



February 2024

Dear Friends

New Year blessings and Peace be with you.

The last quarter of 2023 was a hive of activity for the Community as we rounded up our 30th anniversary celebrations.

Regional Asia Pacific 7 day Intensive Silent School Retreat 22-28 October 2023

We hosted this event for the second time at the Stella Maris Retreat House, Penang. 39 participants from Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, Timor Leste and Singapore, joined 12 of our meditators for this intensive silent retreat. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Fr. Laurence could not be present but thanks to technology joined us virtually, gave his daily talks as per the programme and conducted interviews via zoom.

As was explained to retreatants, this retreat is very much about their own spiritual journey. Fr. Peter Murphy from New Zealand was at hand to celebrate the daily eucharist and lead the small team of spiritual companions to minister to the retreatants.



Father Laurence delivering his daily talks via zoom



Participants at Regional Intensive Silent School Retreat

Comments from our Malaysian retreatants:

The 7 day silent retreat from 22 - 28 Oct 2023 at Stella Maris , Penang turned out to be a happy, joyful silent retreat. It was enlightening to be in a place with so many people coming from other parts of the world to form a community of meditators. Certainly we were strangers at the start but towards the end - I felt that we were strangers no more. So awesome. In this Silent Retreat , the intensity of meditation has encouraged me to deepen my journey of meditating twice a day. All the meditation sessions, talks, contemplative walks, sounds of the rolling waves from the sea, the beautiful vast sea, sky, we experience daylight & darkness etc. makes me appreciate the awesomeness the Greatness of our Creator. Thank you for organising & supporting our meditation journey. GOD BLESS.

Monica Gomez (SFX , PJ Group)

I am fortunate to have attended both the intensive silent retreat (school retreat) and the annual retreat which totaled 11 days. Throughout the journey, it was difficult to maintain the discipline of meditation 8 times a day. Some days are better than others. Nothings seems to “happen” during the retreat yet chose to faithfully follow the program. As reiterated to me, it is a personal journey.

Now after three weeks, I conclude that there is a sense of presence within me. This presence I can only describe as PEACE leading to clarity of mind and decisive action. This presence also diminished my depression – the grace of healing.

*Stillness and silence
Longing, yet found IT within
Gift of Presence- peace*

*I could not hear you Lord
My action was loud
Now in silence, I can*

Alexandra Wong (Kuching Group)

I felt so blessed to be part of this Intensive Silent Retreat (ISR) and the venue was conducive. This was quite a phenomenal experience for me, with eight sittings per day of meditation with a community of faith. Initially, I struggled to be still in mind and body, through the practice gradually, I was able to focus and intentionally enter into silence and stillness. The group was a source of encouragement through their silent presence and stillness. As the days progressed I found myself looking forward to the meditation practice, sitting in the presence of one another. On reflection, group meditation is a powerful experience as the practice itself gives the sense of oneness and unity. I am not alone, we are all connected to the source of Being. The contemplative walks were beneficial as one way of settling the mind and body to calmness in preparation for meditation. This statement from Fr. Laurence's input: "In silence is to become who you are and God who gaze on you", resonated in me and deepened my awareness that God watches over and knows everything who I am and delights in me when I make time to be silent and still in my daily life. Taking this opportunity to say 'Thank you' to the organizing team and Fr. Laurence who was not able to be with us physically but in spirit, his closeness through his talks and in which we remembered him in our prayers .

With grateful heart, Sr. Mercie Lai FMDM, Bukit Mertajam Group

It was amazing in a sense that I was forced to follow 8 times meditation which I haven't done before. I found that it was quite difficult at the beginning. However, after 2 days, I found that it was easy to enter into meditative stage, maybe because of the silence or the ambience that calms both our body and mind. During this retreat, I felt the silence and inner calmness. Thereafter, I started to discipline myself of doing daily meditation twice and enjoy doing it too

Isaac Lee, St. Michael's Church, Ipoh Group

It is my first experience to attend the 7 Days "Intensive Silent Retreat". Having eight sessions of meditation and complete silence throughout the period as well as a daily spiritual companion meeting have given me some spiritual awakening as I would have to reflect on short inputs given by Father Laurence daily. It helps me to go back to ask, "what is God to me?" which follows "how is my relations with Jesus with the practice of meditation? "The intense silence certainly helps me to develop as John Main said" to be the person we are called to be if we allow the silence to develop in our hearts". I went away from the retreat having to be more committed to meditate twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening.

