

The Sound of Silence

Lyn White

Several years ago I experienced a change in my response to Christianity. It wasn't quite a loss of faith but it came very close to it. I had lost any sense of joy in worship and prayer. This affected my entire outlook on life. I began to question whether Christianity was worth pursuing and whether or not life might be easier without it.

As I analysed what was happening I became aware that it was not a sudden occurrence. It had been growing, unnoticed by me, for years. I had been able to continue attending Mass, meeting Christian friends and even praying without any depth or sincerity to these practices. This realisation made matters worse because it added a meaningless quality to what I was doing that seemed almost hypocritical. At that time the only thing that prevented me from walking totally away from the faith was the thought of the immense change it would inevitably bring about in my daily living. I would no longer be able to share with my friends, my godchildren or my husband the most fundamental thing in life.

The emptiness persisted, however, and I was on the point of giving up when I was persuaded to discuss it with somebody else. I was lucky because I came into contact with a Carmelite who was able to perceive and explore what was really happening. Out of those meetings came a completely new way of understanding the spiritual journey. For the first time I recognised that I lacked a personal relationship with God and, worse, that I did not know how to build one. It was then that the value of silence became a means to a relationship with God rather than a barrier.

The sound of silence can be both negative and positive. We view it negatively if prayer apparently goes unanswered or when God seems absent in the liturgy. But it can be positive if we grow to appreciate silence as a way of encountering Christ.

I was taught about the four stages of *Lectio divina*, a way of reading scripture and pondering it in silence, which can lead to deep contemplation. I also learnt one of the many forms of silent prayer. Both of these practices arise from ancient Christian traditions which, to some extent, have been lost to the laity. Much of the writing of two Carmelite saints, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, is about prayer and silence. Many modern books dealing with this subject are based upon their work. The tradition in England is even older. The English classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, was written in the fourteenth century.

By silencing the mind it is possible to become open to God's presence in the heart. I now realise that the Gospels represent Jesus' view of the world and therefore, they have to become mine. Values which I previously held in my head have been transferred to my heart. I now feel them as well as think them. Some old, cherished attitudes have been challenged and discarded because opinions and prejudices have to be exposed to Gospel values. It is as though there is a real encounter with God during those silent times; you don't know when it happens, you don't hear a voice but the results emerge in daily life. This way of prayer doesn't conflict with Mass or any other devotion; in fact they all enrich each other. It isn't always comfortable or enjoyable but, at least, I understand the

spiritual journey better and I find I meet Christ in my everyday life even when I would rather he wasn't looking!

But whenever you do come upon this silence, it seems as though you have received a gift, one which is “promising” in the true sense of the word. The promise of this silence is that new life can be born. It is this silence which is the silence of peace and prayer because it brings you back to the One who is leading you. In this silence you lose the feeling of being driven, and you find that you are a person who can be yourself along with other people.

Henri Nouwen

A good read...

Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina, by Thelma Hall, r.c., Paulist Press, New York, 1988. This book is both encouraging and consoling in leading the reader to discover a way to intimacy with God in the simplicity of a childlike reading of God's Word. Throughout the Carmelite Family and the Church as a whole the way of Lectio divina is being re-discovered and strongly encouraged. It can be ordered through The Friars Bookshop at Aylesford Priory.

A Deeper Love – An Introduction to Centering Prayer, co-written by Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm. and Elizabeth Smith, Burns & Oates, Tunbridge Wells, 1999. This book is the experience of teaching and practising Centering Prayer over a number of years. This introductory book may be of help to those who are searching for and desire to respond wholeheartedly to the invitation of Christ to enter into an intimate relationship with God. Available from The Friars Bookshop at Aylesford.