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Contemplative Outreach Trinidad

Saturday, September 30, 2017

The Power of Silence in Our World

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The Holy One is here

Come bow before Him now
With reverence and fear.
In Him no sin is found,
We stand on holy ground
Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The Holy One is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around
He burns with holy fire,
With splendour He is crowned.
How awesome is the sight,
Our radiant King of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place
He comes to cleanse and heal,
To minister His grace.
No work too hard for Him,
In faith receive from Him
Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place.

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The prophet Elijah is one of the most important of the Old Testament prophets. He appears dramatically in the Book of Kings (19: 11)

proclaiming the name of the true God, confronting unfaithfulness, idolatry and injustice.

He is for all an inspiration in the search for a life of prayer, silence and contemplation. The '*little cloud*' which Elijah saw rising from the sea is a symbol of the faithfulness of prayer and '*the still, small voice*' he heard in the entrance of his cave spoke of a God of gentleness, mercy and compassion. The prophet Elijah arose like a fire, his word flaring like a torch.

A reading that prefigures the Christmas event from the book of Wisdom 18:

14 - 15 says "While all was in quiet silence and the night was in the middle of its course, your almighty Word leapt down from the Royal Throne - a stern warrior to a doomed world".

These Old Testament readings speak to the heart of silence, '*the still, small voice*' and '*while all was in quiet silence*'.

The still, small voice, and while all was in quiet silence, speaks to us of listening and stillness.

The power of silence, in the fullness of time, enabled us to recognise that an unusual event had occurred, the God had come among us. We too, in our day, need to listen to the silence in order to recognise the ongoing revelation of God in our time. It is however, getting more and more difficult because we are bombarded by noise; the constant news bulletins, entertainment, music and our own personal sound tracks delivered via earplugs, MP3 players, in the car and in our sitting rooms, besides the noise that is constantly in our heads and reeling at us. The value of welcoming quiet has become a great gap in modern awareness, and for us too, this is something to consider every now and again so that we don't simply presume we know its importance.

Ecumenical Inclusion

A silent moment is time for tranquillity and reflection- something beyond ourselves. Silence is valued in many of the world religions, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Muslims. This respect for silence goes back thousands of years.

Some religious folk venerate silence as the space in which we can hear the voice of conscience, transcend the ego, rediscover our better selves, reconnect with the 'essence of our being' as in the case of Hindus, or attain a state of enlightenment, as in the case of Buddhists. Muslims, who celebrate Ramadan with intense fasting, avoid food and drink during certain hours, and go into silence and keep free from all forms of distraction. Sufis, the Muslim mystics, believe that God is within us and that the best way to get in touch with God is in silence.

At the heart of our Christian tradition, is consenting to the Divine Presence and action within us. We read in the *Contemplative Outreach Theological Principles* : “ The indwelling Divine Presence affirms our innate core of goodness and is expressed fully in the theology of the Most Holy Trinity.” (Number 5).

Fr. Thomas Keating widely known for this ecumenical approach and inclusiveness, includes in the same *Theological Principles*:

“We affirm our solidarity with the contemplative dimension of other religions and sacred traditions”. The commentary reads : “*United in our common search for God, we respect and honour other religions and sacred traditions and those committed to them. We engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and work together in areas of social justice, ecological concerns, and contemplative initiatives.*” (Number 11).

The Place of Listening

To go into our own quiet place and hear the still small voice, we must be attentive to two things, listening and silence. Franciscan Richard Rohr, we are told, spends four or five of his waking hours, doing writing, gardening and house cleaning, but always going about with a ‘listening ear’ practising silence. In silence one can develop a listening ear, and the question is, what am I listening to and for, and what is listening about? Listening is much more than what we can hear with our ears. A deaf person can ‘listen’ to others. Is listening merely the activity of paying attention? Have you ever had the experience that one is not really listening to you? Yet, they are clearly listening to something. What else might they be listening to other than what you are saying or what is going on? Listening is an inner activity that, when we pay attention to it and get ‘behind it’, brings us to silence. And what of silence? “Silence is God’s first language and in order to hear that language we must learn to be still and to rest in God”. (Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love*). Everything has come from silence, including God. Silence is not something we have to go out and get, it is something we *are* as human beings. In the beginning there was only silence.

