

Silence in the Life of Carmel

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1 Introduction

*Communication is a wonderful gift, but even more wonderful is the gift of **communion**. Communication may leave room for doubt. **Communion** gives the certainty of **love** in its fullness.*

*Preserving one's strength ... is achieving the unity of one's whole being in **silence**, uniting all one's forces to use them only in the exercise of **love**.*

(Elizabeth of the Trinity)

Our Carmelite tradition hands on to us the cult of **silence**, received from the beginning of the Order, when it suggests, as an essential part of our life, that we live in the PRESENCE OF GOD, in constant touch with HIM: "Bear yourself blameless in my presence" (Gen 17: 1). It is the same invitation given to Abraham and his descendants. From this affirmation we can see that silence is of crucial importance as a means of perfection and maturity for our human fulfilment. Silence is therefore indispensable in the life of human beings, since all are called to share in the divine life: "Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through LOVE in his presence" (Eph 1: 4).

Carmel has heeded well this call of God to humankind to "Be perfect" (Mt 5: 48) and in this regard has a long experience to hand on to us. The origins of the Order tell us of a search for a style of life that aimed at educating the heart. Its many reforms have always stressed love of silence, in loving and constant attention to God's presence, as an established and sound means of achieving VACARE DEO. The inspirational models of Carmel – Elijah

and Mary – are perfect models of a contemplative and open SILENCE. Our mystics experienced the fruits of silence in their lives

In following this road, Carmelites have not invented anything new or original. They searched the lives of the people in the Bible, the great moments in their history, the habits of their leaders, the manner of being, speaking and acting of Jesus himself, and they found that these persons achieved maturity in SILENCE. They achieved maturity because they were able to go to the roots of human nature and to its deepest needs.

In Carmel, SILENCE is intimately linked with the experience of the DESERT and SOLITUDE, elements that are interdependent, complementary and indispensable for the rich and wonderful life of our spiritual heritage. Of course, in this heritage, DESERT-SOLITUDE-SILENCE are not necessarily dependent on geographical places. They are above all states of mind and of heart, which produce in persons an interior refinement, a capability and availability to share one's gift and to share in the mystery of the other. This is the revelation of LOVE. Silence, as understood in Carmel, leads to direct contact with the truth of our existence and with the TRUTH which is GOD himself: "LOVE and LOYALTY now meet, RIGHTEOUSNESS and PEACE now embrace" (Ps 85: 11).

The more one tries to practice silence the more one realises that it has different levels, and discovers, appreciates and experiences its usefulness. There are forms and types of silence to suit the needs of each person's make up; exterior silence of words and gestures; interior silence of one's most personal powers: imagination, intelligence, affection; silence on a "conscious" level and silence to enlighten the depths of the

“unconscious”, silence to purify, pacify and unify.

But like all things, even silence may be tainted by ambiguity. It can bring us to the fullness of LOVE and COMMUNION, overcoming the limitations of communication, or it can increase selfishness, leading to a lack of openness, seeking comfort, flight, self-centredness and self-interest. Thus, then, we have to study SILENCE.

Silence brings us face to face with GOD, giving us that deep experience which makes us desire ardently, “Ah, tear the veil of this our sweet encounter!” (John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 1). It is the voice of GOD that we hear when we live in contemplative silence, listening alone and in our deepest self, but hearing its echoes in every brother and sister, and in every creature... Life in VACARE DEO, “Happy the man you choose, whom you invite to live in your courts. Fill us with the good things

of your house, of your holy Temple” (Ps 65, 4-5). When we are capable of communion, of silent and deep understanding, we are in greater solidarity with our brothers and sisters. Our peaceful and loving solitude urges us to greater fraternity because it springs from a pure and boundless love.

Only a deep and personal experience will enable us to really understand all this, because, as someone said: “One half hour of complete SILENCE tells us more about SILENCE than many hours replete with words”.

The present brief study is an attempt to help us on the way towards the maturity of our human life as Carmel understands and teaches this through its rich spirituality. I ask you, if possible:

“...never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Col 3: 17)

2

Silence and Human Maturity

2.1 Introduction

Our inner self is a house. It is silent not because it is empty, but because it throbs with life.

“Silence is a science that is learnt, a wisdom that is acquired, an experience that is lived, but above all a **love** that gives itself.”

Human beings are called to peace, deep joy, love and a constant celebration of life. St. Irenaeus summarised this well: “The glory of God is the ‘living person’, that is, the person who lives the fullness for which Jesus came; ‘I came that they might have life and have it to the full’ (Jn 10: 10)”. Unfortunately, however, few persons understand their life fully. Suffice it to look around us, even at a superficial level, or also within ourselves, to be aware how unhappy people or we ourselves are.

The human person is not a simple being, but is made up of various elements, which, put simply, may be summarised as body, mind and spirit. The degree of integration of these elements in themselves and among them will determine the fullness and joy of life or the disgust and frustration with it. The road to such integration is very complex. However, experience tells us with certainty that they are happy who have learnt

to love, whose “house” is indwelt by LOVE, who live in a relationship of love. Thus, it is only this RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE that gives meaning to human life, because only those who are capable of developing and living this relationship achieve human maturity. To live and to love.

To love, it is necessary to know and accept one’s human condition, together with the solitude, which is congenital to it, in spite of the fact that the present culture tries to deny this. The human heart does not change no matter what are the external influences. It is elusive, incommunicable. Today’s philosophers, writers and scientists illustrate this fact: even though one is incapable of living alone, when one seeks to communicate, one meets the same problems as when living in solitude. One must confront the way of solitude, which leads to oneself, to the other and to God.

“To be alone,” means to accept oneself and the other in his/her otherness; to accept oneself means also to allow for differences. Solitude, in this sense, must not be mistaken for isolation, which is the inability to open oneself to the other, to “communicate oneself”, to listen to the other in his/her unique individuality.

