

## **A taste for solitude and silence**

The lack of taste for solitude and silence is one of the most common illnesses of the modern person. Many are even scared of remaining in stillness, being alone or having free time: they feel more comfortable being constantly occupied; they need words, impressions; they always hasten in order to have the illusion of an abundant and saturated life. But life in God begins when words and thoughts fall silent, when worldly cares are forgotten, and when a place within the human soul is freed to be filled by Him.<sup>i</sup>

So writes Bishop Hilarion, a contemporary leader in the Russian Orthodox Church.

If this is true, and there is a lack of taste for solitude and silence amongst us, it suggests we need to develop that taste. This is not something that will come naturally to us having been raised both in the church and much more so in our culture on an insatiable appetite for activity and sound. We need to practice solitude and silence in order to develop a taste for it.

Mention the possibility of a silent retreat or even a short period of silence and many will respond that they couldn't do that, or that is not them, or they had an experience like that once and they found it difficult.

All these responses pre suppose that silence and solitude are "natural" for some and not for others. My experience is that these are things we all have to learn to some extent, whether introvert or extrovert, whether charismatic or contemplative. Silence and solitude are not "options" for developing a relationship with God; they are at the heart of such a relationship.

In her book, *Spirituality for Extroverts*, Nancy Reeves maintains that "any spiritual practice can be done in an extroverted or introverted way".<sup>ii</sup> She goes on to explore a range of spiritual practices including contemplative prayer, moving prayer practices – walking, pilgrimage, labyrinth walking, dance – spiritual reading and writing, praying in nature and so on. All of these practices have introverted and extroverted dimensions and many of these and some others can be engaged in on a silent retreat. In fact, a retreat with others assists both extroverts and introverts to maintain a focus on God over a more extended period of time.

We need to get over the illusion that silence and solitude are only for some "types". These are spiritual disciplines, just like fasting or worship or service. It may be that we are less familiar with them, but this can be viewed as an invitation to growth, and an opportunity to discover more about ourselves and God than we knew before.

Adele Calhoun, writing in the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, suggests that "The discipline of silence invites us to leave behind the competing demands of our outer world for time alone with Jesus... Like a can opener the silence opens up the contents of our heart, allowing us deeper access to God than we experience at other times"<sup>iii</sup>

It takes courage to open ourselves up like that, and the company of others on the journey can help us to stay with the process.

If you have little or no taste for silence and solitude, work on it as you would a food with which you are unfamiliar. Start small, with a little bit. Perhaps 10 minutes sitting alone quietly in a garden or walking on a beach or a bush track. Perhaps watching the sun come up or go down, or going outside at night and looking at the stars.

Don't worry if you don't like it the first time or if it takes a while to get settled or if you can't reach a level of internal quietness. Just keep practicing.

You might like to notice where and how you practice this discipline now. When are you silent and when are you alone? You might be surprised to discover that some activities you already engage in create this space for you – gardening or walking or swimming, for example.

You might immerse yourself in an experience of silence or solitude for an hour or so, an afternoon, a day, or a couple of days. Your appetite will grow as you discover the benefits of this discipline. And your example might help others.

Last year I conducted a silent retreat for a corps group. For several years a few people from the corps had been coming along to retreats. Others noticed the impact on them and wanted to come too. Can you imagine a group from your corps sharing in an experience like that? Coming aside from everything else to listen to God and be with each other in silent communion. Letting God open the contents of your heart in company with others?

If you want to learn more about silence and solitude or want to conduct a retreat experience for others you might find the following books and websites helpful:

### **Personal Learning Resources:**

- 1) Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, Practices that Transform Us*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2005. *(An overarching guide to a wide variety of spiritual disciplines and a good resource for personal and group use with reflection questions and spiritual exercises on each of the disciplines covered.)*
- 2) Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline, The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1980. *(A book that has been around for a long time now, what we might call a classic. In this book Foster explores 12 major disciplines of the Christian life. In 1988 Foster founded Renovare which has become a major contributor to spiritual formation in the Protestant church).*
- 3) <http://www.renovare.org/>  
*(The website has different portals for different countries – Brazil, Britain and Ireland, US and Korea.)*
- 4) Paula Huston, *The Holy Way, Practices for a Simple Life*. Loyola Press, Chicago, 2003. *(Written in the style of a spiritual autobiography this book traces the author's engagements with some of the major disciplines of the spiritual life, including silence, solitude and simplicity.)*

- 5) <http://conversationsjournal.com/>  
(The purpose of Conversations is to provide spiritual accompaniment and honest dialogue for those who long for radical transformation in Christ. It stimulates hunger and illuminates the path by drawing on classical wisdom and practice, exploring the vital role of community, and illustrating the journey with realism and hope.)
- 6) Jan Johnson, *Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2003. (A series of 8 study guides on a variety of spiritual disciplines)

### **Retreat Resources:**

- 7) <http://breathing-spaces.com/resources.html>  
(For a small subscription you can have access to themed material resources for retreats and other conversations on spiritual matters.)
- 8) Sue Pickering, *Creative Retreat Ideas, Resources of Short, Day and Weekend Retreats* (with CD ROM) Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010.  
(Offers a mix of ready made and build-your-own programme ideas for short and longer spiritual breaks, from half-hour 'tasters' for those busy with work or family responsibilities, to whole days and full weekend retreats.)
- 9) *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, The Iona Community. Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001. (Includes services, prayers, and psalms from the daily worship of the ecumenical Christian community of Iona Abbey.)

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles-2009/Hilarion-Prayer-And-Silence.php>

<sup>ii</sup> Nancy Reeves, *Spirituality for Extroverts (And Tips for Those Who Love Them)*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008:49.

<sup>iii</sup> Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, Practices that Transform Us*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005:108, 109

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