

Our loss! Their gain!

The late Andrew Greeley, priest, novelist and sociologist said that when the Catholic Church throws out a practice or ritual from their vast repository; very often, another religion or strata of society picks it up, dusts it off and integrates it into the common everyday ritual and life.

One obvious example of such divesting and inclusion in another frame of reference is the long time Catholic practice of the Stations of the Cross, particularly during Lent. I have noticed how many Protestant religions have now incorporated the practice into their Lenten schedule.

I have noticed how the practice of “mindfulness” has become an everyday phenomenon in today’s society. I am amazed at the number of elementary schools in Ireland who have incorporated the practice into their daily curriculum and practice. Even recently, our local Ladies Group had an eight week workshop on “mindfulness.”

According to the definition, “Mindfulness means being able to be aware of what's going on in your experience, and to vividly inhabit our experience. It's about being able to stay fully with whatever is going on, being able to be present and continue to be present with whatever is going on, regardless of whether that's pleasant, painful or neutral.”

Perhaps, as Catholics, we have lost the art of meditation and reflection and society has renamed it as “mindfulness.” “Mental prayer” has become “mindful” presence.

Recently, I picked up a book called, “The Stranger in the Woods – The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit” by Michael Finkel. It is the story of a Christopher Knight who lived in the woods of Maine as a hermit. The book exposes his character, background, why this individual as well as countless other individuals down through the centuries have embraced the solitary life.

Hermits are known by many names – recluses, monks, ascetics, swamis, anchorites. Hermits can belong to either of three groups – protestors, pursuers and pilgrims. Protestors leave society because of what it has become. They develop a certain distain or hatred of the world. French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau left a world that was nourished by hatred and betrayal.

The Pursuers are a more modern group of hermits. They include the Thoreau type who withdrew to Walden; the Flannery O’Conner who rarely left her Georgian farm.

The largest group are the pilgrim hermits who sought spiritual awareness by embracing the desert and solitude. John the Baptist had his own period of seclusion as well as Jesus after his baptism. Later on, the Desert Fathers flourished under, most notably St. Anthony.

Maybe, it is ironic if not providential, that the religious communities that are growing most in number and popularity today are cloistered orders. Maybe, it says something about how some are reacting to the consumerism and impersonal nature of today’s society.

Christopher Knight, the Hermit, “sits in quiet contemplation. There is no chanting, no mantras, no lotus position. He is involved in meditation, thinking about whatever he wants to think about. He watches nature where the weak do not survive and neither do the strong. Life is a constant merciless fight that everyone loses.”

Knight was “confounded by the idea of passing the prime of your life in a cubicle, spending hours a day at a computer in exchange for money, was considered acceptable, but relaxing in a tent in the woods was disturbing, observing the trees was indolent; cutting them down was enterprising.” He would have seen the Internet as chipping away at one’s capacity for concentration and contemplation.

Was Knight’s solitary life filled with bliss or distress? Did he choose the solitary life or was it thrust upon him? Banishing someone from society down through the centuries was the cruellest punishment. Today, its co-patriot, solitary confinement, in the penal system takes its place. Humans are wired to connect with each other, yet, the Christopher Knights may be wired to something deeper and more profound or are they just puzzling anomalies.

What Knight missed most about the woods was something between quiet and solitude – stillness. He lost the grasp of time. He measured time by the moon and seasons; the moon being the minute hand and the seasons being the long hand. Solitude increased his perception. In it, he lost his identity. There was no audience, no need to perform, to define himself. In public, one wears a social mask. Once one experiences solitude, one becomes attuned to their own completeness.

The road less travelled will always appeal to the protestor, the pursuer and the hermit; not because of its comforts, but maybe because of its purgative suffering.