

Tablet - June 2009



Fara Sabina

Mindful motion. Walking in a slow rhythm, in a large circle with others, on a balcony with a panoramic view over the gentle grand beauty of the Roman campagna. A distraction eased into a train of thought, diminishing my mindfulness but useful for my column deadline.

After I had left England to start up a new monastic community with John Main I wrote to a young fellow monk to tell him of all that was happening. It must have caught him at a bad moment as he replied rather tartly thanking me for the news but adding that in his opinion in 'the real monastic life nothing ever happens'. As he went on to high office on the international monastic stage I wonder if later he might have changed his mind. His remark however remained with me because in a way I agreed with him more than he might really have agreed with himself. I remember a moment, visiting a monastery long before I entered one, watching the monk-porter sitting at his desk by the door ready – but rarely called upon – to respond to the bell. He was probably a good porter, but he certainly wasn't multi-tasking. My companion also noticed this and made an easy swipe about the non-eventfulness of the monastic life. I joined in the joke but realised to my surprise that I did not truly agree. I saw an unexpected purpose and value in doing – if not nothing exactly, at least not very much. Doing one thing at a time had an unexpected attraction even then and later was at the essence of what my teacher in that form of life taught me. Maybe it was an early glimpse into the meaning of contemplation as taught by the one who said to a burned-out multi-tasker that 'only one thing is necessary'.

I have just finished a weeklong meditation retreat near Rome with a group of forty teachers of the tradition drawn from fifteen countries in our Christian Meditation Community. We call it a 'School Retreat' after St Benedict's term for the monastery as a 'school of the Lord's service'. There were four clergy and the rest were a cross-section of the Church representing varying degrees of relation to the institution and many forms of life. The point of the retreat might appear either sublime, deep, self-centred or plain pointless depending on your perspective, experience of meditation or your mood of the moment.

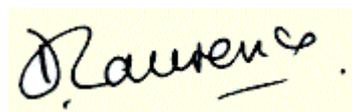
Apart from a short personal interview each day, a short conference and a very quiet mass with

a half-hour meditation after communion, we stayed in complete silence. The conferences were about the nature of faith and belief and their distinctions, not too heady but connecting with the challenges of Christian identity today. The point of the retreat however was not thinking but the work of contemplation. One of the early Christian monks described prayer as the 'laying aside of thoughts'. This is not as it sounds to many a way to gibbering mindlessness but, quite the reverse, to a very useful mindfulness. Minimum reading was recommended. We meditated seven times a day, interspersed with the mindful walk on the balcony with the vast view.

It was remarkable how everyone seemed to slip so quickly and readily into this engaged non-action (as different from inactivity as it is from hyper-activity). Actually, although all found it meaningful, not everyone found jumping in deep end of the pool of prayer easy; and one said that though she still liked meditation she wouldn't do it this way again, thank you. But most of those on this interior pilgrimage opened like flowers in sunshine. They expanded emotionally and spiritually finding peace and joy and renewed meaning for their life, work, family or ministry. Desires and anxiety diminished. One person coming to the retreat during a difficult and anxious transition in his career tasted the peace that lies in a place beyond all understanding but that also underlies all good and balanced judgement.

Discovering that happiness does not consist in the multiplication or even in the satisfaction of desires plunges those who experience it into the mind behind the Beatitudes. Deep shifts of consciousness happened in the silence of the retreat – maybe temporarily for some, for others as irreversible milestones. For us all, life became simpler, faith deeper. Reflecting on the relationship between faith and belief, Karl Rahner's insight seemed even truer, that the Christian of the future will be mystical - or nothing.

On the last night we celebrated the Pentecost Vigil Mass with a special liturgical love. As we prayed the Our Father in our different languages, from Aramaic to Swahili, we heard emerging the prayer of tongues, the music of the Spirit that is so often drowned in the busy blare of our minds. A life in which 'nothing happens'?

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow rectangular background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, followed by a period.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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