

## Is Your Class Too Busy?

Janet Schaeffler, OP

We inhabit a very busy and noisy world. Often times, Catechetical sessions duplicate that noise and busy-ness because there is lots of activity. If it is the right kind, that is very good. Experiential learning with lots of involvement is crucial.

Do we also pay as much attention to the development of our contemplative spirits?

What is contemplation?

Thomas Merton said: "Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source." (*New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1953)

At first glance, those descriptions might sound very ethereal and theological. Yet, they are naming simple but profound qualities of the human spirit: gratitude, the ability to wonder, poverty of spirit, openness to experience, the ability to be surprised.

How are these qualities nurtured? Can they be developed?

One of the prime ways they are nurtured is in silence. We need to find that in our noisy and busy world. When we enter silence, we come face to face with God: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). Meister Eckhart said, "Nothing in all creation is so like God as stillness." (quoted in Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1984, p. 133)

We can do many things to help children find these moments of silence which nurture our joyous contemplative spirit:

1. Begin catechetical sessions with centering or quieting exercises which help them bridge the gap between their noisy world and this graced time. Books with numerous ideas can be found because we are not the only ones looking for this quiet stillness; the educational field in general has seen the wisdom in using these techniques.
2. Scripture is a part of each catechetical session. Before proclaiming Scripture or having a child proclaim it, have a moment of silence as everyone prepares themselves. (Hopefully, this happens at parish liturgies, too: the lector walks with dignity to the ambo and pauses before the reading until there is a peacefulness within the assembly.)
3. Develop prayer services (and moments in the catechetical session) where there is time for

quiet spaces. Often, music can help to create the mood of quiet contemplation rather than just an empty space.

4. Usually it is not enough to tell children to "be quiet; pray and reflect now in silence." Their silence needs to be directed. Suggest what might happen in their quiet time:
  - a) In quiet, feel God's love around you.
  - b) Listen for what Jesus might want to say to you today about all the good things you have been doing.
  - c) In quiet, picture all the people who need our prayer today.
  - d) As you listen to the quiet, what are you thankful for?
  - e) This quiet time is so peaceful. Hand your worries over into God's hands.
  
5. One of my favorite ways of quiet prayer is a visualization prayer which involves a favorite quiet place and the presence of Jesus. *"Close your eyes and picture in your mind a favorite place. It might be a quiet place in your home; it may be outside in a park, near water, looking at the mountains. It could also be an imaginary place that you make up in your mind. Picture it and feel how good it is to be there. As you see yourself in your mind enjoying this place, you notice that someone is coming toward you. As he gets closer, you realize that it is Jesus. He walks over and sits beside you. He places an arm around your shoulder. Enjoy just being there with Jesus. Tell Jesus how you are feeling today: what you're happy about; what you're concerned about. Jesus is eager to hear all about you."*
  
6. Use the following questions to help older children reflect upon the place of silence and quiet in their lives. At first they might rebel at the idea of not always having the TV or CD player on, but the questions raise the awareness for them. Who else in their world calls them to reflect on quiet and stillness and God's presence in it? (My experience has been that once young people have had a taste for quiet-silence-meditation, they crave it.
  - a) *Am I afraid to be alone?*
  - b) *Am I uncomfortable doing nothing?*
  - c) *Have I ever spent time in solitude and silence -- in a park, at the beach, some other secluded area? How did I feel?*
  - d) *When during my day do I experience silence?*
  - e) *Do I have the TV on when I do my homework, when I'm on the phone, when I'm listening to my friend?*
  - f) *When I have some free time, is the TV always on or do I sometimes read, pray, daydream?*
  - g) *After receiving communion, do I sing and pray --or watch people go by?*
  - h) *How much time do I allow each day for prayer? Do I do all the talking?*

In nurturing the contemplative spirit in our young people, it is also crucial to help them understand (and experience) the "fruits" of contemplation. Developing a contemplative spirit

spills over into all of our life.

There are many fruits or effects in our lives (we could write ten articles on them).

Let's look at two that are needed in the world in which we live.

Living life with a contemplative attitude helps us to live in the present moment. Dr. Bernie Siegel (*Love, Medicine, and Miracles*) talks about three of the characteristics of heaven: wonderful temperature, great view, and everyone lives in the present moment. He says that the third one is the only one we can also have on earth.

For too many people, they spend 90% of their time regretting the past or planning for the future. Yet, at this moment, God is not in the past or the future. God is in the present moment. If we're living in the past or future, we're missing God.

We are becoming more and more aware of this: "Be where you is because if you be where you ain't, then you ain't where you is." "Don't hurry. Don't worry. Smell the flowers." "Died at 30, buried at 60." "Enjoy your kids while you have them."

Along with developing this saner attitude toward life, we need to help our young people recognize the God that is present in this enjoyment of living. Thomas Keating said, "When a person reaches a mature level of contemplative prayer, reality is seen in a new perspective. One discovers that God is present in every experience." (*US Catholic*, March 1989, page 8) We can help young people experience prayer that puts them in touch with living and slows them down to appreciate the presence of God at each moment.

Another fruit or effect of contemplation is that it connects us with others and inspires us to involvement and action.

Too often we have interpreted contemplation to mean a withdrawal from people and inactivity. Nothing is further from the truth.

Contemplation is not the opposite of action. There is nothing inactive or passive about the contemplative way of life. Rather, it is the still point that grounds meaning and purpose in authentic human action.

Contemplation keeps us moving into the lives of people. Haki R. Madhubuti's poem says it well:

People play with the spirit  
and at being "spiritual."  
they cut themselves off from the real world  
while meditating on rocks and water  
and turning the sun into the moon.  
the reality of life is confused abstractions

and the people do not understand them  
and dismiss them as being crazy.  
the people are correct.  
meditation is needed and necessary  
but move the higher levels of the mind  
into the people and not away from the people.  
we meditate to maintain a balance in ourselves  
while seeking greater wisdom of the outside.  
it is not wise to seem abstract  
when that which is practical is needed.  
the most spiritual of acts  
is  
how positively you relate to  
and work with your sisters and brothers.

*(The Book of Life. Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1973, p. 80)*

We do much today (and rightly so!) to motivate young people toward Christian service and connecting all of faith to their everyday world of relationships.

That needs to continue and it will be easier if we lead our children/youth to do it the way Jesus did: rooted in prayer and times of silence which allows God to work to develop our sense of wonder, of gratitude, of openness to the gift of each moment of life.

[www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com)

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