Only those who have come to true solitude are capable of a true relationship of love. In fact, love demands an understanding dialogue, a sharing of life and communication. Indeed, we can say that to love is to share, and to share is to communicate. Dialogue – transparent, purified and true speech – is the giving of oneself or the receiving of the other in one’s life. “No man is island” means to live and live together.

Silence and solitude, essential forms of the interior life, have a cru-

cial function in the growth of a person, in the field of inter-relationships. Thus, to achieve perfect communication, a sharing of life, an authentic relationship of love, to achieve this dialogue, which is a reciprocal giving, hence to the maturity of love in complete openness, to achieve all this, we need to learn several things. Among the things to be learnt, SILENCE and SOLITUDE occupy a pre-eminent position in life, a fact unfortunately manipulated by propaganda, consumerism, so-called conquests of “modernity” and by false promises of happiness.

Therefore, silence is a crucial factor in the growth of the person, whatever the situation, condition or vocation. Only through silence can one learn to search one’s interior life, to understand one’s mystery, to define oneself, to know oneself, to find real truth, to grow in perfection, as well as to know the other and to enter into true relationships.

Without silence our dialogue becomes superficial, with no possibility of understanding the mystery of the other or to listen carefully. Silence activates our ability for solidarity. To seek silence, one need not go into an airtight room to be rid of others. That is not being silent but anti-social. Silence and solitude have no meaning in themselves. They are bound to human growth, precisely because they are indispensable elements. To be silent is to create in oneself the conditions to “be more”. Experience of solitude is a guarantee of love and is the trial that the spouse, the friend, the mystic, the religious, the priest must endure, in various degrees, if one wishes to be authentic.

Silence promotes human maturity without which one would remain in sterile emptiness, in confusion, and at a superficial level. Without silence one would never

come to a perfect self-realisation and a true relationship of love. Although the modern world, which urges one to “sound”, to noise, believes that it is impossible to attain silence, silence remains indispensable to the person who wishes to come to the fullness of his/her humanity. It seems contradictory and paradoxical, but it is true. Without silence – and experience shows this – people are ever more dehumanised. People who like silence come to an interior peace that allows them to speak and work more efficiently; in fact, silence is also the climate of creativity. Only silence endows words – instruments of dialogue and of communication – with their deepest dimension and true meaning. Without silence all would be cacophony and confusion. “The world and life are extremely sick. If I were a doctor and should give it a prescription, I would say: Create SILENCE.”

2.2 Meaning

Generally, dictionaries present only the physical aspect of silence: “State of one who abstains from speaking, interruption of noise...secret...dignified demeanour”. These do not give the full definition and meaning of silence which is not only the absence of words or noise, or the emptiness which takes place when activities cease. Today, the science of language teaches us that to explain the values of a term it is necessary to look at its opposite terms. The “opposite” of silence is the word, communication, seen, generally, from the most elementary aspect of their meaning. However, silence is much more and has its own substance. It is the special climate where the interior life of a person blooms and grows. It is rare, if not impossible, for a hardened chatterbox to be someone of worth, someone to be trusted, mature. Much talk has always been considered a sign of weakness and of flightiness. St. Am-

brose says, “He who speaks much is like a flawed vessel which cannot keep the secrets of the King” (PL 15, 1246). A person is built from the inside outwards. One may say that, in the process of internalisation, silence is an indispensable condition to gather and purify the images, impressions, feelings that gradually form the person to be. Psichari says well, “Silence is the great teacher of truth...the teacher of love”. Hence it affects the conscious and subconscious in a person.

It is silence that gives meaning to the word, enriching it, endowing it with truth and authority, making it an authentic expression of one’s being. It is the light of dialogue; and if such is its power in every person, much more will it be powerful for the one who seeks the ABSOLUTE as partner in dialogue. Silence exists in order to create space for revelation, for communion, for covenant: “[Yahweh] will give strength to your bones, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never run dry...(Yahweh) will lead you triumphant over the heights of the land...” (Isa 58: 11, 14).

In the spiritual life, silence becomes an indispensable “attitude” :

- To listen to and know GOD: “O! eternal Word, Word of my God, I want to spend my life listening to you” (Elisabeth of the Trinity).
- To live in a relationship of intimacy with GOD: “The Father uttered only one Word which is his Son, and he uttered it in eternal silence” and it is in silence that one can communicate with it (Cf. St. John of the Cross).

Only one who is capable of silence goes to his/her own roots and, there, is purified, unified, and knows his/herself and reality, with the possibility of penetrating to the centre of life, whence s/he will enter into a

communion of love with GOD. Silence, then, is the indispensable “substance” which accompanies a person along the way to growth and maturity until the person truly becomes formed according to the will of GOD. The heart of every person, no matter his/her state, needs to practice SILENCE. It is the indispensable dimension of human life, the dimension so evidently sought after by the hermits of the past, so that Psichari says:

*In every watchful person the hermit is present. A hermit no longer needs to run to the exterior desert, because this **place of silent peace** is in him/her in the most profound dimension, in his/her most secret inner self, transformed for him/her into a living dwelling place, where nothing is differentiated in the heart in the unity of these nuptials between **silence** and the **word**, between **action** and **contemplation**.*

It is from one’s way of living that one can come to the idea-experience of silence, of this “state” where the being is submerged, with the possibility of always going further, without the need for feelings, words or gestures. Thus one savours the fullest communion, completely awake, with an ever growing clarity, discovering the root of one’s being and, in this light, truly finding oneself. From the discovery of this root, from the perception of life in the centre of oneself, the person will increasingly mature, going from “light to light”, discovering and living in “the truth that liberates”. If life is not immersed in silence, it is impossible, at least in the normal course of human development, to acquire that interior insight which allows one to live in justice, with the necessary just relationship with him/herself, with history, with the brothers and sisters, with nature and with GOD.

