

## “Silence is God's First Language”

[St John of the Cross]

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Sts Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, are our main teachers of prayer in the Discalced Carmelite Order. Teresa is even called, the “mystical doctor of prayer” by the Church. They advise us that if we have an interior vision, or locution (personal word from God), or a revelation in our hearts and minds about something spiritual, we should not noise it about to everyone we know. Too often, in our excitement and enthusiasm of getting a breakthrough or realizing something powerful and precious, we are tempted to tell our friends or acquaintances. Yet, these revelations are intended for us personally as an encouragement to holiness or to help us love Jesus more, or serve Him or others with greater fervency, and sharing it sometimes cheapens the message. Instead, we ought to cherish and relish the intimacy of these revelations or experiences of His grace and love, and bring them to God in silent adoration, meditating on them and thanking Him. Maybe share them with a spiritual director, a priest, or a scholarly individual who can help discern whether the message is from God or from our own imagination. And even pray about it for discernment.

This notion of keeping revelations and visions private is something Edith Stein, St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, did in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when although having become an avowed atheist, she had encountered her Messiah while reading the biography-- The Life of the aforementioned Teresa of Jesus, she said, “*This is the truth.*” When asked what had happened that transformed her from an atheist to a Catholic, St Edith replied, “*That is my secret.*” She was quiet about it until an opportune time and so for us even, keeping silent about such things might be a good idea and we should come before the Lord in silent adoration and prayer.

Yet, when it comes to private silent prayer sometimes feel that in order to pray well, or Adore in front of the Blessed Sacrament, or during the Mass, we need to be saying things to God either outwardly or inwardly. People sometimes feel that they cannot pray, or try and then give up because they feel that unless they use the right language, or the correct theological expressions, or else feel something emotional or tingly, God will not hear them and they will not be getting anywhere. On the contrary, St John of the Cross tells us, “*What we need most in order to make progress is to be silent before this great God with our appetite and with our tongue, for the language he best hears is silent love.*” Silent love. Just showing up and being in His Presence because His glory is there anyway. We do not have to call His glory down, or make a lot of noise; He is already here. We do not have to say anything to Him at all, and we do not need to try so hard as well. St John: “*However softly we speak, God is so close to us that he can hear us; nor do we need wings to go in search of him, but merely to seek solitude and contemplate him within ourselves, without being surprised to find such a good Guest there.*” And if we are unsure about HOW to pray, we can do as the disciples did in Luke 11.1: “Teach us to pray.” We can do as Jesus answered the disciples in that passage. He said, “When you pray, say, Father, hallowed be Your name....” (see her book: The Way of Perfection). The Lord’s Prayer meditated on slowly and repeatedly is the most comprehensive prayer ever because Jesus gave it to us. The order of the Petitions is important too: 1st and 2nd are directed to God; the 3rd to 10th are concerned with our needs and relationships. Thus it contains all the components of a complete prayer and we can rely on it. “*As we repeat the Our Father so many times ... let us delight in it*” -- Saint Teresa of Jesus. Although there are times for vocal prayer such as oral recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, Rosary, or the prayers we say at Mass, truly, silence in the face of the Divine is often one of the best responses. How about taking a few verses of scripture and meditating on them prayerfully like *Lectio Divina*?

*“In discussing this dark night, therefore, I will not rely on experience or science, for these can fail and deceive us. Although I will not neglect whatever possible use I can make of them, my help in all that, with God's favour, I shall say, will be Sacred Scripture, at least in the most important matters, or those that are difficult to understand. Taking Scripture as our guide we do not err, since the Holy Spirit speaks to us through it. Should I misunderstand or be mistaken on some point, whether I deduce it from Scripture or not, I will not be intending to deviate from the true meaning of Sacred Scripture or from the doctrine of our Holy Mother the Catholic*

*Church. Should there be some mistake, I submit entirely to the Church, or even to anyone who judges more competently about the matter than I.*" (Ascent Prologue). And he says: *"Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation..."* (St John of the Cross Sayings of Light and love #79.)

But, whether we close our eyes or do not, whether we are speaking out loud or silent, and whether we are aware or not, He is there in us and around us and that is enough. *"If during vocal prayer your heart is drawn to mental prayer, do not restrain it, but let your devotion take that channel, omitting the vocal prayers which you intended to say: that which takes their place is more acceptable to God, and more useful to your own soul"* (St Francis de Sales); Teresa comments on this too.

