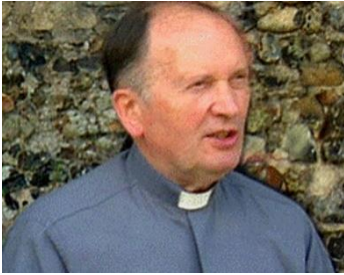


# FINDING YOUR HIDDEN TREASURE - by Benignus O'Rourke

*BENIGNUS O'ROURKE (1929-2019) was an Augustinian friar and a member of the Community at Clare Priory in Suffolk, who led hundreds of men and women, people of all faiths and none, on the way of silent prayer for more than forty years.*

## Chapter 2 - Spiritual Gold



Prayer without words is not new. It is older than Christianity itself and was a rich part of the Christian tradition up to medieval times. It is only in our own lifetime that we have woken up to the fact that here in the West for 600 or so years the treasure of pure, silent prayer has been almost completely forgotten and abandoned, even in religious communities.

The Benedictine monk John Main was one of the first people to make us aware of our loss. Working for the Colonial Service in India, he had discovered the Eastern form of silent meditation and brought it back to Europe and America.

At about the same time young people in their thousands were taking themselves off to the East in search of deeper religious experience. And that caught the public imagination. They learned how to sit still until their minds became quiet, and they discovered a new way of seeing. They were seeing with the eye of the heart, which put them in touch with their deeper selves.

Returning home, some began to explore their own traditions for similar teaching. And in the Christian West they had not far to look. They discovered that much of what they found in Eastern religions was also to be found in Christianity, but no one had told them. Here was a wealth of learning about the power of stillness and silence to lead us to the depths of our own being, where we find God.

Alan Watts, who wrote many wonderful books about Buddhism, said that most of what he found in the East he could have found in the West if only someone had pointed him in the right direction. 'Until I had studied the religions of the East for some years,' he wrote, 'the teaching of Christ and the symbols of Christianity had no real meaning for me. But I do not mean to suggest that a study of Oriental faiths is essential for an understanding of Christianity.' His understanding, he believed, would have been much the same had he read people like Eckhart or Augustine of Hippo.

The kind of spirituality he embraced in the East was available in the great mystics of the West but it had not been made available to ordinary people, he said. 'They do not and cannot be expected to know that the Church has in its possession under lock and key, or maybe the sheer weight of persons sitting on the lid, the purest gold of mystical religion.'

Many others have echoed what Alan Watts said. The Jesuit William Johnson, whose books have helped to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western religions, met opposition from some readers who asked, 'Why go to the East? It is all in Augustine.' And the monk Thomas Merton believes it was his own 'Augustinian bent' that made him receptive to the spiritual wisdom of the East.

It was views such as these that set me looking for what Augustine had to say about finding God in silence and I have been on a treasure hunt ever since. This book is a result of that search.

### Chapter 3 - *We Shall Find God*

It has been a great joy for me, translating Augustine over the years and finding words that do justice to the music of his Latin. There is a wealth of spiritual gold hidden among the five million or more words that he wrote. Hidden, because we come across it unexpectedly in his books, letters and sermons and in his commentaries on sacred scripture. Sometimes it is just a few nuggets, buried within a chapter.

Augustine had discovered for himself, as no one in the West had before him, the mystery of God who hides himself within us. And he realised that silence reveals God to us as nothing else can. If we journey in stillness to the centre of our being, he tells us, we shall find our true selves and we shall find God who, to use Augustine's own words, 'is nearer to us than we are to ourselves'.

Augustine constantly calls us to return to our hearts and it is about this journey inward that I want to write. He has not written a book about the journey, though he wrote countless books. But if we sift through his writing and piece together the fragments of his thinking, he offers us a clear path to help us find our way to God, who is within.

At the time I discovered silent prayer, or the prayer of the heart as it is sometimes known, I was struggling with the round of prayer which was very much part of our lives as a community of priests. As head of a boys' boarding school and of a large religious community I felt that the prescribed daily prayers were not giving me the strength to cope.

So I started to get up an hour earlier than I used to. Sitting quietly in a peaceful room looking out on the priory garden brought a peace that helped me face the day. In the evening, a quiet time in the school chapel helped dissolve the built-up emotions of the day and restored some sanity.

One evening, as I came out of chapel and greeted a group of the boarders heading for their dormitories, I heard one in a loud whisper say, 'What's got into old Ben tonight? He's in a good mood!'

What I suspect had been happening in that time of silence in the chapel was that I had shed the day's weariness and a kind of spontaneity had been recovered. After being an Augustinian friar for 27 years I realised that what was missing in my prayer was silence. A little late in the day I had at last started on the inward journey to my own heart.

John Chapman, who was Abbot of Downside in the 1930s, lamented that he had spent so many years knowing nothing about praying in silence.

'I could have been in it, with immense profit, 22 years ago or more,' he wrote in his letters, 'but no one told me it was possible.' I too regret that it took me so many years to find the gold of silent prayer. In the chapters that follow I shall try to share what, with the help of many teachers, I have since found at the heart of silence.