

The twelve degrees of Silence

Silence is the profound activity of attentive love.

If spiritual life calls us progressively to silence around and within us, it is to make us enter into God's own Being where a constant dialogue of love is experienced between the Father and Jesus, his beloved Son. Silence, therefore, becomes a way of attaining this goal, a tool that facilitates our entry, a road that purifies us.

There is what we call « the asceticism of silence ». To be silent is not something easy. There are obstacles outside as well as within us. Even if silence is precious to monastic life, we must tame it first of all in our daily lives, make it part of our being, choose it and maintain it with efforts and perseverance. For if we seek to establish our dwelling in God, we must realize that God establishes His dwelling within us. Silence, therefore, becomes an encounter between God and ourselves. It is also a journey within ourselves that purifies our being by uniting it with God.

Sister Marie-Aimée of Jesus, a Carmelite from Paris, understood the role of interior silence that she divided into twelve degrees, in parallel with the twelve degrees of humility in the Rule of St. Benedict. Let us enumerate them and comment each one briefly :

1. Silence of the word
2. Silence of movements or action
3. Silence of the imagination
4. Silence of the memory
5. Silence to the creatures
6. Silence of the heart or of feelings
7. Silence of humility or self-love
8. Silence of the spirit or of intelligence
9. Silence of judgment
10. Silence of the will
11. Silence with one's self
12. Silence with God



1st, 2nd and 3rd degrees

Silence of the word

« The persons who really say something are not very numerous;
those who listen are scarcer still.

All words are vain
when they are not ripened within ourselves
with Love's consent. »

Maurice Zundel

In our era of communication, we are asking ourselves if we are not saturated with words. In order that a word be meaningful, it must gush forth from our inner depths to be received in the deep regions of another person. If we are already filled with an abundance of words, won't a creative word fall by the wayside of our heart and be easily forgotten, ignored or misunderstood? To be silent in words allows us to be open to the Word of the Father, Jesus: Word of Life, of Truth and of Freedom.

The Silence of action

To pause in order to better understand the meaning of our actions; to avoid being submerged and distracted by an abundance of things to do; to discern our motivations hidden in our activities and to know how to choose what is essential. For the danger is always there to let ourselves be carried away by our precipitation and neglect love. The frenzy of the present moment hides us from a profound and free awareness of the meaning of life, by making us « surf » on the wave of our being. The silence of action allows us to discern where God wants us now for the good of our surroundings and of society.

For the monk, the silence of action is also an awareness of ones actions, it is living the present moment which contributes to ones inner calm and to the silence of the monastery by making as little noise as possible.

The Silence of the imagination

In a world where dreams, the unreal, cyberspace proliferate in abundance, the influence of ones imagination is strong. Marketing often uses human aspirations to happiness to make us *imagine* and *dream* about things. But the foundations suggested for this kind of happiness are often too materialistic and temporal; this does not satisfy the human heart aspiring for the infinite.

To create the silence of the imagination is to take root in the reality of our lives. Yes, we need aspirations to make us move forth; but they must be founded on reality and on the deep meaning of human values. Our imagination can become a refuge to escape existential emptiness. When it is purified and free, the imagination can become the source of great creativity, in the image of God's own creativeness. To create the universe, God needed a lot of imagination; to build a just and fraternal world, we also need a lot of the same.

4th, 5th and 6th degrees

The Silence of the memory

The memory : indispensable faculty for the continuity of existence! Without it, we would have to learn over and over again how to dress, wash, brush our teeth, walk, etc... Thanks to our memory, we can use all these daily activities and advance in other learning processes. Memory is very much related to intelligence; it conserves and recalls the meaning of our lives. It keeps watch over the unity and continuity of our past, our present and our future.

Memory is also a faculty that forgets and that is a good thing. Among all the words we hear, all the experiences we go through, all that goes on around us, it knows how to discern what we must keep. But it discards some things for we would be submerged by too much information that would be more confusing than helpful.

The memory also needs the imagination in order to remember. To cause the memory to be silent allows us to remember our moments with God and to conserve the graces. We must practice in leaving the history of God take over our own.

The Silence to the creatures

How much time do we take in conversing interiorly either with others or with ourselves? After an encounter, we often rerun it as a « film » in our heads; and if there is something we have not said, we add it to the scenario or we remove what we did not like. This is a good example of the use we make of our memory and of our imagination.

We use it as much for an encounter that already took place, therefore in the past, as for an encounter to come, therefore in the future. This can be useful either for integration or to prepare us, but if we spend too much time on it, we forget to live in the present. It is sometimes useful to silence these interior conversations if they make us go around in circles.

The Silence of the heart or of feelings



The heart is a place where all types of emotions reside. It is also the place where desire takes root, where love flows like a source. The heart is filled with affections and tenderness. It is the community centre of our being.

To silence our heart allows us to purify ourselves of all unhealthy attachments. That is, those that make us prisoners and close us on ourselves. The heart is extremely sensitive and deep, almost « bottomless ». If we do not keep an eye on it, we can be led blindly into traps that can injure us instead of helping us mature.

