

## FR. BISIG'S MASS

By Duncan Maxwell Anderson

My first brush with contemplation was on a three-day silent retreat. I was not yet a Catholic. I had never been on a retreat. And I had never been particularly silent.

Once we were put “into silence” at the end of our first conference, the effect was breathtaking. I was forced to reinvent my life without using words, to see it for the first time unobstructed by plans, opinions, intentions, or by what others might say. We young men sat through dinner together, breathing the mystically silent air. We nodded reverently to each other—pointing—to please pass the salt.

By bedtime, my mind was chattering urgently: The thousands of words I hadn't uttered in my first five hours of silence were careening inside my head like maddened gnats. One by one, they flew off. In the morning, I felt . . . clean. Simple. At rest. As if I were looking placidly at God, and He at me. I was in awe of this mighty silence: “Someday I must get this back again.”

A few years later, my friend Roger McCaffrey asked me to fly to Wisconsin with him and Fr. Josef Bisig, founder and Superior General of the Fraternity of St. Peter, to visit the Bishop of Green Bay. I was needed because Fr. Bisig, who is Swiss, then spoke no English, and Bishop (now Cardinal) Adam Maida spoke no French or German. My childhood of French nursery rhymes taught to me by my bilingual mother and the occasional French newspaper would finally be put to use: I would enable these men to communicate.

After we landed in Detroit, Roger arranged for someone to let us into an empty church where Fr. Bisig could say his daily Mass. Fr. Bisig is tall, genial, and decidedly contemplative. A fairly new Catholic, I was generally a fan of cheerful noise: Bouncy singing, in harmony—in the choir loft, in the pew, and everywhere in between. In fact, before my baptism, the high point for me at my daily Novus Ordo Mass in Midtown Manhattan was the “kiss of peace.” Thank God, I said to myself: Strangers, in a conspiracy of reverence.

In the dimly lit church in Green Bay, Fr. Bisig knelt on the spot-lit altar, praying before starting his Mass. I watched from the pew, the only other soul in the church. He turned to me and beckoned. I came up.

*“Voulez-vous servir?”* he asked. (Would you like to serve?)

I'd had some Latin in high school, and I'd been to Latin Masses. But I told him frankly that I didn't know how.

He reached for the paperback red missal I was holding and pointed: I should read whatever words follow the letter “R.” He would guide me for the rest.

Fr. Bisig faced the tabernacle head-on. I knelt to his right. In the starkness of Low Mass, I finally got it. He was there, first in line, interceding for all of us with the Mystery.

*Introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meam. . .* “I will go in to the altar of God—to God, who giveth joy to my youth.”

God wordlessly gives joy to the youth that is still within us. On the lighted altar surrounded by darkness, the priest points the whole world toward Him.

Between my responses, I am again in the silence—where He speaks to me about my life in the soundless murmur of His wisdom.

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