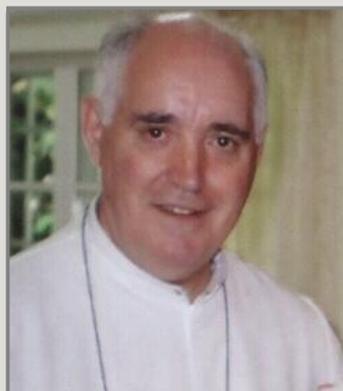




# Dwelling in Love

FRANS DE RIDDER CICM

Frans De Ridder CICM is a missionary of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. After 15 years in Taiwan, he was transferred to Singapore in 1981. Since then, he has been involved with the Marriage Encounter, Engaged Encounter, and Choice programmes. Fr Frans travels in Asia regularly to conduct retreats for priests, religious sisters, and lay people. From January 2010 he will be based in Taiwan as provincial superior of CICM missionaries in the region. In this CD he shares with refreshing simplicity his experience of the fruits of meditation in his life as a priest. He explains how meditation can bring the contemplative, mystical dimension to marriage spirituality, and how it can enrich our experience of daily living.



## *Dwelling in Love*

FRANS DE RIDDER CICM

### CONTENTS

1. Meditation and Priesthood - I	3
2. Meditation and Priesthood - II	8
3. Meditation and Marriage	13
4. Meditation and Christian Life - I	19
5. Meditation and Christian Life - II	24

---

Transcript of  
Interview with Laurence Freeman OSB in Singapore, Jan 2008 &  
Talk given to Group Leaders in Singapore, August 2009

© The World Community for Christian Meditation 2009

**THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION**  
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, ST MARK'S, MYDDELTON SQUARE, LONDON EC1R 1XX, UK  
[www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)

# 1

## Meditation and Priesthood - I

*Frans De Ridder CICM in conversation with Laurence Freeman OSB*

FR LAURENCE: Father Frans, you told me that you came to Asia at the age of 25.

FR FRANS: That's correct. In 1965, as a newly ordained priest, I was sent to Taiwan, and I spent 15 years of my life as a missionary in Taiwan.

FR LAURENCE: And after that?

FR FRANS: Then I was transferred to Singapore. In 1981 I came to Singapore.

FR LAURENCE: And where did you do your training?

FR FRANS: I am a CICM missionary so my training was done in Belgium. Philosophy, I did in French in the south of Belgium; and my theology, one year in Brussels and three years in Louvain.

FR LAURENCE: And what has been the effect of living in Asia on your understanding of Christ and your living of the gospel?

FR FRANS: Well it was quite a shock, I would say, coming to Taiwan and realizing that 95% of the people there did not even know of the existence of Christ. So I thought: Have I to bring Christ here, have I to bring God here? Then I realized very soon that God has always been there, but are people aware of the presence of God? I was really mesmerized and intrigued when visiting Buddhist temples in Taiwan. As a young missionary I visited some temples there and I saw those Buddhist monks and Buddhist nuns – a great serenity, a great simplicity, as a result of their meditation. And I always wondered, what was their experience, what made

them so simple, so serene, so confident? They had a great simplicity and serenity, those Buddhist monks and nuns I visited.

FR LAURENCE: Did it make you feel they had something you did not?

FR FRANS: Oh yes! And I even thought – never materialized, but I thought – if I had time, maybe I would retire from active service to make a study: What motivates those people to spend their whole lives in a temple, to spend a lot of time in meditation? As a matter of fact, in Taiwan there is a tremendous movement of young people who join Buddhist temples. Pu Li is a big temple and they have over one thousand nuns and monks who live there in great simplicity of life. So they must have an experience that is very fulfilling; otherwise they would not go there, they would not stay.

FR LAURENCE: So Asia, it sounds to me, introduced you really to the contemplative dimension of spirituality. What was your own training as a priest in that respect? Were you introduced to it in some way during your formative years?

FR FRANS: Well in the seminary we were taught to meditate, but it was very cerebral and intellectual: analyzing the Bible texts, trying to identify, trying to pray to God for gifts that we thought we needed. So that was very cerebral. We were taught in the seminary, in the novitiate anyway, to meditate twice a day, but to young guys of 18 and 19 that was quite a chore. I think many of us felt it was very hard. And once the novitiate was over I think none of us persevered at doing it twice a day. I tried to remain faithful to my daily meditation by reading a book by known spiritual writers; I just read it, once or twice and tried to get some spiritual nourishment from those readings, but it was quite intellectual I would say, analytical more than experiencing the presence of God.

FR LAURENCE: Does it seem strange to you now, looking back – how many years have you been a priest now?

FR FRANS: It will be 44 years.

FR LAURENCE: So looking back over 44 years, does it seem strange to you now, that in that formation that you received in the novitiate, and in theology and philosophy, that you weren't introduced to a contemplative way of prayer or a contemplative experience of prayer?

FR FRANS: That dimension of prayer was not sufficiently brought to our attention. We were more encouraged to continue to be faithful to our daily meditation more in the intellectual, cerebral, analytical way. We were taught that there were other ways, and God would lead us, God would guide us from one stage of meditation to another. I must confess, after coming to Asia I liked to read books. I did my homework, reflecting on the presence of God. That word really fascinates me: the *presence* of God, as distinct from the *existence* of God. I think God's existence is more a philosophical question. Does God exist? God knows. But the *presence* of God, the more we are aware of and immersed in the presence of God, I believe, the more our lives become very fulfilling. It is like a deep awareness, almost a bodily sense, I would say a glow, of the presence of the God in whom we live and move and have our own existence.