The deepest desire of the heart is one of recognition of our human dignity. When we have value in the eyes of others, our existence finds meaning and fulfilment. Since our existence finds its beginning in the heart of God the Father, only his love can fully quench our thirst of finding our meaning in life. It is then important to receive from him our dignity.

7th, 8th and 9th degrees

The Silence of humility and of self love

We all need to be « proud » of ourselves; to feel personal satisfaction following an accomplishment. This « interior contentment » builds up self esteem and self confidence, by becoming aware of our capacities, our possibilities, our strengths. But if we *continually* await this recognition from others, if we use our talents to obtain admiration, consideration or praise, this fosters self love. We become more concentrated on what we receive than on what we give. And this prevents us from really opening up to others. On the contrary : it weakens our being instead of opening it up and allowing it to grow.

We must accept our limitations, our impotence and sometimes even our misery. It is part of our make up. Saint Theresa of the Infant Jesus used to say : « *Humility is being lovely aware of our misery.* » When we realize that we are loved in spite of our weaknesses, sadness or the discouragement felt at seeing our dark areas, everything is transformed into light and interior freedom. We take ourselves less seriously and become all the more merciful.

The Silence of the spirit or of intelligence

A human being is defined by his intelligence, his ability to think, to reflect, to reason. And intelligence is defined by the ability to know and to understand. « *Who has directed the spirit of the Lord or has instructed him as his counselor?* » (Is 40,3). God surpasses out intelligence, His *grandeur* goes beyond our reasonings.

At a certain moment during our journey in faith, the intelligence falls into a profound silence. It recognizes that it has reached the end of what it can know about God through ideas and concepts. During this period, the intelligence accepts to receive a much deeper knowledge acquired through experiencing the love of God, for example, through daily life. The idea or concept of God's love incarnates itself in many countless ways. The role of the intelligence is then transformed into identifying or recognizing God's manifestations. And most often the enlightenment is provided from God himself for it is of spiritual matter.

The Silence of judgment

The judgment is an act of the intelligence. But quite often, we judge causes and persons in an unintelligent manner. Today, it is a journalistic fashion to ask everyone and anyone their opinion on different topics. Are we really capable of answering these questions, often beyond our daily reality and capacity to truly know what they entail?

The foundation of judgment is truth and God himself is Truth. Outside of him, our judgments are incomplete, for what we see of reality is incomplete. To silence our judgment is to accept that we are not able to grasp all the truth of what is asked and to accept that God alone is able to judge « correctly » for the good of all. That is why the attribute « righteousness » is acquainted to « justice ».

10th, 11th and 12th degrees

The Silence of the will

If intelligence seeks « truth », the will seeks what is « good ». We all search for happiness, pursuing it in all our actions without giving it any thought. The will is like a motor. As long as it does not seek the « Supreme Good » that is God, the will remains prisoner of temporal attractions.

The more our will desires the « good » that God wants for us, the more it becomes free. This freedom is acquired through successive detachments of what is not conform to God's Will, which at times can be quite painful. But when we understand that God's Will is motivated by his love for us, conforming ourselves to his Will becomes much more easier. A time comes when a single attitude silences our own will : a holy abandonment letting aside all the *ifs*, *buts* or *whys*.

All this is the work of interior obedience. It is a question of the will giving in, allowing itself to be purified by exterior and interior trials in order to allow oneself to be united with the heart of God, wanting what He wants. In other words, unite our « two » wills into ONE; it is the principle motive of love.

The Silence with one's self

There are stages in human life where we can sense that we are dying to something in order to open up to something new that is unsuspected. In spiritual life, it is the stage during which we become *a grain of wheat sown in the earth and dying to one's self* in order to become the seed it contains. This stage is related to the Passion and death of Christ on the Cross containing already the signs of the Resurrection.

The silence with one's self is to forget ourselves, remaining completely alone with God. *« The soul is simplified through progressive detachment of self and of all awareness of personal needs, of all attention to its present situation. God constantly draws it within and separates it from all exterior objects. He gradually removes all consideration of itself and of what is happening to itself; to the point where it no longer knows how it is, no longer thinks about itself, is no longer preoccupied by it and carefully rejects all thoughts that would concern itself, in order that God may become its sole preoccupation. »* Fr. Grou

The Silence with God

The asceticism of silence normally attains the mysticism of silence. There is a correspondence of our work with the work of the Holy Spirit within us. It is only in complete silence that our being, in a kind of mysterious sleep, can receive God himself. Having no longer any obstacles to overcome, he communicates directly from his Heart to our heart through the flames of his Love. It is a real communion from heart to heart.

To be silent with God is to be complacent in the beauty of his Being. It is giving our approval to his works, saying « yes » to his Will by the offering of ourselves to him and with him. When we have been detached from all senses, images, memories, activities of the intelligence, movements of the will, in brief, everything that is attached to the « ego », our being is simplified and can now nourish itself through the contemplation of God. A new world unwrappes itself to us, the key of accessibility being the capacity to listen to God's Word speaking to us through his Son, Jesus Christ.