Nicholas Choong, St Ignatius Church ,PJ Group

The retreat helped me to discipline and stay focussed in my prayer life

Fatima Michael (formerly) Our Lady of Lourdes, Klang Group

This was my first 7 day silent retreat with WCCM and it made a significant impact in my faith journey. The gospel reflections, contemplative walks, meditations and environment

was perfect for the retreat. Definitely increased my commitment to the practice and community.

Roland Victor, Church of Divine Mercy, Penang Group)

To me, the retreat was a spiritual wake up call, an invitation to spend a quiet and silent time with the Lord. Truly it was an intensive meditation retreat that surpasses all the meditation retreats that I have attended. It was definitely an invitation by the Holy Spirit to spend a quiet time with the Lord. the first two days were restlessness for me as I have to meditate 8 times a day interjected with the Contemplative walks which I thoroughly enjoyed.

In fact, it was refreshing to undergo such spiritual exercises and listening to Fr. Laurence' talks that rekindle my time of meditation before the pandemic. The sound of the bell was a gentle reminder to come before the Lord in silence just like Mary who pondered the words of the angel Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke. I am thankful for this invitation. I am now reviving my interest again the meditation through attending the on line sessions to join with the community of Christian meditators to sit silently before the Lord. I loved so much the sound of the Tibetan meditation bowl that I purchased one on line.

Joseph Tan,(STM Subang Group)

Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of WCCM Malaysia

(Full text of article submitted to the Herald. It was published in part on 26 November issue)

The Art of Friendship: Finding oneself in the Other was the theme of the 4-day silent retreat that marked the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) Malaysia's 30th anniversary. 82 retreatants from Peninsula and East Malaysia attended the retreat held at Stella Maris Penang that ended on All Saints Day.

The "friendship" was founded on 29th November 1993 when WCCM's Director, Rev. Fr. Laurence Freeman, OSB, visited the Church (now Cathedral) of the Holy Spirit in Penang to deliver a talk and introduce Christian meditation to 150 parishioners. Shortly after, the inaugural meditation group led by our first National Coordinator, the late Serena Woon, OFS, was born. The anniversary retreat was to be led by Fr. Laurence but due to unforeseen circumstances he was not able to be physically present and delivered his conferences virtually. Fr. Laurence spoke of communion through community building, the oneness of friendship, and of course, our first friend, Jesus Christ. And the beauty of discovering Him to discover our true selves through His greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22: 37-39).

In essence, Fr. Laurence's talks explored the subject of friendship in how we are reflected in our relationships with ourselves, our families, peers, friends and even strangers. When we know someone beyond their superficial identity, we also begin to see our own true identity emerging.

During the retreat, we were most fortunate to have the spiritual guidance of our current as well as former Spiritual Directors, Rev. Fr. Gerard Theraviam and Rev. Fr. Paul Cheong OFMCap, respectively. Both of them, incidentally, were also celebrating the 30th Anniversary of their sacerdotal ordinations making it a doubly momentous occasion. In addition, we were delighted to welcome Fr. Mark Noel Bonchol from Kuching.

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All three priests fielded questions from the retreatants, cleared their doubts, heard confessions and shared their perspective of *The Art of Friendship: Finding oneself in the Other*.

We were also blessed to be joined by members of the Hong Kong Meditation Community – Lina Lee, the former National Coordinator WCCM HK and Pamela Yeung – as well as Augustine Xiao Xiao, National Coordinator of WCCM China.