So in that way I thought Christianity becomes more like *experiencing* God the way Jesus experienced God. To sense the presence of God the way he sensed it, which I think is wonderfully expressed when Philip in the Gospel of John says: "Lord, show us God your Father!" And he says "Philip how can you ask me this question? When you see me, you see God, because I dwell in God and God dwells in me. "

In that way I think the experience of Jesus is not a matter of archaeology — that it happened to him 2000 years ago. I believe that what has happened to Jesus, and this is very sound theology, must happen to us; that we too live in God and that God lives in

us. And to grow more deeply aware of it, I believe, is the essence of our faith.

FR LAURENCE: What are the strongest sources of that experience of the presence of God now, for you?

FR FRANS: I think reading the books by John Main. And also many of your books which I have read. I heard you in Louvain. I was there and I listened to your reflections in the late 90s, I think, in the Catholic University Parish in Louvain. So almost every day I read one paragraph or one page from the books by John Main. The one I just finished I find fascinating. I very seldom read books twice, but that one, it's my third time.

FR LAURENCE: Which one is that?

FR FRANS: *The Present Christ*, the deepest I think of all, but very solid and marvellous. He says that each time we meditate we enter deeper into the mystery of God. And since God is infinite, since God is a mystery beyond our comprehension, it is a journey that will never end, going on day after day, leading deeper into the mystery of God. That is why it is never tiring, it's never boring, it's never frustrating, because you go on and on. You walk, as it were, deeper into the mystery of God.

FR LAURENCE: I think some priests listening to you would think you must be living in a very remote, contemplative monastery, but in fact you have a very full, busy, active ministry as well. Could you describe your ministry, how that has developed?

FR FRANS: Well I am indeed quite a busy man. I am involved in Marriage Encounter, Engaged Encounter. Today, I was the whole weekend in a weekend for young people (single adults' Choice Weekend), in the meantime I had a Mass outside in Tampines, a Chinese Mass this morning. and I had a marriage yesterday morning. So I am pretty busy.

FR LAURENCE: And have you done your meditation?

FR FRANS....Yes, I do my meditation twice a day, early morning and late in the evening. Tonight when I go back home, it can be midnight, I will still sit for half an hour. I believe in it and I think it balances my life also. We are not short-changed when we spend enough time with God, or dwell in God. It's what meditation is all about, isn't it? We need less hours of sleep, I feel energized. It is not frustrating, it is a matter of faith. It restores a balance in our life. I always like this text of Jesus in the Gospel of St Luke (10:27) to love God with heart, mind, soul and body.

Of course, intellectualizing, preparing homilies, they are very important, but during meditation I should not prepare my homily, but just focus on the presence of God and repeat my ma-ra-na-tha, my mantra, even though I may have temptations. I may get a great idea and I think: "I better write it down for my homily tomorrow", but I must resist that temptation. And I get more out of it; if later I sit at my desk to prepare my homily, I need not worry, it comes.

The word that is so important is "discipline": *Make* time for God. Some people say, "Father, no, I cannot find time for God". I say "You lie!" Because, it is not a matter of finding time. You must *make* time. And if you make time for God, the rest of your daily schedule will fall into the right place. Do not worry about that. But if it is important for you, make time for God and the rest will fall into the right place.

---

## Meditation and Priesthood - II

*Frans De Ridder c1cm in conversation with Laurence Freeman osb*

FR LAURENCE: What about the other aspects of prayer, the other forms of prayer, how has your meditation influenced those, or how does it mix with those?

FR FRANS: Well I discovered that, thanks to meditation, the Bible comes alive. I seem to enjoy the Bible much more, and also many things. As a priest, it is 44 years now isn't it? I made my first vows in 1959, that's 49 years ago, so I have read many parts of the Bible many, many times already. Many Bible texts, seem to have a deeper dimension now. So it enriches whatever I do: my sermons and my contacts with people. Very spontaneously and very naturally, I would say, I can talk with people about spiritual life.

Last night I was at a Choice weekend. There was a young lady next to me and in no time I was talking about her prayer life. After a while she said, "I pray a little bit..." "What about meditating?" Then I wrote her a short text on how to meditate, and said, read that and see whether it helps you." I think there is a tremendous hunger among many young people, but they do not know how to go about it.

FR LAURENCE: A lot of priests, I think, would not be approached by their parishioners on the subject of prayer, on their inner life. And a lot of priests would not feel comfortable in advising people about their prayer.

FR FRANS: I agree with you. We cannot be judgmental; every priest must take responsibility for his own prayer life. But I think it could reveal that that priest has not taken sufficient care of his own prayer life. The vibes, the vibrations are not there. In his mouth,

or in the contact that he has with some of his Catholics, the topic of prayer does not sound natural. I think when I do my best to remain faithful to my own journey of daily meditation, very spontaneously, naturally, in many contacts, I can talk about it and no one seems to be shocked or scandalized or finds me sermonizing or lecturing them.

