CENTER VALLEY – As part of their 1994 comeback tour, recorded as “Hell Freezes Over,” a popular music group, the Eagles, launched a couple of new songs that rose quickly on the charts. One wispy ballad, in particular, enticed listeners old and new with a simple yet stirring message, its refrain echoing with a quasi-religious tone: “Learn to be still.”

Having recently returned from Mobile (AL), where I spent six days and nights in a cloistered monastery preaching a retreat to the nuns there, I know how hard that lesson is to learn. Yet, having now resumed life according to a calendar of courses to teach, meetings to attend, and other tasks to complete, I realize again how important it is that we do learn it.

The sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary, a religious order founded by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal in 1610, continue to dwell throughout the world in an atmosphere of relative silence, their aura of prayer only occasionally interrupted by the sound of the telephone or the door bell. In Mobile, that lifestyle has carried on unabated since their foundation in 1833. It has survived the ravages of a civil war, the damaging force of a hurricane’s direct hit, and the destruction of a fire that leveled their abode. Apparently, stillness holds a key to longevity.

In their monastic solitude, these sisters profess a life of perpetual chastity, in contrast to a culture that celebrates “Sex in the City” ... and in the suburbs, and on campus, and wherever, and whenever, and with whomever. Instead, their love finds a communal expression, especially in their daily charity toward one another and in their long-term care for each sister as she grows old and infirm.

They live by a spirit of poverty, in contrast to our society’s assumption that wealth begets worth, and that work (understood as the essentially human process of doing, making, earning, getting, and keeping things) determines our personal identity. Instead, they manage to get by on simple
means, like making their infamous “heavenly hash” candy, but mostly they survive on the generosity of local benefactors (Catholic and non-Catholic alike) who esteem their holy presence.

They dedicate themselves to complete obedience to God, in the faith conviction that a divine will determines human flourishing and fulfillment in ways far surpassing the pro-choice proclivity that our culture presupposes liberty to mean. Instead, they learn to see and to accept all that happens to them as a manifestation of God’s “good pleasure” in the historical unfolding of divine Providence.

And in all this they are genuinely happy!

In spite of their countercultural beliefs and anachronistic ways – or maybe because of them – joy pervades their place and peacefulness characterizes their lives. It’s a mysterious mood, to be sure, but anyone who interacts with this group of women knows that their happiness is both real and profound. One walks away from this encounter with a sense of awe.

Clearly, though, such stillness is not for everyone. Too much solitude can become perturbing. After two or three days, I could sense myself getting antsy: pining for my computer and access to the Internet world, longing for Sportscenter updates and other important news, even yearning for a trip to Yocco’s. Some things, it seems, are just not meant to be without.

Or are they? As the hustle and bustle of the holiday season draws near, it might be worthwhile for each of us who dwell “in the world” to pause and ask this question by considering the eternal context in which our lives unfold. Envisioning life from a transcendent viewpoint can put mall madness in a different perspective, and may even inspire us in ways similar to those who lead fully contemplative lives.

The nuns’ ways may be unusual, but their values are universal. Humility, gentleness, and simplicity are virtues that never go out of style. Their kind may be diminishing in number (only seven sisters currently live in the Mobile monastery), but their vision is enduring. Seeking peace, within persons and among nations, is what our upcoming holidays have always encouraged us to do.

As the rest of us once again succumb to the annual rituals that raise consumer behavior to a frenzied peak, we should consider taking time this season to visit a place of solitude: a monastery, or any worship space, or even a public park. There learn to be still, for however long you can – you may just find the music of your soul.

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