

Oasis of Silence in Whitby

HEARING THE VOICE OF CHRIST IN THE SILENCE

Time spent in contemplative prayer and in silence is an invitation to deepen our relationship with God in ways we might not have expected. Fr Tony Slingo, parish priest at St Teresa's Norris Green, Liverpool recently discovered what the Oasis of Silence at St. Hilda's Priory in Whitby meant to him and writes:

"Listening" is the in thing these days of Synodality. The current conversations in the Spirit demand the growth of skills in listening well to each other. Recently added to this for me and a growing number of Christians was a profound learning time of "listening within" ourselves, listening for the Spirit to show the Word of God.

Such was how the work of contemplative prayer was taught to us on the "Gries Path" retreat at St Hilda's Priory, Whitby. Listening with the heart is enabled by the disciplined practice of awareness through the senses – and it works if we do! Because it does mean work, but so lovingly presented we gave ourselves up to it! I knew I was listening through attending, being interested in, intending from my faith to be with God wholeheartedly. And as the silence within me extended and deepened, I "heard" – mysteriously and marvellously outside the meditation times themselves, the Word of Christ could get through to me from within!

For many years now, as Catholic and then priest for thirty years plus, I have engaged in contemplative prayer through silent meditation, but never have I found such a serious, thorough and loving retreat opportunity as this one, led with a firm and light touch by Angela Simek, extensively nurtured in this way by Franz Jálícs the founder of this path. The theology grounding it proclaims God as "speaking" to us always, through all the senses into our souls; so our prayer was awareness rooted in those senses and the faith to be open in listening with the heart. We were directed to such awareness prayer in nature at some times, and others in meditation sessions.

Steps and stages of slowly deepening the silence helped me, amazingly, to lay aside thinking, and planning, and be faithful to being now, in the present – where the Presence of Christ is given! So simple – and so lovingly were we encouraged that we marvelled that we actually DID it to the extent we did! I have come to call this the way of "unthinking....unplanning..." to serve the traditional spirituality of the Cloud of unknowing.

Formal prayers, scripture and inspirational reflections surrounded the assigned meditation times, and good food in silent company was a revelation of taste. The companionship of others with the faithful desire for such prayer enabled a true communion, joyfully celebrated at the end. A beautiful "Taste of Silence" which might well be called "The Song of Silence". I am still singing as I return gratefully to parish life, ably equipped anew for our synodal times.

Fr. Tony Slingo