To hear the language of God, we must come to stillness. Here the inner experience quiets. The body quiets. We make ourselves available to being fully present without concept or conversation. With no thoughts of the past or future, we allow ourselves to simply be present in this moment and in this space. We allow ourselves to be present in the silence against which all that is not silence is opposed. We allow ourselves simply to be. What separates the experience of everyday life

from the experience of silence is the stillness of the inner experience, the allowing oneself to be fully present to all that is, and the peaceful relationship to the circumstances that occur when one stops resisting. Even if the circumstances are nothing more than a scratchy throat or a hard chair. One can stop resisting. Stop critiquing, and just be with everything as it is. Allowing for everything. This is when in our practice we return to the sacred word and to our intention to consent to God's presence and action within. "When all striving ceases, I awaken to behold, ever-present awareness, keeping silent watch".

Centering Prayer as Kenosis

Centering Prayer, Thomas Keating says, begins with an attitude of Kenosis, the Greek word for emptying. Philippians 2: 6 speaks to this, "Jesus, though being divine in nature, he did claim in fact equality with God, but emptied himself taking on the nature of a servant, made in human likeness". Kenosis means doing just this, emptying yourself. Our Centering Prayer practice does not involve talking, nor is it thinking or remembering, it is non-engagement with Self. The Cloud of Unknowing says "thought cannot comprehend God and so I prefer to abandon all that I know, choosing rather to love him, whom I cannot know". Centering leads to a deep listening to the Holy Spirit. Prayer becomes more intimate, an exchange, a conversation with God, sometimes, a communion with God, allowing God to speak to you through the heart, normally without words. Contemplative prayer is not a conversation in words, but an exchange of hearts. Waiting is a stance that is required. Waiting presupposes patience. Not having expectations, or agendas for the prayer to be the same all the time. Patience that the clicking clock is moving along! Thus listening, silence, emptying, waiting and patience, enable us to disengage from yourselves and our ongoing agendas.

Contemplative Values are for all

People living ordinary life, cherish contemplative values, and regard these characteristics as precious. For example, actors, who insist that playing the silences in a drama is just as important as speaking the words. Musicians that the pauses are as vital as the notes. The silence before and after a performance is an integral part of any piece of music. The piece starts before the first note is played. There is a preparation, an anticipation, a kind of receptiveness that something amazing is about to happen- a great performer will know instinctively

that exact moment at which the music is meant to start. When stepping into a cathedral or a simple church or house of prayer, one is gripped by the silence upon entering, often thoughts and memories of those who worship or worshipped there come to mind. We are drawn into their faith experience, for we are surrounded by ‘a cloud of witnesses’ (Hebrews 12: 21) and we worship with united minds and hearts, often in silence and awe.

So our everyday experiences and the power of silence enable us to keep silent watch.

There are various approaches to silence and many reminders of the call to stillness.

For *Quakers* silence is being in the presence of God or the divine God of

Mystery . It is the realm where we hear God and get rid of clutter that gets in the way. Many Quakers would say they are trying to ride above the internal hubbub. The absence of the outward, ‘leads to a greater sense of the presence of the inward. In the inward encounter there is, for some, a tangible feeling of being in the Presence and, if you stay in that place, you will be guided.

The *Vast Ocean*, the movement of a very vast ocean of water is continuous in silence. Likewise *Air* which is all around us, unseen, colourless, surrendering us in silence. Maybe it is in the majestic *Mountains* that you realise how small you are because they have a way of putting you in your place!

Mary Oliver, much loved American poet, wrote this poem : (The Penguin Press, 2014).

Such Silence

*As deep as I ever went into the forest
I came upon an old stone bench, very, very old,
and around it a clearing, and beyond that
trees taller and older than I had ever seen.*

*Such silence!
It really wasn't so far from a town, but it seemed
all the clocks in the world had stopped counting.
So it was hard to suppose the usual rules applied.*

*Sometimes there's only a hint, a possibility.
What's magical, sometimes, has deeper roots
than reason.
I hope everyone knows that.*

*I sat on the bench, waiting for something.
An angel, perhaps.
Or dancers with the legs of goats.*

*No, I didn't see either. But only, I think, because
I didn't stay long enough.*

For Mary Oliver, What's magical, sometimes has deeper roots than reason.

Silence in Childhood

My love for silence was born in my childhood years in elementary school. We observed silence in the classroom and sat, without any instruction or method, in silence for some time each day. This gave me a taste of silence that has never left me. Laurence Freeman of Christian Meditation, says, "We have spent centuries mapping the outer world and thinking about God, but we don't take a break to actually be with God". In the West we have spent the last 250 years mapping our outer world- an exercise that gave us global power- but, in the process, we have forgotten that 'there is a truth to be harvested within ourselves.' Sadly we have almost got to the point where we are incapable of seeing the inner truth of anything or discover what's magical.

