

Issue Date: September 9, 2005



-- Photos by Amy C. Elliott

Fr. Thomas Ryan leads the yoga class at St. Paul the Apostle Parish.

Tuesdays with Father Yogi

By RENÉE LaREAU
New York

It is 6:15 p.m. in midtown Manhattan, and the New York City rush hour is in full swing. Commuters flood the Columbus Circle subway entrance in the shadow of the behemoth Time Warner Center, and tourists amble about Central Park's southwest corner. One block away, at St. Paul the Apostle's parish center, preparations for an unusual Tuesday-evening parish meeting are taking place.

New Yorkers of all shapes and sizes, clad in T-shirts, spandex and sweatpants, drift into a darkened second-floor room and take their places on thick charcoal-colored blankets. Some lie on their backs, eyes closed. Some sit cross-legged on small foam blocks, chatting quietly with one another. Others stretch their hamstrings intently. Backpacks and bags stuffed with the day's castoff professional attire line the hallway outside, while quiet flute music emanates from a CD player in the front of the room. To the casual observer, it is not quite clear whether what is about to take place is a workout or a retreat.

But one who sticks around for more than a few minutes learns that it's both. Part retreat, part workout, it's the hottest parish meeting this side of Lincoln Center. Welcome to week six of Meditation and Yoga for Christians, taught by Paulist Fr. Thomas Ryan.

Ryan, 58, tall and trim, takes his place in the front of the room on a slightly elevated platform, his demeanor confident and pensive. He leads the class in singing a five-minute Taizé chant, and offers a brief homily, placing the practice of yoga in the context of the Lenten season. He shares e-mails from absent participants, including one who has recently been diagnosed with stage four tongue and throat cancer.

"We begin tonight with an awareness that this class has a communal dimension like this Lenten season we are in," Ryan says. "Think of the others who need you to be here. We offer this prayer of ours for them tonight. When one of us is missing, this class literally isn't the same without you -- and that's true for us as church as well."

Ryan, a certified Kripalu yoga instructor, warms up the group with a series of stretches, offering brief commentaries on each position.

"This pose is a restorative pose," he says, as participants lie on their backs with hips elevated and legs in the air. "It sends blood to the heart, giving the heart a rest."

“Now this pose is good for the end of the day,” Ryan says, as he bends over and grasps his toes in a seated position, back arching upward. “You are conserving energy, preparing your body to go to bed for a peaceful night’s sleep.”

After a brief period of instruction, Ryan leads the class in yoga prayers, a series of postures and stretches set to music. Following his lead, a sea of 25 sets of limbs wave through the air, rotating, flexing and scissoring in rhythm to a musical rendition of evening prayer Psalm 141.

Looking across the room during this one-hour-and-45-minute class, one can almost see the stress of a workday melt away in a New York minute. A sense of peace and collective wellness is palpable, a sense that is confirmed talking with some of Ryan’s yoga devotees.

Though their ages range from early 20s to mid-80s, and their careers range from stay-at-home mom to Web designer, they are uniformly staunch in their commitment to the integration of yoga into Christian spiritual practice.

Maria Lonczak, 43, drives 50 miles from northern Westchester County to attend Ryan’s class.

“The way he ties yoga to Christian spirituality is extraordinary to me,” she said. “Other yoga teachers have taught me the breathing and the different positions, but I have never been a part of a class that includes time for meditation.”

Kate Van Tassel, 27, a program associate at an environmental justice agency, values the uniqueness of a communal experience of bodily prayer. “You don’t find this anywhere else. In the city, it’s rare that you get to pray in silence with other people.

“Plus,” she said with a laugh, “it’s great for my back.”

For Ryan, whose 1991 sabbatical in India inspired him to seek professional yoga training, carving out 20 minutes of communal meditation time is simply a matter of staying true to the original purpose of yoga, a 3,000-year-old discipline.

“Yoga first emerged as a physical practice designed to enhance one’s ability to sit in meditative poses longer by strengthening the hips and back,” said Ryan, director of the Paulist North American Office for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations. “When yoga was brought to the Western world somebody made a marketing decision early on to detach it from its context of spirituality, lest market share be limited. Thus yoga has been marketed as the latest fitness fad workout-type exercise.”

