

The language of silent love

As I prepared to enter into Lent this year, I found myself thinking about how I could make this season spiritually fruitful. I'd heard plenty of people discussing what they planned to give up, from Starbucks to the snooze button.

My friends had lots of good ideas, but none of them spoke to my heart. Then, shortly before Ash Wednesday, I came across a quote from the Carmelite saint, St. John of the Cross: "What we need most in order to make progress is to be silent before this great God with our appetite and with our tongue, for the language he best hears is silent love."

My heart responded: Yes! There was something meant for me here. I decided it was time for a visit to Carmel.

The Carmel of St. Joseph in Spruce Grove is home to the Archdiocese of Edmonton's only community of contemplative nuns. In the early 1990s, Carmelite nuns in Macau, China, were facing persecution from the Communist government.

Archbishop Joseph MacNeil welcomed the sisters to the Archdiocese of Edmonton, where they built a new monastery amidst the natural beauty of Parkland County. Here, the nuns reestablished their routine of silence, prayer and intercession, a rhythm of life that has continued uninterrupted for the last 25 years. During that time, the original group of nuns has welcomed Canadian-born women into their community.

Part of the monastery chapel is open to the public. Whenever I am able, I like to visit the chapel for a time of personal prayer, and I took time to do this in the second week of Lent.

Coming from my home in the heart of downtown Edmonton, the noise of the city decreased the further I drove.

When I pulled up outside Carmel, there was a quiet that I have not experienced since ... well, the last time I had visited.

I felt almost unnerved. It was a dramatic change of environment from my home and work settings. Even my phone, robbed of its usual Wi-Fi connection, was still.

I stepped inside through the public entrance, and slipped into the chapel to say hello to Jesus in the Tabernacle. As I knelt in his presence, in complete silence, peace wrapped around my heart like an embrace.

Silence is a hallmark of Carmelite spirituality.

The Carmelite Order traces its roots back to the Old Testament Prophet Elijah,

who famously encountered God in silence. The first book of Kings tells how Elijah witnessed a strong wind, an earthquake, and a fire, and realized that God was not present in these events. After the earthquake, he heard “the sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19: 12).

In the silence, Elijah stands in the presence of God. Elijah speaks to God, and God answers. It is one of the most intimate encounters between God and a human being described in the Old Testament.

The Carmelite tradition seeks to safeguard this space of intimacy with God by emphasizing the role of silence in the spiritual life.



Carmelite Sisters in prayer at The Carmel of St. Joseph in Spruce Grove, Alberta. Part of the contemplative order's monastery chapel is open to the public, while the nuns remain behind the grille in choir (the nuns' part of the chapel).

My favourite part of my visits to the Carmel of St. Joseph is the time for what

Carmelites call "mental prayer." Mental prayer is being with Jesus and speaking to him in the silence of the heart.

The sisters pray in this way early in the morning, and again in the evening. These two hours of intimacy with Jesus each day are precious to the Carmelites.

When I join them in mental prayer, I know that they are sitting just behind the grille in choir (the nuns' part of the chapel), while I sit in the public part. In the silence, the sisters and I are together, and one with Jesus.

A few of my friends have questioned why on earth I would want to spend my day off praying in silence.

I realize that this style of prayer is not for everyone. But for me, silence is the way I feel that I am myself with God. I do not have to maintain any pretence, or say "the right things." We can just be together.

When it comes time to leave Carmel, I'm wistful; I wish I could stay longer. But the visit has been a gift, a Lenten gift from Jesus.

Even as I drive back into the noise of the city and the demands of work, and as my phone roars to life again, the silence of Carmel remains in my heart. It is a quiet that will stay with me during the rest of these 40 days.

www.CarmeliteNuns.ca

– Rose Derksen is a pastoral assistant at the parishes of St. Alphonsus and St. Clare in Edmonton.