

Cherishing the Stillness

Review of
Silence, Joy

By Thomas Merton
Edited by Christopher Wait
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Reviewed by **Wayne Simsic**

Reading through the collection of Thomas Merton's writings in this pocket-size book, I came across the poem "In Silence" (10-11). I recall several years ago participating in a conference on Merton's theology, writings and life. The culminating event of the four days of talks took place at the monk's hermitage, where a large group sat on bales of hay surrounding the cement-block cottage and listened to Ron Seitz, a poet-friend of Merton, read "In Silence." As the words trailed out over the Kentucky knoll, they seemed to have a transforming effect on those gathered.

Be still
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
To speak your
Name . . .

It was easy to imagine Merton rocking in a chair by the fireplace, reading, reflecting, praying, and intermittently looking out over this seemingly tame landscape. Then, in a moment of revelation:

And this is difficult. The whole
World is secretly on fire. The stones
Burn, even the stones
They burn me. How can a man be still or
Listen to all things burning? How can he dare
To sit with them when
All their silence
Is on fire?

At the last words of the poem a hush descended on the group. An atmosphere that previously seemed common and peaceful was now alive with the dynamic silence of nature and of human solitude. Listeners heard the poem's invitation to embrace the mystery without and within: "Do not / Think of what you are / Still less of / What you may one day be. / Rather / Be what you

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are (but who?) be / The unthinkable one / You do not know.” They responded by surrendering themselves to the moment, lost in the depths of silence. If only for a brief moment the fire that Merton witnessed flamed in these hills.

I mention this experience because the selections in this book, *Silence, Joy*, do not offer an explanation or interpretation of silence and joy but rather, through poetry and prose writings, some overlooked, some familiar, act as a catalyst for our experience. Each of these passages entices readers, particularly those already familiar with Merton’s writings, to integrate the monk’s wisdom into their lives. (Those who wish to continue the meditative path into silence mapped out in *Silence, Joy* should consider an excellent resource, *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings*, edited by Jonathan Montaldo.)

Merton taught that, when our wandering mind grows still, when our cravings abate, and when the heart’s desire is rapt in stillness, then a depth of silence is revealed and, within this depth, God is seen as the hidden ground of love. To be silent and to let God work within – this is freedom; this is true joy. The last selection in this book, the poem “O Sweet Irrational Worship,” brings all the writings to a fitting conclusion. It highlights in beautiful, meditative verse, the person lost in the depths of silence where separation between the self and other is momentarily overcome. This Zen-like poem invites us to listen deeply to Nature’s silent language and allow it to open our hearts to communion with the divine. In simple images that hint at a oneness with all life and a reality beyond the objective/subjective dichotomy, the poet introduces us to a sense of joy possible for everyone:

By ceasing to question the sun
I have become light,

Bird and wind.

My leaves sing.

I am earth, earth

All these lighted things
Grow from my heart. (85)

In the end, this collection of meditations, edited by Christopher Wait, calls us back to the experience of silence and joy at a time when we sorely need to re-anchor our lives. With a culture of chaos, noise and diversion threatening to overwhelm us, we need a vision of the world that rises from the depths of silence, a silence that is not simply the lack of sound but rather the eternal, joy-filled silence within which the Word speaks. This silence points to an ineffable reality that we need not bring into our lives, like adding more memory to a computer, but which is already within. We only need to wake up and take our inner lives seriously; and, in the pages of this small but evocative book, with its well-chosen selections, you will find the call.