The fellowship over the course of 4-days was memorable. Lina's take home message from the retreat was: *"We can find the gracious God among our friends, especially those who share the same ideals. In meditation, we are all as innocent as children, experiencing the love of our Heavenly Father; so we are transformed and have the ability to love. When we get along with others, we can feel that the other person is also loved by our Heavenly Father; then we have the ability to face and overcome the difficulties and setbacks in life."*

Another meditator, Sally Soo from CHS, Penang summed up the highlights of the talks with a leaf from John 13:34: Love one another as I have loved you. Sally said: *"Unconditional love, trust is essential to friendship. A life without friendship is not worth living. The importance of a spiritual journey is 100%. Friends bring us to our fulfilment – we treat our friends in the way we are treated. The ideal is spiritual friends grow at the same level otherwise they will grow apart. Friendship comes with grace. This gift has to be accepted – that is the art of friendship. Meditation can be a catalyst – we express love when we meditate. The perfect friend is God."*

Over the past 30 years, WCCM had established meditation groups in parishes and homes in Alor Setar, Penang, Butterworth, Bukit Mertajam, Taiping, Ipoh, Klang Valley, Melaka and Kuching. These groups meet weekly on the same day and time. The meditators pivoted during the pandemic to host sessions online 5 days a week. Although social distance is no longer needed, the on-line sessions, now down to 3 days, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday continue to draw steady participation. We can only attribute this growth and constancy to the Holy Spirit guiding, leading and paving the way for us. Deo gratias!

In practising this Contemplative dimension of prayer, we join over 2,000 groups in 62 countries (and counting) around the world and in all 5 continents. We continue to share our gift by conducting Introductory workshops to Christian Meditation in parishes all over Malaysia. It is hoped that, in HIS time, we can establish a meditation group in every parish in the country.

More about this form of prayer was highlighted in a recent article in the Herald by our Spiritual Director Rev. Fr. Gerard Theraviam titled "Pray as you can, not as you can't." It is a balanced and beautifully written article. A must-read! Please see page 8 of this newsletter for the full article.

WCCM Malaysia



The retreatants and Fr. Laurence delivering his daily talks virtually



The Jubilarians cutting their 30th anniversary cake. Looking on is Fr Mark Bonchol.

Comments from retreatants

My thoughts on the retreat at Stella Maris Nov. 2023

This retreat was for me a return to Penang as I moved to Ipoh earlier this year. In fact it was my fourth retreat at Stella Maris and it was good to be back there. Each time I know more people so it was also a reunion.

Of course we were disappointed that Fr Laurence could not be with us and we all prayed for a successful surgery and a full recovery for him. Instead of Fr Laurence we were blessed with the presence of Fr Gerard, Fr Paul Cheong and Fr Mark from Kuching.

Fortunately we were able to watch Fr Laurence's talks on video, so it was almost as though he was there, except for the questions and answers which were handled by Fr Gerard.

The subject of friendship was largely about love and there were many aspects to the theme. In the early mornings we had some practice of qigong from Fr Paul and also took part in a contemplative walk. All of us enjoyed walking on the beach in the fine weather. Our creature comforts were well cared for in the restaurant and we shared some of the household tasks involved. It was a perfect venue for the retreat so I am sure all went home spiritually fulfilled.

Valerie Black , Our Mother of Perpetual Help Group, Ipoh

Thank you to all the organizers of the WCCM 30th Anniversary Retreat at Stella Maris, 29th Oct -1st Nov 2023.

Although I live in Penang, I had never made it to the previous years retreats conducted by Fr Laurence Freeman. This year I could not afford to miss the chance again so I registered and paid up without considering whether I would be there or not! I wanted to see Fr Laurence in person !

When the retreat started and we were told that Fr Laurence would not be coming I was a little disappointed. However when instead of his presenting in person, we had recorded videos of his sessions I was quite surprised. I could see him and hear him talk! And to top it all the subject of his sessions was The Art of Friendship, something very close to my heart! From the talks I have learnt to value friendships more and also learnt that with each friendship we perfect them till we find our perfect friend who is God himself! How beautiful! From Fr Gerard too, we were taught to read and meditate on the scriptures before starting our morning meditation. I have been practising it and it makes my meditation even more fruitful! The words of scripture carries me through the day!

