

19. Silence and Solitude

If we are to learn to pray we must learn to be silent. To be silent we must learn not to be afraid of solitude. Jesus lived in communion with God in whatever circumstances he was, but he still withdrew at times from people and from activity to be alone and pray:

‘In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed’ (Mark 1:35).

‘Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God’ (Luke 6:12).

‘Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him’ (Luke 9:18).

‘Jesus said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him’ (Mark 14:34-35).

Jesus invites us to share this experience:

‘Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret’ (Matthew 6:6).

It is especially in solitude that we experience the truth that we are never really alone:

‘The Father who sent me is with me, and has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to Him’ (John 8:29).

‘You will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me’ (John 16:32).

We are never alone. God is within us drawing us into communion.

‘Our centre is God ... We are not yet in our deepest centre when we can go deeper in God’ (John of the Cross, *Living Flame* 1.12).

For most of us, a large portion of our waking hours is spent in activity and often with others. We need to remind ourselves that only when our activity is in accordance with the will of God does it have value. We recall Jesus’ parable about the seed that produced a harvest while the farmer was absent (Mark 4:26-29). It is the creative action of God that is the key to a productive life. God tells the people that things will be different in the Promised Land. In Egypt they had to work for themselves, but:

‘the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that the Lord your God looks after. The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning to the end of the year’ (Deuteronomy 11:11-12).

Let us, then, give ourselves to the activity to which God calls us, leaving the productivity to God; but let us also allow God to draw us into silence and solitude. There we will discover the spring from which the pure waters of inspired action flow.

‘The Lord will fight for you. You have only to keep still’ (Exodus 14:14).

‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Psalm 46:10).

John of the Cross speaks of this silence and solitude in his *Spiritual Canticle*. In Stanzas 14 and 15, the bride declares:

My Beloved is the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands,
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes.

The tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music,
sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

In Stanzas 18-19 she instructs the world of the senses to stay outside. She wishes to be alone with the Bridegroom:

You nymphs of Judea
while among flowers and roses
the amber spreads its perfume
stay away, there on the outskirts;
do not seek to touch our thresholds.

Hide yourself, my Love;
turn your face toward the mountains,
and do not speak.

An obvious area for silence is in our speech. Jesus warns us of what will happen to us if we use our tongue to put others down (Matthew 5:23). The Letter of James is particularly insightful in exposing the evils committed by an unbridled tongue. Disciplining our speech, however, is not only a matter of avoiding sins such as lying or cursing or speaking of the faults of others. We must also learn to be sensitive to the inspiration of God's Spirit so that we use only those words that come from our communion with God. Jesus is our model:

'What I say is what I have seen in the Father's presence' (John 8:38).

'What I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me' (John 12:50).

Words that come from this communion are a vehicle of truth to others and of love. Words that do not come from this communion may not be sinful, but they can create distraction and clutter both our minds and hearts and the minds and hearts of those with whom we are carelessly chattering.

We must be especially careful about speaking of our spiritual experiences. We have noted the importance of revealing to a spiritual director what is happening in our souls, and there can be other situations in which it is appropriate to share our prayer-experiences with another person, so long as we keep the focus not on ourselves but on God the giver of all good gifts. However, sometimes we experience a feeling of unease when we have spoken about our spiritual experiences. Something precious can be lost by indelicate exposure.

Marie-Eugène writes:

'Giving expression to our experiences lays bare our depths. For a moment the depth disappears; its restful shadows and its silence are dispersed. God, who has sought the deep quiet of our inmost centre for the creative action of God's divine life, seems hampered by our being brought to the exterior. Likewise, the communication from outside which was meant to enrich often merely disturbs our silence and the divine action in us by bringing in useless things that are distracting, causing disquiet, increasing the difficulties of interior recollection and inhibiting the divine action' (*I want to see God*, 416).

It is obvious that God calls us to be creative and loving in the way we behave. We must be ready to do God's will with all our mind and heart, all our soul and strength. If prayer is genuine it will bear fruit in the way we live. John writes: 'Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action' (1 John 3:18). We recall also Jesus' insistence on the ultimate importance of the way we express true love in our relationship with others: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat ...' (Matthew 25:35).

In chapter five of her *Book of Foundations*, Teresa of Jesus warns those who prefer a life of quiet and find the demands of action difficult, to check whether they prefer silence because of the feelings of devotion which they experience, rather than because it is God who is drawing them into silence. She reminds them of the central importance of wanting God's will not our own preference.