As a teenager I remember walking on the beach in Co. Wexford, Ireland, where the taste of the salt water, the feel of the golden sand on my feet, the smell of seaweed and the clear warm air gave me a deep encounter with silence. I came to call that my 'healing beach' for it was there I could reflect on what I thought was my significant life, and find perspective and most of all healing for the hurts I was carrying within. These turbulent years of adolescence were all brought to the 'healing beach' and over time to a deeper place within, where solace was found.

When I was introduced to the Psalms, I found my voice echoed in many of them. My favourite over the years is Psalm 62.

“O God, you are my God, for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry weary land, without water.”

The search for God, for meaning in my life, brought me to join the Dominican Sisters at the age of nineteen. As Dominican Women, we are called to

‘Contemplate and to share the fruits of Contemplation’, it is always a privilege to preach and I am grateful to be here today. And then some years later when missioned to the United States, the continuing search brought me to Contemplative Outreach in 1988. I was captivated by its Vision and when I met Father Thomas, I knew I had met a deeply human spiritual guide.

Centering Prayer as a Way of Life

For almost thirty years I have practised Centering Prayer. It has brought me to the awareness of not simply praying contemplatively but living contemplatively too. I have found a depth of interiority, ‘being at home’ with myself easy to take. Silence has slowed me down in the good sense. To have a profound experience of God, silence is the best possible course.

Silence is not just a human virtue or a physical absence of noise; silence is a kind of “property” of Being prior to Being.... Being and Silence cannot be severed from each other... In the beginning, there was only Silence.

A favourite parable of mine is called the Treasure, found in Matthew 13:44 “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. The one who finds it buries it again; and so happy is he, that he goes and sells everything he has in order to buy that field”.

People in Palestine often hid treasures, and a treasure might remain concealed if the hider died before he could retrieve it. Probably the central character of this parable is a peasant working a wealthy landowner’s field who when plowing turns up a strongbox or jar containing coins. Once he buys the field, the field’s content legally belongs to him, freeing him later to ‘rediscover’ the treasure. While most stories like this parable emphasize the finder’s extravagant lifestyle afterwards, Jesus lays the entire emphasis on the price the

man is ready to invest in this treasure. It is far greater than any he already owns. In no small way, we too need to be like the character in this parable, ready to invest intentionality in nurturing the treasure that lies within us, in other words the Indwelling Divine Presence. In the Trinity are three essential relationships. The Father enjoys the fullness of the Godhead as Source.... The Son is all that the Father is, coming into actuality, hence, the Word of God is the creator of all that exists. The Spirit flows from the Father and the Son as an expression of their unity, which is so perfect that it manifests itself in a person, the highest form of unity that we know of in creation.

The third Principle says, “The Theological foundation of Centering Prayer is the Divine Presence in every human person”.

The new Commentary reads: *The presence of the Divine in us is the permanent self-giving of God to every human person. The Word of God and Source of all creation sustains everything that exists and relates to each human being in a personal way. The primary call of the Spirit is to consent to this intimate relationship.*

And what is it to Consent in life?

Here is a telling story in the art of consent by the late David Muyskens.

The Paschal Mystery
A Happy Loser
J. David Muyskens

Even though I am retired, I am as busy as ever. When I sit down for Centering Prayer, I find myself thinking about all the things I want to do. But the invitation is to let go of all thoughts, consenting to God’s presence and transforming work in me.

The little loss of whatever comes to mind is practice for the larger losses that are necessary for growth. Without loss I will not move on in the journey of life. At birth I lost the comfort of the womb. In childhood I lost dependency on my parents. In adolescence I lost my childhood. In adulthood I have lost friends and family members. At mid-life I began losing my strength and health. In old age I will lose my independence. At death I will lose my physical life.

Each transition is a movement toward the new, but not without losing the old. I can try to win without loss, but, ultimately, will not succeed.

The emptiness of loss becomes openness to God - if I choose. And the choice is mine daily.

Sadly David died in April 2017 , I know from his family that he died peacefully, no doubt giving a full consent. This is one of the true gifts of silence in his life.

In the book *Invitation to Love*, chapter 7, Fr Thomas speaks of the Four Consents, they are simple and yet profound, so simple indeed that one would miss them in the context of the whole book.

