

October 9, 1983

A few weeks ago the New York Times carried a story about a group of cloistered Carmelite nuns who were taking the unusual step of going to court to protect the privacy of their convent precincts. The convent, it seems, had been established when the area of New Jersey in which it is located was wild and uninhabited. Now, however, Route 24 runs along one side of the nuns' property, there are three gas stations across the street, and their immediate neighbors include shopping malls and movie theatres. What caused these eremitical women to go to court, however, was the prospect that an office building would be built next door to them which would afford a view of their walled convent garden from its upper stories.

It happened that a few days later, after I read this story in the New York Times, I chanced to meet a Carmelite brother who is not cloistered but who runs a youth program in the Brooklyn neighborhood where I live. Remembering the story I had read as we were conversing shortly after we met, I asked Brother Matthew, "Who are these Carmelites who are trying to stop progress out on Route 24?"

Brother Matthew explained to me that the Carmelite community traces its origins back to the time of the prophet Isaiah. Apparently at about that time, Mount Carmel in the Middle East became a gathering place for holy people seeking to pursue a kind of desert spirituality. The movement has persisted through all these centuries, becoming Roman Catholic somewhere along the way, and having been given a simple rule approved by one of the medieval popes. Brother Matthew further explained that from the beginning of the movement the practice of outward and inward silence was one of the main aspects of their spiritual discipline.

I was particularly interested in this latter point, since it is my sectarian bias to assume that it is Quakers who invented silence. Brother Matthew was quick to point out that the practice of silence has a long history in the Christian church, and he drew my attention to a passage in St. Augustine which is almost rhapsodic in its praise of quietude:

If to anyone should grow hushed the tumult of the flesh, hushed the images of the earth, and of the waters, and the air, hushed, too, the poles, and if the very soul should be hushed to itself, and where by cessation of thought of self to pass beyond itself; if all dreams and imaginary revelations, every tongue and every token, were hushed, and whatsoever falls out through change; if to any, such should be wholly hushed to si-

lence, since could any hear them, they all say: "We made not ourselves, but he made us, who abideth forever," and this said, if now they should cease to speak, because they had inclined our ears to Him, who made them, and He Himself by Himself should speak, not through them, but of Himself, so that we should hear His Word, not uttered by a tongue of flesh, nor by a voice of angel, nor by thunders of a cloud, nor by a parable of comparison, but Himself, whom indeed we love; if, I say, we should hear Him, without these, as now we strained ourselves, and in the flight of thought touched upon the Eternal Wisdom that abideth over all things; if this were continued, and other visions of a nature by far inferior were taken away, and this one alone should ravish, and absorb, and enwrap the beholder of it amid inward joys, so that life everlasting might be of such a kind, as was that one moment of comprehension for which we sighed; were not this an "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord"? (Matthew 25:21). And when shall that be? Shall it be when "we all shall rise again, but shall not all be changed"?

It is interesting to contemplate the phenomenon of an ongoing community of silence and of sanctity surviving the tumult of wars, of the rise and decay of empires, of the passing of fad and fashion, until we find one of its expressions planted here right amongst us on Route 24! I cannot help but hope that the nuns win their court case, and that their sanctuary of silence will be affirmed amid the cacophony of coarse sounds on Route 24. Surely it is useful for us to protect this company of people who through the centuries have witnessed through their silence to the truth that it is a far better thing to live well than to speak well.