

Catholic approach to mindfulness?

So, you're struggling with prayer and meditation and are looking for a way to wind down and escape for a moment. This is often a good thing to aspire to, but unfortunately, many well-meaning people are led to a dangerous practice that is recommended by many therapists and psychologists: the practice of mindfulness. It can even fool some Catholics.

Now, there is nothing wrong with being mindful, per se. The problem arises with the execution in this type of mindfulness and what is made central to the meditation. In the course of traditional mindfulness meditation, there is the notable absence of God and the person's awareness of God. This is because the practice is rooted in the atheistic religion of Buddhism. This also means that the practice is a barrier to conversation with God, which is what true prayer and meditation should be. The focus instead becomes the self and one's own interpretation of their inner lives, including thoughts and feelings.

If we are left to our own interpretation, one has no objective judgment of those thoughts and feelings, which leads one to feel that there is no real notion of good or bad except what they themselves think or feel (moral relativism). As Catholics and Christians, we know that this is not true. Natural law asserts that there are certain truths and norms given to us by God that will always hold, regardless of time and place in history. This means that there must be a difference between right and wrong and good and bad. Erroneous judgments and inordinate desires in our nature are a direct result of the Fall and are not part of this natural law.

Mindfulness meditation – regardless of how certain professionals try to spin it – drags us further into this

separation from natural law and from what was intended by our God. It does indeed teach us to be mindful of our thoughts and feelings, but it gives a false sense of what we should do with this mindfulness by telling us that we are in control when we are not.

I said earlier that there is nothing wrong with being mindful, as long as it is in a Catholic sense. Being mindful in our everyday lives can bring us closer to God and help us become more like Christ. A good place to start in this is a daily examination of conscience. There are many methods for this examen, but a simple way to go is to have a particular examen and a general examen.

A particular examen usually takes place in the middle of the day and is focused on a specific virtue that is decided on beforehand (e.g. humility, obedience, etc.). One examines how they have dealt with opportunities to grow in this virtue up to that point in their day. They take note of how they can do better and what can be done during the rest of the day to help them grow in this virtue. This method can also be used for a vice that one is trying to uproot from their lives.

A general examen is done at the end of the day and is used to look back and reflect on events and how one responded. Did I move closer or farther away from being Christlike today? What can I improve on? Also take the time to listen to God and what he is trying to tell you about these things. In order to make these examinations, one does have to examine their thoughts and feelings and judge them. Having thoughts of covetousness or feelings of envy, for example, are problematic and need to be atoned for and dealt with before they get any worse. In order to have a relationship with God, one cannot simply take note of thoughts and feelings and accept them.

Another simple way to be mindful is by taking note of things and events around you and thanking God for them: "Thank you, God, for such a beautiful day with blue skies", "Thank you,

Lord, for the blessing of seeing Aunt Susie.” Learning to be grateful and seeing everything that comes to you as a gift from God is a great form of mindfulness. And over time, you will become more aware of events and trials that come from God in your everyday life.

When it comes to prayer and meditation, the first thing to ask yourself is “What am I really being mindful of?” The practice of mindfulness rooted in Buddhism says that the answer is for you to control the present moment, excluding God and what is right and wrong in your life. This is not Catholic prayer and meditation, where mindfulness consists of our knowledge of God and his work in our lives.

Emily Berns writes from Florida.