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REDISCOVERING THE CONTEMPLATIVE EXPERIENCE

Reflections on Two Recent Books by

Father Joseph G. Healey, M.M. and Sister Colette Ackerman, O.C.D.

SILENT MUSIC: The Science of Meditation, by William Johnston (Harper & Row, 1974, pp. 190, \$7.95).

POUSTINIA: Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man, by Catherine de Hueck Doherty (Ave Maria Press, 1975, pp. 216, \$3.50).

In the Maryknoll General Council's Report to the Inter-Chapter Society Assembly in April, 1975, Father Ray Hill stated: "Maryknollers are coming to feel the need in these times for a more prayerful and, for some, even a more contemplative approach to the apostolate." Perhaps such a statement could not have been made 10, 5 or even 3 years ago. Within this context of a renewed interest in prayer, contemplation, and ministry of spiritual presence in Maryknoll and the whole Church two recent books, *Silent Music* and *Poustinia*, have been published concerning which it must be said, their "time has come."

Silent Music, by the author of *The Still Point*, can be read on four levels. First is the beginning of a new "science of meditation" through the recent entry of science into the world of contemplation and prayer. Johnston begins with a survey of the latest scientific research into altered states of consciousness, brainwaves and biofeedback and draws out their implications for the practice of meditation. Biofeedback is an electronic technique for human self-monitoring in which a person is able to observe the quality of his or her brainwaves while at the same time reflecting on the person's internal state of mind. Tests show that people who meditate—Zen, Yoga, Christian contemplation—enter easily into alpha brainwaves. In one research project all the contemplatives tested produced high-amplitude alpha, indicating a rather deep state of relaxed concentration.

Johnston explains the similarities and differences between Zen consciousness, Yoga consciousness and Christian contemplative consciousness. He puts this within the context of the contemporary dialog between the scientist and the mystic, and the insights of Eastern and Western religious traditions.

Silent Music can be read on a second level: insights into the experience of meditation. Johnston states:

"In the meditation of the great religions one makes progress by going beyond thought, beyond concepts, beyond reasoning, thus entering a deeper state of consciousness or enhanced awareness that is characterized by profound silence."

This contemplative experience transcends the intellectual, rational approach to God which has been overemphasized in the training and formation in prayer and spirituality in the West (e.g. our seminaries and novitiates). Rather it is an intuitive heart experience which leads a person to touch his deeper self and experience a deeper union with God. Johnston describes the four stages of mysticism in terms of four gradually deepening states of consciousness:

1. Prayer of quiet.
2. Prayer of union.
3. Ecstasy.
4. Transforming union.

As an increasing number of people throughout the world (Maryknollers and others) are searching for a more "contemplative dimension" in their lives Johnston's explanation of the traditional signs for desiring the contemplative experience are helpful:

1. Conversion and total dedication to good.

The contemplative experience transcends the intellectual, rational approach to God which has been over emphasized in the formation of spirituality in the West.

2. Desire for solitude and the longing to be alone.
3. Inability to think discursively in time of meditation.
4. Constant presence of the contemplative urge.

Johnston stresses that "love is the essence of the deepest meditation." The norm is Christ. A person's meditation should lead him to a deeper faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. Christian mysticism is union with Christ. Related to this is the title of the book, which is taken from a quotation of St. John of the Cross, that describes a person's love affair with God: "My beloved is the mountains, the solitary wooded valleys, strange islands . . . silent music."

A third level of the book emerges in Part III on the theme of "Healing." Meditation can be therapeutic, and its potential in the healing of the body and the mind is now beginning to be realized. The author points to the discovery of "passive energy" and other physiological and psychological benefits gained from meditation. He treats the healing of the mind, the deeper healing found in the Christian experience of death and resurrection and cosmic healing which emphasizes the mystic's universal love for mankind.

