

THE IMPORTANCE OF SILENCE

By St. Alphonsus de Liguori

Note: The importance of Silence cannot be stressed enough in our day of frequent distraction and noise, for God does not speak to us in such things but in silence as “in a gentle breeze is the Lord heard.” (3 Kings 19:12-14).

[Extracted from The True Spouse of Jesus Christ by St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, Doctor of the Church]

[Although written for religious sisters the benefit for those living in the world cannot be overstated.]

CHAPTER XVI

SILENCE, SOLITUDE, AND THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

[Only the section on Silence is here presented]

CASSIAN says: "The religious prays little who prays only when she is on her knees in the choir or in the cell." (1) To fulfil the obligations of her state, a religious should keep her soul continually united with God; but to maintain this constant union, continual prayer is necessary. There are three means of acquiring the habit of continual prayer; namely, silence, solitude, and the presence of God. These were the means that the angel suggested to St. Arsenius when he said: "If you wish to be saved, fly into solitude, observe silence, and repose in God by always keeping yourself in his presence." (2) We shall speak of each of these means separately.

I. Silence.

In the first place, silence is a great means of acquiring the spirit of prayer, and of disposing the soul to converse continually with God. We rarely find a spiritual soul that speaks much. All souls of prayer are lovers of silence that is called the guardian of innocence, the shield against temptations, and the fountain of prayer. For by silence devotion is preserved, and in silence good thoughts spring up in the soul. St. Bernard says: "Silence and the absence of noise in a certain manner force the soul to think of God and of eternal goods." (3) Hence, the saints fled to the mountains, to caves, and to deserts, in order to find this silence, and escape the tumults of the world, in which, as was said to Elias, God is not found. (3 Kings, xix. 11) Theodosius the monk observed silence for thirty-five years. St. John the Silent, who gave up his bishopric and became a monk, observed silence for forty-seven years before his death; and all the saints, even they who were not solitaries, have been lovers of silence. Oh, how great the blessings that silence brings to the soul! The prophet says that silence shall cultivate justice in the soul; (Isaias, xxxii. 17) for, on the one hand, it saves us from a multitude of sins by destroying the root of disputes, of detractions, of resentments, and of curiosity; and on the other, it makes us acquire many virtues. How well does the nun practise humility who when others speak listens with modesty and in silence! How well does she practise mortification by not yielding to her inclination or desire to tell a certain anecdote, or to use a witty expression suggested by the conversation! How well does she practise meekness by remaining silent when unjustly censured or offended! Hence the same holy prophet said: In silence and in hope shall be your strength. (Isaias xxx. 15) Your strength shall be in silence and in hope; for by silence we shun the occasions of sin, and by hope we obtain the divine aid to lead a holy life.

But, on the other hand, immense evils flow from speaking too much. In the first place, as devotion is preserved by silence, so it is lost by a multitude of words. However recollected the soul may have been in prayer, if it afterwards indulge in long discourses it will find the mind as distracted and dissipated as if it had not made meditation. Besides, the Holy Ghost tells us that in speaking too much we shall not fail to commit some fault. In the multitude of words they shall not want sin. (Prov, x. 19) While they speak and prolong conversation without necessity, certain persons think that they are not guilty of any defect; but if they carefully examine themselves they will find some fault against modesty, of detraction, of curiosity, or at least of superfluous words. St. Mary Magdalene Pazzi used to say that a religious should

speaking only through necessity. For religious are bound in a special manner to give an account of idle words, for which, according to our Saviour, all men shall have to render account. But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall account for it in the day of judgment." (Matt, xii. 36)

I have used the words to some defect; but when we speak too much we shall find that we have committed a thousand faults. St. James has called the tongue a universal evil: The tongue is . . . a world of iniquity. (James iii.6) For, as a learned author remarks, the greater number of sins arise from speaking or from listening to others. Alas! how many nuns shall we see condemned on the day of judgment, on account of having had but little regard for silence! And what is most to be deplored is, that the religious that dissipates her mind by intercourse with creatures, and by too much speaking, will never be able to see her defects, and thus she will go from bad to worse. A man full of tongue shall not be established in the earth. (Ps, xxxix. 12) The man that speaks too much shall walk without a guide, and therefore he shall fall into a thousand mistakes without the hope of ever perceiving them. Such a religious appears as if unable to live without speaking continually from morning till evening. She wishes to know what happens in the monastery and in the world; she goes about asking questions from all the others, and afterwards says, What evil am I doing? I answer you, dearly beloved sister, put an end to idle talk; endeavor to recollect yourself a little and you will see how many defects you have committed by the multitude of your words.