So sometimes, we seem to be asleep spiritually. And in a way, it is a kind of dark night of our senses for us too because we are asked to pray to Someone we cannot see with our physical eyes. And even if and when we are assailed by a million distractions like "did I turn the light off before I left?" "Or, what will I make for supper?" just trying to be quiet especially in front of the Blessed Sacrament, we are in His presence and He has His loving eyes on us. All so many saints in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, did was go about their regular day of silence and prayer, and then the LORD showed up in dreams or visions, through angelic messengers, or locutions. Our response should not be will Jesus "show up" to us in prayer in the same way if we are going about our daily tasks or intentional in prayer. In other words, what we need to do is honour and worship God as He is, thanking Him and loving Him, even and especially in silence, and He **will** be glorified in our midst. Wherever we are, He is there, and that is holy ground. We need to take our shoes off spiritually as Moses did, set up a rock for a pillow as Jacob did, or be available as our Lady did, and walk softly before our great God Who is always in our midst and humbly and gratefully approach Him ever careful of our words as Teresa says, but knowing that He hears us and loves to be with us.

On this earth there is no place more glorious and full of God's presence than in a Catholic church where the Blessed Sacrament is reposed in a tabernacle or a monstrance or at the Consecration at Mass. The holy ground is present also during the Stations of the Cross, penitential times, and even our private prayer times, again whether or not we are aware. All He really asks from us is to make room for Him, to be intentional to take the time to be with the one who loves us so much. He wants to speak to us in the silence and quiet of our hearts, St John: *"Never give up prayer, and should you find dryness and difficulty, persevere in it for this very reason. God often desires to see what love your soul has, and love is not tried by ease and satisfaction."* And if we persist in prayer, we will make spiritual progress. For now during Lent and in this life as well, we are given the marvellous, wonderful, merciful promise of His presence and glory revealed in us and to us — secretly, quietly, and mystically. Believe it or not, Jesus is in fact, waiting for us anyway.

No, we might never get heavenly visions as Moses, Jacob, or Mary did. St Teresa of Jesus says *"Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us. The important thing is not to think much but to love much and so do that which best stirs you to love."* Frequently could also mean just talking to God whenever and wherever, when we arise and go to bed, in the kitchen, in the car, when there are problems and griefs, and not. When we wake up in the middle of the night, instead of being irritated about it, maybe the Holy Spirit wants us to pray or intercede for something or someone. The bottom line in all of this is that we develop an interior prayer life relationship with God. Let Lent be Lent for us for during our Lenten journey we have the focused opportunity to intentionally meet with the LORD to say to God, "Here I am, Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening." If we need to reconnect with God or "jumpstart" as it were, our spiritual lives, maybe find a Lenten retreat somewhere and there are plenty of them online. I am doing one with St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross: *Retreat Online - Carmelites in Vienna*. And, singing to the Lord, a "new song" as it were is especially good, or putting on quiet, reflective music in order for us to sit and rest in His presence. St Augustine actually said, *"He who sings well, prays twice"*, so there is a great value to prayer in song and music.

Developing a prayer life is so helpful especially as we make our way to that great Feast of our Redemption: the commemoration of the death of Jesus our Saviour on the Cross, and the celebration of His resurrection.

I close with quotes on Silence and prayer from some more of our saints.

St Elizabeth of the Trinity on Silence: *“As for me, I have found my heaven on earth in my dear solitude in Carmel, where I am alone with God alone. I do everything with him, so I go to everything with a divine joy, whether I’m sweeping, working, or at prayer, I find everything good and delightful since it is my Master whom I see everywhere..... I think that in heaven my mission will be to draw souls by helping them go out of themselves to cling to God by a wholly simple and loving movement, and to keep them in this great silence within that will allow God to communicate Himself to them and transform them into Himself.”*

St Thérèse in Story of a Soul: *How great is the power of Prayer! One could call it a Queen who has at each instant free access to the King and who is able to obtain whatever she asks. To be heard it is not necessary to read from a book some beautiful formula composed for the occasion. If this were the case, alas, I would have to be pitied! Outside the Divine Office which I am very unworthy to recite, I do not have the courage to force myself to search out beautiful prayers in books. There are so many of them it really gives me a headache! and each prayer is more beautiful than the others. I cannot recite them all and not knowing which to choose, I do like children who do not know how to read, I say very simply to God what I wish to say, without composing beautiful sentences, and He always understands me. For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.*

Finally, let us close with that great saint of our time and servant to the Poor, Mother Teresa of Calcutta:

*“Before you speak (or act) it is necessary for you to listen, for God speaks in the silence of the heart. The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; the fruit of love is service; and the fruit of service is peace.”*

The order of our lives for this modern St Teresa is that silence through all the above stages leads to peace, peace in our hearts, and maybe peace in our little corner of the world. The fruit of silence then, is peace. Accompanied by silence, our charism of prayer will lead us to this peace as Discalced Carmelites.

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