The fourth level of *Silent Music* focuses on the theme of "Intimacy." The context is the modern world's great interest in community, interpersonal relationships and intimacy (Johnston mentions that "new thinking on religious celibacy stresses personal love and intimacy in the single state"). The practice of meditation has a remarkable impact upon relations between people and the search for friendship and intimacy. The author shows that the non-attachment and empathetic knowledge which accompany the meditation process can help people meet at the core of their beings. Detachment leads to greater freedom and greater fulfillment as a human

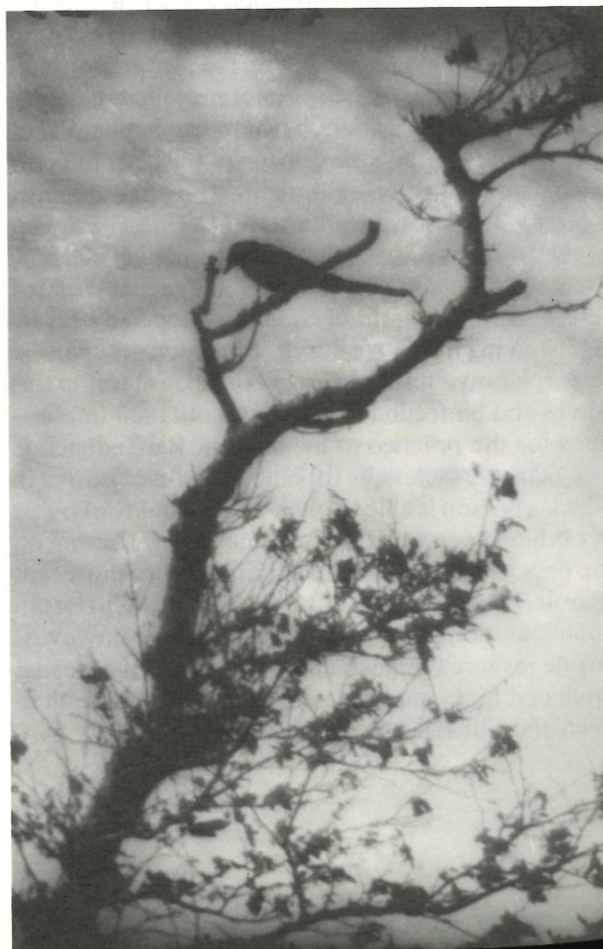
being, not less. Thus meditation can help people to know and love one another at a deeper level of awareness. Johnston's words can have a special meaning for missionaries:

"In the deepest intimacy it seems to me, there is no merging; but there is indwelling, to such an extent that people can live in one another and be part of one another even when separated by thousands of miles. What makes the difference between merging and indwelling is, I believe, personal love and commitment and trust."

In discussing mystical friendship he stresses that the mystics' "most intimate interpersonal relations were the outcome and extension of their profound contemplative experience." He mentions examples such as David and Jonathan, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross and describes Teilhard de Chardin in these words:

"Radically dedicated to celibacy, he yet had the most intimate spiritual relationships with both men and women friends; and he experienced in the depth of his being the creativity that is unleashed by such encounters."

Johnston, with an assist from Teilhard, has many challenging and prophetic remarks about radical celibacy, friendship as a way to Christ, deep spiritual



love between two persons and the cosmic dimension of friendship. His comment that "in all friendship separation plays an important role in leading friends away from absorption to an even greater universality" has important implications for missionaries.

It is good that mystical friendship and intimacy are presented in the context of prayer experience and not as a separate entity. It is really only in this context that men and women with a commitment to celibacy can explore and experience the depth of human love that happens between them. Thus they can grow in handling intimacy as it comes into their lives and they can become more free and holy.

Johnston expresses well that mystical friendship is a means to grow in prayer and universal love. It is a gift from the Spirit. But perhaps both Johnston and Teilhard are too optimistic in suggesting that these kinds of mystical friendships will be frequent in the future.

The author of *Poustinia* is the Director General of the Madonna Apostolate. The word "poustinia" is Russian, meaning "desert." In the Western sense of the word it means a place to which a hermit goes and thus could be called a hermitage. De Hueck states:

"The poustinia is not a place at all—and yet it is. It is a state, a vocation belonging to all Christians by Baptism. It is a vocation to be a contemplative."

In another place in the book she says:

"You must understand that the poustinia begins in your heart. It is not a place, a geographical spot. It is not first and foremost a house or a room. It is within your heart."

