

The space within

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Painting by Marko Rupnik, SJ

At twenty-one, I was a young agnostic who thought that life was only what we experience here, what we can know, and especially what we can see and touch. I was attracted to beauty and the cause of justice. I looked for meaning in life and was something of an adventurer. In the midst of all this searching, one night a tremendous Love erupted in my being, and nothing was the same. All reality, all things, were bathed in light. When I remember that moment many years later, I never cease to wonder and to be grateful. At this time I was finishing my journalism studies and did not yet know the Society of the Sacred Heart. I had my first encounters with other religious, who thought perhaps I had a vocation to the contemplative life in a cloister or monastery. I felt that I loved the world and people, from whom I did not want to separate myself or withdraw, but on the contrary, to enter more deeply. They didn't understand me very well, or perhaps it was I who didn't express myself very well, but I had the feeling of "having arrived" when I read for the first time something of Madeleine Sophie, and I discovered that it is possible to have a profound life rooted in God with great openness to the world and its circumstances, and to have love for all that is human. I then heard that we can be "wholly contemplative and wholly apostolic," completely for God and completely for others.

When I first met the RSCJ, I found women deeply happy, very involved in the world, receptive, with a good perspective, and this made me consider that perhaps there was in me, too, this possibility, the longing to love and be loved, to live intensely. I admit that years have gone by and I find myself more and more impoverished. In the present moment I open myself again to receive this call to contemplation, this invitation to active interior life, and I ask myself and keep searching for how to live this invitation in my daily life, in the circumstances I choose and those that I must accept, and how to be sure that it is manifested in my perspective and my deeds.

I can say from my own experience and from conversations with friends that it is not easy to structure our lives in order to have periods of silence and spiritual presence. There is a Presence that we know within ourselves, as our deepest heartbeat, that surprises us on the



faces of others, that leaps out in the patterns of light and darkness in the fabric of life. To the extent that we withdraw, it is for this Presence that is manifested in solitude, which requires rest and time to quiet so many voices, which happens when we can silence our inner life, to remain doing nothing, without speaking, incapable of anything except waiting in nakedness.

I've rediscovered Etty Hillesum in her *Essential Writings*, that Jewish woman with a magnanimous heart invaded by God: "I always wanted someone to come and take me by the hand," she said, giving voice to the need we all have to be led, to let ourselves be carried, to let go with eyes closed, knowing that the hand that leads us will take us to a secure place in which we have nothing to fear. From her own very human experience, Etty knocks at the door of our heart so that we will not forget the great love that the heart can shelter. Her friends, her reading, the blue sky, the wounds and suffering of her Jewish people, she lived them all revealingly, as opportunity to be grateful for life and to experience in it the goodness of God.

Etty's words are like balm. They have the power to awaken longings and profound searching, as if bringing me back to my own truth, to this house from which I withdraw, to this interior place of calm and quietude that remains intact in the midst of chaos. Madeleine Sophie called it *the place of interior life*, and said it was essential for us: to discover it, to care for it, to feel it growing, to make it available to others. This profound life is our secret, what gives us warmth and beauty, depth and taste ("*calor y color*" as we said in the Chapter of 2008).

How difficult it is to listen to daily demands in the age of distraction, to listen to the many requirements and tasks, increased by the "virtual" world, and to reestablish within ourselves this space in the heart from which we encounter each day and make ourselves available for others. In this space we feel without fear, without threat, safe. Etty's voice invites us in our own time to recover this interior space from

which everything flows, where our reality is at peace and finds its meaning: "The strength comes from within, from a small, enclosed center to which I withdraw sometimes, when the outside world is too noisy." Etty finds in it a silent space from which to welcome receptivity to life. At the same time she tells us of her difficulty: "This half hour of silence is not easy. It must be learned: to dislodge our noisiness, including our emotions and edifying thoughts and to convert the deepest part of ourselves into a vast empty plain into which not even the slightest trace of malice impedes something of God or of love from entering." We need so much this silencing and space for love!

Without this deepening, without going down to this place in the heart, we cannot keep up hope in a world that is so fragmented and violent, nor can we discover and celebrate how much beauty and goodness lies hidden in it. I have been thinking these days that in the midst of so many coaches who want to teach us how to live, of trainers of soul and body, that we need to return to the interior Master who waits for us

within and allow him each day to train us in silence and simplicity. Exposed to his Presence, we can abandon ourselves to his mystery.



(Translated from Spanish by Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ)



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