2.3 The Importance of silence

In the spiritual life, every means - including silence and solitude – is relative, that is, silence and solitude are not ends in themselves nor do they guarantee the attainment of an end. Even though silence is always important and indispensable as a means to attain that which one seeks, by itself it is no guarantee of the spiritual life and of the maturity of the person. Nevertheless, without silence a person will find it difficult to attain fullness of life.

Silence, therefore, is relative to the growth of a person at one's deepest level. It is not the substance of the spiritual life, but it is bound to it in such a way that it becomes a pre-requisite in order to conquer and live the spiritual life. It reveals to persons the reality of the spirit and of their inner life. Even though there are not sufficient "wells of silence" for humanity, especially since silence must begin within oneself, yet silence guarantees depth of life, both so that every one may attain to the fullness of the interior life (integration, unity, happiness, holiness), and so that it may give meaning to one's works or expression to one's talents (artistic, scientific, intellectual, mystical).

There are many psychological experiences that use silence to help people seek peace and heal diseases. This is "silence-therapy". It is a form that may help harmonise psychology to attain personal integration. However, the silence that the spiritual person must seek is not born of psychological necessity, but of an intrinsic need of his/her being. Only through SILENCE may one attain:

- knowledge of one's own mystery (the search for one's own identity);

- a meeting with reality (to recognise values, their hierarchy and discernment in their practice);
- an experience of the ABSOLUTE (discovering the root and sense of one's own life).

It is impossible to achieve human fullness without discovering these things and without living the dimensions they propose:

*Now let us allow **silence** to work.*

*It is a great master of **truth**.*

*To these spaces of silence
that cross my soul,*

I really owe all that is good in me...

*Pity those who have not known
silence.*

*Then I rested full of love and
respect,*

*Because **silence** is also*

The master of love (Psichari).

*I wish to write for you a hymn on
silence,*

*watchfulness of God over our
feverishness,*

*mantle of God on our human
clamour...*

*It is good to meet **God**, who is
eternal **silence**,*

***silence**, haven of ships*

***silence** in **God**, haven of every ship.*

*Love begins where there is no
expectation of reward.*

*Love is above all the exercise of
prayer,*

*and prayer is the exercise of **silence**.*

*They and I were no other than
prayer which dissolved into the
silence of God (Exupery).*

Although these reflections were not written by religious, but by people who experienced something in their interior depths, in reality they express Jesus' invitation: "In your prayers do not babble as the pagans do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard" (Mt 6:7).

Silence is of capital importance for the spiritual life. It allows for the

concentration of one's whole being, the intellectual, affective and volitional faculties, in a single centre. If we have to seek Truth with all our being, silence is the condition that permits this, it helps one to free oneself from the dispersion of energies in order to settle in LOVE, in GOD. Gradually one will learn to take root in God, using all one's energies to perceive true life.

His mother stored up all these things in her heart (Lk 2:52).

Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally (Mt 1:19).

The fulfilment of life demands this keeping of silence which leads to maturity of heart and fulfils the person: "So I tell you this, that for every unfounded word people utter they will answer on Judgement day" (Mt 12:36).

The ancient Fathers of the Church, such as Clement of Alexandria, the pseudo-Dionysius, Basil, John Climacus, Ambrose, recommend silence as a fundamental element of the spiritual life... For example:

The silence of human reason is necessary for the knowledge of God, grace alone enlightens the spirit (Clement of Alexandria).

The silent praise of God is the only thing which is adequate to his infinite being (Gregory of Nazianzen).

The revelations of God recounted in the Bible have silence as background (together with the desert and solitude). For us Carmelites this is an important thought that we shall take up again later. Suffice it to recall here the torrent of Karith where Elijah drank the water of contemplation that enabled him to discern the difference between the living and true GOD and the false gods, idols that he fought vehemently. The desert, seen as a form of more absolute SILENCE, is also for

us "the place to drink the water" of intimacy with God, the "place" which allows us to purify our desires, our motivations, our means. To purify ones motivations means to penetrate the depths of one's heart, that is, the unconscious. Elijah, our Prophet, reveals to us the importance of SILENCE for this purification and for life in the presence and service of GOD.

2.4 The basic types of silence

Silence is of great value for human maturity in all its aspects. But, as in all matters human, even silence, contaminated and polluted by selfishness, may atrophy rather than mature the person. There is a silence, which is attentive to the Word of God in us, and there is a silence that is the negation and closure of the Word in our hearts. One can be silent externally (dumb!), but without the silence that comes from the heart and, therefore, purified. We, then, have two types of silence:

- the silence that is a negation of the Word
- the silence that welcomes the Word.

2.4.1 The silence that is a negation of the Word

This kind of silence closes the person to love, to communication. It is inspired by selfishness and takes on various forms, according to the passion from which it takes its origin. Let us recall a few:

- Silence of indifference: as though the other did not exist.
- Silence of contempt: as though the other were inferior.
- Silence of pride: as though the other were worth nothing.
- Silence of rancour: not accepting or giving forgiveness.

- Silence of weakness: fear of commitment, flight.
- Silence of complicity: covering up culpable situations.
- Silence of betrayal: refusing to witness to the truth.

2.4.2 *The silence that welcomes the Word*

This is the silence that gives proper space to persons. It provides one with the opportunity to listen to him/herself, to listen to the other, to listen to God. It harmonises the mind with eternity, leaving room for LOVE. This is the silence that purifies, silencing the dissonant voices of selfishness that pollute LOVE. This is the silence that brings the fullness of life.

Silence, a school of love and of death where the soul finds life.

