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Faith Today

Spaces...

By Father Basil Pennington, OCSO
NC News Service

The sun will soon rest on the horizon. The flood tide of a day's activities is ebbing. A calm enfolds the abbey. The monks silently gather. A young monk reads a few lines from the sayings of the desert fathers:

"Theophilus of holy memory, bishop of Alexandria, journeyed to Scete, and the brethren coming together said to Abbot Pombro: Say a word or two to the bishop, that his soul may be edified in this place. The elder replied: If he is not edified by my silence, there is no hope he will be edified by my words."

Now the monks file into the church. A bell rings and the ancient service of Compline proceeds. Finally, the lights fade. Two solitary candles shadow the folds of her mantle and caress the smooth cheeks of the medieval Madonna. The final strokes of the evening Angelus lose themselves in the surrounding hills. Night has come.

Creation has given up its activities. It is time for the monk who has entered into God's established rhythm to be quiet and rest.

I cannot say how many times I have been asked: Do you still take a vow of silence? Actually, Trappist monks never took a vow of silence. But we do have rules or agreements on silence in the monastery — valued by a group of persons living together and still seeking the context in which to be at one with themselves and to commune with God.

God does indeed speak to us through all the events of life, through all the persons we encounter. God is in the mighty wind, the earthquake, the fire — in all.

But God's voice is subtle, even though it thunders louder than all the voices of creation. Two could sit in the warm morning sun, listening to the bright morning calls of chickadees, robins and finches. One might hear only the rich melodies, while the other, who had perhaps sat that morning in the quiet and attuned his inner ear to the divine voice, hears a message of ineffable love:

"Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they?" (Matthew 6,26)

In the quiet, whether we listen to the creation around us, the city's noises, the words of revelation or the deepest stirrings of our hearts, we begin to perceive a voice too often lost in the static of life.

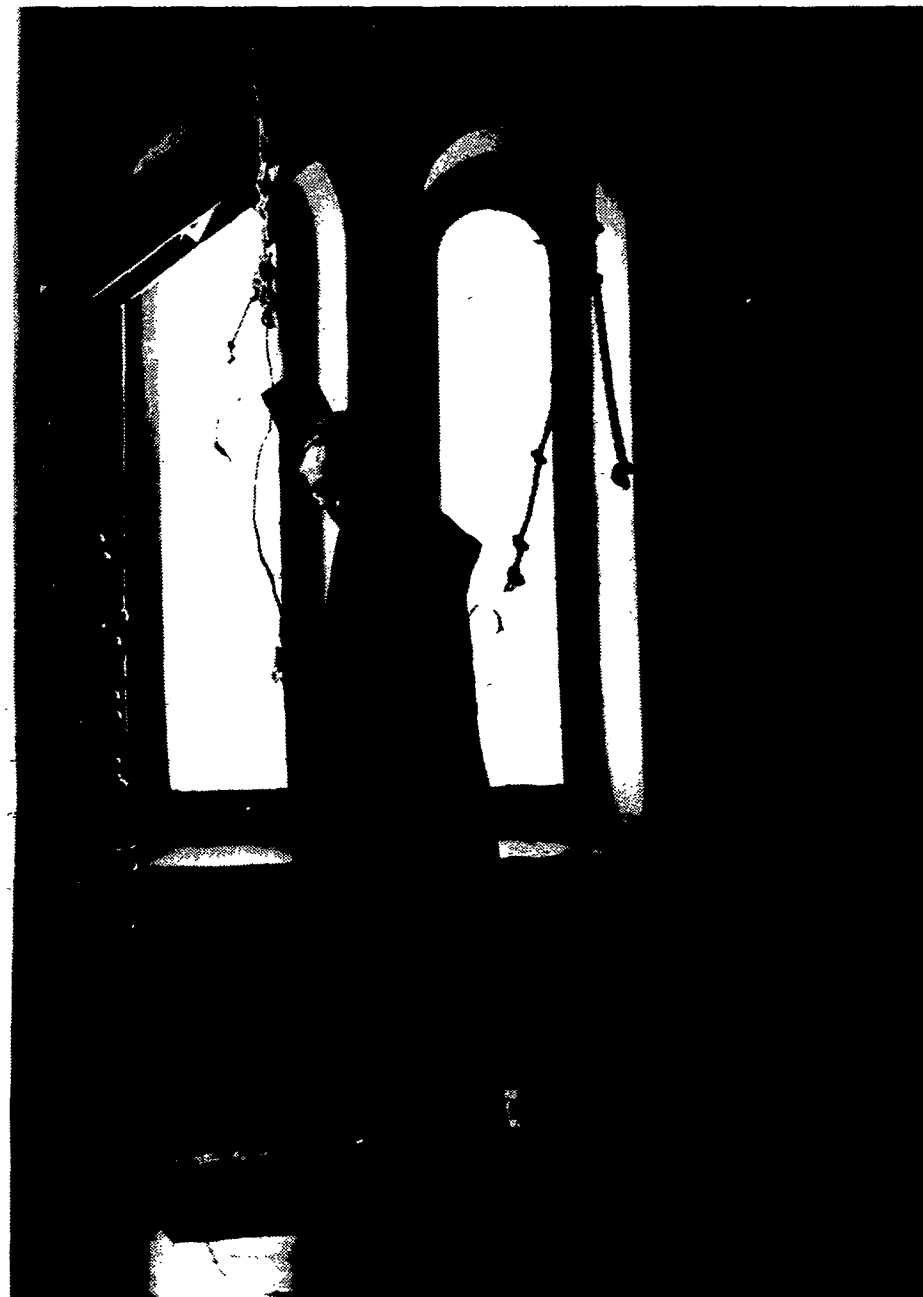
In the quiet spaces, the monk hears God. He also hears someone else. He hears himself — his true self.

Happiness consists in knowing what you want, then knowing you have it or are on the way to getting it. We have to know ourselves to know what we want.

Ultimately, it is when we see ourselves reflected back in God's all-loving eyes that we truly know ourselves with our infinite potential for beauty, for life, for truth, for love. In the quiet we come to know ourselves and what we truly want.

LENT

In the calm and silent moments of our lives, writes Father Basil Pennington, we can become attuned to the sounds of God. And we can hear the murmurs of our deepest selves.



...in the heart

In the monastery there are silent times; the "great silence" of the night, times of prayer, study, reading, rest. And there are silent places: the cloisters, reading rooms, cell.

If you want the value of this in your life you will need to find or create places of quiet, to agree on times of quiet. It might be a quiet time in the morning until breakfast, an hour or two in the evening or a few hours on Sunday afternoon when each is left free to read, pray, reflect, write.

This is not impossible with children. They can be put to quiet games. And for teen-agers, a structure to discover the sounds of silence can be a gift that is perhaps at first not welcomed, but for which, as for dry wine, a taste develops.

The individuality of all children should, of course, be respected. If they cannot enter into the quiet, they should be asked at least to respect the needs of others. Role modeling by parents in this regard is very important.

The basic human need for balance between times of stimulation by sound and quiet times can go unrecognized, becoming a cause of much stress and strain. But whether we be silent or whether we speak, it is the divine word we want to hear and to express.

(Father Pennington is a Trappist monk in Spencer, Mass.)