FR LAURENCE: Because you're simply sharing...

FR FRANS: So I think the word "discipline" is very important. And then the faithfulness to the enormous simplicity of the mantra -- just keep saying it. And that is what I like, where God is very fair. If only the bright theologians can meditate and experience God, then God is absolutely unfair, then he excludes 95% of humanity from experiencing God. If you need a PhD in theology or scripture before you can meditate, then God is very unfair. "Happy are the poor in spirit," he says. So even the illiterate people can grow aware of God and have a deep experience of the presence of God in their lives.

FR LAURENCE: Over the 44 years of your priesthood you've seen the Church change in many ways. How would you see it moving now? In what direction do you think it is moving? What are the main pointers, the main trends that you think we're moving in?

FR FRANS: I see only one way, and that is a growing contemplative mentality in our Church. We have so many doctrines, so many documents, that many people never even read them. But do people really enjoy the presence of God? Can God be *enjoyed*? Can God be *experienced*? I often think -- I have said that more than once -- I think that our Church, in a certain way, has maybe let people down. Maybe we have taught people how to say prayers, but not, I am afraid, helped people to pray, to communicate with God, to dwell in God, to experience God. And I do not see any other or any better way for the moment than meditation.

FR LAURENCE: When you share these thoughts, this vision, with other priests, generally how do they respond?

FR FRANS: Well, I have not often shared that with many priests. Occasionally with some. And some say: "It is too difficult" or "I cannot focus enough on the word." I think it is a matter of being generous with God. Give God a chance to reveal himself in your life by creating space and silence, so that nothing else distracts you from experiencing the presence of God and enjoying the presence of God. There's a great danger, I think, that priests may think: "Well since I am a priest, I studied the Bible, I studied theology, is that not too simple for me, to just sit there for half an hour and repeat one simple word?" There, I would think: It is absolutely simple, and that is why it is the best way! The poverty, the absolute simplicity of this meditation I believe leads to absolute joy. Nothing and nobody distracts us, pulls us away from God. The text that came to my mind this afternoon, was by Peter. He asked the Lord: "Lord, we have given up everything for your sake -- house, family, wife, land, houses -- what do I get?" And I think the answer is, "no thing". You receive God! When you let go of everything else -- your desires, your plans, your dreams, your ambitions, your attachments, when you let go of everything -- then you get God! That is Teresa of Avila's word: When we have God, we lack nothing, we are complete.

FR LAURENCE: How do you feel we should move forward now in the Church towards this more contemplative foundation for our ministry, our sacramentality, for our understanding of scripture? How do we move forward in practice now?

FR FRANS: Well it gives meaning to my life, and I hope I can talk about that with my colleagues, priests, with a degree of credibility and authority. I often feel strongly sometimes our churches are too noisy, more like entertaining people rather than leading

people into the presence of God. In our liturgies, after the homily sit down for a while, after holy communion sit down for a while, and let, as it were, the presence of God, or the Word we have listened to, or the Eucharistic bread we have taken become flesh and blood in our flesh and blood. Otherwise it remains too much a theory, I think, a story rather than an incarnation of the Word, an incarnation of the mystery of God's presence.

FR LAURENCE: So you are really describing a quite radical change of consciousness, a sort of metanoia within the Church.

FR FRANS: I read in the Gospels Jesus when he was most successful (Luke 5:15-16) he would always go away to be alone and to pray, to dwell in God in order to remain faithful to himself, not to be carried away by his success, getting a thick neck and thinking that he was saving the world. Just to be faithful to his own identity, the beloved Son of God. That was what he treasured most. That was the yardstick of all that he did – his miracles and his sermons, his homilies, his dealing with people, doing that as somebody who is deeply aware of: "I dwell in God and God dwells in me". That is the yardstick of authenticity, I would say, the true ministry that he had to do. I have travelled in China giving retreats to priests and sisters and it is the great complaint of many sisters: "Our priests do not pray." They feel short-changed: "Our priests are not filled with the presence of God." That is a very painful complaint I heard many times in China.

FR LAURENCE: We know through the experience of the World Community that contemplation is a universal gift, a universal path, and the vast majority of meditation groups are led by lay people. There are many priests and sisters who also lead groups, or support groups. But there is often a feeling among the laity, that more support from the priests would be very helpful, especially I think in the Catholic Church, where the role of the priest is very

strong of course in deciding what goes on in the parish. Do you have any thoughts about how priests could be encouraged or introduced into a more supportive role, even if it is a background role or even a leading role, in teaching meditation?

FR FRANS: First of all, I would not be too worried, if the movement is led by lay people. I think in Church history, often the lay people have saved the Church. And if really they have an authentic experience of God in their meditation, it will flow over, I would say, also in their relations with the priests. And I think the lay people can often invite the priests to their meditation groups.

FR LAURENCE: So it's a gift really that the lay person can share with the priest if the priest is open to it.

---

### 3

## Meditation and Marriage

*Frans De Ridder cism in conversation with Laurence Freeman osb*

FR LAURENCE: One of the most important parts of your priestly ministry now is working with the faith of married couples in Marriage Encounter. What has that been like for you as a priest, celibate? How does that talk to you more about the presence of God, this deep involvement in the sacrament of marriage as lived out by many couples that you must have helped and worked with and journeyed with?