Key-silence which opens the immense furnace of the heart of God.

Word-silence, phrase, discourse of passionate love which is consumed in the embrace of God.

Silence, more than union is oneness with the Lord.

(Catherine of Hueq Doherty)

The right use of the Word and of Silence requires attention to the material aspects (that which one must say, that which one must do), to the manner of speaking or keeping quiet (negative silence, welcoming silence), to opportunities (when to silence someone and when to keep silence oneself) and to the purpose of silence.

Guard against foul talk; let your words be for the improvement of others (Eph 4: 29).

The blessings of Yahweh are on the head of the virtuous one, premature mourning stops the mouths of the wicked. The lips of the virtuous drip with kindness, the mouth of the wicked with deceit (Prov 10: 6. 32).

2.5 The effects of silence in a person's life

Silence produces beneficial effects in the person who learns to cultivate it genuinely. Even from a natural point of view, if properly understood, silence produces admirable fruits: it calms, purifies, comforts, enlightens, frees, leads to unity, and strengthens communion. Those who live it may say that they are happy, because “Happy are they who listen to the voice of God in their hearts and receive from his mouth words of love, happy the ears that capture divine melodies purified from the deafening coarse sounds and noises that render one ugly”.

Many are the practical effects of silence:

1. Silence reveals one's identity.
2. Silence refines the conscience.
3. Silence leads one to intuit the presence of God in oneself.
4. Silence makes the “heart” grow.

2.5.1 *Silence reveals one's identity*

This is the first effect of silence: it allows one to know oneself, one's very self. This knowledge of self is indispensable for one's maturity. In all of us there are fundamental questions that need to be answered: Who am I? From where do I come? Where am I going? These are existential questions... Then there are essential questions: How am I? Why am I like this? Why is my personal history this and not another? Only one's personal experience with the Other, made possible through silence (internalisation), will provide satisfactory answers.

Only in the deepest silence is this search possible. An Arabic proverb says: “Your best friend is yourself, listen to yourself more than to oth-

ers; it is your self who will tell you the truth". To listen to one's heart is to seek the truth written there, and it is one of the gifts of silence.

2.5.2 Silence refines the conscience

Silence brings one to the truest perception of reality making one capable of perceiving values, of responding creatively and justly (with rectitude) even to the subtlest demands of personal and social reality. The major effects of such perception are:

- purification that frees the soul from all ties that impede one from loving,
- ability to see and love the world as God sees and loves it,
- detachment that implants one exclusively in LOVE,
- discretion that makes one moderate,
- peace that gives an interior strength born from God,
- joy that expresses the fullness achieved.

2.5.3 Silence leads one to intuit the presence of God in oneself

Carmel is guardian of this experience: life in the presence of God! John of St, Samson recommends, "Walk in the presence of God, visibly orderly and composed in true tranquillity of spirit and heart".

If this truth must enlighten the whole of life, guiding one on one's journey, only silence will allow us to perceive the presence of God and allow us to be guided by it. It is impossible to discover God in noise and confusion. The more the heart is tuned-in, the greater the perception. For a deeper perception, there needs to be greater silence. Words,

images, thoughts become "dross" which intervenes between God and ourselves when we try to communicate with GOD.

Silence is the most powerful form of communication and union... a direct form that dispenses with other mediations such as symbols and signs because COMMUNION is the most perfect communication. Those who do not love and understand the beauty of silence will find it difficult to understand matters divine.

2.5.4 Silence makes the 'heart' grow

Silence gathers the person in all his/her aspects (physical, psychological, and spiritual), it favours the growth of the "heart" or of the "mystical mind". Gradually, or suddenly if God so wishes, we perceive our "re-creation". We discover new nourishment, enjoy a great feeling of wellbeing, feel an inexplicable consolation. We enter a life that no longer needs any search, any labour to placate our feelings, thoughts, words, nor any effort to live in silence. Such persons are like those who have the sensitivity that blind people have in their hands and ears, but still go on using their sight to the full... They have reached the depth of life. They contemplate reality in its true light. They have attained the harmony of their being, the most stable unity. "It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me." They live more from the essence than from the appearance of things... PEACE and JOY are their permanent "habitat". They are ecologically perfect, because there is no pollution in their inner self and in their vision.

Only those who recollect themselves in the deepest silence are awake, and only those who are awake live truly and in the full sense

of the word, because they are aware that God is contemplating them, and live in anticipation of the glory to come. This is the dynamism of silence, it is the opposite of passivity and still gives the experience of the ardent desire so well expressed by Elisabeth of the Trinity: “To forget myself completely in order to gaze on You, immobile, peaceful as though I were already in eternity”.

St. Francis de Sales says that, to reform a monastery, it is sufficient to regain seriously the observance of silence. The same may be said of the heart of each person. Silence, practised responsibly and fully, educates the person in the difficult art of speaking, making one weigh well one’s words and say only that which is according to God’s will. “In silence...lies your strength” (Isa 30: 15, cf. RA 21).

2.6 *Biblical texts for internalisation:*

Further reading

Ps 48; Qo. 5: 9-15; Prov 15: 1-17; Isa 35: 1-10; Mt 27: 11-14.

Read the text carefully and note:

1. The anthropological reasons for the silence.
2. The connection between human maturity, dialogue and silence.
3. The relationship between silence and the experience of God.
4. Draw a diagram of the text or underline those sayings which seem most important. Discuss them. Amplify them. Research the theme.

For self evaluation

1. Where do I stand in relation to silence? How do I define silence in my experience?
2. Do I think that I can learn to be silent? How do I begin my education? What are my difficulties?
3. Am I convinced of the importance, value, and necessity of silence or do I think that it impoverishes, that it is difficult, not necessary?
4. Have I understood the ecological value of silence?
5. Entrust the spiritual director with my thoughts, feelings, conclusions, and decisions.

