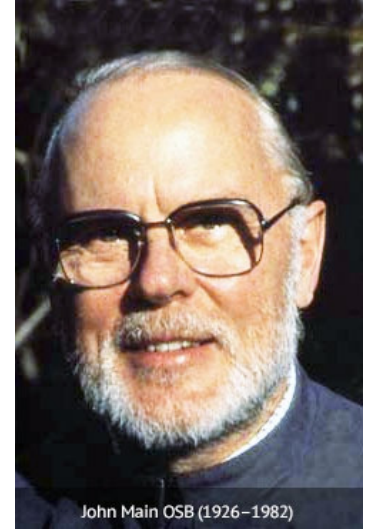


Benedictine Spirituality – part 2

Fr. John Main, OSB (1926-1982) was born in London, the fourth of six children, as Douglas Main. Douglas entered seminary and began his studies in Theology in the forties, but later changed his mind and graduated instead with a law degree in 1954. After graduation, Douglas began working as a civil servant and was assigned to spend two years in Kuala Lumpur, where he studied with a swami the art of meditation through use of a Christian mantra. Upon his return to England in 1956, Douglas began to teach law. In 1959, deciding to return to his passion for theology and spirituality, Douglas joined the Benedictines at Ealing Abbey where he was ordained Fr. John Main in 1963.



In 1970, John was appointed headmaster of St. Anselm's Abbey School in Washington, D.C. While there John, for the first time, read the writings of John Cassian. John Cassian, a desert father, was a prolific writer hugely influenced by the theology of Evagrius. Cassian wrote out Evagrius' theology of the vices which provided the framework for the Catholic Church's view of the seven deadly sins. Cassian was not fully embraced by all during his life, because he believed that sometimes the goodness of the human spirit, nurtured and strengthened by the grace of God, plays a role in spiritual enlightenment. This teaching contradicted the teachings of other theologians of his time like Augustine who believed in total depravity of the human spirit. Cassian writes, "For when God sees us inclined to will what is good, He meets, guides, and strengthens us: for "At the voice of thy cry, as soon as He shall hear, He will answer thee;" and: "Call upon Me," He says, "in the day of tribulation and I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me." And again, if He finds that we are unwilling or have grown cold, He stirs our hearts with salutary exhortations, by which a good will is either renewed or formed in us."

Inspired and comforted by Cassian's portrayal of this "dance" between the human and the divine, John Main returned to Ealing Abbey and began to teach Christian meditation groups. Three years later, John was sent to Montreal, Quebec to establish another Benedictine monastery where he continued his practice of leading Christian meditation groups. Five years after establishing the monastery in Montreal, John Main died of cancer, but his Christian meditation work continued and expanded. By 1991, the Christian meditation practice John Main had started began to network with the World Community for Christian meditation which annually hosts the John Main Seminar.

"In contemplative prayer we seek to become the person we are called to be, not by thinking of God, but by being with God. Simply to be with God is to be drawn into being the person God calls us to be."

"The important aim in Christian meditation is to allow God's mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality but the reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, everything we are."

"The light which enlightens us bathes the whole of creation but it enters us through a narrow aperture"

Prayer Exercise: Meditation

When John Main led meditation groups, he gave very little instruction, knowing that as a teacher, he was not meant to share his own experience, rather his role was to provide the space for others to have their own experience. Laurence Freeman met John Main when he returned to Ealing Abbey and accompanied him in meditation groups throughout the rest of his life, continuing to teach the practice after John Main died of cancer. He summarizes John Main's instruction as this:

“Sit down with your back straight. Relaxed but alert. Close your eyes lightly, breathe normally. Begin to repeat, silently, interiorly, a single word or short phrase – a “mantra”. The word recommended is “maranatha”. Say the word gently and continuously. Return to it when you become distracted. Meditate twice a day for between twenty to thirty minutes, morning and evening.”

The word “Maranatha” means “Our Lord comes.” Unless you have a different word that you are particularly drawn to, try this one. If during your prayer a different word arises, it is OK to switch to whatever word you feel comfortable with. So, John Main kept his instructions simple, and in the spirit of Main, I will do likewise. Peace!

Reading Assignment: Chapters 5 and 18