In a broader sense poustinia stands for prayer, penance, mortification, solitude, silence, atonement and reparation of God.

Generally speaking, a poustinik (a person dwelling in a poustinia) means someone in a secluded spot. But anyone who wants to enter into the contemplative experience can be a poustinik. For the poustinia begins in one's heart.

In an approach similar to Johnston's, De Hueck emphasizes the dangers of the "overliteral, rational, compartmentalized Western mentality." Stating that Western man tends to process everything through his head rather than through his heart, De Hueck urges over and over again a different approach—intuitive, feeling, from the heart. She says that the poustinia experience "begins by my



Photo by M. Vittengl, M.M.

Prayer, meditation, and contemplation can and must become a part of the missionary's way of life.

folding the wings of the intellect and putting my head in my heart." The integration of our affective and intellectual parts is an aid to prayer and loving. This is one of the main things that the West can learn from the East.

Chapter headings include: "Silence . . . Desert . . . Prayer," "The Western Poustinik," "Poustinia in the Marketplace," "Kenosis," "Touching Neighbor," and "The Poustinia of the Heart."

The author stresses that the poustinia experience is not escape but involvement. The poustinik is a person for others. He or she must be completely available to everyone. This person lives in a house with one wall missing: "The poustinik enters his poustinia and takes humanity with him. He lifts that humanity before God with all its pain, sorrows, joys, everything."

Each in their own way, William Johnston and Catherine de Hueck Doherty are suggesting answers to the searching questions of modern man. The reader may find their answers too dogmatic and too subjective. For example Johnston says: "I myself believe that next to God the most influential person in the cosmos is the mystic." De Hueck says: "It is the poustinia of the heart that I believe is the answer for the modern world. This demands kenosis."

Both authors approach prayer and spirituality in a non-Western way that an American may find un-

usual at first, but this gradually becomes more meaningful. For Johnston and De Hueck meditation is a whole "way of life." It takes over and transforms. In general De Hueck approaches this from simplicity and from the heart, while Johnston's approach is more systematic and intellectual.

Silent Music and *Poustinia* have insights into the oneness of our lives that busy missionaries searching for more and deeper prayer experience will find valuable. Johnston states:

"The dichotomy between contemplation and action is a false statement of the problem. Since contemplation is activity—the highest form of activity—it is in itself a return to the marketplace and a building of the earth."