The four Consents

1. *Consent to our basic goodness.*
2. *Consent to the full development of our being, talents and creative energies.*
3. *Consent to non- being, diminution of self through illness, old age and death.*
4. *Consent to Transformation to the death of the false -self.*

1. In childhood, God asks us to consent to the basic goodness of our nature, the development of imagination, memory, and language, and learn to relate to family and peers. We are asked to accept the goodness of our own being before we do anything else. *One might think, but how is a child supposed to give this consent at three or four months old? I have observed my grandniece, Eimear, smiling, responding, listening, loving and simply being who she is. This is consent at its best.*

2. In early adolescence, God asks us to accept the full development of our being by activating our talents and creative energies. We are asked to consent to the goodness of our sexuality and creative potentialities. *Adolescence is a critical time for encouraging awareness of the depth within and for deepening the interior life. So often a young person challenged by peer pressure, can develop low self-esteem and as a result destructive habits and behaviour can develop.*

In early adulthood, God invites us to make a third consent: to accept the fact of our non-being and the diminutions of self. Here we are asked to let go of everything we love in this world, whether persons, places, or things. If we have not made the previous consents, this one is more difficult.

Letting go of everything is an ongoing process, if we can let go in small things, we are prepared for the bigger things that come along. We begin by letting go of our baby teeth, the natural colour of our hair, our perfect way of walking, our memory, etc and we do it out of love.

3. The fourth consent is the consent to be transformed. We might think that everybody would be eager to make this one, but even the holiest people are inclined to say, 'Let's not rush into this.' The transforming union requires consent to the death of the false self, and the false self is the only self we know.

The false self is the self-made in our own image, rather than the image of God.

These four consents are invitations to welcome life and death as God's gracious gifts and to appreciate the universe with all its beauty and potentialities. It is the school of divine love in which God invites us to accept the divine plan to share divine life with us in a way that transcends all the human imagination can foresee.

Silence is the entrance to these consents and through silence we enter by way of the heart. God does not leave us unaided for "The Indwelling Divine Presence affirms our innate core of goodness and is expressed fully in the indwelling of the Most Holy Trinity."

The Narrow Gate

Matthew 7: 6. 12 "Enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to destruction is wide and spacious, and many take it; but it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, only a few find it."

Entering the contemplative path is entering by the narrow gate that leads to life, this is Kenosis, this is Centering Prayer.

We are following Jesus, our teacher and friend he is one who exemplifies the very transformation we are facing. He leads into the mysteries, and initiates us into the secret of the life he has led. The four consents are operative within us, consciously or unconsciously. Every person born will experience them in one form or another.

Perhaps what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin S.J.

wrote many years ago will give encouragement and help us realise this is not our doing, but that to which we give our consent.

Patient Trust

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability -
and that it may take a very long time.

As so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually - let them grow,
Let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.
(1 May 1881 – 10 April 1955)

Fr. Damien a Cistercian from Gethsemani, says, it is important to be silent, and it takes a lot of silence to discover who you really are and who God really is. The journey with silence is a process and silence is a very potent thing.

The Trinitarian experience is best realized through silence, for all that is said comes from silence and returns to silence. Once you are aware of that you realise that silence is a presence. Silence is wonderfully humble, it never interferes, never interrupts, never makes promises. You can't see it, touch it, taste it, smell it and yet it's greater than all the things which you can taste and smell. Gregory the Great in the Sixth Century, said, contemplative prayer is *a taste of God*.

And how do we go into the Silence?

A keystone quotation from our tradition is Matthew 6: 6 : “When you pray, enter your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.” This is the place of transformation. ‘Contemplative prayer is a

process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading if we consent to divine union.’ (Fr. Thomas).

When you enter your inner room, you leave behind the work and the cares of the day. The concerns about our loved ones, the state of the world, climate change and so on. These concerns are all included when we enter into the present moment. All prayer forms are there:

Adoration, Thanksgiving, Petition, Intercession and Repentance. The inner room is not fixed, static or empty, but something living, spacious and open, a place needing to be nourished and attended like a garden. This inner room will have its seasons. These seasons keep repeating themselves as we move deeply into the mystery of God. There will be spring growth, characterized by a movement from exterior to interior silence. Summer will be joy in the awareness of God’s loving presence. With the autumn comes purification. Winter can bring dryness, restlessness and even boredom. And in all of this God has taken the initiative and invited us into greater intimacy. The spiritual journey is not about getting something, but about awakening to something you already have. Going within is the journey of a lifetime and the *journey itself* is what matters. The movement is *Ordinary Awareness*, where our everyday thoughts are dancing back and forth, to the *Spiritual Level* of our Being, the place of peace which is just below the surface, the *True Self*, made in God’s image and likeness, to *The Divine Indwelling*, the place of meeting, having given our consent to be there. These are all stages of consciousness.

Silence is the thrust of the spiritual journey, a movement into resting in God in interior silence. We opened with words from the Book of Wisdom, “While all was in quiet silence and the night was in the middle of its course, your almighty Word leapt down from the Royal Throne”. A manifestation of Divine love which is compassionate, tender, luminous, totally self-giving, seeking no reward, unifying everything.

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Dublin, Ireland

