
INTO GREAT SILENCE

It may have been the sudden shift into the slowness of the film or the dinner unwisely taken before seeing it but I drowsed through the first half hour of *Into Great Silence*, the three hour long portrayal of life in the Carthusian solitude of La Grande Chartreuse. Like the thousands who have flocked to it in Europe making it a cinematic prodigy and bizarre success I was drawn by many comments and invitations to see for myself how a



film without a plot – not even about bird migration or penguins but the most enclosed of Christian monks – could have touched the nerve of a culture as sensation-driven as ours.

Seventeen years before it was made the director had approached the abbot to ask permission to live in the monastery and film the life. He did not receive a downright refusal but was told they were not yet ready. Fifteen years later the abbot called him to say they were now ready. I don't know the abbot's reasoning but I admired his sense of timing because the community was indeed ready to bear witness with remarkable innocence to the mystery of the contemplative life and the enigma of the way it is lived in monasteries.

The camera sits in the solitude of a young monk's austere cell watching but somehow not intruding on his prayer cycles, the fifteen minute sessions on knees and up, his reading, his seriously concentrated eating. As a viewer you are made to feel the awkward intimacy of the prime medium of this age, the voyeurism of its objectifying eye, the bigbrotherhood of its ability to make the mundane engrossing. The film moves as slowly as the life of its subjects and makes as little effort as they to justify its existence. There are no stars. No dramas. No vocational crises. No lament for the path not taken. It is difficult to say whether or not it has a tinge of romanticism. What it omits seems not to exist, not to be concealed. And what is revealed is a sparkling emptiness.

The only uneasy moment in the film is a formal community recreation period but ask any novice and he will tell you these can be the most difficult of all monastic moments. The romp and sliding in the snow on the community outing seems genuinely boyish and filmed at a discrete distance that makes the solitude of their life appear all the more cosmic, like a plantation of chosen humanity on a spaceship to a new planet. At generous intervals there are living cinematic portraits of the monks who stare silently, with strange ease into the lens. The faces are young and eager, old and tired, intelligent and a little stupid. There is no judgement, no favouritism. They are as the life is. At the end of the film an old blind monk says how his loss of sight has helped him see God better.

First, I thought, the film is popular because it illustrates an alternative life-style. Unless they have chosen to die, which happens, monasteries are usually looking or hoping for vocations. But Carthusian life is rarely represented at vocation exhibitions. It is a very unusual life. But for many today their unsatisfactory life-styles and the growing sense of horror at what we are doing to the planet suggest an entrapment, a loss of freedom in a world of infinite choice. Here one sees something really and utterly different. It may not attract many candidates but it shows we do have freedom and can use it for happiness.

Secondly, what is being portrayed is perhaps the only kind of religious experience felt to be authentic today. Without proclaimed dogma and yet built on faith and belief,

not seeking recognition or converts, not moralising or judging, the life of this monastery - at least as it is shown in this film - has a zenlike isness. As in many past periods of social crisis and religious turmoil it is solitude and silence that appear salvifically on the radar screen of the culture. The solitary and silent life – alone together – witnesses most eloquently to the true nature of the God whom everyone is fighting over.

Thirdly, it is about more than religion. It is a love-story. This is the secret of the film. The monks seem happy but are not in love with each other. If they love each other it is because they are in love with the same invisible yet apparently ever-present person. Unnamed, unseen, even unspoken to, God plays in every scene. At first, one assumes it is the visible actors who are the lovers. Slowly it dawns that they are mirrors. The love we speak of is not our love for God but God's love for us.

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Into Great Silence website: <http://www.diegrosse stille.de/english/>