FR FRANS: I believe that quite a lot of our couples, especially those who are asked or invited to become presenting teams, that they have a deep sense of the sacramentality of their relationship. Often the couples say that their human encounter becomes a divine encounter. And that I think is a tremendous discovery, a breakthrough. How many of our couples reach that stage, I dare not vouch for it. But there are definitely couples I think who can rightly say that with deep joy. Any human encounter, I would say, is potentially a divine encounter. There are couples who have come to that spirituality. In some of the weekends I have been involved in I listen to some of the sharing of those couples who have a deep sense of the sacramentality of their matrimonial relationship, and that can move me to tears. They really sense God and they make God present in their matrimonial, their marriage relationship.

FR LAURENCE: And what do you feel is your role in working with them?

FR FRANS: That is precisely my role I think: to tell couples your encounter as husband and wife is much deeper than you ever thought. It is an encounter with God.

FR LAURENCE: Do you think a couple needs that sort of external, in a sense, presence or stimulus to make that aspect of their relationship conscious?

FR FRANS: I hope that couples themselves come to that but I do not know how many come to it. I'm afraid that many relationships of couples are very superficial. That is I think one of the tragedies of the modern world, that people give up on each other, that people can be replaced in relationships by somebody else, like a spare part of a machine.

FR LAURENCE: Or even just live together at a very superficial level for a long time ...

FR FRANS: Live together like two parallel lives. Like two tracks of a railroad, they never meet at a deeper level. There's a lot of pain, a lot of superficiality in many couples. The temptation of compensation is very great, I think. They watch TV, go to bed with their remote control... The people I can guide, I tell them: Your first half-hour in the morning should be to dwell in God, soak yourself in God, immerse yourself in God. And the last half-hour, the same.

FR LAURENCE: Marriage is a very difficult undertaking for many couples today, many young couples. What are the big difficulties, the big challenges that they face do you think?

FR FRANS: We are a noisy society. Many people, the first thing in the morning, they switch on the radio or the TV, listen to the stock markets these days; the whole day there is noise. The simplicity of Psalm 46:10: "Be still and know that I am God"; I think we have lost the sense, the taste for God. And this can only be recovered by silence. Society is not conducive at all. People are scared of silence, but only in silence can we experience and enjoy the presence of God. I came across a text by Henry Newman a few days ago: "Never less alone than when alone", because then nothing distracts me and God fills my whole being.

FR LAURENCE: An essential part of the Marriage Encounter programme is dialogue. How does that work? And do you think it does work – how effective is it?

FR FRANS: It remains a very powerful instrument. There are couples who are very committed to that on a rather regular basis: write to each other feelings about topics they both agree on; later they share what they have written. Writing and then sharing. But I think that many couples after a very short while give up, and come back to it, only in moments of crisis, which is of course wonderful already. They have an instrument to go beyond their conflicts and heal their relationship. But those who really go deeper into it as life-giving spirituality, there are not many.

And one of my apprehensions also is that not all couples have the same intellectual level and have the same verbal capacity to find the right words. And of course they find it quite tedious to write for 10 minutes about how they feel about certain topics, then also followed by verbal dialogue. Often women are more vocal maybe than men, and the man feels like a loser to his wife in that he cannot just say what he wants to say. Or vice versa, some men are also more articulate than women are. So I think for some couples it soon becomes a chore, and then they give it up very soon.

Whereas, I believe, if we could introduce meditation together, you need not be producing high literature, you need not discuss anything. Words are very dangerous, I believe. Words can never completely, accurately, express how it feels inside. And then words could become contentious and bones of contention in the relationship.

Whereas when we make an abstraction of all words, of all symbols, of all thoughts and we let go as a couple, husband and wife together, in the reality of God who is beyond all words, that could bring about a great sense of intimacy. Then the same reality is our reality as a couple, and that is God. So I believe that it is a marvellous tool that we could offer to many couples provided of

course they take the trouble to make the time and practise meditation, being faithful to that simplicity, the absolute simplicity of the mantra.

So it is an enormous gift, that simple statement of Jesus in the Gospel of Mathew 18:20: “When two people are gathered in my name I am there in your midst.” For couples, what a marvellous reality! Just pay attention to the presence of God in your midst beyond words; just let go into the presence of God together. Not a verbal dialogue, but a dialogue of the soul – that both of us are living in the reality of God. And that can heal many things maybe easier than many words. Words could easily lead to new discussion: what do you really mean, did you mean this or that? And that could easily degenerate into new discussions and arguments.

When we let go of all words and formulas, I believe it is much more promising – to experience healing, to experience intimacy, and really community, because both of them are immersing themselves together in the same Divine reality, which I think is the divinization of their relationship, which I think is the meaning of Christianity: “Dwell in my love.” (John 15:9) *Dwell*. He does not say analyze it or understand it! Just let go and “*dwell* in my love”.

We must continue. I’m very happy and very proud of those couples who remain committed to regular dialogue. Daily dialogue, there are not many; regular dialogue, there are some. So It remains a great gift of God to Marriage Encounter, but I think we could give them more. That is what I advocate. Can we offer them or initiate them into meditation together as husband and wife? This could, I think, enrich their relationship and their family life tremendously.

