

On the Spirit of Silence for Oblates *Sister Karen Joseph*

Restraint of Speech

Silence is the great teacher, and to learn its lessons you must pay attention to it. There is no substitute for the creative inspiration, knowledge, and stability that come from knowing how to contact your core of inner silence. The great Sufi poet Rumi wrote, "Only let the moving waters calm down, and the sun and moon will be reflected on the surface of your being." -- *Deepak Chopra*

There are some evenings when our small pond is very still and the moon and the pines reflect perfectly & beautifully on its surface. Such reflection is only possible when the pond is perfectly still. The monastic environment is intended to provide us with the same calming and quieting atmosphere, a time of rejuvenation of the spirit. *"Be still and know that I am God"*.

Read RB, chapter 6

Benedict gives us clear reasons for practicing silence:

1. To avoid falling into sin
2. Because of the importance of the spirit of silence

"Out of esteem for silence"

"So important is silence"

3. As an expression of docility to and reverence for God

"Speaking and teaching are the teacher's task; the disciple is to be silent and to listen.. (... to the Word of God and the Prioress)"

Other than Chapter 6, Benedict has a trilogy on the question of monastic silence in the "Instruments of Good Work":

Vs. 51 To Guard One's tongue against evil and depraved speech

Vs. 52 Not to love much talking

Vs. 53 Not to speak useless words or words that move to laughter

Vs. 51 Corresponds to Chapter 6, "On the Spirit of Silence"

Vs. 52 Epitomizes the 9th degree of humility

Vs. 53 Suggests the 11th degree of humility

While vs. 51 and chapter 6 stress the evil tendencies of the human tongue, vs. 52 and the 9th degree of humility encourage the monastic to talk as little as possible. Verse 53 and the 11th degree of humility obligate the monastic to clothe her speech with qualities reflecting seriousness and gravity of purpose.

Let's take a brief look at each **of St. Benedict's reasons for silence.**

TO AVOID SIN

"In much speaking you will not avoid sin" (Proverbs 10:19; RB 6:4) and "the tongue holds the key to life and death" (Prov. 18:21; RB 6:5)

St. Benedict here shows clearly his understanding of our weak human nature. In too much needless chatter, you will not avoid sin! Surely, it is my experience.... is it not yours as well?

St. Benedict emphasizes the psychological and emotional control a monastic possesses who is in full mastery of her tongue. And in control of the emotions, she in turn exercises control over the deepest part of herself, **the deeper inner sanctum of the soul.** Control of the tongue is truly the key to personal emotional stability (maturity). Have you ever noticed how much calmer, how much more "together", less fragmented, you feel on renewal days or retreat days? Control of the tongue is the key to personal emotional stability.

St. Benedict also expresses silence to be an effective guardian of peace of soul whenever the monastic has to endure hard and contrary things, even injuries and injustices in obeying superiors or other community members, by encouraging us to hold fast to patience with a silent mind (4th step of humility) at these times.

"Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days? If you hear this and your answer is 'I do', God then directs these words to you: **"If you desire true and eternal life, keep your tongue free from vicious talk**

and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim." (RB Prologue, vss15-17)

And, of course, we all know Benedict's strong feelings regarding "murmuring", referred to at least 14 times in the R.B. Often we combat evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words. Judgment can be curbed and smothered by never allowing them the right to be uttered. In the letter of James, we read "***The one who holds her tongue in check controls mind and body.***" (Jas.3:2 ff) {Holding one's Tongue=Monastic Instinct to be cultivated.} (Also cf. Psalm 50:20 - 21; James 4:11-12; Eph. 4:29)

Benedict does not teach total silence, that is, the absence of all speech, as he has us encouraging each other gently in the mornings to be sure that we are all up and ready for the *Opus Dei*. But his caution is around perhaps the loudness or disruptiveness to the spirit of silence as well as the quality of our conversation. It should not be mean spirited. I noticed an interesting footnote in the RB 1980 when I was preparing this reflection. In verse 8 of Chapter 6, Benedict says, "We absolutely condemn in all places any vulgarity and gossip and talk leading to laughter, and we do not permit a disciple to engage in words of that kind." The Latin words for the word "absolutely" are "*aeterna clausura*. The image in Latin then is that of enclosure. "The mouth is like the door of an inner cloister." (RB 1980, p. 191) St. Benedict wants the door closed to certain kinds of speech. The Master develops the image more elaborately, allowing for degrees of enclosure.

