

Loving Silence

[Before speaking, allow for a period of forced silence for 15 seconds, or less if someone breaks silence.]

- Silence. Sometimes it is welcomed and sometimes it is not. Most people react to prescriptive silence in one of two ways. They are either drawn into the silence, or they interrupt the silence with words or noise. Each person's reaction to imposed silence typically depends on the circumstances of the environment and their personality.
- Most of the time, we do not voluntarily inflict long periods of silence on ourselves. But there is a lot of truth to the proverbial saying that "Silence is golden." And when on a silent retreat using the Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, it is essential.
- Exterior silence, along with its companions of solitude and stillness, are necessary to be able to eventually experience interior silence. This is a physical, mental and spiritual state that allows us to most readily engage in a direct two way exchange with God.
- I don't believe it is possible to experience absolute perfect interior silence while we exist as breathing and thinking human beings. It is likely just as difficult for us as coming to love perfectly as God loves.
- But attending a silent Ignatian retreat probably allows us human beings to get as close to perfect interior silence and perfect love as we could hope to get in this world. That is why I try to go on a week-long silent retreat every year.
- St. Ignatius developed his Spiritual Exercises to individually direct retreatants through four specific phases or "weeks" over a 30-day period. These spiritual exercises were used primarily by religious orders and other clergy when they were first published in 1548. In our modern times, lay people are a majority of those who use these spiritual exercises.
- However, most people cannot put their lives on pause for 30 days to get away for a silent retreat, so the exercises are condensed into shorter periods. The four phases or "weeks" of the experience still apply in these condensed exercise periods.
 - The first phase brings the retreatant to an acute sense of sin and their need for Jesus.
 - The second phase invites the retreatant into deeper relationship with Jesus as a disciple.
 - The third phase allows the retreatant to suffer through Christ's passion and death bringing a greater appreciation of his sacrificial love
 - The fourth phase celebrates the triumph and joy of Christ's resurrection and hopefully brings the retreatant to a higher understanding for the purpose of his or her life.
- Two weeks ago, I was in the middle of my most recent silent retreat. I was in the second phase of the exercises on Friday and Saturday. Something I conveyed to Father Tran, my retreat director, prompted him to recommend that I pray for the grace to fully understand and realize detachment from my own needs and desires.
- This would better prepare me to be Jesus' disciple. He suggested I pray and reflect on this using Matthew 6:9-15, which is the scripture passage where Jesus taught his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer.

- After my afternoon meeting with him, I relaxed by wandering through the natural beauty of the retreat center and then getting some aerobic exercise. Afterwards I attended Mass, went to dinner and then spent an hour in silent adoration.
- The day was almost over when I finally sat down at nearly 9 pm to pray with the passage on The Lord's Prayer. But I was relaxed and peacefully silent, so I thought my prayer efforts would quickly prove fruitful.
- But maybe I was too relaxed and silent, because I fell asleep in my chair soon after I began reading and praying. I woke up over an hour later. I decided not to fight sleep and went to bed for the night.
- The next morning I woke up early. It was still dark and I knew the coffee wouldn't be ready for another 40 minutes. So I used that time to resume praying with the scripture passage on the Lord's Prayer. I expected to get a good sense of God's desires for me in time to get coffee and then go outside to watch the sun rise.
- I closed my eyes and thought about the grace of becoming fully detached from my needs and wants. My mind began to turn over many thoughts about this. I wondered what complete detachment would feel like. I've been told this is the path of true humility before God. I have read that surrendering to a completely humble life is a necessary aspect of full discipleship. I wondered if I could really do that.
- My mind was unsettled in these thoughts. I realized I was nowhere close to being interiorly silent, which would be necessary to experience God in my mind and heart. I decided to move on to praying the Lord's Prayer to calm myself and open space for God to speak.
- Initially, I considered praying it from memory as I normally do, but then thought better of it. The referenced scripture passage contains a little more than just the Lord's Prayer, and this version taught by Jesus is worded differently from the modern version we use in rote prayer. So, being a purest with Lectio Divina prayer, I decided to retrieve my Bible and read it aloud.
- When I opened my eyes to get my Bible, I saw that it was lighter outside than I was expecting. More time had passed with my preliminary thoughts than I realized, and I was about to miss the sunrise. I dressed quickly, grabbed my coffee cup and headed out the door.
- As I left the room, I made a last second decision to bring my Rosary. I thought it would be nice to pray with Mother Mary while watching the sun climb into the sky if I could find a chair or bench not covered in dew.
- When I got outside to the edge of the open fields I was pleasantly surprised to see other people already out to watch a beautiful sunrise. On the prior mornings I was out there by myself. Unfortunately, though, there were no more of the dry chairs available where I could sit and pray while I basked in the early morning sunlight.
- So I stood and viewed the majesty of the sunrise at a break in the trees of this quiet, serene meadow we were in. The bright fiery sun was up over the tree lined horizon in a matter of minutes. I decided it was better to return to my room to pray while sitting on a dry chair.

