



SILENCE

waiting upon God

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A FEW YEARS AGO I WAS SPEAKING WITH SOMEONE who had known the community for about forty years. We were speaking about our life as a monastic community and our practice of silence and solitude. I don't remember what I said, but it clearly didn't satisfy her. She felt the amount of silence we had in our life, and the time we spent alone was at best odd, at worst, unnatural. Finally, not knowing what else to say, I said, "But this is what monks do. We spend time alone, in silence, so that we can think, pray, and reflect, and be alone with God." Either something in that comment clicked, or she still didn't understand me, but the conversation moved on.

When I first came to the community, there were two wooden signs, one just outside the chapel in the statio, and another in the pantry, off the refectory. They both said in bold capital letters: SILENCE. I don't know how helpful they were as, at least in my experience, they seemed to impose something on us, rather than draw something out of us. And that, I think, is what we mean when we speak of the quality of our silence and solitude. Is it being imposed upon us, or has it been drawn out of us?

One of my favourite passages of Scripture comes from Galatians. I return to it often in my prayer. I use it as a benchmark in my life, as a way to determine whether or not I have strayed from my journey into the heart of God: *...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*¹

This is what I mean when I speak of silence being drawn out of us. Is our silence and the desire for solitude an expression of the fruit of the Spirit or are we doing our best to ignore or shut someone out? Living as closely as we Brothers do at the monastery, we all know when someone is not speaking because they are doing their best to avoid us. The latter, I would suggest, is not real

1 Galatians 5: 22 - 23

silence. It may be an absence of conversation but it is not a response to the Spirit's gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Father Benson, in his *Instructions on the Religious Life* speaks of mystical silence. "*Mystical silence*," Father Benson teaches, "*is the soul's waiting upon God.*"² [2] He goes on to say: "*Cherish this mystical silence. Keep the soul expectant, waiting upon God.*"³[3] As our Rule of Life says, "*The gift of silence we seek to cherish is chiefly the silence of adoring love for the mystery of God which words cannot express.*"⁴[4]

Father Benson puts it this way:

*The love of silence must draw our hearts up to God. Heaven will then shine forth in our life, and we shall glorify God in all our utterances. This silence will be a glad and cheerful silence. There will be no gloom in it, so silence is the bond between the mind of [humanity] and God, and the soul that rises up to God learns to rest in God and in His loving care. Our life will be made joyous if we have real unbroken fellowship with Jesus.*⁵

If our silence truly is drawn out of us as a loving response to God who first loved us,⁶ then our silence, far from being gloomy, to use Father Benson's word, would be a sign that we are truly partakers in the divine life of God. Again, to quote Father Benson:

*In silence we welcome the presence of the Incarnate Word. So [silence] must be a real, positive silence. Oh, if we felt the presence of God! If we all felt it, what a joyous community of fellowship with God! To speak with God is to become partaker of the Eternal Word and Spirit!*⁷

This is the quality of silence which we seek to cherish. It is marked by joy, happiness and delight, and as Father Benson assures us, when we cherish the happiness of silence, then we will become partakers of the divine life of God, who will be sure to pour God's divine gifts upon us⁸ in abundance.

2 Benson SSJE, Richard Meux, *Instructions on the Religious Life*, First Series (1927), 60.

3 Ibid, 60.

4 "Silence," Chapter XXVII, *Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist*, 54.

5 Op. cit., 61.

6 1 John 4:19

7 Benson SSJE, *Instructions*, First Series, 61

8 Ibid, 61

QUOTES *to ponder*

"We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls." – *Mother Teresa*

"Silence is a source of great strength." – *Lao Tzu*

"One of the greatest attacks of the enemy is to make you busy, to make you hurried, to make you noisy, to make you distracted, to fill the people of God and the Church of God with so much noise and activity that there is no room for prayer. There is no room for being alone with God. There is no room for silence. There is no room for meditation." – *Paul Washer*

"Learn to get in touch with the silence within yourself, and know that everything in life has a purpose. There are no mistakes, no coincidences; all events are blessings given to us to learn from." – *Elizabeth Kubler-Ross*

PRACTICES *to try*

Sit for five minutes in complete silence, observing (as an objective outsider) the sounds you are aware of in your environment, your thoughts, any physical sensations, and your feelings. What is it like to pay attention to yourself and your surroundings in this way? Practice silence each day.

Is there a time in your day where God gets your full attention? Sit quietly in God's presence, perhaps repeating gently a prayerful word until you are still. Then, listen to the world around you and within you, listen to the words of scripture as if they were addressed to you, listen for God's still, small voice deep within you.

Make a retreat (or take a quiet morning). Separate yourself from the noise of your daily routines, find a quiet place (like a monastery or a field or a hilltop). Let your inner busyness die down and fade away as you let go of your tasks and deadlines, your preoccupations and distractions, your thoughts and your feelings. What is it like to simply be?

QUESTIONS *to consider*

Where does meditative silence find a place in my life?

Consider the difference between a “good” silence (the silence of being in nature, or in prayer) and a “bad” silence (silence in the face of injustice, silence as part of a conspiracy of lies or false pretenses, silence used as a weapon to hurt someone, etc.) What are some of the ways silence can be used for good and for ill?

RESOURCES *to explore*

A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation, by Martin Laird

The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom and Silence, Henri Nouwen

The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise, by Robert Cardinal Sarah and Nicholas Diat

Silence: A Christian History, by Diarmaid MacCulloch

A PRAYER *for silence*

In silence, my soul waits upon God. Lord, let me keep my soul expectant. I cherish this mystical silence.

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Living Intentionally

A Workbook for Creating a Personal Rule of life

Reconciliation

Preparing for the Sacrament

Resurrection

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Time

Redeeming the Gift

Transfiguration

To Bear the Beams of Love

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