

SILENCE AS THE GUARDIAN OF THOUGHT AND SPEECH

Conference 1 of 2

When the pace and pressures of daily life become hectic and oppressive, silence and solitude can be particularly attractive: we need “space,” a “break,” “down-time,” relaxation.... Paradoxically, when we manage to find time and quiet for ourselves, silence can seem surprisingly empty. For example, I think it is true that many people have trouble with vacations, leisure, or retreats that they’ve looked forward to for a long time. Monks can testify that silence isn’t easy and that the consequent tendency is to fill it up with noise. This may be noise inside us, thoughts which whirl around and around, associations of ideas, desires, and dreams; or else it may be the exterior noise of talking, of being tethered to mass or social media, or simply being busy. I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that we live in a world of continual noise; after all, *many of us seem to be busy with something all the time*. The challenge, whether we live in a monastery or not, is to learn how to become silent, to find the inner silence necessary to tame the obsessive mind, and at the same time to let this silence become an *inhabited silence*, a *home-coming* and a *life-giving aspect of our lives*. What might that mean?

First of all, to experience solitude and silence we don’t have to have a monastic cell, and we don’t have to be free of the responsibilities of an active life. One of the 4th-century desert mothers, Amma Syncletica, astutely pointed out: “There are many (hermits) who live in the mountains and behave as if they were in the town, and they are wasting their time. It is also possible to be solitary in one’s mind while living in a crowd, just as it is possible for one who is physically solitary to live in the crowd of his thoughts.” The early monks saw solitude not so much as needed privacy or a protected place, but as *a place of conversion*, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place *where the emergence of the person occurs and finds itself*. For them, solitude and silence were a courageous encounter with our undefended, most raw, and real self—in the presence of pure Love.

For monastics, then, the value of silence is not as a technique for relaxation, or as a way to find relief from our preoccupations. Rather, according to the *Rule of St. Benedict* silence is practiced specifically as “the guardian of thought and speech,” and its primary value is in fostering a certain “openness to God,” the kind of openness and receptivity that is associated with *listening*.

My second point: *Silence as listening* –

In the 6th chapter of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, the observance of silence is described not as “*refraining* from speaking” but as “*restraint* in speech” (the Latin word *silentium*, which refers to physical quiet, is rarely used; rather, *taciturnitas*, which refers to the *human quality of being quiet*). The approach is almost entirely geared to the avoidance of bad speech and to listening to the abbot!

Famously extreme, most Trappist communities up until the 1970s used sign-language in order to avoid speaking at all. Sign language is still commonly used today by our Trappistine nuns. However, in the years following Vatican II, the practical emphasis in the Order shifted from *physically not-speaking* to the role silence has in fostering *good communication*, both with others and with God. In our Constitutions (finalized in 1990), for example, the short section on Silence (Const. 24) says:

Silence is counted among the principal monastic values of the Order. It assures *solitude* for the monk in community. It fosters *mindfulness* of God and *fraternal communion*. It *opens the mind to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit* and favors *attentiveness of heart* and *solitary prayer* to God. Therefore, at all times but especially during the hours of night, the brothers are to be zealous for silence, which is **the guardian both of speech and of thought**.

In a monastery, silence is governed both by *the time of day* (night) but also by *place*: silence is to be observed especially in the church, in the cloisters, the refectory, the scriptorium, in our cells and dormitories—just about everywhere in the monastery except outdoors and in the various workplaces. (Spencer doesn't even have a seminar room, a common room, or any small rooms for private conversation, other than the Novice Master's office, the Dean's Office, and the Prior's Office. The architecture reflects and dictates lifestyle; the place was built for *physical silence*.)

In our Community Guidelines, however, the section on Silence emphasizes: "*It is the responsibility of each member of the community to create and preserve an atmosphere of silence and recollection. Silence is an important mode of communication and is the ambience in which communication is assessed. Silence and verbal communication are reciprocally related: just as silence, the guardian of both speech and thought, bears fruit in quality communication, so also good communication and mutual understanding enrich silence.*" (That last point is rarely emphasized!)

The basic understanding, then, is that "silence" is not just "not-talking" or a "technique" for contemplative living, but an *attitude and atmosphere of mindfulness/awareness* that should prevail in the monastery in order to foster *openness to God*. Silence is the "place" in which we can listen to the Word of God in Liturgy and in reading Scripture, the "environment" in which we can live most consciously in the presence of God. The point of silence is to open us to the Spirit of God and to make us sensitive to God's presence, especially *in one another and in all that happens*. It is not just a "vertical" reality but is also "horizontal": it helps us hear the Word of God in the words of others and in daily events. (My experience is that *silence helps us see the presence of God in one another*, something absolutely crucial for living humanely/maturely in community.)