FR LAURENCE: How do you feel that meditation, entering into a silent dialogue, as you said “a dialogue of the soul” together, how does that help them to communicate better verbally and psychologically?

FR FRANS: I would think that in meditating we let go all our conflicts, misunderstandings, our feelings; we immerse them into the Divine

reality. And a lot of healing takes place when we are living in God. Afterwards, I believe, they will come together, if in a verbal dialogue, come from within God and communicate about things in a more loving, caring way, less aggressive, healed already by the common experience of dwelling in the same Divine reality. So I think they can then come together and explore and understand and maybe try to find solutions to their problems, but coming now from within God and not from their own wisdom or their own so-called too human experience.

It boils down to the same question: Do we live in God? And do we look at all our problems – family, sexuality, social, political life – coming from within God; and from within God address and look for solutions? I think it can make the dialogue much more gentle and loving than just to talk and to dialogue without the experience of contemplation and meditation.

FR LAURENCE: What you are describing is really a sort of conjugal mysticism, and in the Church mysticism the contemplative path has always been identified really with the celibate life or the solitary life, and the married life has been seen as a life of action, a life of social responsibility and parental responsibility. What you are envisioning, is a Christian marriage that really does have a mystical dimension in its spirituality and its prayer, not just in its sacramentality but in its actual lived daily life. That's something new isn't it?

FR FRANS I regret profoundly that the contemplative dimension is not part of the life of all Christians. I think that this is probably the answer to all the problems we are facing in the Church of today – that we think that meditation is only for nuns and priests who live the secluded life. I think that it should be for all human beings, all believers. What St Paul said, “I live no longer, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20), was for all people not just for a select group or minority of the Catholic Church. I think it is very sad and very regrettable that in that way we have short-changed our people; that we seemingly

confine contemplation and the mystical experience of God to a select group of celibate priests and sisters, and not make it available to all and not train people, initiate people in *living in God*, twenty-four hours, day and night – professional life, married life, family life.

We lack I would say a Catholic family-life culture. Meditation or contemplation could be very much part of it for a family too. They meditate as a couple and the children at times too can join in. You yourself are now trying to help young children to learn to meditate in silence from early childhood. That is a very important step in promoting Catholic family culture, that people experience God and learn to live in God twenty-four hours day and night in all that they do. It could be *the* answer to make our world a peaceful place.

FR LAURENCE: There are certainly couples who meditate every day. There are wonderful insights into how that deepens their common experience of God and their marital sacrament, their marital sacredness. But there are also a lot of couples where only one meditates; the other one just doesn't see it, just doesn't feel called into that particular form of contemplative prayer. Do you think a marriage can benefit when only one partner is meditating?

FR FRANS: I think so, because I believe if either partner is committed to daily meditation I think that cannot not rub off on the other partner. The other partner will sense that his spouse or her spouse has an experience of God which has filled her or his life with simplicity, with serenity, with a deeper dimension of the meaning of life. I think it will rub off on the other partner sooner or later. They may meet with resistance. That is the whole human psychology: the more the partner who is meditating tries to verbally convince the other, the more resistance he or she will have to overcome. So I would not talk about it too much. Do it faithfully! And hopefully the vibrations, the presence of God will ooze out, I hope, from the one who does his or her meditation.

## Meditation and Christian Life - I

Frans De Ridder – Talk to Group Leaders, Singapore 2 August 2009

First of all most welcome this afternoon. I am really impressed by your presence here. It shows something of what I call the silent revolution in our Church: people who try to spend every day, twice, 20 minutes to half an hour in silence hidden somewhere in one of the many HDB flats here in Singapore. The quiet revolution. And I think nothing else can change our world. Nothing else can change our world unless people learn to dwell in God's love: "Be still and know that I am God."

I will start with a simple anecdote. Maybe ten days ago, I had a dream and in that dream the name Claudius, of all names, Claudius came back in that dream. And I tried to recapture where did I meet a person, Claudius? Claudius; and that kept coming back. Now yesterday morning I was going to one of the prisons in Singapore to minister to the prisoners and there were 6 or 7 of them in that particular prison. They introduced themselves, and there was Nelson and one was Claudius. Claudius! A man from Kenya, an African who is here in one of our prisons in Singapore. Now why do I tell you that? Well because before we have mass with them they can come to confession, and Claudius came to confession. Then I remembered I had him maybe one or two months earlier in that same group. So Claudius. Then he said, "Father, I must thank you." I said "Well why?" "For that penance you gave me last time." "Oh? What penance did I give you?" "Well you told me to use a mantra, a very simple mantra: 'Dwell in God's love.' Father, it has changed my life, tremendously. Every day, twice a day, I sit quietly, at least twice a day, in silence; sit straight, close my eyes, relax and repeat that simple mantra 'Dwell in God's love'. Father, this is paradise now. It is

not prison anymore. The walls and the bars do not matter anymore. I've learnt to live in God. At times of course – the group dynamics in a prison – those people, have all their *barang barang*, they have their problems. But the moment I get tense or angry I go back and spend again some time quietly with my mantra, and I can deal and cope with any problem. It is unbelievable, Father, how this simple mantra, the simple discipline has changed my life. I have two more years to go, over 700 days. But it doesn't matter. Bars and walls and prison wardens do not matter anymore. God matters. Dwell in God. That is enough for me."