However, activity, even activity motivated by the desire to love, can be a distraction. Activity needs to be disciplined quite as much as speech if we are to enjoy silence.

Teresa writes:

‘We must be careful, in doing good works, even those of obedience and charity, not to fail to have frequent inward recourse to our God. And, believe me, it is not length of time spent in prayer that brings us benefit. When we spend our time in good works, this is a great help to us and a better and quicker preparation for the enkindling of our love than many hours of meditation. Everything must come from the hand of God’ (*Foundations* 5.17)

There are two traps to be avoided. We must take care lest attraction to prayer lead habitually to neglect of our duties, and lest carrying out our duties leads habitually to neglect of prayer.

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Activism takes cover under numerous and often noble excuses: necessities of life, urgent duties of one’s state, fear lest a certain milieu win and dissipate people, joys to be had in generous action which opens up and enlarges one’s power, the aridities and apparently useless abjection of prayer, and above all a great pity for those around us whose extreme material or spiritual misery is a constant appeal to our Christian charity.’

(*I want to see God*, 420)

Silence of the tongue and care not to be always active are helps towards making space for inner silence – the silence in which our heart can be attentive to the One who speaks tenderly to us, the One for whom we long.

‘Silence takes us beyond the doctrines and divisions created by the mind. If everyone has a spiritual story to tell of his life, everyone has a spiritual silence to preserve. So it is that we might almost say silence is the tribute we pay to holiness; we slip off words when we enter a sacred space, just as we slip off shoes ... We hold our breath, we hold our words; we suspend our chattering selves and let ourselves “fall silent”, and fall into the highest place of all ... Silence could be said to be the ultimate province of trust: it is the place where we trust ourselves to be alone; where we trust others to understand the things we do not say; where we trust a higher harmony to assert itself ... In love, we are speechless; in awe, we say, words fail us’ (Pico Iyer, *Time* January 25th 1993).

John of the Cross writes:

‘Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God with the appetite and with the tongue, for the only language God hears is the silent language of love’ (Letter of 22nd Nov. 1587).

‘Forgetfulness of creation, remembrance of the Creator, attention to what is within, loving the Beloved.’

In his *A Letter to John Dryden*, James McAuley writes:

‘Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land.
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,
It works unseen like radium in the dark.’

We have already noticed that there are things that we can do to focus attention and to eliminate certain distractions. However, let us not forget that we do not initiate prayer. We must also

remember that the silence that we can achieve is not the silence of communion with God. Spiritual writers warn us against the danger of concocting an artificial silence and thinking that this is communion with God. Let us do what we can to be still and to eliminate distracting words, images and thoughts. Let us do what we can to be attentive and receptive and to prepare ourselves to receive God's gift, but we must not fall into the trap of manufacturing our own silence and confusing it with the silence which floods us when we open ourselves to God gift of God's Self to us. Much wisdom can be found in the following statement from *A Carthusian Miscellany*:

'It is normal that intellectual activity be gradually stilled during prayer; similarly, to the extent that the emotions of the heart are channelled, all kinds of distractions and diversions lose their sense. This means that, with an almost spontaneous movement, prayer of the heart leads us towards silence. Sometimes this experience is especially strong and inevitably one finds oneself exposed to what I might call the temptation of silence itself. Silence is a blessing that tends to seduce all hearts, once they have really had a taste of it. Yet there are many types of silence, not all of which are good. Indeed most types are distortions, rather than authentic prayer of the heart.

'The first temptation is to make of silence an activity, even if we are entirely convinced we are doing the opposite. Basing ourselves on the fact that intellectual activity has ceased and that our heart is at rest, we imagine that we have achieved a genuine silence of all our being. In fact, even if it has a real value, this silence is a result of a tension on the part of the will, which is the most subtle, but equally the most pernicious of activities. Instead of keeping our heart attentive and alert, we maintain ourselves in an artificial state in which we are not receptive to the Lord but are relying on our own resources. In the case of people with strong and active wills, this can prove a major obstacle to attaining a state of readiness and openness to receive the Lord. Materially speaking, this silence is impressive, but it is silence turned in on itself and dependent on itself.

'Another temptation is to make silence an end in itself. One imagines that the goal of prayer of the heart, and even of all contemplative life, is silence. One focuses on a purely material reality, rather than on the person of the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. My inner state is what matters and not the relationship of loving receptivity that I have with God. I am no longer even praying; I am merely contemplating myself!

