

John Main, born of Irish parents in London in 1926, joined the British Intelligence Service during World War II and spent time rescuing intelligence workers left behind on the continent.

After the war, he studied law. And later — he had learned Chinese by then — he became an assistant to the governor general of Malaya.

It was in Malaya that Main met the Hindu Swami Satyananda. Drawn by this man's deep peace, Main asked to hear more from him about prayer.

Meeting once a week, the two began to pray together for one half hour in silence. At the same time, Main practiced silent meditation twice a day on his own. This experience was to have great influence on Main.

At age 30 Main returned to Ireland, where he taught international law at Trinity College in Dublin for several years. Finally he decided to become a Benedictine monk in London.

Father Main's life as a priest eventually placed him in the role of headmaster at St. Anselm's, a Benedictine school in Washington, D.C. There he again pondered what he had discovered about meditation in Malaya.

It happened that a young man

came to Father Main asking to learn about Christian meditation. Father Main in turn went back to the writings of John Cassian, a fifth-century spiritual guide for St. Benedict. The tradition of meditation he had experienced in Malaya, he discovered, had been alive among early church fathers.

From that point on Father Main sought to lead people to a deeper experience of meditation. In 1977, at the request of Auxiliary Bishop Leonard Crowley of Montreal, Quebec, Father Main opened a center of prayer in that city. Bishop Crowley invited the center because of his concern about people who were moving away from their own faith into various meditation cults.

In "Letters From the Heart," Father Main stated: "To meditate is just to 'stand still at the center.'" The word "meditation," he explained, means "to abide in the center."

How is it possible for people whose lives are filled with activity, noise and frequent pressures to experience meditation regularly? Father Main urged people to set aside two separate periods of 20-30 minutes each day, the first usually in early morning.

Next, he suggested the person find a comfortable sitting position, with the back held straight. Then it is possible to begin.

Father Main proposed that people use a "mantra" — a single word or phrase — in meditation. He said: "You should choose a word that has been hallowed over the centuries by our Christian tradition."

He added: "One of these is the word 'maranatha'...which means, 'Come Lord. Come Lord Jesus.'" It is the word that St. Paul uses to end his first letter to the Corinthians.

Another possible Christian mantra is the simple word Jesus used, "abba," or Father.

The person meditating repeats the mantra for the entire medita-



Mantra. The word has an exotic ring to it. But in fact, as Father John Main discovered, mantras and meditation have deep roots in Christianity. Father John Main believed meditation moves people from thinking about God to just being with God.

tion period. When attention wanders, repetition of the mantra brings things back into focus.

Father Main said: "We begin by saying the mantra in the mind...then the mantra begins to sound not so much in our head but rather in our heart...then it seems to become rooted in the very depths of our being."

In this way the person moves from thinking about God to simply being with God. What's more, Father Main believed, the meditation becomes a process of

self-discovery, integrating one's body, mind and spirit.

Father Main described the effects of this kind of meditation this way: "Just as a flower opens and blooms when we let it be, so if we simply are, if we become and remain silent, then our hearts cannot but pour through: The Spirit cannot but pour through our whole being."

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