A fitness fad so popular in the Big Apple, in fact, most yoga classes are overcrowded, which discourages many potential participants. For filmmaker George Rivera, Ryan’s parish-based class is a welcome respite from the city’s jam-packed yoga studios.

“There was an article written a couple of years ago about the fact that yoga has become a contact sport in New York,” said Rivera, 50. “It had become so popular that classes were getting very competitive and aggressive, and there was an assumption on the part of instructors that you were a high-level practitioner. If you weren’t, they didn’t have a lot of patience for you.”



Fr. Ed Novak, a priest in Ryan's community, takes the class.

As an instructor, Ryan exemplifies attentiveness to the varying degrees of strength, flexibility and balance in adult bodies. He demonstrates adaptations to each yoga pose as his assistant, Bernadette Latin, who teaches the class when Ryan travels, offers individual instruction during the course of the evening.

Ryan, who also skis, swims, rollerblades and lifts weights, has offered Meditation and Yoga for Christians at St. Paul since 2000. He teaches four or five 10-week sessions from September to May, with an average attendance of 30 people. Participants pay \$100, and the classes earn nearly \$8,000 annually for the parish's charitable works.

"It's a great example of the theoretically tight relationship between prayer and almsgiving actually playing out in practice," Ryan said.

When Ryan first pitched the idea for the program to the parish, he was met with a healthy dose of skepticism.



"I told people I wanted to offer a 10-week series and they said, 'Oh no, you'll never get that kind of commitment from New Yorkers -- they're too busy. You'll have to do it on a drop-in basis.'"

Ryan tried the drop-in class, but the lack of continuity bothered him. He decided to take a chance and advertised a 10-week class. "I said, 'Forget this. I don't care what they say about New Yorkers.' And when I asked people for the commitment, the class size doubled."

Though their ages range from early 20s to mid-80s, and their careers range from stay-at-home mom to Web designer, they are uniformly staunch in their commitment to the integration of yoga into Christian spiritual practice.

Kim McNamara, a 38-year-old nurse, attends the class weekly with her husband, an attorney. "Sometimes it's hard to get here," she said. "But we always walk home saying to each other that it was well worth it. With most

exercise you don't get this spiritual component."

Ryan's students speak of the class not only as a fitness experience, but also as one of communal prayer.

"It's different from working out with people you have no connection to whatsoever," said Rivera. "These are people you see on other occasions around the parish."

Though some of Ryan's yoga students are taking the class for a second or third time, most of them are new to the experience of praying with the body. According to Ryan, the practice is something that blends seamlessly with a Christian theology that prizes the body in doctrines of Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven.

"Our Christian theology is very clear in asserting that this body may be biodegradable but it is not disposable," Ryan said. "God wants the whole you, and your body is not going to be sent away like a banana peel or a recyclable bottle."

Ryan recently authored his ninth book, *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality* (Paulist Press), which all of his students receive upon signing up for the class. In addition, he created the newly released

DVD, “Yoga Prayer: An Embodied Christian Spiritual Practice” (Sounds True), in response to former students’ requests for a take-home video. Throughout the 90-minute DVD, he integrates yoga postures with some of the same traditional Christian prayers he uses in his Manhattan class.

“There are classic Christian prayers people may have been praying their whole lives, but from the shoulders up -- never through their whole person. To enter the prayer this way is a fresh and sometimes quite powerful experience for people,” Ryan said.

Just ask the busy New Yorkers in Ryan’s class. Evidently, denizens of the city that never sleeps do take some time to practice yoga, pray and meditate with one another. They’re nourished by it. They love it. And they’ll be back next week.

Renée LaReau is the author of [Getting a Life: How to Find Your True Vocation](#). She writes from Columbus, Ohio.

National Catholic Reporter, September 9, 2005

[This Week's Stories](#) | [Home Page](#) | [Top of Page](#)

Copyright © The National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company, 115 E. Armour Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64111
All rights reserved.

TEL: 816-531-0538 FAX: 1-816-968-2280 Send comments about this Web site to: webkeeper@natcath.org