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STEALING MOMENTS OF QUIET

FINDING GOD IN PRAYER

Is there a way in this noisy world to be still and listen to God? Or is such a treasure reserved for cloistered monks, ancient mystics, and long-dead saints?

By Michelle Franci-Donnay



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EDITOR: JOAN MCKAMEY DESIGNER: MARK BERNARD

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“I can’t even figure out what you’re asking in this problem! Where do I start?” moans the chemistry student in my office. Her overstuffed binder perches perilously on the corner of my desk. “Do I use the equation for pH? Or an equilibrium table? Or...?” Her words spill out as she madly flips through her class notes. All the while, the phone in her backpack calls for attention.

“Can you stop for a minute?” I gently inquire. She looks up. “Breathe,” I say insistently. She laughs, and then listens as I help her start to untangle the problem.

My students are often surprised by what they know and what they can hear when I ask them to stop and take a breath, to leave off scrabbling through their notes and their minds, and to be still.



TOO MUCH NOISE

When it comes to my prayer life, I could use my own advice. It sometimes feels as if I live in a riotous Broadway musical, with two tenors singing, “When, oh, when will dinner be?” while a baritone voice strikes up a countermelody in the wings—“Did the plumbers say when, oh when, they will be coming?”—all set to an orchestral accompaniment of the meowing cat, the beeping kitchen timer, and ringing phones (plural).

God, I want to cry, are you here? Can you hear me? I’m having a hard time hearing you over the all the noise.

I’m sorely tempted at times like these to take my cue from St. Arsenius (354–450), who, while living at the Roman imperial court, heard a voice telling him to flee the chaos and be still with God. Arsenius became a monk in the desert, listening to God in the desolate silence.

I can almost feel the shimmering desert heat as I bow in prayer in a small cave. I can hear the cool night breezes just beginning to gather. Alas, it’s just the heat from the oven as I bend over to see whether the pizza is done. And that’s the sound of the washer in its spin cycle. Absent any angelic hints to the contrary, I still need to get dinner on the table and the next load of laundry going.

Yet. But. Still. In the back of my mind, deep in my being, a tiny seed lurks. A longing for stillness and silence—for God—

remains. I hear the words of Psalm 46:11: “Be still and know that I am God!” Is there a way in this noisy world to be still and listen to God? Or is such a treasure reserved for cloistered monks, ancient mystics, and long-dead saints?

Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a Trappist monk, asserts that the gift of contemplative prayer—the ability to be still and know God—is a normal part of the life of prayer for every Christian (see “What Is Contemplation?”). God plants seeds of stillness within each of us when we are formed in the womb and waters them at baptism.

To be still, to know God deeply and intimately in the depths of silence, is not just for saints and mystics—it’s for *everyone*.

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