St. Joseph Calasanz used to say "that a dissipated religious is a source of joy to the devil." And justly, for by her dissipation she not only does not attend to her own sanctification, but is also an obstacle to the advancement of others, by going about the monastery in search of some one to converse with her, by speaking in a loud voice in every place, and by a want of reverence, even in the choir and sacristy. St. Ambrose relates that a certain priest, while at prayer, was disturbed by the cries of a multitude of frogs: he commanded them to be silent, and they instantly obeyed. The holy Doctor then took occasion to say: "Shall senseless animals, then, be silent through respect for prayer, and shall men not be silent?" (5) And I add, will religious refuse to practise silence, after having entered the monastery in order to become saints, to observe their Rule, and to maintain holy recollection; or will they perform the office of the devil, by disturbing their sisters who wish to pray, and to be recollected with God? A certain author justly calls such talkative nuns "the home devils of monasteries," who do great injury to the Community.

According to St. Ignatius of Loyola, to know if there is fervor in a convent, it is enough to ascertain whether silence is observed or violated. A monastery in which the sisters speak continually is an image of hell; for where there is not silence there must be continual disputes, detractions, complaints, particular friendships, and factions. But, on the other hand, a monastery in which the religious love silence is an image of paradise: it excites devotion not only in all who live in it, but also in those who live in the world. It is related by Father Perez, of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, that while a secular he entered one day into a house of the Order, and was so edified and filled with devotion by the silence of the brethren, that he renounced the world and remained in the convent. Father Natalis, of the Society of Jesus, used to say, that to reform a religious house it is enough to establish in it the observance of silence. Because each of the religious would then practise recollection, and would attend to his own advancement. Hence, also, Gerson says that the holy founders of religious Orders have prescribed and earnestly recommended silence to their religious, because they knew how important its observance is for the maintenance of fervor. In his rules for nuns, St. Basil insists, not once, but frequently, on silence. St. Benedict commanded his monks to endeavor to observe continual silence. (6)

And experience shows that in the monastery in which silence is observed, discipline is maintained; and on the other hand, where silence is neglected, but little fervor is found. Hence few religious become saints, because few love silence. In many monasteries the rule of silence is prescribed by the written rules, and is strongly recommended; but some of the religious appear not to know what silence is, and therefore they unhappily live in dissipation, without fervor, and always in trouble. But, dear sister, do not imagine that the negligence of others will excuse or exempt you from the rule of silence. Blessed Clare of Montefalco used to say that in the time of silence it is difficult to speak without committing a fault.

Some one may excuse herself, saying, that it is sometimes necessary to speak in order to get rid of melancholy; but how can the violation of silence free a religious from melancholy? Let us be persuaded that all the creatures on earth or in heaven cannot console us in our afflictions. God alone is the author of consolation; but will he console us at the very time we offend him? But when there is any necessity for speaking in the time of silence, at least ask permission. Another religious does not seek occasions to speak, but as often as they are presented she allows herself to be led into breaches of silence by others who wish to speak. But her condescension will certainly not excuse her from the fault. It is necessary, then, to do violence to yourself, and to go away, or to remain silent, and sometimes by putting the finger on the mouth to make a sign that it is a time of silence.

And even out of the hours of silence endeavor to practise it as much as possible if you wish to keep yourself recollected with God and free from imperfections; for there is no sin more easily committed than sins of tongue. He, says Solomon, that keepeth his mouth keepeth his soul. (Prov, xiii. 3) And St. James says that he who sins not with the tongue is a perfect man: If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man. (James, iii. 2) Hence it is the same thing to be a silent religious and a holy religious; for by observing silence she will be punctual to the rules, she will be devoted to prayer, to spiritual reading, and to her visits to the Holy Sacrament. Oh, how dear to God does the religious render herself who loves silence! (7) By silence we learn to consider well what we shall afterwards say. But for a religious who wishes to become a saint, what is the time for silence and the time for speaking? The hours of silence for her are all the hours in which there is no necessity for speaking. The time for speaking is when necessity or charity obliges her to speak. Behold the excellent rule of St. John Chrysostom: "Then only should we speak when it is more useful to speak than to be silent." (8) Hence the saint gives the following advice: "Either remain silent, or say what is more profitable than silence." (9) Oh! happy he who at death can say what the monk Pambo said: "That he did not remember to have ever uttered a word which he was sorry for having spoken." (10) St. Arsenius used to say that he often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent. (11) St. Ephrem gave this excellent lesson to religious: "Speak a great deal with God, and little with men." (12) St. Mary Magdalene de Pazzi used to say the same: "The true servant of Jesus Christ bears all things; she labors much, and speaks little."

