

One New Book for the Preacher

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VOICES OF SILENCE: LIVES OF TRAPPISTS TODAY by Frank Bianco.
Anchor: New York, 1992. 220 pages, softcover, \$9.00.

And now for something completely different: a book by a man, about men, reviewed by a clergywoman! On top of that, it is about spirituality! Just the kind of book I have always avoided. *But...* spirituality is afoot. It is like a new word you discover, and then you come across it three times in the morning paper. The September PC(USA) evangelism event in Chicago took the stance that without spiritual renewal evangelism will not happen. Spirituality is invading everything!

Yet Bianco's book came into my life at a time of need for personal, not national, renewal. I had always been curious about Trappists, yet how can a *woman* learn about monks except through a *man*? I had wondered: how can they maintain silence? What do they get from it? Are they truly holier than thou? Through *Voices of Silence* I got to be a fly on the wall, truly my heartiest desire in this arena.

For the reader, it is urgent to read the introduction. More, it is the *sine qua non*. Without the understanding the introduction imparts, the book is just a sweet documentary. The book is far more...it deals with the deepest pain I can imagine, and God's aggressive, explosive possibilities for healing, which the author is seeking.

Bianco is a man on a quest. His holy grail draws him on, and gives the book a new flavor. He is a journalist, a crafter of words, a seizer of images, a master story recognizer. Bianco gives us vignettes and insights imminently usable in sermons. Mac is the monk who is most open with Bianco. He shares wisdom and experience:

"You're touching them where they feel most vulnerable," Mac said. "Monks for the most part are very shy. People aren't born shy. That's a defense they learn when they get turned off by unloving, exploitative (sic) human beings. Instead of being nurtured and nourished by the people closest to them early in life, they get ripped off. So they learn to retreat and stay away, especially from a very articulate New Yorker who sounds like he can and will dismantle all their defenses if they don't slam the door shut, and I mean slam. This place is all about solitude. You already know it is not a vacuum. It's a very active, loving presence, and it heals those people whose previous attempts to love may have gone awry....Don't threaten to tear them away from the only loving they have been able to achieve" (pp. 29-30).

Again, Mac's insights: "Alone with your God, you find freedom. You are freed of the need to blame, freed of whatever holds you, impotent, in your past. No longer bound by fear of failure, or the need to be what you believe pleases others, you will discover what it is to be yourself."

"As I listened to Mac speaking so poetically—and mysteriously—about solitude, I had the feeling it was a place, a destination where I would find a guidebook that laid out my true self like a beautiful nature trail. I found myself tantalized by the thought that this identity, this power, lay tucked away, well oiled and waiting for me to jump start it simply by remaining silent" (p. 36).

Are the monks silent constantly? Obviously not. In addition, to my naive shock, they have a sign language usable during the silent periods. But silence is still a large and valued part of their lives. At times they even yearn for more of it!

Dom Stephen, abbot of the monastery, “learned the pain that every monk carried deep within him. It was the other side of the story that few people ever knew existed....It was always the same: somewhere along the way, God’s love had been short-circuited.”

“Bede was one of the most deeply wounded. In Bede’s mind, God’s compassion was a remedial program necessitated by sins. More that once Dom Stephen had tried to make Bede see how he confined God to a single dimension, made him a judge who only sentenced wrongdoers, a warden who supervised their detention. Christ’s love rarely got through to Bede. ‘God forgave you, Bede,’ the abbot said. ‘Stop making your guilt an identity....Get with the program, Bede. Make the good—and God—a part of your life.’”

“Cautiously, Bede would try, as did everyone from time to time. Dom Stephen called it ‘the God thing,’ the relentless loving by one’s peers. ‘If they can accept me,’ each monk reasoned, ‘then I can live here without pretense’” (pp. 67-68).

In the course of the book, the reader learns of Bede’s wounds. Gradually and gracefully the reader is moved into deeper understanding of why one would be drawn into a Trappist monastery—the special gifts of the ordinary, the trials of living closely with those individuals they did not choose, the hard work, the loyalty, the grappling with honesty. Mac, the philosopher, put it this way: “Real joy and peace are in the opposite direction (from consumerism), where God exists. Happiness, here, now, comes from adding to life, not subtracting. Turf, image, power—they’re illusions, an elaborate shell game our society tempts you into thinking you can win. It’s rigged, and most people don’t find out until it’s too late” (p. 15).

It was no surprise to find in this book that while people come in “him-or-her” (it was, after all, first published in 1991), God only comes in “he.” Why would monks want to change an understanding of God which has seemed to serve them well, when they have no contact with those who may not be well served thereby? Still, it is a danger: making God in man’s own image can no longer be assumed to be innocuous.

One other small flaw is that it is sometimes difficult to tell who is speaking.

The grace of this book is that the added experience of spirituality which comes with reading it may rub off into sermon preparation and delivery. Spirituality is afoot, and it can be subversive. Watch out...you may find you have just preached a truly inspirational sermon, which is exactly what one scholar in my church said of my last sermon, the first such comment in eighteen years of preaching!

The central site of *Voices* is a monastery named Gethsemane, in Kentucky, the same monastery where Thomas Merton was, though the book does not mention this until page 179. If you know Merton, you can see his fingerprints in the lives of the monks. It is not a reason to read the book. The book itself is reason enough. Not to be read in one sitting, *Voices* is for savoring. A chapter at 6:00 A.M. is nice. Finishing it brought sadness. I miss its daily challenge and richness. Yet, this fly on the wall is satisfied. I saw what I needed. Thank you, Frank Bianco.