

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Golden Silence

I'm finishing off the last of a pint of Häagen-Dazs (Bailey's Irish Cream) and as I lick the spoon I take a deep sigh and think: "Those monks can't do this."

"Those monks" are the men who live, pray, work, eat and sleep at the Grand Chartreuse monastery in the French Alps. After much too long a wait, I've finally just completed watching the DVD of the remarkable documentary about their life, *Into Great Silence*. The men who have vowed their lives to that silence at Grand Chartreuse live in spare wooden cells, with a wood-burning stove and a desk and a kneeler and not much else. They gather twice a day, at morning and evening, to chant the Divine Office. Otherwise, they remain in their cells, isolated, in complete silence, devoting every ounce of energy and attention to one simple task: prayer.

Ice cream isn't part of the deal. And it leads me to believe I'd be a terrible monk.

The film is a beautiful, challenging, eye-opening experience. For two and a half hours, there's almost no talking. There are a few brief snatches of conversation or prayer, in French. The rest is comprised of images of the men going about their lives. Sounds leap off the screen. The sawing of wood, the slicing of fabric, the chopping of celery, the scrape and shuffle of sandaled feet along ancient slate floors. And bells. Periodically, a monk grabs a great long rope and rings the bell that gathers the men for prayer.

The camera dwells on the simple, homely images of the monastic life—a glass of water, a bowl of fruit, a washed dish dripping water—and finds in them a kind of unexpected, almost painterly poetry. The movie also follows the men through mundane routines that run the gamut from planting vegetables to cleaning floors. (And getting haircuts: the men regularly file into a large room where electric razors dangle from long chords, and a bearded old monk patiently and methodically shaves each head.)

ED. NOTE: *The Carthusian monks may lack ice cream, but they make something that enjoys great reputation—Chartreuse liqueur, one of the best (and strongest) of all, made from local herbs employing a carefully kept secret formula. The considerable income from worldwide sales provides much-needed funds to maintain the monastery. The film shows how the monks go about making the herbal liqueur, using centuries-old methods, but it doesn't tell us whether or not they partake of it.*

The order that was filmed, the Carthusians, is arguably the most austere Catholic monastic order in the world. They really do give up everything. Apparently, the director of the movie, Philip Groning, wrote to the Carthusians in 1984 to ask permission to film the monastery for a documentary. Sixteen years later, they wrote back to say, "Okay. We're ready."

The result is a unique movie-watching adventure. There is a loose structure—following the four seasons of the year—but no narration, no score, no plot. To watch the movie is to experience, for a brief moment, what these men experience over the course of a lifetime. It isn't about doing; it is about being. And it takes a while to settle in to absorb the monk's solitary and cloistered world.

But the rewards are worth it. These are men literally living the Gospel mandate to "give up everything" to follow Christ. Their choice challenges those of us who made a different choice: what can you give up? How much noise do you let into your life? And what would happen if you just shut it all off?

It sounds dull and joyless. It isn't. And when I asked my wife what her favorite part was, she replied: "Playing in the snow!" Near the end of the movie, on a gorgeous winter morning, the monks take a rare excursion into the outer world, hiking to the top of a neighboring alp. And from a distance we see these men in their white robes gliding down a long hill on makeshift skis. They laugh. They tumble. They can't wait to get up to the top and do it again.

It's delightful — a reminder that these sober, prayerful men do know how to laugh

And it proved to me something else: if they don't get to experience ice cream, at least they get ice.

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