From all that has been said, every religious that wishes to live in union with God may see with what care she should shun the parlor. As the air that is breathed in the choir or in the cell is the most salubrious for religious, so the air of the grates is for them the most pestiferous. And what is the parlor but what St. Mary Magdalene de Pazzi called it, a place of distractions, inquietudes, and of temptations. The Venerable Sister Mary Villani one day compelled the devil, on the part of God, to tell in what part of the monastery he gained most. The tempter answered: I gain in the choir, in the refectory, and in the dormitory: in these places I partly gain, and partly lose. But in the parlor gain all, for the whole place is mine, Hence the Venerable Sister Philippa Cerrina had reason to call the parlor an infected place, in which the contagion of sin is easily caught. St. Bernardine of Sienna relates that a religious in consequence of having heard in the parlor an improper word miserably fell into a grievous sin. Truly happy was the holy virgin St. Fabronia, who afterwards gave her life for the faith at the age of nineteen; she would never allow herself to be seen at the grate by any secular, male or female. St. Teresa appeared after death to one of her spiritual children, and said to her: The religious that wishes to be a great friend of God must be an enemy of the grate.

Would to God that in all monasteries there were grates of perforated iron such as we find in some observant convents! A certain author relates that the Superior of a monastery procured a narrow grate; but the devil, through rage, first bent it, and afterwards sent it rolling through the house. The good Superior placed it, crooked as it was, in the parlor to give the nuns to understand that as the grate was hateful to hell so it was pleasing to God. Oh! what an awful account will the abbess have to give to God who introduces open grates, or who neglects to make the companions attend. In one of her letters St. Teresa wrote this great sentence: "The grates when shut are the gates of heaven; and when open they are the gates of danger" (she did not wish to say hell). And she added: "A monastery of nuns in which there is liberty serves to conduct them to hell rather than to cure their weakness."

What rapid progress in divine love does the religious make who resolves never to go to the grate! When you, dear sister, go to the parlor, be careful at least to conduct yourself like a religious. In your intercourse with seculars you should not only guard with great care against all affectionate expressions, but should also be very grave and reserved in the parlor. St. Mary Magdalene de Pazzi wished her nuns to be "like the wild deer" —these are her very words. And the Venerable Sister Hyacinth Marescotti used to say: "The courtesy of nuns consists in being discourteous by cutting short all long discourses in the parlor." This applies, ordinarily speaking, to long discourses even with spiritual persons.

Mother Anne of Jesus, a Discalced Carmelite, said: "A nun acquires more fervor in the choir or in the cell than by the longest conferences in the parlor. Show all respect to directors, but you should treat with them only through necessity; despatch your business with them in a few words."

Should you ever happen to hear in the parlor an indecent word, go away immediately; or, at least, cast down your eyes, and change the discourse, or give no answer. In a monastery of the Venerable Sister Seraphina de Carpi two women began to speak about a certain marriage: the attendant at the turn heard the voice of Sister Seraphina (who was dead) saying, "Chase away, chase away these women." And whenever it is in your power, endeavor to change all discourses that savor of the world. St. Frances of Rome received a buffet from an angel because she did not change the conversation of certain ladies who spoke of worldly vanities. You should be still more careful to observe silence with your sisters in the monastery: for the occasion of breaking silence with them is more continual. Hence it is necessary to mortify curiosity. The Abbot John used to say: "Let him who wishes to restrain the tongue shut his ears by mortifying the curiosity of hearing news." It is also necessary to avoid the conversation of any religious who speaks frequently. It is, moreover, well to fix some time each day during which you will observe silence, remaining alone in your cell or in some solitary place in order to avoid the occasions of speaking. Whenever you have to speak, be careful, in conformity with the advice of the Holy Ghost, Make a balance for thy words, (Ecclus, xxviii. 29) to examine what you ought to say. Make a balance for your words that you may weigh them before you give expression to them. Hence St. Bernard says that "before your words come to the tongue, let them pass twice under the file of examination," (13) that you may suppress what you should not utter. The same was said by St. Francis de Sales in other words, namely, that to speak without sin every one should keep a lock on his lips, that in opening his mouth to speak he might reflect well on what he wishes to say.