In a certain way, that simple man taught me once again and reinforced my own awareness of the importance of what is Christianity: Like Jesus Christ, *dwell in God*. God is our reality. For too many people I am afraid, Christianity is a doctrine, catechism classes, a theory. But for this man and I hope for all of us increasingly so, Christianity, our faith, is dwelling in God's love: being permeated as it were by the very presence of God in our lives.

So many people complain that they do not know how to pray or that prayer does not serve any purpose. And indeed that is something very important. Must prayer serve any purpose? For too many people I think prayer means asking God for things. How many times do I hear people say we must "storm" heaven or convince God, repeat the same things over until God "yields" to our demands. That *our* kingdom can come, not God's Kingdom.

I believe prayer is, in the first place, about relationship with God, to be in relationship with God. In a certain way, when we meet our best friend, we feel good, and we can talk about a thousand things, but it is not the topic in the first place but much more the feeling good in that person's presence. The relationship; the presence of God in our lives. For too many people I am afraid God can be a rival or a competitor, somebody we must convince of our agendas and try to snatch, maybe to bribe him if need be, until he gives us what we

want. And that is not God. God is not a rival, not a competitor. God wants to give us himself and short of having God I, of enjoying God's presence, nothing else will ever satisfy our souls. To *dwell* in the presence of God. To *enjoy* God.

A few days ago we had a meeting with some couples at an Engaged Encounter weekend – last week this time I was in Ponggol in an Engaged Encounter weekend. We talked with those couples: “Do you enjoy God? Do you enjoy your Faith?” Surprise on many people's faces! For many people our faith is a chore, a burden, rather than a joy. A “being in relationship”, enjoying God's presence, I believe that is what meditation is all about. Live in God's presence. *The reality*, says St Paul, “is God”. So in prayer, it is not about *us* but about God. And the more we are in the presence of God I think the more our own lives will be transformed. *Will be transformed*: our tastes, our hunger, will change gradually. We learn to live in love. Is prayer difficult? Is prayer easy? In a certain way. I think the great point is we must learn to *make* time for God.

The words “find” and “make”. I've been a priest for 45 years today, how many times I've heard that complaint by people: “I can't find the time Father.” Time is yours. *Make* time for God. And the more you make time for God, the more God will make time for you. Don't blame God. God is always present. Pay attention to his presence. Learn to *dwell* in God. Walk humbly with your God as the prophet Micah will say. Is it easy? It is not easy, but it is very simple. That's not the same. It must be very simple. I always say to people if my mother, my grandmother, cannot do it, then God is very unfair. Then he excludes 99% of humanity. If you need a doctoral title, a PhD, or a Masters degree in theology or in scripture before you can meditate and enjoy God, then God is very unfair. How many of you have a doctoral degree in theology? I don't have. But all of us have the privilege of learning to live in the presence of God and the joy of living in God's presence and enjoying God. It is very simple, the first

thing is make time. *Make* time. And if we give that priority to God – that God is our top priority, that we make time for him – don't worry, many other things in your life will fall into their right place. So make time for God. I need not repeat that, you know that by your own experience. And the discipline is there, very simple.

When I started meditating in this way, it was when I was in the Philippines. I came across a book of John Main in the Daughters of St Paul bookshop in Baguio, and I read that and I said ‘hey!’ I was a little bit apprehensive: twice a day! As a priest and of course as a missionary we were taught to meditate every day. In the morning, to try to digest, to struggle through the bible text of that particular day to try to understand, to grasp some new insights into the bible texts. But letting go as it were completely, and letting go into God, I was already growing in that direction but I never did it twice a day, only in the morning. So then I thought, “My goodness not twice a day! I'm such a busy person!” I was very busy. But I decided to give it a try, and ever since I've never given up. I will have time in the morning and no matter how late it can be at night.

How many people tell me that they can't, and I say again, “Don't deceive yourself.” “I am so tired Father! God will understand that I am so tired I cannot do it in the evening.” I say, “God understands everything, no problem with God. But you short-change yourself. God has no problems. God understands everything. But you short-change yourself!” And when we meditate and dwell in God, I believe there will be a greater balance in your life. The way God made us is heart, mind, soul and body. And our soul has a tremendous hunger, maybe more than our bodies even. Do we do justice to the spiritual hunger for God in our lives? So *make* time. Do not short-change yourselves. *Discipline*. Make time. The discipline of *making* time for God.

And then the second element of discipline is this: No matter how many thoughts you have and worries you have and other preoccupations that you have, let go. Let go of all these thoughts.

That is what we hear in the Bible in so many texts. The Lord says, “Those who want to follow me, must *renounce* themselves.” It is not denying the true self, but letting go of the ego, of the false self, of what we think we need most. What we truly need most is not what we think. What we need most is God. St Teresa of Avila, a great Carmelite sister of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, says that when you have God, you have everything, nothing you shall want. So the discipline of no matter how many thoughts I have, my worries, my fears, my complexes, my sins of the past – let go. I have so many urgent things to do – let go. That is enormous difficulty for many of us. To let go, to die to the self, to all that we think we need most in life. “Leave self behind” is what John Main will say, and also Laurence Freeman. Leave the false self, the ego; leave that behind. Then I believe gradually there is space for God.