- On my walk back to my room, I reflected on the fact that so far that morning I had not given much consideration at all for coming to an interior silence before prayer, much less detaching from my need for caffeine or my desires for creature comforts. I resolved to do better.
- When I was ready to pray, I was torn between resuming my prayer using The Lord's Prayer and praying the Rosary as I had spontaneously committed to do just 15 minutes earlier. I considered that this is a good dilemma to have. Either way I would be praying to God and enjoying an immersion in his eternal joy.
- But then a thought occurred to me, which quickly moved to heartfelt feeling. Why couldn't I do both at the same time? I brought both my Bible and my Rosary to the bedside chair. Right away I felt nestled in comfort.
- I prayed for the grace to know clearly what humility and detachment should mean for me. I also reflected on the other nine retreatants and prayed that they also would come to know and feel the graces they were seeking. I then began praying the Joyful Mysteries and for each Our Father prayer, I read and reflected on the Lord's Prayer passage in Matthew 6:9-15.
- This proved to be more enlightening than I had anticipated. With each mystery, an example came of complete detachment by Mary, Joseph or Jesus. What better example could there be than that of the Holy Family.
- While praying with the Annunciation, I felt the young and purely innocent Mary come to understand what the Angel Gabriel had told her about being favored by God and chosen to be the mother of his Son. With a completely humble heart, she detached herself from any thought or concern about how this would affect her life, to include her marriage to Joseph.
- Likewise, I felt how Joseph also became completely detached from his concerns about how Mary's pregnancy would be perceived. Once he understood that they were both chosen by God to bear and raise his Son, he abandoned all of his concerns out of complete love for God.
- While praying with the Visitation to Elizabeth, I could sense the detachment that both women had about the impact of pregnancy on their bodies. I've seen this also in my wife and other pregnant women I have been close to.
- During pregnancy, most women are primarily fixated on caring for their unborn babies. They don't abandon any care for themselves. In fact the opposite is normally true. They take better care of themselves for the sake of their babies. They are motivated in all they do by a selfless love for the child they carry.
- When praying about the Nativity, I felt both Mary and Joseph become overwhelmed with love, not just because they had a new baby, but because this baby was the Son of God born for the good of the world as they knew it.
- Most new parents would have been overly protective of their newborn baby. But Mary and Joseph abandoned this protective posture and were detached from all concern as they welcomed the shepherds to come into their space to worship the newborn Son of God.
- During the Presentation in the Temple, I imagined Mary and Joseph humbly accepting Simeon's affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah. They remained calmly detached even when he

stated that Jesus would cause the rise and fall of many people in Israel and that he would be a sign of contradiction among the people. They did not flinch at the ramifications of his comments, even when he said Mary's heart would also be pierced. They accepted whatever God had in store for their family out of complete love and commitment to God.

- Finally, in the mystery of finding young Jesus in the Temple, I imagined what Mary, Joseph and Jesus must have been feeling from their different perspectives. I don't know that Mary and Joseph could have been detached from their feelings of anxiety as they searched for Jesus. How could any parent be detached from anxiety while searching for their lost child?
- However, I am certain they were both detached from all of their physical needs during their frantic search. Thankfully, it was also easy to feel and celebrate their momentous joy when they found Jesus.
- I also sensed Jesus' detachment. He knew that he was where he needed and wanted to be. He had done nothing wrong as he responded to his heavenly Father's prompt to learn more about him. Yet when Mary and Joseph found him and gave him a gentle rebuke, he understood the anxiety that they felt and quickly detached from his feelings of right vs. wrong.
- He also detached from his near term desire to learn more about his heavenly Father. Out of complete and empathetic love for his frightened and anxious parents, he committed to always keeping their concerns in his heart and always being obedient to them.
- He didn't put his love for God on hold. He found that he could love everyone all the more through a humble attitude of detachment from his needs. He focused on completely filling the desires of his heavenly Father and his parents.
- This prayer opportunity produced good fruit for me as did the entire retreat experience. Let me share some of that fruit with you in case you are not inclined to spend a week in silence yourselves.
- First – coming to a posture of interior silence is always a struggle initially, and it occasionally becomes a struggle again throughout a week long retreat. I realized, though, that I was trying too hard. In my efforts to control this, I stirred up the waters even more.
- One of the surest and quickest ways to interior silence turns out to be resting in the calming presence of our Mother Mary as we enter into prayer with her son.
- Second – an attitude of humility and detachment is not something we can program. It will not be achieved through will power and discipline. It is something that must be desired, but then turned over to God. It is eventually realized as an outcome of unconsciously loving God fully and unconditionally without any regard for self.
- This comes by falling in love with God and letting him lead us into the depths of our own hearts to explore our own infinite capacity for loving. We can then choose to love all other people in this world no matter their personalities, their circumstances, whether they are strangers or not, or the nature of our relationship with them. This is loving as Jesus loves.

- And last – the first two pieces of fruit are really nothing unique. They are things that can be acquired at home. So you are probably wondering, then, why I drove 6 hours to Louisiana and subjected myself to a week of silence.
- Because that is where I found God, the Vine Grower, gardening in the silence of the Jesuit Spirituality Center. I had the humble pleasure of working directly with Him to be shown how to grow this fruit for myself. The fruit is always sweeter and more rewarding when you have grown it yourself than if you have received it from someone else's vineyard.
- Brothers, I hope I have enticed you to think about a different way of connecting deeply with our Lord. But even if an Ignatian silent retreat is not your thing, consider how you can best keep your friendship with him fresh and intimate. Consider how he can lead you into further exploring the limitless interior expanse he has given you.

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett