

MISSION: Prayer 9

“The Sound of Silence”

Have you ever noticed - or heard - that children like everything loud? The television has to be loud enough for the neighbors to enjoy the program. The music has to be loud enough for the previous owner of the home (sadly, deceased) to hear it. I was the same way, of course. And when I was a kid it always drove me nuts that adults were constantly "shushing" me. After being "shushed" several times during an especially long homily at Mass, a four-year-old boy finally had enough. Pointing to the loquacious priest he loudly inquired, "How come Jesus gets to talk and I don't?"

While kids are particularly fond of the highest of decibels, the truth is few of us actually crave silence. We "shush" children so that we can hear something else we actually prefer, not silence. More often than not, we want to hear the radio, television, iPad, smartphone, another person - the list goes on and on.

In this day and age, we are conditioned for distraction and noise. It greets us at every turn. Images incessantly assault us. Music or chatter greets us at the grocery store, the mall, even the gas station. Noise constantly surrounds us, even when we aren't actively listening. You'd be hard-pressed to find an elevator not piping in a bad orchestral version of the Backstreet Boys or Bon Jovi. I was once even forced to endure "Muskrat Love" in an airport bathroom. (If that's not grounds for a lawsuit, I don't know what is.)

Why does society feel the need for constant diversion and noise? It's pretty simple, actually. Silence is scary. It makes us uncomfortable. Have you ever caught yourself getting annoyed or even anxious when technical or human error causes the dreaded "dead air" on the radio? You rush to change the station and breathe freely only after the silence has been broken. The pumping bass or the dulcet tones of yet another golden-throated deejay salve our angst and calm our spirits.

In silence we're confronted with ourselves. You could go so far as to say that silence puts us to the test. Free of distraction, it forces us to peer inside and be honest. I once read of a famous spiritual director who made anyone coming to see him spend an hour in an adoration chapel without any reading materials or other diversion. God did the heavy lifting for him.

Unfortunately, the modern world has no time or tolerance for silence. In a utilitarian universe obsessed with production and exploitation of resources, silence is of little value. How do you use it? What can you do with it? Who wants to pay for it? In the eyes of the world, silence is a "holy useless-ness," says French philosopher Max Picard.

One of our problems is a tendency to view silence as an absence of anything. But silence isn't a "nothing." Silence is the reality into which sound invades. It's always present underneath the noise. I love a line from Picard, who wrote, "Silence towers above all the puny world of noise; but as a living animal, not an extinct species, it lies in wait, and we can still see its broad back sinking ever deeper among the briars and bushes of the world of noise."⁴⁴ Loud though the world may be, we'll never be able to fully drown out silence. Like God, it had no beginning and has no end. "It is like uncreated, everlasting Being."

And silence is sacred. That's why most people immediately lower their voices or stop speaking altogether when entering a beautiful church. The knowledge of who dwells there demands awe and reverence, which naturally translates into silence. Even the most beautiful piece of classical music is normally out of place in an adoration chapel. Silence is required to recollect ourselves and enter undistracted into God's presence. It's necessary to quiet the exterior noise that is always threatening to drown out our interior lives.

Silent Movies

From the moment I entered the dormitory my first year of college back in the eighties, I was amazed at the level of noise. In fact, one of the first scenes I witnessed in my new "home" was two freshman boys karate-fighting up and down my hallway while a yellow boombox blared the theme song "You're the Best" from *The Karate Kid*. It still gets me pumped up. Only now it's all about motivation for hand-to-hand combat with the laundry as opposed to fighting a fictional member of the Cobra Kai dojo.

While eighteen-year-old boys (one with a thin leather tie around his forehead) duking it out to loud music before classes even started is somewhat understandable, actually studying amid the cacophony of television shows or

eighties arena rock always vexed me. Worse yet, students took pride in possessing the loudest stereo and were constantly seeking opportunities to prove it.

Not that I didn't enjoy turning The Outfield up to eleven every now and then, but the constant blare of loud music eventually becomes a battering ram knocking down the walls of sanity. I was once driven to physically threaten a hall mate who insisted on repeating The Eurythmics "Here Comes the Rain Again" as loud as his stereo could go for over twenty-four straight hours because he swore someone stole money from his room while that song was playing. He mistakenly believed it would drive the thief crazy enough to return the money. It turned out the thief lived in a different wing and didn't share my anguish over having a good song forever destroyed.

How in the world can a person even think in that kind of environment? I couldn't. That's why I almost had to resort to physical action. I couldn't take it anymore. My "sweet dreams" were not "made of this." It was a nightmare. Of course, trying to do your homework enveloped in noise is one thing. Trying to pray surrounded by noise and distraction is quite another.

We've already noted the importance of recollection when entering into prayer. Quiet is a necessity if we're going to put ourselves in the presence of God. "The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son," says John of the Cross, "and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul."⁴⁶

But silence is something more than no sound. We must quiet our interior selves, too. If you haven't noticed, our minds love to wander all over the universe even when we're "quiet." Distraction from within is just as problematic as exterior disturbance. St. Teresa says to just laugh at distractions and give them back to God as part of prayer, but it's better if we're never distracted in the first place. That's why silence must be cultivated in every area of life. This doesn't mean you have to move into Maxwell Smart's "Cone of Silence" for the rest of your life. But it does mean reigning in your consumption of the world in general terms. Interior quiet isn't a switch you can flip (or a cone you can lower) any old time you want.

The sights and sounds we take in are food for the imagination. It's vitally important we guard what we allow to enter it. It's hard enough to focus when innocent

distractions abound. It's downright impossible to move into the presence of God if your mind is picking through the trash you recently dumped in. Of course, it doesn't just stay inside. As the old saying goes: garbage in, garbage out.

Enough Said

The Letter of James in the New Testament scares me to death. It's the primary reason I took James as my confirmation name. He keeps me on the straight and narrow. Right from the get-go he's lobbing bombs in my direction. Even when I'm able to avoid the explosions, he still manages to get me, poking me in the eye with a verse like: "If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain" (Jas 1:26). Never have I wanted someone so right to be so wrong.

As a participation in the divine life of God, our spiritual life is of a delicate nature. Even "small" venial sins (there's nothing actually small about any sin) can snuff out our fervor or derail our ascent to God. And there's no easier sin than saying something we shouldn't. Not controlling our tongue is one of the fastest ways to regress in the spiritual life.

One of the reasons James speaks so forcefully about our tongues is they're a great indicator of what's inside of us. "You brood of vipers! how can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt 12:34). Imperfections make themselves known in what we say. If we think lustful thoughts, it comes out in lewd speech. If we're envious of another person, we'll start to backstab. If we're angry, look out!

When we can actually tame the little monster in our mouth, it's a pretty fair indication we're practicing virtue in other areas of life. But since "the tongue is a fire ... full of deadly poison," this is all easier said than done (see Jas 3:6-8). History shows some people went to great lengths to avoid sins of the tongue. One of the reasons the Desert Fathers fled society was so they could stop talking. After all, it's kind of hard to speak poorly of people when there are none.

But what are the rest of us to do? Is everyone who lives in a city with more than a population of one in danger? The short answer is "yes." The long answer is, "Don't give up because there's hope." That's what grace is for.

Hush Up

Don't get the wrong idea about what I'm saying regarding the danger of speech. To talk is human. In fact, our ability to speak is one of humanity's distinguishing features. We use our tongues to communicate ideas, as well as to praise and pray to God. And, frankly, my total silence around the house would likely engender more than a few choice words from my wife. Even worse, she might stop talking herself - the dreaded "silent treatment."

God created the world through speech, and the Word of God was proclaimed verbally long before it was written down. The celebration of the liturgy needs words, too. Can you imagine a priest resorting to shadow puppets for his homily? Let's all take a moment and pray that never happens.

James says "bridle" your tongue, not cut it off (see Jas 1:26). We have to talk. If everyone stopped speaking, the unemployment lines would be full of mimes! (Hmmm. On second thought...) Rather than a total negation of speech, silence is a means to help us put our tongue to right use, something that remains a problem for most of us.