The Value of the Spirit of Silence

A second reason given by St. Benedict in Chapter 6 for the practice of silence is the importance of the "spirit of silence". "Since the spirit of silence is so important permission to speak should rarely be granted". St. Benedict distinguishes between silence (that is, refraining from speaking) and the "spirit of silence". Silence itself must be so strictly practiced, the tongue must be so drastically curtailed in its function because, otherwise, it is not possible to have a "spirit of silence." The one is therefore the means to the other; silence creates a spirit of silence; *silentium* begets *taciturnitas*. This *taciturnitas* is so important in a monastery that permission to speak should rarely be granted even to perfect disciples, even though it be for "good, holy, edifying conversation".

Taciturnitas is the atmosphere of quiet, the tranquility and stillness of order, peace, and harmony within the walls of the monastic dwelling. *Taciturnitas* is not silence but the "spirit of silence", the atmosphere of Benedictine serenity and joyous peace. Silence is the absence of speech; the spirit of silence is obtained when the spatial areas of the Benedictine home are bathed in an atmosphere free of all useless noise, confusion, and discordant sounds.

While including freedom or absence of the negative elements of noise and chatter and loud sounds, *taciturnitas* is a very positive quality of the monastic surroundings, that spirit which disposes a monastery building for true monastic life within its walls. It enables monastics to apply themselves to the pursuit of their goals, purity of heart and pure prayer, in an environment suitable for their attainment. *Taciturnitas* creates a spirit so that monastics within the monastery may find it desirable, possible, and even easy to "seek God truly" in their work and prayers. It provides the opportunity for the uninterrupted and undistracted quest of God. *Taciturnitas* is the breath of God's presence. *Taciturnitas*, in a word, is monastic serenity.

Once a monastic understands the nature and necessity of *taciturnitas*, she will understand also the eleventh degree of humility. For *taciturnitas* regulates not merely the amount of speech but its manner as well: "When the monastic speaks, she should do so gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, in few and sensible words, and that she be not noisy in her speech." It is written, "a wise person is known by the fewness of her words" (RB 7, the 11th degree of humility). The true monastic is she who when she speaks does so gently, with a delicacy respecting God's presence and the feelings of those around her, humbly, sensibly, and with as few words as possible."

SILENCE AS AN EXPRESSION OF DOCILITY TO AND REVERENCE FOR GOD

Lastly, we come to consider the principal reason suggested by St. Benedict in Chapter 6 of *The Rule* for the development of the spirit of silence. The monastic must practice silence and must be surrounded by a spirit of silence and serenity, in order to develop reverence for God's presence, docility to God's grace, and attentiveness to God's word. Thus stated, monastic silence is spiritual in purpose. Silence nurtures the spirit of adoration, mindfulness, and presence.

By monastic profession, the monastic is a life-long student in the school of the Lord's service. St. Benedict insists on this student-like receptivity.... "permission to speak should rarely be granted even to perfect disciples... for speaking and teaching belong to the teacher; the disciple's part is to be silent and listen". "The ninth degree of humility is that a monastic restrain her tongue and keep silence, not speaking until she is questioned". In all humility, the disciple of Christ is silent, silently attentive to the Lord, listening for the *Vox Domini*, the Voice of the Lord. The monastic listens to the teachings of the leaders in community and the Word of God (*lectio*) in a meditative, receptive silence, :with a peaceful heart, ruminating over their words of counsel, reflecting on the meaning of these words and/or events, pondering over these things, as did Mary during her pregnancy and Christ's infancy.

The spirit of silence is an essential and integral element in monastic life. It disposes the environment of the monastery for the pursuit of prayer, and it creates the atmosphere of peace in which the monastic can effectively devote herself to the practice of obedience and humility. It is not by coincidence that these two topics, obedience and humility, are on either side of the chapter on silence in the Rule.

Summary

Silence is reverence for God! Through silence the monastic respects the presence of God in which she stands. Silence, for the monastic, is adoration, an act of divine service. By means of silence a monastery is established as the school of the Lord's service. Therefore the monastic leaves choir in the most profound silence. But silence is not to be left at the chapel door; the monastic must carry this silent recollection in God into her daily life, both as an attitude of mind and as a practical mode of behavior. God is master/teacher of the monastery, for the monastery

is God's house! God's presence must be a perceptible fact pervading the entire monastic establishment. The divine presence, made perceptible by the exterior spirit of silence and serenity and by the interior spirit of recollection, becomes the "spirit" of the Benedictine monastery. In that spirit monastics can be "in touch" with God, communicate with God, live with God a life of mutual conversation of personal prayer. As the natural habitat for the fish is water, so the truly monastic habitat of the monastic is the divine presence. In this

presence the monastic lives her entire life. She shows her reverence for this Divine Presence by her silence.

Monastic silence is the key to Benedictine prayer and contemplation. To seek God is the primary purpose of the monastic. Such union with God, with faith, hope, and love as its expression, is prayer. But the atmosphere conducive to prayer is silence and recollection.