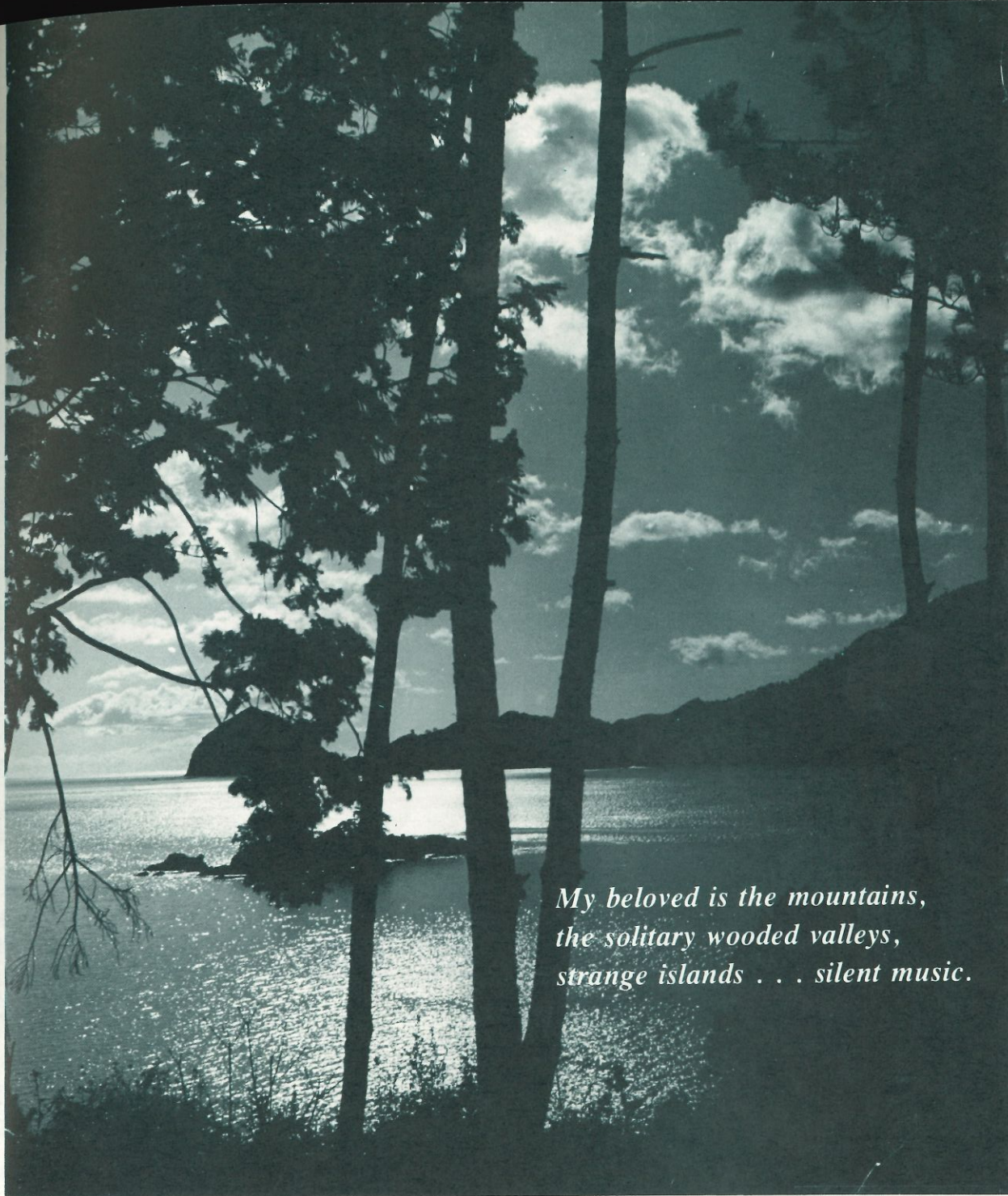
Catherine de Hueck says:

"The contemplative and active life cannot be separated. This is so difficult for the West to understand. Its Roman, juridical attitude tends to label and classify and categorize everything. The active and contemplative life of the Christian are one."

Silent Music and *Poustinia* may not be to everyone's interest and liking. But for those who feel drawn to these subjects the books are an enriching and deepening experience. Yet it is not enough just to *read* these two books. It is not enough to even *reflect* on them. Their insights have to be integrated in one's life and interiorized in one's life. Basically this means approaching the two books not with the head but with the heart. For if *Silent Music* and *Poustinia* are read on the information level only, their main value and most important insights can be lost. The richness of the insights on prayer, meditation and contemplation is best received when made part of our daily Christian experience.

For those people who really spend time with these two books they will not just remain on your bookshelf. You will want to make them part of your life. You will want to live them. Prayer, meditation and contemplation can and must become part of the missionary's way of life. You may ask: "Is this really possible? Can active missionaries integrate a contemplative dimension in their lives? For an increasing number of Maryknollers the answer is YES. Along with the valuable experience and insights of Johnston and De Hueck, a Trappist priest in Kenya, East Africa has this suggestion: To develop the contemplative dimension of one's life the busy priest, brother and sister on the missions can start by





*My beloved is the mountains,
the solitary wooded valleys,
strange islands . . . silent music.*

Photo by T. Kuechmann, M.M.

spending 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening in contemplative prayer (quite affective prayer *not* discursive mental prayer). These two periods will give a flow and harmony to the person's whole day. In this way the person can touch "silent music" and the poustinia of the heart.



(Father Healey was ordained in 1966 and has worked in the social communications apostolate in Eastern Africa since 1968. At the end of 1975 he will begin a "contemplative in the world" vocation as a Maryknoller in Rulenge Diocese in Western Tanzania. Sister Colette is a contemplative Sister, a member of the Carmelite Community in Baltimore. Father Healey and Sister Colette were asked to co-author this review so that the viewpoints and suggestions of an active missionary and an experienced contemplative could better convey the richness of these two books.)