

THE GIFT OF SILENCE



Sr. Hilda Frost OSB - "Reflections"

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'Listen to me in silence...' (Isa. 41:1)

Benedict obviously cherished silence, and saw it an absolute necessity for anyone who wants to pursue a spiritual path. He devotes a whole chapter of the Rule to silence, (RB 6) as well as mentioning it in a number of other places too. The very first word of the Rule, and the sentences that follow imply the need for silence: 'Listen'....'listen with the ear of the heart...' 'today if you hear God's voice, harden not your heart' (Ps. 95) (Prol.)

Benedict speaks of some of the reasons why his followers should observe silence. First of all personal prayer, lectio divina, and study are hard to achieve in the midst of a lot of noise and chatter. So Benedict sets aside certain times, seasons, and places in the monastery that will provide an environment of silence.

'The oratory must be a place of prayer...when the Work of God is over all must depart in absolute silence..' (RB 52) 'During meals there should be complete silence disturbed by no whispering. Only the reader's voice should be heard' (RB 39). After Sext (lunch) 'they should rest in complete silence on their beds...' (RB 48) Of course the 'Great Silence' or 'Solemn Silence' after Compline cannot be broken without grave necessity.'

Silence should be sought at all times by monastics and this is especially important for them at night time' (RB 42) As well as that Benedict recommends that Lent might be a good time to add a little more silence to one's usual observance' by denying ourselves ...excessive talking' (RB 49) Then Benedict recognises that in our human weakness we are apt to fail in matters of speech. 'We ought to follow the advice of the psalm (Ps. 39) which says: 'I have resolved to

keep watch over my ways, so that I may not sin with my tongue' (RB 6).

Especially he cautions against any kind of murmuring or grumbling 'Above all else I urge that there should be no murmuring in the community' (RB 40) Benedict further suggests that sometimes silence can be better than speech even when the conversation is about good things 'I have accepted silence...refraining even from words that are good...because of the value of silence' (RB 6). Again Benedict encourages his disciples to 'speak gently and seriously with words that are weighty and restrained' (RB 7)

At first sight some of this may sound unnecessarily detailed and even negative. Yet we have to remember the times in which Benedict lived and the kind of people he was dealing with - some of whom were recent converts from Barbarianism, (note RB 22, the admonition not to sleep with knives by their sides!) who needed everything spelt out in detail. So silence was a new idea for some of them. What I think comes through in these writings of Benedict is his deep love and appreciation of silence, not just silence for the sake of silence, but silence for the sake of something - as a way to God and union with him. For Benedict it was a matter of cultivating an inner stillness and silence in order to listen to God and experience his presence within.

It is not easy for any of us to incorporate Benedict's teaching into our lives. Even for those of us who live in a monastery it is often a struggle to find times and places of silence in our busy day. Yet we yearn for silence and stillness in our lives, as we seek to follow the spirit, if not the letter of Benedict's teaching.

In their writings and retreats both John Main and Laurence Freeman constantly speak of the importance of silence: As we know it is part of the 'essential teaching' of 'how to meditate': 'Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word.....'. Again: 'Now to tread the spiritual path we must learn to be silent. What is required of us is a journey into profound silence.....Meditation is the way to silence because it is the way of silence' (Silence and Stillness in Every Season, p. 178)

May the God of all goodness, give to each one of us the gift of silence.

With love to each one of you, and thanks to Ron McRae for so kindly distributing this reflection.

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Sr. Hilda is a Benedictine Sister at St. Benedict's Monastery, Winnipeg Canada. She comes from a very ecumenical background: with a Methodist father, a Congregationalist mother, who attended the Anglican Church in England. After attending a convent school Sr. Hilda became a Catholic, and entered the cloistered Benedictines in England. When the community became diminished and eventually had to close she came to Canada in 1981. Sr. Hilda has a background in Scripture, monastic history etc. and has been a meditator for more than 20 years. She has given retreats and workshops on the Rule of Benedict, the mystics, as well as on Christian meditation. She is coordinator of the WCCM Oblates in Canada, and also leads a meditation group in her own monastery.

Oblates

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