3

Biblical Foundations of Silence

3.1 Introduction

“In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God; and the Word was God ... The Word was made flesh, he lived among us” (Jn 1: 1, 14).

“When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-encompassing Word...” (Wis 18: 14-15).

“Where the divine mysteries are present there must be much silence” (St. John Chrysostom, PG 49, 372).

Sacred Scripture, the dynamic tale and revelation of the LOVE of God for humankind, is, for this very reason, the “place” of the meeting on the journey towards communion with the MYSTERY of GOD. If communion between partners of the same nature demands, among its requirements, the need to “speak-listen”, to pay concentrated attention in “deciphering” the message, then much more is demanded when communion is not only between interlocutors who are not of the same nature, but who are infinitely different, asymmetrical, a meeting between the divine (ineffable) and the human (contingent).

Basically, in order to listen to God it is essential to learn God’s terminology, to know God’s “code”,

to understand God’s language. The whole of Scripture teaches us this Scripture is a communication concerning the “dynamics” of God who dialogues with biblical persons and with us, introducing us increasingly into the knowledge of God’s LOVE.

In Scripture, the Carmelite learns to “Vacare Deo” (to wait on God) and “puritas cordis” (purity of heart), when s/he commits him/herself to “meditate day and night on the law of the Lord” (RA 10) and makes it his/her orientation, his/her goal, his/her life’s destination. In this school s/he also learns that the Lord shows how to listen to him and that the first step is silence: “The Lamb then broke open the seventh seal, and there was silence in heaven, for about half an hour” (Rev 8: 1). Before the infinite, that is God, silence grows into a natural attitude of expectation. This is what Zechariah suggests when he invites Sion to marvel at the restoring visit of the Lord: “Let all humankind be silent before Yahweh! For he is awaking and is coming from his holy dwelling” (Zech 2: 17).

3.2 The God of Silence

The Bible reveals to us that our God is the God of Silence: “God pronounced only one **Word**, that is his Son, and he pronounces this Word in eternal silence” (St. John of the Cross, Maxims 21). It is probable that this thought echoes the internalisation of the Scripture: “When peaceful silence lay over all and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word...like a sharp sword...” (Wis 18: 14-15). And starting from “the Word was made flesh” (Jn 1: 14) in the midst of a humanity in need of salvation, victim of evil as ordinary state of life, became that

“sign of contradiction” (Lk 2: 34) which allowed humankind to find new ways.

We have already seen that silence is “the goal” of a greater reality, namely, communication. Silence without the word has no value. Only silence can generate the word, accompany it, and make possible its expression and the understanding of its content. Concerning God, whose nature cannot be defined because it is infinite and ineffable, we can see that silence is an essential part of that nature. In fact, God’s attributes, in one sense, derive and become understandable when one interprets them in the light of silence. Silence in God is God’s simplicity, God’s communicating uniqueness that becomes the Trinity and from God’s depth God descends towards creation and incarnation.

Thus our God has a silence that St. John of the Cross calls “loud silence” because, when contemplated, it reveals to us a God who speaks and not a mute God. God’s ineffable nature is not willful silence, the “self-closure” of an absolute being. From all eternity there is in God the generation of the WORD that becomes the divine communication in the Holy Spirit: a personal and personalising colloquy in the Trinity.

We know of this wonderful silence of God only thanks to the WORD, revealed in creation, in the Mosaic covenant, and, fully, in Jesus Christ.

The silence of God in creation is the revelation of God’s immense power, which does not need the least sound in order to establish the laws that call being into existence. God’s word is enough. In the story of creation in Genesis (chs. 1 and 2) we find that “God said” is enough in order for each reality to acquire its existence. And, when thinking of humankind, God wished to make

them “*in God’s own image and likeness*” so that, by means of the gifts that such a plan granted to them, they might be beings of silence-word, of communication and communion. Hence it is humankind that must “name” all things. To this day, it is up to humankind to manifest, hide or destroy the voice of God in nature (cf. Gen 1: 26-31; 2: 19).

We find a reflection of this silence in our experience. The history of humankind has shown that the great works, the masterpieces of any art and in any intellectual field, are always conceived, produced and perfected in silence, and demand silence to be made known in their depth and admired in their perfection.

The whole of the Old Testament, human parable from sin to the incarnation of the Word, is a manifestation of this attribute of God, “silence-word”. The exhortation “Listen Israel!” (Deut 6: 4) echoes throughout the whole of the history of salvation right to the end:

At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, God has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is (Heb 1: 1-2).

In Jesus Christ, God has translated the Word; generated in the Trinitarian eternal silence (cf. Wis18: 14-15), into the Incarnation and into the earthly birth of the Word in the silence of the night in Bethlehem (cf. Lk 2: 1-4).

Silence, then, is an essential part of the language of God, the revelation of God’s greatness, of God’s mystery, unity (simplicity) in the Trinity of persons (communion, communication of life among them and in creation). Thus, contemplating silence in God, we understand

that it is in silence that are born the fundamental attitudes of the person, where the purest expressions are born (*puritas cordis*), where vital expressions bear the fruits of love, justice, peace, wisdom, fortitude, poverty...in sum bear the perfection which becomes gratuity and the exercise of the gift of personal freedom. All this is realised in the measure that one allows him/herself to be saturated by silence thus acquiring a serene self-presence: “I always have my soul in my hands”.

3.3 The silence of Jesus and Mary

The Bible teaches us that silence is the way to the centre of God. It is the way that teaches us to perceive the coming of God, to remain attentive and awake in faith, accepting and desiring the greatest mystery that surrounds humankind.

