

9. A Silent Heart

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 every circumstance, 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). He 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: 'You will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me'(John 16:32). God is in the centre of our soul drawing us to God's self.

Silence of the tongue

To experience this silence we must learn to discipline our tongue. This applies even to sharing our spiritual experiences with others. Sometimes it is appropriate to share such prayer-experiences (with a confessor or spiritual director, for example), but even here it is important that we keep the focus not on ourselves but on God, the giver of all good gifts. We will all have experienced a certain unease when others have spoken of their 'spiritual' experiences in such a way that however they may claim to be giving the glory to God, it is hard to avoid the impression that they are in fact drawing attention to themselves, and that they feel somewhat better than their fellow human beings who don't have such 'experiences'. We have probably also felt uneasy when we have spoken to another person of *our* spiritual experiences. When these experiences are genuine they have a certain delicacy about them, which can be lost by being carelessly exposed.

Silence in our activity

Silence should also play a role in our activity. 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. In Egypt the Hebrews worked as slaves. God promises them that things will be different in the Promised Land:

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 of the year to the end of the year (Deuteronomy 11:11-12).

It is obvious that our activity is important. We will be judged on what we have done: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat ...'(Matthew 25:35). We must be careful that attraction to prayer does not lead to neglect of our duties. Teresa has this to say:

When we spend our time in good works, it 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)

For most of us the danger is that we will get caught up in what we are doing and neglect prayer. Teresa introduces the passage just quoted with these words:

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 (*Foundations* 5.17).

In his commentary on the writings of Teresa, Father Marie-Eugène OCD 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*, page 420).

Interior Silence

Silence in speech and in activity are means of nurturing the most important silence of all – silence of the heart, by which we are attentive to the One who dwells there and who is speaking tenderly to us. 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 language God hears best is the silent language of love (*Letter* 22nd November 1587).

There is a danger that those who wish to commit themselves to prayer will be satisfied with techniques that assist in creating an artificial silence. The silence that we can create should not be confused with the silence which floods our souls when God draws us into love. A Carthusian monk writes:

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 which 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 which 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 his 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 which 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 (from *A Carthusian Miscellany*).

Solitude

Solitude can play an important role in deepening our silence. Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God says: 'I will allure you, and bring you into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to you'(Hosea 2:14). This solitude can be very precious. Hence the following warning from John of the Cross:

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 such a person 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 soul 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).

The ultimate criterion by which we are to choose between silent solitude and loving action is always the will of God. Discerning God's call is sometimes quite difficult. Firstly, it is necessary that our desire to do God's will is genuine: we must truly want

what God wants. This desire will direct our attention to notice whatever inspiration God is offering us – which is a good start! Even when we genuinely want to do the will of God and have done our best to discern it, we still have to be ready to adjust when matters become clearer. As always, we fall back on Jesus' words: 'a tree is known by its fruit'(Matthew 12:33). We touched on this matter in the chapter on an obedient heart. Living as we do in time, we can remember and anticipate. However our actual experience is always present. We exist because we share in the eternal present of God. We can never consider our discernment of God's will as something completed and locked in. It requires constant vigilance. I am not speaking of preoccupation or anxiety. The vigilance we are called to is a peaceful one, for we are assured that God is not hiding God's will from us. God knows our frailty and gently reveals to us the next step that we are graced to take. If we take a wrong step, God is still there guiding us along the path of love. For each of us, each day, the right balance between action and solitude depends on God's calling. By living in God's love we will learn to find it.