At the Eucharistic celebration on All Saints Day which was the closing mass for the retreat, Fr Mark had linked the WCCM concluding prayer to the Beatitudes. The words of the prayer.."a friend for the seeker, a guide for the confused" reflects and parallels the Beatitudes!

I also met new friends from Hongkong and Shanghai and a long lost friend from Malacca! This retreat has unexpectedly impacted me greatly! Thanks be to God!

Margaret Boey, Tanjung Bungah Group, Penang

Fr Gerard's article in the Herald.



As I was contemplating

Fr Gerard Steve
Theraviam

My journey in prayer has gone through the ups and downs of life and I have discovered different methods and styles of prayer that have served different stages of my life. As a child, I was introduced to set prayers by my parents who taught me basic prayers. My parents would pray nightly with me and read from my Children's Bible — and that task sometimes fell to my not-yet-Catholic father when my mother was on night duty as a nursing sister. This was my foundation in prayer and I remember later when I was older and had to pray by myself, I would sometimes be awakened by bad dreams and realise I had fallen asleep without praying, but my fears would go away when I prayed.

In secondary school, I discovered the Bible and prayed with it daily, something that I was introduced to in my non-Catholic school, thanks to the School Christian Fellowship and a group of classmates that started a weekly Bible study group. Spontaneous prayer was also something that my Protestant friends introduced me to. In my late teens, I was introduced to Charismatic prayer and this featured strongly in my life, especially when I was discerning about the priesthood. (Interestingly, many of my contemporaries in the seminary then had also had a Charismatic leaning although that wasn't a feature I saw in later generations I taught.)

When I entered the seminary, I was introduced to many other methods of prayer and it almost seemed too much to digest at once but I was encouraged to experiment and see what worked. In this period, the Liturgy of the Hours became a mainstay and the Psalms have ever since been a powerful source of prayer. I was also introduced to discursive meditation, allowing my mind to work through

the Scriptures through Ignatian meditation as well as *Lectio Divina*. Yet I also aspired to what I saw then as 'higher' contemplative forms of prayer as I looked at St Theresa of Avilla and St John of the Cross. I wanted to be floating on the clouds of ecstasy but came to realise that prayer is hard work and often dry and difficult, and found myself sometimes in despair and desperation. Yet I battled on for I had already 'tasted' fleeting moments of the touch of God in prayer and I longed for more! I learnt from St Mother Teresa that it is more important to be faithful than successful, and that applies to prayer as well as other aspects of the Christian life.

Slowly, I found myself being led to a quieter, contemplative spirituality. This was nourished by Taizé prayer, with its repetitive chants punctuated by silence, as well as short Scriptures. Creative prayer with poetry and art has also helped. Later, there was an introduction to Christian Meditation when Fr Laurence Freeman OSB, as well as other priests from the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), led the retreats for priests in Peninsular Malaysia. This strongly resonated with me and has been an important part of my prayer life, with an overall sense of peace even though distractions may sometimes affect me.

Interestingly, WCCM has sometimes been looked with suspicion as Fr John Main learnt

to meditate from a Hindu swami. He was then a colonial officer working in Kuala Lumpur around 1955 and had some dealings with Swami Satyananda of the Pure Life Society in Kuala Lumpur who taught him how to meditate in his way, yet insisting that he would have to meditate as a Christian. This guidance was over a period of 18 months and the practice took root in John. Fast forward, John returned home and joined the Benedictine order, later being ordained a priest. John expected to continue and intensify using the form of meditation with a mantra that he learnt in Malaya and practiced regularly but when he mentioned that approach to the novice master, he was told that this was not the Benedictine way. With a spirit of obedience and detachment, he relented. Some years later, now a priest, on being asked by a student who had spent time in India and wanted to see how his experience fitted with Christian tradition, John gave him the book by Augustine Baker, *Holy Wisdom: A History of Contemplative Tradition*. On re-examining the book, he discovered the ancient writer, John Cassian (360-425), whose Conferences he read and discovered key similarities to the meditation with a mantra. Recognising that this form of prayer had deep roots in Christian tradition, he returned to the form of prayer learnt from the swami. For him it was a 'coming home': reconciliation