Although the Bible explicitly recommends some aspects and details of human behaviour regarding silence, it does not, however, teach or value a silence based only on control of speech nor does it propose a philosophical silence as an initiation into “mysteries” or “mysticisms” of human invention. The silence of the Bible concerns the realisation of the human vocation. This allows one, by the help of God’s grace, to come close to the mystery of God himself and to be “caught up into paradise and hear things which must not and cannot be put into human language” (2 Cor 12: 4). Basically, it is the perception of revelation. The Biblical models *par excellence* of such silence are Jesus and Mary.

3.3.1 The silence of Jesus

The entire history of Jesus is one deep lesson on silence, indispensable to the realisation of his mission. From the Incarnation to the Cross and Resurrection, the whole behaviour of Jesus is marked by silence.

By his incarnation, Jesus, who was from the beginning the Word in the Father (Gal 1, 1ff.), proceeds from the inter-Trinitarian dialogue in order to raise humankind to this dialogue, making all participate in his inheritance, co-heirs in the mystery of God. As the Word of God that must be proclaimed to the whole world, he knows that silence is indispensable in order for him to be received. That is why, in order to reveal the greatness of God, he comes into the world in the midst of the deepest silence; divests himself of his divine condition and becomes obedient unto death even death on the cross (Phil 2: 6-8). He assumes this kenosis: he is born in the silence of time (midnight); in social silence (he emigrates to Bethlehem); in historical silence (unknown to the great of this earth). He grows in silence (hidden in Nazareth); realises his mission in constant silence, intent on announcing his Father and not himself. Before the noisy and euphoric cries that acclaim and exalt his miracles, his attitude is one of discreet silence. In every situation, he always turns to the Father, as for instance, “I knew indeed that you always hear me, but I speak for the sake of all these who stand round me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me” (Jn 11: 42). The characteristic of his mission is that of restoring deep silence to those whom he meets on his way, leading them to the Father: “If you only knew what God is offering...” (Jn 4: 10); “Go home... your son will live”

(Jn 4: 50); “Go away, and don’t sin any more” (Jn 8: 11); “My daughter... your faith has restored you to health; go in peace” (Lk 8: 48); “Be careful not to parade your good deeds before people to attract their notice...” (Mt 6: 1); “When you pray, go into your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place...In your prayers do not babble...(Mt 6: 6-7).

We contemplate the summit of the greatness of Jesus’ silence in his passion. Even at the height of Jesus’ sufferings, silence reigns in adoration of the Father and in communion with God’s will. He reveals himself as truly the servant of Yahweh announced by Isaiah: “Harshly dealt with, he never opened his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter-house, like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers” (Isa 53: 7). His silence during the most painful moments of his passion (before Herod, Pilate and his executioners: Mk 14: 61; Lk 23: 9; Mt 27: 14; Jn 19: 9) is not the silence of cowardice or fear, but the silence that reveals conformity with his messianic calling; that is why he breaks the silence when he has to declare that he is the sent of the Father (Mt 26: 64; Mk 14: 62; Jn 18: 36-37) and when he turns to the Father in filial trust on the cross (Mt 27: 46; Lk 23: 43, 46).

The message of the Resurrection is also proclaimed in an atmosphere of silence. Suffice it to see the biblical texts that announced the event of the empty tomb (Lk 24: 3), the discreet apparition to the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24: 13-35) and the meeting with Mary Magdalene (Jn 20: 11-18). Jesus does not appear in the splendour of divinity, but in familiar and simple, even if sublime, form.

3.3.2 *The silence of Mary*

Another great model of silence in the Bible is the figure of Mary. The Evangelists present only four episodes where she intervenes:

- Lk 1: 34-38: her dialogue with the angel at the Annunciation. Her word puts the seal on the vital commitment; she accepts the mission he asks of her.
- Lk 1: 46-55: on her visit to Elisabeth, Mary breaks the silence in connection with the great mystery of God, but only to say, in the Magnificat, that God works marvels.
- Lk 2: 48: in fulfilling her mission as Mother, when she anxiously meets her lost Son and chides him: “Son, why have you done so to us?”
- Jn 2: 3, 5: “They have no wine...” and “Do whatever he tells you”. Her concerned silence leads her to an efficacious request and to help the servants to carry out Jesus’ command, even though it seems to be a senseless one.

These four passages, where the Bible reports the words of Mary, are very significant. These are essential words at crucial moments in the life of Jesus, and so, indispensable in the development of the history of salvation. These are words that reveal the co-redemptive mission of Mary. And they hold such strength, preciseness, efficacy, because Mary had understood them in the mystery of silence.

- Mt 1: 18-23: the divine origin of the Messiah. So deep is the mystery of the Incarnation that Mary protects herself before Joseph under the veil of silence. We can imagine her pain, but also how mature she was and how well she was rewarded! Clearly, here we can also contemplate the beauty

of Joseph's silence: "Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally" (1: 19).

- Lk 2: 19, 51: "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart".

The silence of Mary, learnt in joy and in admiration of the mystery, but also in the depth of suffering, was not a passive silence. On the contrary, the silence led her ever deeper into her commitment as mother of the Saviour, of co-redeemer. Mary was the faithful disciple of the Lord, attentive and penetrating ever deeper into the mystery of God, realising all that concerned her relationship with the Son of God and his works. Hers was a solicitous, strong, stimulating presence from Bethlehem to Calvary. Faithful witness of the Lord, her silence at the Resurrection is the greatest proof of her burning and deep faith, and so she could stay in the Cenacle (Act. 2: 14) watching over the newly born Church, in a role which could only be fulfilled by her who rendered concrete the ideal of the strong woman, as proposed in the Bible (Prov 31: 10-31). This ideal matures in silence, in meditation of the heart. Thus "When she opens her mouth, she does so wisely; on her tongue is kindly instruction" (Prov 31: 26).