This casts the "observance" (practice) of "silence" in a special light: instead of seeing it as a monastic "discipline," I would describe it more as an *attitude of reverence*. (Years ago, I heard a monk describe silence as "a gift we make to one another"—which presupposes a deep level of mutual respect and care.) Silence, then, is not something negative/austere but rather a profoundly positive attitude of *reverence* for the Presence of God in everything and everyone we encounter throughout the whole day. *The Presence of God* is supposed to be precisely the domain in which the monk lives, in which we feel at home, secure, unqualifiedly accepted.

Whether we live in a monastery or not, silence is the interior disposition by which we open ourselves to the reality of the God who encompasses us and has "pitched his tent" within and among us. That is why it is more than not-speaking. And, of course, we can refrain from speaking with our "teeth clenched" (e.g., "I didn't react to what he said but *held my tongue*")—but that's not openness. We can open ourselves to the presence of God only when we *lay open our whole being*, when we *let go of ourselves*, when we *listen with "the ear of our heart"* to everything and everyone around us. And that's nigh impossible to do if we're constantly talking!

I can assure you that monks don't observe silence as a technique to artificially induce a "contemplative" disposition or simply as a form of asceticism. We cherish silence *because* we have encountered God in a life that is "ordinary, obscure and laborious" with our brothers—and we do not wish to nullify this encounter by casual or superficial speaking.... On the other hand, we may not *refuse to speak* to others who may be waiting for a kind or helpful word. It is wrong for us to retreat into silence because we don't want to be bothered. Authentic silence is not a passive inactivity that makes me feel better, more relaxed, blissfully alone with myself. There are plenty of poor reasons for cultivating physical silence. So, we monks who have embraced a "culture" of silence as a way of life have to ask ourselves, "is my silence self-serving, self-

protective, manipulative or controlling, punishing or isolating, etc.? Or is it essentially *reverent*, that is: open to God, a matter of deeper communion with everyone and everything, something that contributes positively to the community?"

A third point: *Silence as completion of prayer* –

Silence supports not only to our listening but also our praying. It provides an atmosphere for prayer, and *it preserves the growth that has been gained in prayer*. For example, if we monks begin to speak immediately after praying in common, we will not be able to preserve the fruits of our prayer; our mindfulness quickly dissipates and the spirit of prayer isn't allowed to reverberate and take root in the heart. (That is why we have the custom of remaining in the church for about a half hour of silent prayer after Vigils, or making a Thanksgiving after Mass, or lingering in church after one of the Hours of the Divine Office when possible.) But even more than supporting prayer, silence *is* prayer, as I'll explore tomorrow.

In that regard, for now I'd like to mention only that a theme that appears again and again in the monastic teaching on prayer is that *prayer should be without images or thoughts*; in other words, *prayer as pure silence before God* is held up as the ideal. (St. John of the Cross taught this, but St. Teresa vehemently disagreed with him, proving to be probably the better theologian!) . . . The only thing I'd say about wordless/imageless prayer is that it is ultimately *a gift of God's grace. It cannot be practiced as a technique*. (John of the Cross calls it "infused contemplation.")

In a more ancient monastic tradition, going back 9 centuries before John of the Cross to a Syrian monk, St. John Climacus in the 7th century, it is recognized as the 4th step in *lectio divina* ("sacred reading")—reading, meditation ("chewing the cud"), prayer, and *contemplation*. The point of *lectio divina* is ultimately to repose in the silence of the Word. But this is not something we can bring about. The Word creates a stillness of its own; it leads us into a living stillness; first, a "silent dialogue" with God, and then, God is encountered simply in pure silence. This is pure gift, a grace. Another way of saying it: silence is not a technique that leads to an experience of God; rather, it flows from an experience of God. Silence overwhelms us when we are so deeply moved by the Word of God that our own words and thoughts are muted: "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was a great silence in heaven for about half an hour." (Revelations 8:1)

Our prayer can seem dry and meaningless for long stretches; we seem to experience only our own emptiness—at best, we may have only a vague presentiment of fullness in the midst of emptiness. God seems to have gone silent. However, silence is his language. In any case, "silent prayer" is not simply a matter of our renouncing or letting go of images and imaginations, "turning off the movies" Our deepest silence is brought about by God, permeated with his presence. It is, then, not something that we can really speak about . . .

I think Michael Casey expresses particularly well this relationship between silence and prayer:

Silence not only provides the environment for prayer; it progressively becomes the content of prayer. Contemplative prayer is an attentive and respectful *stilling* of the voice, the imagination, and the mind in anticipation of the Lord's presence, slowly revealed. As prayer develops, it tends to become less wordy until, at last, it needs only a few words to frame it. (Grace on the Journey to God, p. 172)

Tomorrow: "The Prayer of Silence"