between his experience of Eastern meditation and his own Benedictine tradition. Soon he began to teach this form of meditation to others. Sadly, Fr John died in 1982 but his work has continued through the efforts of Fr Laurence Freeman OSB who was his student and partner in mission, as well as the World Community of Christian Meditation, a global spiritual community united in the practice of meditation in the Christian tradition which is also active in Malaysia.

Perhaps for me, the lesson here has been not to judge anything negatively just because it comes from another tradition but to rather, appreciate the fruits that it produces. The Spirit blows in ways that we cannot understand. There is more that we share with other traditions that perhaps we realise. And for those who struggle in prayer, never give up! Pray as you can, not as you can't! Remember that at different seasons of our lives, some things will fade and others emerge — even ways of prayer. Yet all types of prayer lead us to encounter God, even if my prayer is a shouting match at God or just arms lifted up in silence and surrender.

● **Fr Gerard Theraviam** is the Parish Priest of the Cathedral of St John the Evangelist in Kuala Lumpur, as well as the Spiritual Director to the World Community for Christian Meditation, Malaysia.

Pray as you can, not as you can't!

How to Meditate by Fr John Main

Sit:	Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert.
Say:	Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-word MARANATHA. Recite it as four syllables of equal length.
Listen:	Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything spiritual or otherwise.
Return:	If thoughts or images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word.
Persevere:	Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.

MEDITATION CREATES COMMUNITY

BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH MEDITATION

A bridge has been built in the city of Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia and the city of Brisbane, Australia. Actually, it is a bridge between the Christian Meditation group, from the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit (CHS), Penang and the Sunnybank Christian Meditation group, Brisbane.

It all happened when I announced to my CHS Christian meditation members that I will be away for two weeks visiting Brisbane, Australia. Then one of our meditators, Sally Soo, said that I should try to meet a Malaysian couple, Edmund Lai and his wife, Cecilia from Brisbane whom she met in Bonnevaux, France, during a pilgrimage tour in May 2023.

After making contact with Edmund, he arranged for us to join the meditation group in Sunnybank, in the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes on 2nd November 2023.

This is my experience of the meditation session we had together and reflection.

1. Hospitality: we were overwhelmed by the hospitality of the group, especially Edmund Lai, his wife Cecilia, Pam Nair and Gabby Nelson, who made us feel at home and invited us to join their fellowship coffee after that.
2. Openness: there were about 14 persons present and with a warm welcome from Pam Nair and the group, our hearts were opened to the group.

3. Oneness: we felt united immediately with the group, even though it was our first time meeting everyone there. I believe this is because all were opened to the silent presence of God and we easily became one community.
4. Spirit-led connectedness: I believe it was the Spirit that led us and joined the dots with the others, and in the silence of meditation, focussing on the sacred word “Maranatha”, we became bonded in love naturally. It made the opening prayer which we always recite a reality.

Here is some information on the Sunnybank Christian Meditation group. It has an ecumenical membership, which meets weekly on Thursday mornings in a room at the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Sunnybank, Brisbane. The group leader is Gabby Nelson and the group has about 10 regulars with visitors joining in once in a while. The meditation group has been meeting for the last 20 years. Attached is a photograph of some members gathered with us at the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, after the meditation session. From left to right – Des and Shirley Shannon, Bella De Souza, Anna and Bernard Capel, Edmund Lai, Gabby Nelson, Shirley Tan, Angela Tan, Cecilia Lai and Pam Nair.



It was an enriching experience for us and we hope to be able to meditate with the Sunnybank Meditation group again. We welcome any of the members there, if they come to Penang, to meditate with the CHS Meditation group which meets twice a week on Tuesdays at 7.45am and Thursdays at 5.00pm at the Blessed Sacrament Chapel portico, at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, Penang, Malaysia.