3.4 Other biblical teachings on silence

The great events in the Bible contain an exceptional lesson in silence. Let us consider the attitudes of some figures who understood the invitation of God to listen to God's plan of love and to dedicate themselves to it:

- Gen 24: 12-21: the servant of Abraham finds a spouse for Isaac: "while the man watched in silence, wondering whether

Yahweh had made his journey successful or not".

- 1Sam 3: 1-20: The call of Samuel; it is good to contemplate how Samuel listens attentively to the word in prayer at a difficult moment in the life of the people of God. He goes back to listen to the Word: "Speak Yahweh, your servant is listening" (3: 10).
- 1Kings 17: 2-6: the prophet Elijah in the silence of Carith listens to the call to his mission of prophet of the true God...
- 1Kings 18: 42: on the summit of Mount Carmel, the silent prayer of the prophet is heard by the Lord in contrast to that screamed by the prophets of Baal.
- 1Kings 19: 9-18: Elijah, during his existential crisis and while fleeing from his responsibility, reveals a silent heart when he hears the voice of God in the murmur of the gentle breeze.
- Isa 41: 1; Ab 2: 20; Zac 2: 7, etc.: all the prophets invite the whole of the earth to silence before God.
- Pss 37: 6; 46: 11; 65: 2-3, etc.: teach us to keep silent before God.
- Lk 9: 36: "This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him". It is the Father himself who, at the Transfiguration, asks us to listen to the Son, to his teachings, above all to the dedication to his redemptive mission.
- Lk 10: 38-39: Jesus in Bethania: Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who listens attentively and joyfully to the Word of the Lord, "seated herself at the Lord's feet, and listened to him speaking".

There are many other situations and passages which tell us of the beauty and value of silence, explicitly inviting us to cultivate it as an excellent means for our personal growth and benefit.

Wisdom literature gives many counsels that remind people of these dispositions, if they wish to lead an upright, holy and fruitful life. We recall some:

- *A flood of words is never without fault, the one who has lips controlled is a prudent person* (Prov 10: 19).
- *If you have been foolish enough to fly into a passion and now have second thoughts, lay your hand on your lips* (Prov 30: 32).
- *Whoever scoffs at his/her neighbour is a fool, the person of discernment holds his/her tongue* (Prov 11: 12).
- *A time for keeping silent, a time for speaking* (Ecclesiastes 3: 7)
- *A wise person will keep quiet till the right moment* (Sir. 20: 7).

There are many other texts and deep lessons on silence, which one must learn if one wishes to penetrate into the mystery of God and to live God's covenant.

3.5 *Biblical texts for internalisation:*

Further reading

Many texts have been cited. Select those you prefer.

Evaluation:

- 1 Do I always visit the “school of the Bible” to study silence?
- 2 Does silence lead me to the discovery of God's plan, of what God has willed for me? Does silence prepare me to realise my mission in the history of salvation? Do I see silence from this point of view?
- 3 “Mary treasured these things, and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2: 19). Which word turned me towards the Lord and did I welcome it?
- 4 At critical moments in my life, what kind of silence do I maintain and what is my word? What do I need to learn from the silence of Jesus?

Attentive reading of the text:

- 1 Look for other texts dealing with silence in the Bible.
- 2 Read: Pss 13: 2; 28: 1; 83: 2; 109: 1. How do we interpret that which we call “the silence of God”?

4 Silence in Carmelite tradition

4.1 Introduction

If you remain united to the light it will teach you everything, it will reveal whatever needs to be learnt, not with words, but in another way.

Silence without internal words would be nothing, absolute emptiness.

Silence makes up much of the Rule of Carmel. In other prescriptions it is succinct and concise, but when it presents silence in number 21, it does so explicitly with biblical references and in detail as to its observance. Let us look at the main points of its content:

The Apostle would have us keep silence, for in silence he tells us to work. As the Prophet also makes known to us: Silence is the way to foster holiness. Elsewhere he says, Your strength will lie in silence and hope.

For this reason I lay down that you are to keep silence from after Compline until after Prime the next day. At other times, although you need not keep silence so strictly, be careful not to indulge in a great deal of talk, for as Scripture has it - and experience teaches us no less - sin will not be wanting where there is much talk, and he who is careless in speech will come to harm; and elsewhere: The use of many words brings harm to the speaker's soul. And our Lord says in the Gospel: Every rash word uttered will have to be accounted for on judgement day. Make a balance then,

each of you, to weigh his words in; keep a tight rein on your mouths, lest you should stumble and fall in speech and your fall be irreparable and prove mortal. Like the Prophet, watch your step lest your tongue give offence, and employ every care in keeping silent, which is the way to foster holiness."

As revealed in the whole of the provisions of our Rule, silence is to give content to life, authority to the word, sense, content and transparency to dialogue and communication, especially in that which concerns the highest level of human life. Silence is the means, an indispensable one, recognised as sound from the experience of many who in the past and in the present have chosen to live according to this Rule. It is strange and remarkable what authority this Rule holds, a Rule that is so brief and concise, yet woven with "well-chosen words", born from lived experience rather than from mere concepts and empty considerations. Seven centuries have already gone by, and we are witnesses still to its relevance, its vigour in the twentieth century, in spite of all modern innovations. The value of silence is emphasised in the Rule not only by the words in number 21, but by the whole style of life it puts before us.

4.2 Carmelite experiences of silence

The Carmelite's style of life is marked in a special kind by silence. The whole of the Rule implies that a life of silence is synonymous with a full life, because it is a life of intimacy with God, of fraternity, and of service. It is only by learning to dialogue well that a fruitful spiritual life is possible. And, as we have seen that dialogue consists in WORD-SILENCE. The Carmelite must learn reverential silence in his/her relationship with God. "The Lamb then broke the seventh seal, and there was si-

lence in heaven for about half an hour” (Rev 8: 1).

