

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Sssshhhh

One summer, while a lot of people headed to the beach or the mountains or to Disney World, two people I knew headed straight into the deepest realm of human existence.

Silence.

They're spent thirty days in separate corners of the country, each in a completely silent, Ignatian retreat. For a full month they said nothing. They may have written a note or jotted a phrase on a piece of paper. But all the time and energy was spent being, simply, silent. No words. Just existence. No speaking. Just listening.

Part of me was deeply envious.

The other part of me thought it would make me scream.

I am, by nature, a verbal person. I work with words. They are both my livelihood and my pleasure, and I thrive on stringing them together.

The thought of spending a month, day and night, night and day, through rainstorms and sunshine and heatwaves, through headaches and insomnia and deep slumber, through joy and irritability, through prayer and through dinner, utterly silent...well, it's both alluring and terrifying. (My wife, I should point out, would probably love it. She's a quiet sort anyway. She once cracked, "Silence is my first language.")

For myself, I imagine it would bring me great peace for a few days. And then it might begin to gnaw at me. I don't know. Maybe someday, if I have the luxury of time, I'll give it a whirl. But it's a daunting prospect.

I suspect a lot of people feel the same way. We live in a world of noise these days, from the jackhammers in the street to the iPods in our ears. (Let's not even mention the iPhone.) We're not accustomed to quiet, or to solitude, or to just *being*. We need to be busy, or distracted, or entertained.

Personally, I think that's one reason (among many) for the shortage of vocations: people are too distracted to hear God's call—and they miss it. The busy-ness of life doesn't let in the Divine, or leave room for a whispered invitation to holiness.

And we are conditioned to *do*. Our culture has taught us to believe that we are what we do, and we are identified with action, not reflection. Which, of course, is nonsense.

One of the most powerful and enduring gifts of John Paul's papacy came in the final years of his life, when he could *not* do, and could only *be*. His be-ing, his struggling and straining existence, was a profound testament to the value of all human life, even the frailest. He almost seemed to echo with his life the words of St. Paul: in weakness, he was strong. His dying days seemed to underscore, painfully but powerfully, the very Gospel of Life that he celebrated.

But why can't we—who are able and who are strong and who have the abilities that he didn't—why can't we surrender some of that, and just be? Why is it so hard for us to give up speaking, or the chatter of daily life, and accept the blessed gift of silence?

I don't know. It's a mystery to me.

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