There is of course the power of the mantra, that very simplicity of the mantra, one word or one short sentence that we repeat no matter how many times we are distracted. No matter how many other important urgent matters we have to fulfil, let go by just simply repeating “maranatha”, come Lord come. That is discipline.

Discipline also – look for a place where you are not going to be distracted. It may not be the best place to sit in front of your TV to do your meditation. Go to your own bedroom, a quiet place. Sit down; *be*. Be in the presence of God. A quiet place where we will not be too easily distracted. Go for a quiet place, sit down quietly, and keep your spine straight. It is also not so simple to do that. Or you can sit on a chair. Or sit on the floor, for those who are still young and whose bones are still young enough to sit on the floor or on a cushion. Even that is not the most important. But try to keep your body straight. There is some great wisdom in our body that helps us to focus, focus on the only necessary thing: that is God.

---

## Meditation and Christian Life - II

*Frans De Ridder – Talk to Group Leaders, Singapore 2 August 2009*

A few days ago some people were talking to me and saying we hear it said that meditating in this way is not good. Some fundamentalist groups among our Christian brothers and sisters may frown about this method of meditation or prayer. But I said no it is the opposite. When we let go of our thoughts, our insights, our desires, then what do I get? And I think the answer is very simple. Our good friend St Peter in the Gospel of Matthew and Mark and Luke asked that question: “Lord I have given up everything for your sake, what do I get? What do I get if I do all that?” And the Lord says “Well Peter, if, [that is a very important “if”] “if you have given up everything – your thoughts, your desires, your dreams, your ambitions, your pride – for my sake, then you will get 100 times in return. When you let go of everything else you get me. You get *me*. Then you experience what I experience: God’s unconditional, absolute love; God’s presence in you. You get me; you experience how I experience God. You learn to belong to God the way I belong to God. You will know what God’s plan is for all of us: To live your human life in a different way, in God’s way.”

God made us and only God can ultimately satisfy our deepest urges and needs, can gratify what we truly need: his presence, his life, so that our life, as it were, can be divinized. Christianity is about divinization, not just after we die – of course that is the full blossoming, the full unfolding of that mystery – but while here on earth. Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven: To live in the presence of God.

So discipline for sure! Make time and I tell you, you will not be short-changed. Your other activities will fall in their right place. But it

is a major decision, a great commitment morning and evening. And believe in the power of it, in the absolute simplicity. It must be very simple, which is not the same as easy. Make time and repeat the mantra; it's not always easy. You might think: I waste my time; I could do so many more other things, so many urgent matters are waiting for me and I waste my time, I'm daydreaming. It doesn't matter how many times the most crazy thoughts come to your mind, just repeat the mantra from beginning to end. Repeat it, and as it were listen to it.

That is something new to me. I had read that before but I just kept repeating the mantra till only recently when I heard one of the tapes, I believe by John Main or Laurence Freeman: Repeat the mantra in your heart and listen to it as it were, the echo of the mantra that is in your heart. Listen to it and then go on; repeat it in the quiet of your heart and listen to it.

Now we talked about the mantra as discipline, focus on the presence of God. Dwell in that presence of God. How can we manage to dwell in God's presence? Well that is the mantra, so absolutely simple. That is why it is important and is a good method. If it is complicated, it cannot be a good method. Absolute simplicity and fidelity. "Happy are the poor in spirit" says the Gospel. A very simple way, a great fidelity, and results will follow. Maybe you will not see a great difference in your own life right away; it doesn't matter. Do not analyse yourself, Do not say after 3 weeks, "I get nothing out of that; I waste my time."

Transformation takes place beyond our knowledge. Again let go of our thoughts, of our knowledge, of our insights. Do not look for statistics nor percentages: "I have grown a little bit already ..." Don't! Just let go; let God do his work. I believe that when we let go of everything our ambitions, our dreams, our fears, our sins... Our sins. I sometimes feel sorry for many Christians: "We are sinners Father." "No!" once we belong to God, we learn to dwell in God, St Paul says

"You are the saints of God." We may commit sin, but we are the children of God. As the children of God you are full of grace. That is the truth about us once we believe and belong to God. How do I compare that transformation process? I would think that like a potter who has a lump of clay in his hands, when I make enough time for God and am committed to my mantra that I repeat in good times and in bad times, in distractions and in wonderful feelings, then God is like fashioning that clay, moulding me in my true self, as it were processing that raw lump of clay into something beautiful: sons and daughters of God. Trust God, he is a skilful artist. He makes all of us into his sons and daughters. That is the absolute simplicity again: Surrender to God, he will transform us and fill us with his very presence.

There's that story in the Gospel of St Luke that is also quoted by some of my friends trying to argue against this method of meditation. A man has an evil spirit, and that man tries hard to get rid of that evil spirit and cleans his house till the evil spirit leaves him. The evil spirit roams around and doesn't find a place to stay, and he comes back with 7 other spirits and they occupy that house. And the man's condition is worse than before. I think there is something marvellous in that. Why could the evil spirit come back with 7 spirits even worse than itself? Because the house remained empty. So, living in a vacuum – I want to live a life without committing sin but without the presence of God – it doesn't work. But when our house is full of God even 10,000 spirits cannot come back anymore. Your heart is full of the presence of God, not your own ambitions, your own dreams, or even sinfulness or past sin. And what are those evil spirits? They are the seven capital sins: pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony. When we think we live a more decent human life, we have cleaned up our house, if that remains empty then those vices will come in. Let God fill your heart. Let God fill your heart, mind, soul and body so

the house is filled with the very presence of God. Evil cannot co-exist with God when God fills our hearts.