May the Lord Jesus be praised.

Bernard Capel

Introductory Workshop Chapel of Kristus Aman , K.L. 25 November 2023

This event attracted 96 registrants not only from the parish but many others from neighbouring and KL parishes as well.



Fr Paul Cheong OFM Cap delivering the first talk

Fr. Gerard Theraviam at Q & A

Some comments from participants :

Good introduction to Christian Meditation. Looking forward to joining Meditation sessions in KA and in SIC .

Must congratulate and thank the good work of the team.

It is a real challenge for me to sit comfortably on hard unpadded chairs. Perhaps we should be encouraged to bring our own pillows if desired next time?

Thank you. Applause to the formation team. Well done It was well organized. Good information.

Father Gerard should have been given a slot to lecture rather than only at the Q n A at the very end.

It was fascinating when Father Bede Griffiths was mentioned , I find his writings really helpful . It was also interesting to see the relationship with Swami Satyananda and the Pure Life Society .

Need to practice Christian Meditation consistently for some time before one can feel the positive results and its benefits to the faith

Talks were precise and informative by speakers.

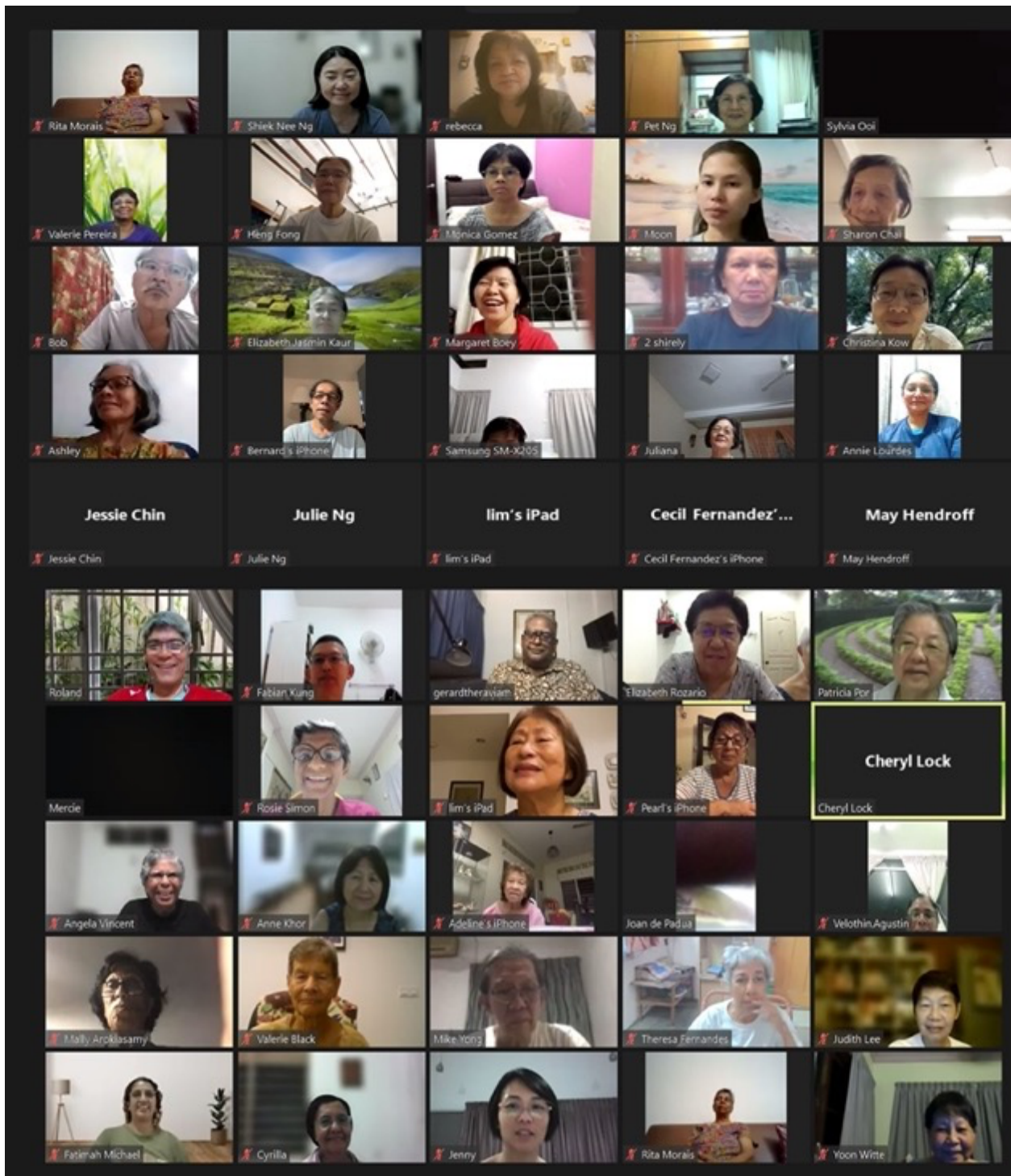
Good. Good. Enjoyed the talks. Food was good too. Thank you for a great job done. Praise God. Thank you for all your organizing.

