## **Thoughts on Silence**

## **Silence**

Silence is solitude practiced in action. Silence is an indispensable discipline in the spiritual life. Ever since James described the tongue as a “whole wicked world in itself” and silence as putting a bit into the horse’s mouth (James 3:3,6), Christians have tried to practice silence as the way to self-control. Clearly, silence is a discipline needed in many different situations—in teaching and learning; in preaching and worship; in visiting and counseling. Silence is a very concrete, practical and useful discipline in all our ministerial tasks. It can be seen as a portable cell taken with us from the solitary place into the midst of our ministry.

Silence is the home of the word. Silence gives strength and fruitfulness to the word. We can even say that words are meant to disclose the mystery of the silence from which they come. For the Desert Fathers, the word is the instrument of the present world and silence is the mystery of the future world. If a word is to bear fruit, it must be spoken from the future world into the present world. The Desert Fathers, therefore, considered their going into the silence of the desert to be a first step into the future world. From that world their words could bear fruit, because there they could be filled with the power of God’s silence. In the sayings of the Desert Fathers, we can distinguish two aspects of silence. All of them deepen and strengthen the central idea that silence is the mystery of the future world. Firstly, silence guards the fire within. Secondly, silence teaches us to speak.

## **Silence Guards the Fire Within**

A positive meaning of silence is that it protects the inner fire. It guards the inner heat of religious emotions. This inner heat is the life of the Holy Spirit within us. Thus, silence is the discipline by which the inner fire of God is tended and kept alive.

Diadochus of Photiki offers us a very concrete image: “When the door of the steam bath is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it; likewise, the soul, in its desire to say many things, dissipates its remembrance of God through the door of speech, even though everything it says may be good. Thereafter, the intellect, though lacking appropriate ideas, pours out a welter of confused thoughts to anyone it meets as it no longer has the Holy Spirit to keep its understanding free from fantasy. Ideas of value always shun verbosity, being foreign to confusion and fantasy. Timely silence, then, is precious, for it is nothing less than the mother of the wisest thought.”

These words of Diadochus go against the grain of our contemporary life-style in which “sharing” has become one of the greatest virtues. We have been made to believe that feelings, emotions, and even the inner stirrings of our soul have to be shared with others. Expressions such as “Thanks for sharing this with me,” or “It was so good to share this with you,” show that the door of our steam bath is open most of the time. In fact, people who prefer to keep to themselves and do not expose their interior life tend to create uneasiness and are often considered inhibited, asocial or simply off. But let us at least raise the question of whether our lavish ways of sharing are not more compulsive than virtuous; that instead of creating community, they tend to flatten out our life together.

What needs to be guarded is the life of the Spirit within us. We who want to witness to the presence of God’s Spirit in the world especially need to tend the fire within with utmost care. It is not so strange that

many ministers have become burnt out -- people who say many words and share many experiences, but in whom the fire of God’s Spirit has died and from whom not much more comes forth than their own, boring, petty ideas and feelings.

Sometimes it seems that our many words are more an expression of our doubt than of our faith. It is as if we are not sure that God’s Spirit can touch the hearts of people – we have to help him out and, with many words, convince others of His power. But it is precisely this wordy unbelief that quenches the fire. Our first and foremost task is to faithfully are for the inward fire so that when it is really needed, it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers. As ministers, our greatest temptation is toward too many words. They weaken our faith and make us lukewarm. But in silence is a sacred discipline, a guard of the Holy Spirit.

## **Silence Teaches Us to Speak**

Another way that silence reveals itself as the mystery of the future world is by teaching us to speak. A word with power is a word that comes out of silence. A word that bears fruit is a word that emerges from the silence and returns to it. It is a word that reminds us of the silence from which it comes and leads us back to that silence. A word that is not rooted in silence is a weak, powerless word that sounds like a “clashing cymbal or booming gong” (I Corinthians 13:1).

All this is true only when the silence from which the word comes forth is not emptiness and absence, but fullness and presence; not the human silence of embarrassment, shame of guilt, but the divine silence in which love rests secure.

Here we can glimpse the great mystery in which we participate through silence and the Word -- the mystery of God’s own speaking. Out of His eternal silence, God spoke the Word, and through this Word created and recreated the world. In the beginning, God spoke the land, the sea and the sky. He spoke the sun, the moon and the stars. He spoke the plants, birds, fish, and animals. Finally, He spoke man and woman. Then, in the fullness of time, God’s Word, through which all had been created, became flesh and gave power to all who believe to become the children of God. In all this, the Word of God does not break the silence of God, but rather unfolds the immeasurable richness of His silence.

Words can only create communion and thus new life when they embody the silence from which they emerge. As soon as we begin to take hold of each other by our words and use words to defend ourselves or offend others, the word no longer speaks of silence. But when the word calls forth the healing and restoring stillness of its own silence, few words are needed. Much can be said without much being spoken. Thus, silence is the mystery of the future world in that it guards the fire of the Holy Spirit who dwells within and allows us to speak a word that participates in the creative and recreative power of God’s own Word.

Henri Nouwen*: The Way of the Heart*

## **Scriptures to Ponder:**

#### Ecclesiastes 3:7

#### Isaiah 30:15

#### Zephaniah 3:17

#### Ephesians 3:29-30

#### James 1:19; 3:1-12

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