

Making space for contemplation

Spotlight on CHIJ Katong Convent.

Yin Mei Lenden

It is 12:30pm. In the swell of voices and the blur of lessons, the school bell sounds, rising above the cacophony of the school day. But it is a different chime from the usual: this one is more dulcet, more soothing. A voice comes over the PA system. "Good afternoon, it is time for our mid-day prayer. Let us quieten our hearts and minds and remember that we are in the Holy presence of God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit ..." *

A calm drifts over CHIJ Katong Convent (KC), as students and teachers, regardless of faith, settle down, wherever they are, for quiet contemplation and reflection.

It is a brief bubble of peace that floats in the middle of the hubbub of the school day, all too quickly popped by the next ring of the bell that signals the start of yet another lesson; yet for that moment, room is made for something more than the routine busyness of daily needs-to.

In Letter 36, founder of the CHIJ schools, Nicolas Barre exhorts us to pay attention to our inner silence, to quieten the thoughts, emotions or impulses which may lead to anxiety so that we may hear the gentle voice of God in the depths of our being. Three hundred years later, his wisdom rings loudly for us in KC.

With the world constantly changing as it discovers new technological innovations and pursues economic growth, it is easy to be crushed in the gears of progress. In the words of poet A.S.J. Tessimond, we have become "the man too busy with a living to live, Too hurried and worried to see and smell and touch". Such a life alienates us from ourselves, our fellow (wo) man, and from God. We have become more stressed, more anxious, and more burned-out, leaving no space in our life for grace and graciousness.

To avoid being swept away by the tide of modernity, KC turns to a suite of contemplative practices as a means to ground and centre each individual. To develop communion, connection, and awareness with ourselves, each other, and God, the school makes room for contemplative practice: moments where all may focus on either stillness or generative practice as a means to grow in peace with the rest of the KC family.

Morning reflection is a daily occurrence in KC, with students and teachers, regardless of faith, coming forward to share their experience and learning with the rest of the school. Despite the scale of the sharing, an individual or two, with the whole KC family, it is a tender, intimate time. Teachers and school leaders share personal stories



Students finding peace in the school garden. Photos: CHIJ Katong Convent

and struggles, students unearth insights and frustrations. Sharing reflections not only helps us feel less lonely but it also cultivates compassion.

Each week, the school chaplaincy team presents a theme to explore in the reflections, articulating how it would look or sound like in day to day practices to illustrate how we may enact God's words that "love never fails". Whether it is how to be present and attentive, or how to connect and understand, before another individual leads the school in prayer, the school takes half a minute of silence. This quieting of mind and body helps to foster focus and calm, embodying the reflection of the day.

It is a struggle to make time and space for contemplative practice in this day and age, but biblical verse and quotes from God's servants around the school remind the KC family that they are not alone in the difficulties they face – that God's presence is around them constantly.

A particularly comforting reminder is emblazoned on the school hall, "Whatever happens, be at peace and trust in God." Blessed Barre comforts and brings that bubble of peace to students when they sit for the



A prayer box installed by parents outside the chapel of the school.

Morning reflection is a daily occurrence in Katong Convent, with students and teachers, regardless of faith, coming forward to share their experience and learning with the rest of the school.

national examinations, allowing them to contemplate connection instead of anxiety and loneliness.

Connection and communication is one of the roots of contemplative practice, and KC constantly seeks to fill the wells of loneliness we have as we hurry and worry through the day.

Creating mini communities of support structures, such as Prayer Parents, a group of parents who gather during the periods of the national examinations to bless the students with prayer, or building the Secondary One Catholic student community through the school's Catholic Connect programme, is a way to reassure students and teachers in their time of need.

The KC family strives to constantly connect all her members in different ways to build a safe space for contemplation, reflection, strengthening and healing. Be it the monthly Masses attended by parents and students, the termly Spirituality Programme where students reflect on being mindful community members, or in Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) lessons where the class shares on topics such as harmony and rising to meet challenges, space is made for the school community to connect with themselves, each other, and God.

In the wise words of two Sec two students Zara and Gabrielle, who shared a morning reflection, making room for grace is "showing kindness and consideration to everybody, bringing out a feeling of worth, it's listening to other people's thoughts and opinions as well and acknowledging their sharing before we express our own thoughts," and it begins first, with having a moment to quieten our hearts and minds, and contemplate our place in this world.

Non-Catholic students are free to do silent reflection or pray in their own faith. □