Meditation Group in Chapel of Kristus Aman

Following the workshop, a meditation group led by Theresa Wong was formed. They meet every Friday evening at 8pm

Advent Reflection led by Fr. Gerard Theraviam - 14 December 2023

There was a good turnout of 55 meditators at this **on line event**.. Fr Gerard gave a meaningful advent reflection on the themes of advent - Hope, Peace, Joy and Love with reference to how a visit to prisoners at Kajang prison during this season touched him. The session ended with meditation followed by Father's blessing.



Screenshot of participants at Advent Reflection

Commemorating Fr. John Main's 41st Anniversary, 30th December 2023

The finale of our 30th anniversary celebration fittingly ended where it all started, at the Pure Life Society where the seed was first planted by Swami Satyananda in Fr. John Main. The big difference this year was missing the presence of the late Mother Mangalam, who was always a gracious hostess.

We listened to Fr. Laurence commemorating the event sharing his personal thoughts on how he has felt Fr. John's presence over the years whereby he felt a kind of 'protection' when Fr. John assured him that everything he needed will be given to him. He liked three qualities of Fr. John as a person which were great teaching moments:

First of all, Love, which radiated from Fr. John

Secondly, his integration making him at ease in all circumstances.

Thirdly, his spiritual freedom through the exercise of self-discipline.

Finally he shared his memory of John Main as a deeply grounded person centred in Christ.

The video link is as follows:

<https://youtu.be/UL4fwvNs3Mc?si=wgCNNwC17njL9nDs>

After meditation, we spent some time in the grounds and paid our respects to the late Mother Mangalam who is interred about 10 yards from her guru.



Rest in Peace, Mother



After the event, the group adjointed for an appreciation banana leaf luncheon on the retirement of the National Coordinator, Patricia Por and passing of the baton to her elected successor, Beth Rozario who's appointment took effect on 1 January 2024.

Advent Donation for FRIENDS

A total of RM1,813.00 in donations was received during advent for the FRIENDS programme.

GBP300 was remitted to WCCM, UK.

Thank you. Your generosity is much appreciated.

International News

Attached is the International News with updates of news around the world and Fr. Laurence's message.

Enjoy the read...

Pat Por & Beth Rozario (former National Coordinator and current National Coordinator)

POSTSCRIPT: A BIG THANK YOU

This newsletter would not be complete without a very heartfelt and resounding big 'THANK YOU' to Dr Patricia Por who has guided and led our WCCM Malaysia tirelessly, relentlessly and lovingly for many years. We also thank her for graciously sticking around as advisor, as we face future challenges and changes. We wish her peace, blessings, good health and love always.

*Beth Rozario (National Coordinator),
Fr Gerard Theraviam (Spiritual Director)
and Council Members, WCCM Malaysia*