And that is of course an ongoing process. We can never pride ourselves; the word pride is there also amongst the seven capital sins. It is ongoing, keep growing, because God is infinite. We can never finish the journey, it is an ongoing journey. Every new day we are apprentices, learners; every new day we start all over again, just to ask God "Maranatha. Come Lord, come." That absolute simplicity and the great fidelity to the mantra: make the time; repeat the word. Believe in the outcome even if you do not see it right away. Do not be discouraged. Give that, the most important part of your precious time, to God.

God cannot be grasped in our definitions. Think, why there are so many religious wars going on in the world. So many signs of pride and arrogance because people think that they can catch God in their definitions, that they have the monopoly on God. Nobody has. That is an ongoing journey and the more we surrender to God, the more our life becomes filled with humility and compassion for other people. Rather than comparing ourselves with other people and priding ourselves in our superiority. Only when our hearts rest in God, I believe, do we become our true selves from the false self, the self-centred me; from what I think I am to what God knows I am, what God is achieving in me. *He* is transforming me and I need never pride myself, because living in God is an ongoing process even beyond our physical death. We keep growing even after our death, in God's love. because God is infinite and we are so limited in our intellectual capacities, in our comprehension of the mystery.

A few days ago I was called to Gleneagles Hospital; a man from the parish of the Holy Cross is dying there with terminal cancer. Exhausted, he cannot sleep. When his wife and his sister went to the canteen we were just together the two of us and I asked him, "Can you pray?" "No Father, I cannot anymore, not even an Our Father

anymore. I cannot." I gently put my hand on his bed and I said, "Well hold my hand." And he put his hand in my hand and we decided to use "Come Lord, come", the simple mantra, for 20 minutes. Praise God his wife did not come back so soon! But it was a marvellous experience. I just repeated gently "Come Lord, come." Just repeating that, focusing on the presence of God with this dying man; and I saw him relaxing and a smile came on his face. And after 20 long minutes he said, "Father, I saw Jesus." Of course I could have given him a lecture on death and suffering but that would have been, I think, exhausting for him and for me too. But just claiming the presence of God or affirming because God is there. God is always present in our lives. The problem is not God. The problem is us. We do not pay attention to that presence. So that was I think a very beautiful, fulfilling experience I had a few days ago.

When we let go of the false Gods, the idols, and one of them is indeed the rat race of Singapore, and we are willing to waste time for God, just to dwell in God, with no other, ambition, no other agenda than God, and allow God to act in our lives so that more and more we become that kind of personality that has a relationship similar to the relationship that Christ had with God his Father. That self-awareness of Christ becomes our self-awareness; that consciousness of Christ becomes our self-consciousness – what St Paul says in Galatians 4:19, "until Christ is fully formed in you". It is of course an ongoing process but it *is* happening; and trust that it is happening.

When we surrender our thoughts, our ambitions, our fears, our worries then God can shape us into the image of Christ himself. Then as St Paul also says, "It is no longer *I* who lives but Christ who lives in me". Do we relate with daily life's challenges the way Christ did – with childlike simplicity and trust in God? We are specialized in worry, not specialized in God enough. There's that marvellous line that St Paul also speaks in Colossians verses 3 and 4: when Christ is

revealed in all his glory. He says it and then St Paul typically stops and says: he is your life and you too will be revealed with all the saints and angels in the glory of God. He *is* your life.

And how can that come about? Give God a chance in your life. Create space and time for God and the only way, the best way I think – there are many ways of meditating, but I think the best way at my age, forgive me saying that, at my age – I believe is this one. Because I always remember that it is such a sharp insight that John Main also gives in one of his writings, he says we can fall in love with our own thoughts about God. And that I think is the very reason why there are so many religious wars going on. We have created God in our own image. And the truth is God creates us in his image: that is the truth about Christianity. We make a God according to our own liking. *Allow* God to be God and then you will become a true son, a true daughter of God the way Jesus Christ was a son of God, and join that wonderful intimate childlike simplicity of relationship with the loving God, loving Father.

So God is a loving energy, benevolent loving energy, always present to us. That is God. Surrender, yield to God and he will shape you and fashion you into the image of Jesus Christ his only son. What do I get? God. I remember our Pope when he talks about the present world, he says what people really need is not our money in the first place but they need God. In so many parts of the world, even in western Europe (I come from Belgium) at times people ask me: why do you go and be a missionary; is Singapore not a developed nation? As if mission is about under-development and development – give them schools, give them more money, what people need is schools, education; improve our social life in our economic situation. But when we have that we could become very selfish. It's never enough; always we want more at any price.

Only God can satisfy the hunger of our hearts. With a line of St Augustine, I want to end by sharing. St Augustine says: “God you

created us for yourself and our hearts remain restless in us until they can rest in you.” That I believe is the ultimate result, an ongoing process into God. The more we are living in God, the more our hearts come to rest, and then we enjoy God's presence, the only thing that really matters.

---