Before speaking you should consider—

1. Whether what you intend to say can injure charity, modesty, or exact observance.
2. Examine the motive that impels you to speak; for it sometimes happens that what a person says is good, but her intention is bad; she speaks either to appear spiritual, or to acquire a character for talent.
3. Examine to whom you speak, whether to your Superiors, to companions, or to inferiors: whether in the presence of seculars, or of the postulants, who may perhaps be scandalized at what you say.
4. At recreation, which is the proper time for unbending the mind, speak when the others are silent, but endeavor as often as you can to speak on something that has reference to God. "Let us speak of the Lord Jesus," says St. Ambrose, "let us always speak of him." (15) And what other enjoyment should a religious seek than to speak of her most amiable Spouse? He who has an ardent love for another, appears unable to speak of anything but of him. They who speak little of Jesus Christ, show that they have but little love for Jesus Christ. On the other hand, it often happens that good religious, after speaking on divine love, feel more fervor than after mental prayer. At the conversations of the servants of God, says St. Teresa, Jesus Christ is always present. Of this, Father Gisolfo, of the Congregation of the "Pious Workers," relates a memorable example, in the life of the Venerable Father Anthony de Collelis. He says that Father Constantine Rossi, the Master of novices, saw one day two of his young disciples, F. D. Anthony Torres, and F. D. Philip Orilia, conversing together, and with them a young man of most beautiful aspect. The Master of novices was surprised that two novices, whom he regarded as most exemplary, should speak to a stranger without permission: he therefore asked who was the young man whom he had seen conversing with them. They said there was no one conversing with them. But he afterwards learned that they were speaking of Jesus Christ, and understood that the person whom he saw in their company was our divine Saviour.

Except in the hours of recreation, and other extraordinary occasions, such as in attending the sick or in consoling a sister in tribulation, it is always better to be silent. A religious of the Order of St. Teresa, as we find in the Teresian Chronicles, said that it is better to speak with God than to speak of God. But when obedience or charity obliges you to speak, or to have intercourse with creatures, you must always endeavor to find intervals, for at least repairing the losses caused by the distractions attendant on these external occupations; stealing at least as many little moments as possible to recollect yourself with God; thus following the counsel of the Holy Ghost: Let not the part of a good gift overpass thee. (Ecclus, xiv. 14) Do not allow that particle of time to pass away: give it to God, if you can have no more to give him during the day. But whenever you can abridge the conversation, abridge it under some pretext. A good religious seeks not pretexts, as some do, to prolong conversation, but endeavors to find out some means of shortening it. Let us remember that time is given us not to be spent unprofitably, but to be employed for God, and in acquiring merits for eternity. St. Bernardine of Sienna used to say that a moment of time is of as much value as God, because in each moment we can gain his friendship, or greater degrees of grace.

Prayer.

O my God, may the patience with which Thou hast borne me be forever blessed.

Thou hast given me time to love Thee, and I have spent it in offending and displeasing Thee.

Were I now to die, with what heartfelt pain should I end my life, at the thought of having spent so many years in the world, and of having done nothing.

Lord, I thank Thee for still giving me time to repair my negligence, and so many lost years.

O my Jesus! through the merits of Thy Passion assist me.

I do not wish to live any longer for myself, but only for Thee, and for Thy love.

I know not how much of life remains, whether it is long or short; but were it a hundred or a thousand years, I wish to spend them all in loving and pleasing Thee.

I love Thee, O my Sovereign Good, and I hope to love Thee for eternity.

I do not wish to be ever again ungrateful to Thee.

I will no longer resist Thy love, which has so long called me to be entirely Thine.

Shall I wait till Thou abandon me, and call me no more?

Mary, my mother, assist me, pray for me, and obtain for me perseverance in my resolution to be faithful to God.

Notes referenced in the text:

1 "Perparum orat, quisquis, illo tantum tempore quo genua flectuntur, orare consuevit." –Collat. 10, c. 14

2 "Si vis salvus esse, fuge, tace et quiesce." –Vit. Patr. 1. 3, n. 190.

3 "Silentium, et a strepitu quies, cogit coelestia meditari." –Epist. 78

4 "Cave a multiloquio; hoc enim sanctas cogitationes extinguit." –Doctr. 24

5 "Silent igitur paludes; hominibus non silebunt?" –De Virgin. 1. 3

6 "Omni tempore silentio debent studere monachi." –Reg. c. 42

7 "Per silentium disci, quod postea proferatur."

8 "Tunc solum loquendum est, quando plus proficit quam silentium." –In Ps. cxl

9 "Aut tace, aut dic meliora silentio."

10 Prac. of perf. p. 2, tr. 2, ch. 8

11 "Me saepe poenituit dixisse, nunquam tacuisse." –Surius, 19 Jul

12 "Cum Deo, multis; cum hominibus, paucis loquere." –Encom. in Ps.

13 "Bis ad limam veniant verba, quam semel ad linguam." –Punct. perf. 7

14 Spec. disc. p. I, c. 31

15 "Loquamur Dominum Jesum, ipsum semper loquamur." –In Ps. xxxvi.

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