'A similar temptation consists in making silence a reality in itself. Silence is everything! Once all the 'noise' of the senses, the mind and the imagination has been stilled, a genuine feeling of joy arises, and that is enough for us. We seek nothing more. We refuse to look for anything else. Any thought which might enter our minds even if it related to the Lord or came directly from him, would seem to us an obstacle. At such a time, the only divine reality is silence. There is nothing left but the casting of an idol called Silence. It cannot be denied that authentic silence is very important and much to be prized. Nevertheless, if I wish to enter into genuine silence, it is essential to renounce silence from the bottom of my heart. I need not belittle or underestimate it, nor cease seeking it, but I must avoid making it a goal in itself.

'Above all I must avoid believing that real silence is the result of my own efforts. I do not have to make silence from scratch, as though I were manufacturing something. Too often one thinks that silence only entails establishing peace in one's intellect, imagination and senses. This is one aspect of silence, but there is more to silence than that. It is also necessary that the very depths of the heart, to the extent that they reflect and express the will, should themselves be silent; that all desires be stilled other than that of doing the will of the Father. Instead of tensely imposing itself on the rest of my being, my will should abide in a state of pure receptivity, listening and welcoming. Only then does the possibility arise of entering into an authentic silence of all my being before God, a silence born of the

genuine conformity of my deepest being with the Father, since it is created in God's image and likeness.

'God alone suffices; everything else is nothing. Genuine silence is the manifestation of this basic reality of all prayer. Silence truly exists in the heart once all the impurities that were opposed to the reign of the Father have disappeared. True silence is found only in a pure heart, a heart that resembles the heart of God. This is why a pure heart is able to maintain complete silence, even when it is immersed in all sorts of activity, because there is no longer any discord between it and God' (pages 88-89).

When God draws us into silence, it can happen that we find that the silence overflows into our imagination, our memory and our thoughts. However (and we shall return to this in a later reflection), since God is beyond all our experiences of God, it is also possible that, while we are in deep silence our imagination, memory and thoughts, having nothing to keep them focused, run wild. God, as it were, has taken us into the still depths, but storms can still be lashing the surface of the ocean. We have to start learning a different approach to distractions. Teresa of Jesus warns us against focusing our efforts on attempting to counter these surface distractions. The very effort will disturb the interior silence of communion with God. Stay in the depths where God has taken us and let the storm rage. It need not disturb our silence.

'When we find ourselves in this quiet (and note well this counsel, for the matter is important), we should not pay any more attention to our thoughts than we would to a madman. For should we want to keep our thoughts near, we will necessarily have to be somewhat disturbed and disquieted. And in this state of prayer everything will then amount to working without any further gain but with a loss of what the Lord was giving us without our own work ... Laugh at the mind which goes off to the more foolish things of the world. Remain in the quiet' (*Way of Perfection*, 31.8.10).

Solitude

Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God says:

'I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her' (Hosea 2:14).

Solitude can play an important role in deepening our silence. We think of Jesus in the desert. Elijah went forty days and forty nights through the desert before encountering God in the silence (1 Kings 19) and the disciples struggled all through the night on the lonely seas before Jesus came to them (Mark 6:48). In the Song of Songs, we are told 'Do not stir or awaken my love until she is ready' (2:7; 3:5).

John of the Cross in his *Spiritual Canticle* writes:

'If, then, I am no longer seen or found on the common, you will say that I am lost; that, stricken by love, I lost myself, and was found.'

He goes on to warn us against our compulsion to be active and against urging contemplatives to forgo their contemplation for action:

'Great wrong would be done to a person who possesses some degree of this solitary love, as well as to the Church, if we should urge them to become occupied in exterior or active things, even if the works are very important and demand only a short time. Since God has solemnly entreated that no one awaken a person from this love, who will dare to do so and remain without reproof. After all this love is the end for which we were created. Let those, then, who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labour, by one work than

they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm.'

(Spiritual Canticle 29.3).

'She lived in solitude and now in solitude has built her nest;
and in solitude God guides her, God alone, who also bears in solitude the wound of love.'

(Spiritual Canticle 34)

Henri Nouwen reminds us that we can dare such silence and solitude only when graced by God's love:

'As lonely people we cannot create free space. Our own need to still our inner cravings of loneliness makes us cling to others instead of making space for them' (*Reaching Out*, page 94).

The ultimate criterion by which we are to choose between silent solitude and loving action is always the will of God. The amount of solitude that is appropriate for us depends on God's calling:

'It is for God to direct us, to detain us in solitude or to send us wherever God wills.'

(Marie-Eugène, I want to see God, page 449)