



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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SILENCE

Noise is a problem for the spiritual life. We are surrounded by noise so much of the time these days. The television is on all during the evening, even if no one is paying much attention. We keep the radio on in the car, and have Muzak at the store and even in the elevator at the office. Perhaps the greatest image of the attempt to fill all of one's time with some kind of noise is the teenager walking down the city street with a forty pound radio perched on his shoulder and blasting into his ear.

To be sure, it is not evil to watch television or listen to the radio. The problem for the Christian is that there must also be a time of quiet. Day by day, he must take the time to draw apart from all the noise, to be alone and to be quiet. If he is to become ever more one with the Lord Jesus, he must be able to hear what Jesus is saying. This relationship, like any human relationship, requires silence in order for communication to take place. When a boy and a girl meet for a blind date, they are likely to be nervous. Out of that nervousness, they are likely to fill the silence with chatter. They will not really listen to what the other is saying, because each is thinking of something else to say -- so that there will be no awkward silence between them. The situation is very different for the mature husband and wife. They no longer fear silence. In fact, it is a delight for them to be quiet together, for in that silence is a deep communion of their souls. Their intimacy extends beyond words, and is finally expressible only in shared silence.

That is the intimacy to which we aspire with Jesus. It requires (among other things) that we learn to be quiet with Him. This sounds as though it shouldn't be too hard. In fact, it takes a lot of work.

Our first problem is that we are not used to being quiet. We are used to activity. We tend to think that any time we are not actively doing something, we are wasting time. So if we are going to be quiet, we have to get used to spending time doing "nothing." We also have to accept that this is not a waste of time. From time to time, we will be tempted to think that we should not spend so much time being quiet -- that we should be helping the poor, or working at church, or reading spiritual books, or being otherwise active. But it is a temptation, and thus to be resisted. Quiet is of course but one element of a balanced spiritual life. It must always remain integrated with the rest of one's rule of prayer.

Once we get over thinking that being quiet is a waste of time, we will encounter the next obstacle. For as soon as we begin to be quiet we find that it is scary. We find that we are afraid of being quiet, more afraid than we can account for rationally. We are scared because being quiet means being alone and defenseless. In quiet we cannot maintain the facade that we put up for others (and for ourselves). We cannot maintain the illusion that we are better than we really are -- an illusion that we all cherish in one way or another. We are forced to face the reality of our failings. We are forced to let go of our pretences and to look at ourselves truly and honestly.

That is a hard task: to begin to see ourselves as God sees us. We will need His support to see it through. But that honesty is necessary for our relationship with God. For otherwise we will be tempted to think that we do not really need God's redemption, that we are basically good without it. By facing the truth of our needs, we will be able to appreciate all the more what God has done -- and is doing -- for us.

It is hard to face just how needy we really are. We prefer to think of ourselves as independent creatures, able to fend for ourselves. Being quiet shows us how vulnerable we really are. The hurts and temptations that we have swept under the rug come creeping out to show us just how much we depend on other people for our emotional and spiritual (not to say physical) sustenance. For example, you may find that once you begin being quiet, you are overwhelmed with feelings left over from a past relationship that meant a lot to you and is no more. All those feelings that you thought were past and done with were not past but just concealed beneath the surface. As you persevere in quiet, more of these surprises will come up. It is all part of setting things in order.

There are two important benefits from these experiences, though they may be quite painful at the time. First, they teach us to know ourselves. They show us some of what is really inside. Only by knowing ourselves truly and honestly will we ever be able to love ourselves as God loves us. Second, they draw us into a closer dependence upon God. By seeing what is inside of us and its need for a redemption that we cannot accomplish ourselves (for after all, we can only deal with these things by sweeping them under the rug), we see concretely our need for God. Experiencing it concretely leads us to depend on God not just in principle but for these particular needs. This is a hard lesson to learn, but one which brings great blessings.

Having begun to face the truth of our nature, a final obstacle arises: an irrational fear of what might be inside us. We begin to feel that there might be something dark and horrible deep inside. It is an undefined fear, and we are not really sure what it is that might be lurking there. But we are sure that we would rather not disturb it. Part of us (at least) would rather stop looking at what is there -- and live with the possibility that there might be something dark within -- than to go on and find out what it is.

