

FINDING YOUR HIDDEN TREASURE

The Way of Silent Prayer

BENIGNUS O'ROURKE OSA



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‘God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart.’

Augustine of Hippo

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FOREWORD

Benignus O'Rourke has both rediscovered and modernised the lost art of the monastic chapter as a literary form.

His concentrated and economic prose communicates depth without wasting a word.

Most chapters in *Finding Your Hidden Treasure* are just over a page in length. They are arranged thematically. Each addresses a crucial threshold along the spiritual path.

If you are looking for a book that is eloquent in its simplicity, perceptive in the issues addressed, and will bring comfort in the presence of a God closer to us than we are to ourselves, *Finding Your Hidden Treasure* is a sure-footed guide.

Those of us drawn to silent prayer will feel very much in debt to Benignus O'Rourke for producing this fine volume.

Martin Laird, author of *Into the Silent Land*

INTRODUCTION

A Boyhood Dream

At the age of 16, I made a chance visit to a Cistercian monastery. On the way home from boarding school for the Christmas holidays my friend Joe was breaking the long train journey to visit his brother, who was then a novice at Mount Melleray Abbey in County Waterford. Con and I decided to go with him.

The modern abbey, white stone against the brown-grey Knockmealdown mountains, was startling in its new beauty. And in the 24 hours we spent there I caught a glimpse of a life of prayer, silence and stillness. White-cowled monks moving soundlessly over the shining floors, the quiet, gentle chant that seemed to reflect the holiness of God, the bells sounding in the high tower, everything enclosed in a deep stillness.

All of this cast its powerful spell on my young imagination. Looking back, I realise now that in my earlier days I had already met what I would later come to know as stillness. I had sensed it in my grandmother, Mary Roche. Her home and her life reflected a deep stillness which seemed to flow into my life. As John Banville writes: 'So much of life was stillness then, when we were young, or so it seems now; a biding stillness, a vigilance.'

A few months after my visit to Mount Melleray I asked the priest

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who was guiding me in discerning my vocation if the life of a contemplative would be right for me. Quietly, he dismissed my dream as fanciful. Without hesitation he said, 'You can take it from me that you have no vocation to the contemplative life.'

I took it from him and, two years later, joined the Augustinian Order for a life based on prayer and active ministry in the world. The longing for the life of Melleray faded, but never completely. That longing was to be fulfilled many years afterwards in a way I could never have predicted. I discovered the prayer of stillness and silence, and its place in Augustine's spirituality. It changed my life and my work. And it is a gift of God that links me with that boyhood dream.

For many years I have tried to share with others the gift of silence and stillness. This book is an attempt to share that gift more widely, and to thank God for it.

Martin Nolan, a fellow Augustinian who has spent about 40 years giving retreats all over the world, says that what people need most to help them on their spiritual journeys is simple. 'First, there is a great hunger for prayer everywhere, which is not being met. Second, people of all ages are asking how best to pray.'

Alan Watts, an Anglican priest who became a Buddhist, was aware of this need when he wrote in *Behold the Spirit* of the 'thousands of souls, in church and out of church, who realize that what they want from religion is not a collection of doctrinal and ritual symbols, nor a series of moral precepts. They want God himself, by whatever name he may be called; they want to be filled with his creative power and life; they want some conscious experience of being at one with Reality itself.'

There is of course no one way of praying, although many of us

may have been taught only one way to pray. And there is no 'best' way to pray. Different people pray in different ways, and each of us will pray in different ways at different times.

But there are two golden rules about prayer. One is that we have to pray as we can in the way best suited to us, not in the way we think we ought. So there is no need to change the way we pray if we are happy with it. And the other rule is: the less we pray, the harder it gets.

So my book is written for the very many people, young and old, in or out of church, who may be struggling in their own attempts to come closer to God and are finding that familiar ways of prayer are not helping, not working.

PART ONE

OUR LOST TREASURE



1

Sitting There All Peaceful and Quiet

Some time ago an elderly lady complained to me that she could no longer pray. ‘Father,’ she said, ‘I can’t pray like I used to. I come here to church after my shopping and sit here all peaceful and quiet. But,’ she sighed, ‘I can’t pray like I used to.’

I tried to suggest that perhaps sitting there all peaceful and quiet *was* prayer. Maybe it was a gift God was offering her at this stage of her life. But she was not convinced. Prayer for her meant keeping her mind on the words, battling with distractions, concentrating. Sitting there all peaceful and quiet would have seemed to her like laziness and failure.

What my parishioner was discovering, in fact, was one of God’s loveliest gifts, the purest form of prayer. She rejected it because it was not what she had been taught. And she is not alone. Many people who come to the retreat house where I live, to attend Sunday or daily Mass, or in search of peace and quiet or guidance, share her anxiety about praying.

Many of us will remember being taught that prayer is a lifting of our minds and hearts to God. This teaching can lay a heavy burden on us. We feel that we must make an effort to speak to God, to praise

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him, to give thanks, to ask for help. We normally use words, thoughts and images, and feel we have to keep our minds fixed on what we are saying.

But there are times when we cannot find the words, or when the well-known prayers which usually inspire and comfort us strike no chord in our hearts. Or we may be singing God's praises while our hearts are heavy, or empty. And our hearts become heavier because our feelings do not match the words.

We are perhaps tired of words, anyway. Tired of asking God in words that have no life in them. Tired of thinking about God. Tired of being talked to about God. Tired of saying prayers that may be beautiful in themselves but are not bringing God closer to us.

Then, perhaps it is best to simplify our prayers and follow the age-old advice, to go from many words to few words, from few words to one word, and from one word into silence. Sometimes when we pray, our words, any words, can be barriers. They come between us and God. The deepest communion with God comes through silence.

There is a form of prayer where we do nothing, where we sit in stillness and silence, not straining or striving. We abandon all words and reflection and we rest. We put ourselves in God's hands and wait in silence, to let God's Spirit pray in us. Sitting there all peaceful and quiet, like the elderly lady in church, is what this kind of prayer is all about.