While it's obvious we must speak at appropriate times, it's more obvious that a lot of what we say should not be said. Much of our speech is motivated by pride, vanity, jealousy, anger, and a host of other bad things. How easily we slip into gossip when talking about another person. How delicious to thrust the knife of slander into someone's back. (A much better visual than backbiting.) For some reason we believe cutting someone else down to size will elevate our stature, while it only lowers our standing with God.

Even when not denigrating someone else, excessive talking can be problematic. Many of us love to chat. We desire to be the person with "breaking news" that others haven't yet heard. It gives us a sense of superiority and control that is nothing but selfish and egotistical. It's hard to escape this wicked satisfaction even when we're trying to help someone by providing new information or knowledge. Pride is a cruel taskmaster and rarely comes "in the name of love," regardless of what the band U2 sings.

Incorrect use of the tongue - and I don't mean licking a metal pole in winter - not only damages us but can easily cause others to fall, too. We love to set people up to get a response we desire. How simple it is to say something we know will elicit a negative comment from our companion. Even a question as innocuous as "Guess who called again?" is a problem when you know you're setting the other person up to roll his eyes and launch into sinful speech. Don't forget that Jesus said, "Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come!" (Lk 17:1).

Those are scary words. But they're not the scariest. If I had to pick one verse out of the Bible that always makes me shudder it would be Matthew 12:36. Jesus says, "I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter." I don't know about you, but I've said some ridiculous things in my life for which I would much prefer to shake the eternal Etch-A-Sketch and start over. What are we supposed to do? How do we tame the beast? (Join me now in breast-beating.)

The solution is supremely simple, yet devastatingly difficult. Stop talking. Hush up as much as possible. Even when your emotions are running amok and you feel the need to lash out, think twice. In fact, think three times. Generally speaking, it's best to get control and put a sock in it. Oftentimes emotions lose their force if you don't express them. Mortify your tongue as you would your taste for chocolate or beer during Lent. Talking can lead to sinful satisfaction - deny yourself the opportunity. God gave us a tongue to glorify him.

Too often we simply glorify ourselves. As Mama always said, "If you can't say something good, don't say anything at all." Of course, this is all pretty rich coming from a guy who makes his living in part by speaking to thousands of people every year. And it's a pretty solid bet that speech is necessary for the rest of you, too. But silence can be maintained even when speaking if we follow the "golden rule" of Father Leen:

The rule is, never to speak merely for one's own sake or for one's own gratification, or to satisfy some impulse, but solely for the glory of God, for the right accomplishment of duty, for the promotion of truth, for the exercise of charity, for the comfort of the sorrowful and for the purpose of brightening the day of one's

fellows. That's a lot to remember, so until I can, I'll probably just try to shut up. But note that silence isn't a virtue in and of itself. Otherwise, mimes would be the holiest people on earth. (Yes, I have a problem with mimes.) Silence becomes virtuous when it is intended to boost control over our interior lives. It's meant to help us gain command over our crazy imaginations and unpredictable feelings so we can grow. St. John of the Cross said: "What is most necessary for our advancement is to silence our appetites and our tongue. The language He [God] understands the best is the silence of love."

True silence suffers, says St. Paul, when we are distracted from "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious ... anything worthy of praise" (Phil 4:8). Essentially, silence is recollection applied to speech. And it's a necessary habit if we're going to grow in Christ, who, after all, practiced this spirit of quietness.

Scripture says Jesus regularly escaped to the quiet of the wilderness to be alone with his Father (see Lk 5:16; 6:12). That's how important silence was to his deep life of prayer. And in the Gospel of Luke we read that he stayed up all night in prayer before choosing his apostles (6:12-13). In fact, prayer in solitude is how he kicked off his entire public ministry - the Holy Spirit "*drove* him out into the wilderness" after his baptism where he spent forty days and nights in solitude (Mk 1:12).

So ask yourself: If the incarnate Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity needed to be quiet with God, doesn't it make sense we should, too? Enough said.