This fear is hard to deal with because it is irrational, and has no clearly defined object. It tempts you to think that there might be something within you which is beyond God's power to redeem, something which is beyond your power to face. If you can put it in those terms, you will remove its power to frighten you. For then it is clear that it is not a reasonable fear, a fear to be heeded and acted upon. It is a fear that wants to keep you from quiet. It is defeated by trust in God, by asking Him to reveal and redeem all that is within you. As you progress in seeing yourself by the light of His grace, you will grow in your trust of Him. You will learn concretely that He will show you what you need to see, and redeem all that is within you. By practicing that trust, and persevering in your desire for the depths of quiet, you will develop trust for God's redeeming love.

If the obstacles to silence are great, the rewards are greater. Perseverance in the prayer of quiet brings an honest appreciation of one's self. We learn to know ourselves just as God knows us, seeing all of our faults as well as our strengths. This honesty will relieve us of ever having to be defensive or envious. It will free us to live the life before us, without always having to judge ourselves against others. It will give depth to our relationship with God, a depth which comes in no other way.

It will give us the capacity for attention: the ability to devote ourselves entirely to whatever task or person is before us. By cultivating silence, we will learn to work better in any work requiring attention. We will also be better as friends, since we will be better able to pay attention to others, to understand what they are saying and feeling. As we become more at home with ourselves (and with what God has done for us), we will be more at home with others, and what He has done for them.

By being quiet we learn to receive from God. Everything that we have is from Him. Being quiet is the way we learn to appreciate the fact. When we are surrounded by noise, we can take much for granted simply by ignoring that it is all a gift. It is easier then to live as if we were at the center of the universe and all revolves around us. Being quiet helps to show us the lie in this way of living. It shows us how much we are afflicted by the temptation of playing God.

There are many methods which will help us learn the prayer of quiet. They all begin with setting aside a time and place where you can go apart and be alone and uninterrupted. Many people find it works best first thing in the morning, even if it means getting up earlier. Some do it before they go to bed, though most people tend

to fall asleep if they try it at that time. Some people go into the bedroom and shut the door; others find a quiet church nearby when there is no service. The point is to find a time and place that suits your particular schedule. It is important to decide how long you will spend: 15 or 20 minutes is a good start. Set the kitchen timer, and then you will not need to watch the clock.

Having found a time and place, the next step is to begin. Since few of us can just sit down and be quiet, some structure is a great help. Most of us have many extraneous thoughts going through our minds when we try to be quiet: things we have to remember to do when we get up, what we would like to have for breakfast, even great spiritual insights that we want to remember afterwards. To be quiet, we must learn to let these all go. Quiet is impossible when half the mind is devoted to remembering things for later. We cannot force them out of our minds, but we must let them go of their own accord. We can picture ourselves watching our thoughts as we would watch birds in flight -- with a certain interest, but with no compulsion to follow them wherever they might lead. It may help to keep a pad and pencil at hand to write down the things you feel you need to remember for afterwards. Then you will have no excuse for not letting go of the thoughts.

After a week or two, these overwhelming distractions will subside. Quiet is a learned skill. It improves with practice. It helps to have some focus each day: some scripture passage or other spiritual reading. Whenever you find yourself far afield, gently bring yourself back to your text. You need not read any set amount: some days you will read for the whole time, other days one line will be sufficient. The aim is not to get through the book, but to be with God. The text will also provide you with some substance for your reflection and as a guide on the way to God. If you try one book for a week or two and it doesn't seem to be for you, try another. The end -- being quiet in the presence of God -- is what is important, not the means.

Sooner or later the temptation will come back to think that this is all a waste of time, that you really should be using the time to do something worthwhile. Resist it. For you are made to be with God -- that is what things will be like in heaven after all, and we should begin getting used to it now.

Every Christian needs quiet on a regular basis. He needs to listen to himself. He needs to be sensitive to what his being is trying to tell him: about an illness in his body or a besetting sin that afflicts his soul, or about some need or other that is not being satisfied. All these things affect his spiritual life. Only by facing them in silence, and sharing them with God can he deal with them. Only then can he offer them to God to be redeemed. Only then can he be made whole.

We need quiet to listen to God. For He does care about us, inconceivable as that is to us sometimes. If we are serious about our relationship with God, then we will be serious about silence. It is a means for us to be with God.