



The World Community for Christian Meditation

Published on *The World Community for Christian Meditation* (<http://www.wccm.org>)

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Tablet - July 2010



Montserrat

On my way home I was swept up in a great football liturgy. Thousands of Barcelona FS fans poured onto the streets of their beloved home city to celebrate their victory. Liturgy (leitourgia) originally meant the public celebration of a duty. But on the streets that night, as I fought my way through the crowd and eventually surrendered to its brute force duty did not seem the best word to describe it.

It was not an external obligation but an irrepressible inner impulse that was driving its tidal movement. The joy of the crowd did not need to look for opponents to fight with. Its good natured exuberance did not need alcohol to fuel it. The cheers that greeted the appearance of the members of their pantheon on the big screen, the dancing in the fountains, the fans climbing the statues was all from the heart.

Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia, a fiercely independent part of Spain that is proud of its history and often scornfully indifferent to the institutional church. During the Franco dictatorship the Church legitimized the regime in return for financial subsidies, status as the official religion and conformity of the law with Catholic dogma. It might have seemed a dream for the institutional church, an arrangement the church might even seek still in many countries even today. But a nightmare for the spirit and a sword of separation severing the mass of people from the church. Some of the movements that arose in the Spanish church during these years became globally influential - Jose Maria Escrivá enthusiastically praised Franco's regime - but the hearts and minds of many Catalans and their children were lost.

The notable exception to this indifference is the ancient Abbey of Montserrat built high and deep into the rock of the mountain an hour or two from Barcelona. After the ecstasies of the soccer liturgy I made my way the next morning to this place of myth and heroic political courage. Some Arthurian legends locate the Grail here and the Black Madonna still attracts busloads. But during the Franco years it resolutely defied the repressive regime and maintained the Catalan language and culture. The government dared not attack it directly but the security forces would regularly lie in wait and arrest the poets and political leaders at the bottom of the mountain when they came down from meetings in the monastery.

The monastic community today is still robustly self-confident and seems to know who it is ? rare enough for monasteries today. Each day after the midday prayer the Escolonia, the famous boys' choir, sing the Salve in Catalan under the shrine of the Madonna. It is a deeply moving place of worship bringing culture, faith and religion together in an experience of sublimity and natural beauty. What impressed and intrigued me most was that the liturgy of the streets the previous night did not feel estranged from the liturgy of the choir and the altar. Religion was still fed from roots in the life of the people.

I was pondering this when I understood the third dimension which made this marriage of religion and culture so fertile. High above the monastery, reached by way of a flight of steps cut into the mountain are the cave hermitages. When the Dalai Lama visited the monastery he asked to speak with Dom Basili Girbau, a hermit of renown and influence throughout Catalonia. He told me he had asked the learned and solitary Benedictine monk what he did all day and the reply was ?I meditate?. ?What do you meditate on?? the Buddhist monk asked him. ?Love? was the reply. The Dalai Lama said he looked into the hermit's eyes and knew immediately and for certain that he was telling the truth.

What do hermits do? Like sannyasis, wandering renunciants in Indian tradition, Christian hermits are free spirits. They evolve in community and without being uprooted from relationship they soar in a cosmic liberty of spirit. It is an enormously powerful form of spiritual life and witness because it reconciles the opposites of community and solitude; and because it connects.

Hermits have lived on the mountain of Montserrat since the sixth century, before community life was established there, before the Madonna and the coach parties. This witness connected with a desperate generation. The modern hermits of Montserrat who had in a real sense transcended religious forms distilled the authority of true religion and of Christ in its defiance of injustice and oppression.

The early church believed in three liturgies: of heaven, the cosmic praise of the creation to the creator; of the altar, celebrated here in daily life by ordinary people; and the liturgy of the heart that unites them. The hermitages signify that hard to reach cave of the heart in which they meet.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laurence".

Laurence Freeman OSB

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Source URL: <http://www.wccm.org/content/tablet-july-2010>