

John Skinner  
**Hear our Silence**  
ISBN 085224-46128 or 0852 4461 2899.9  
*Gracewing, 2004, £9.99*

Besides being a Third Order Franciscan, I have an interest in the Carthusians from worshipping regularly at the church in Witham in Somerset. Witham church is the only remaining building of the original English Charterhouse founded by Hugh, later Bishop of Lincoln.

The author was a Jesuit before becoming a journalist and later a writer and lecturer on the English mystics. This enchanting book is about a period one summer spent with the English Carthusians, living in the Charterhouse at Parkminster in Sussex.

He gives a vivid account of his time with the monks, who live the eremitical life within a supportive community. Each has his own detached dwelling with high-walled garden. There are times of communal prayer, following the familiar structure of the seven-fold monastic offices, and the community Eucharist. But Skinner's "quick computation ... annotated on the timetable revealed that a monk spends eleven hours of his day in prayer and spiritual exercises, five hours either working, studying or eating and the remainder asleep in two periods (of four hours and three) separated by the Night Office."

Woven through the narrative is the history of the Carthusian order and gentle, almost loving, insights into their life; he was able to talk to each of the monks individually on the community country walk. The rule and norm is silence, and talking is kept to the minimum required to get a task completed properly, for example, in the kitchen. This astonishingly attractive way of life is encapsulated as "the seeker who journeys into the silent desert of the heart to encounter God."

As a result of his time at Parkminster, Skinner has set up contemplative prayer groups, which sound fairly similar to the more well-known Julian meetings, except that afterwards there is no tea and chat - "the silence is precious and each takes it away within themselves."

I found myself trying to read slowly, to make the book last longer; rationing oneself to four or so pages a day would be a more disciplined approach!

***Sandra Hancock TSSF***