To learn Silence-Word one needs to go through solitude and the desert. “Silence and solitude are brother and sister who hold hands and gently help each other” (John of St. Samson, *Theorems*). Fr. Michael of St. Augustine calls silence “inseparable companion of solitude”. From its earliest origins, Carmelite life is presented in a style that may be called hermitic-communitarian. The first Carmelites established themselves on Mount Carmel (in the valley of the pilgrims and the hermits) and there found caves to live in a solitary environment. Not only this. As modern historians affirm, they served pilgrims on their way to Accon-Cesarea in a spontaneous apostolate demanded by the situation and by a life of charity, fruit of their solitude:

The vineyard of the Lord has flowered anew...because from the various parts of the world, from every tribe and tongue, and from every nation under the sun, pilgrims hastened to the Holy Land, religious men, attracted by the sacred and venerable places...Holy men left the world and, in their zeal to serve the Lord, moved by different feelings and motives, sought places that corresponded best to their ideal and devotion...Some lived in imitation of the great Prophet Elijah as hermits... They lived in solitude, each on his own, in small cells like beehives, where like bees they produced the divine honey of spiritual sweetness (James de Vitry).

Here we find the first statement which shows the value of silence in the life adopted by the Carmelites: choice of appropriate places, imitation of the great Prophet Elijah, hermits in small cells like beehives. A further analysis based on their way of life shows that their experience of silence was well organised on a community basis: election of a prior, obedience to him in their work, a specific cell, the invitation to remain in the cell. This was also expressed

by the word matured in silence: prayer in common, the celebration of the Eucharist together, community meetings, work, justified commitments including preaching, and all without useless conversations.

All this leads us to the conclusion that: “Silence is voluntary solitude, kept even in the midst of the people. Without silence man is attracted to external things. It is silence that makes the desert, without which it is impossible to find holiness” (L. Herling, S.J., *Ascetic and Mystical Theology*).

When the formula of life was transformed into a religious Rule, the group gained in stability and was inserted into the apostolic fraternity of the Mendicants. The eremitic demands are kept but adapted to the new environment (after their migration to Europe) and the community requirements are increased (meals in common, the vows, “appropriate places” and not just hermitages, the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours like clerics, the ownership of asses and mules, the use of meat when travelling, etc.). The same attention to silence is kept, and, for practical reasons, further establishing the obligation on the community of the observance of silence from Compline to Prime. “Silence creates and preserves the atmosphere...of the religious life.”

A great effort is made to preserve the eremitic spirit (life in solitude), deepening the values of the charism, always cultivating silence before the new challenges: clericalisation, travelling on the quest, urbanisation, university teaching, etc.

This silence was not necessarily identified with the seclusion of the person, estrangement from life, alienation from reality. In this study it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that silence and solitude may arise from neurosis, sickness, a de-

sire to escape from life and reality. Silence and solitude may also be the result of egotism born of the search for self-comfort and, what is worse, rationalised and made sacred. This is not the silence of Carmel. In Carmel, the search for solitude and silence is one with the experience of the desert, that is purification, and thus involves a very demanding and active silence and solitude, not sought for personal satisfaction, illusion of holiness, or neurotic and egotistic escape from life and people. This wrong use of silence is worse when those who practise it take on a meek and pseudo mystical attitude.

The desert (the hermitage) which gives form to Carmelite silence and solitude, is an experience that leads the person to a purification of its ambiguities, towards a radical Christian commitment, creating the conditions for following Christ, “to serve him pure in heart and stout in conscience”.

This, however, is not a Carmelite discovery. The tradition of the desert goes back to the Bible. Abraham, our father in faith, Moses, the people of God, the exodus (going through the desert), Elijah, our “founder” and inspirer, John the Baptist and Jesus himself, all went through their experience of the desert and lived marked by the values that come from this spring. We cannot understand biblical spirituality without this dimension.

The practice of the desert, which includes silence – absence or purification from the solicitations that prevent love - is the keynote and is part of any serious search for God. When we examine how our brothers put this practice into effect, we discover that silence-solitude-desert is not just a geographical refuge in some hermitage or the practice of some psychological exercise. It is a way of following Jesus. It is not just

an external sign of life that the Carmelites sought and still seek, but they really desired and still desire to achieve the renunciation of all that is attached to the old person in order to arrive at the experience of the ABSOLUTE of GOD and of the relativity of all else, including people and oneself.

Let the classic of Carmelite life, the book *De institutione primorum monachorum*, speak to us:

For he (Elijah), in order to achieve divine contemplation and because of his desire for a higher perfection, left behind the cities and, abandoning all that is earthly and worldly, started, first among men, to live a religious and prophetic-eremitic life... This life consists in offering a holy heart, pure from all stains of sin... and even in this life to experience in the heart and in the mind the force of the divine presence and the sweetness of the heavenly glory...

What the author puts forward as the example of the life in the desert and “exercise” of silence of the prophet Elijah, is quite concrete: he renounces all passing things, he renounces his own will and concupiscent, he seeks an undivided heart, perfect love, he avoids all that may weaken charity and embraces poverty, chastity and obedience in order to grow in love. Finally he puts forward the most absolute of silences, namely the death of self in order to contemplate God who dwells in inaccessible light. It is in this mould of thinking that many generations of Carmelites were formed.

Throughout the centuries, the Constitutions of the Order and of Carmelite Congregations have always kept and encouraged this prescription. In their directives they always show fidelity to the primitive ideal of Carmel, insisting on a life of recollection, flight from anything that might endanger or threaten it, the use of appropriate means to ensure life in the presence of God. In

the 1971 revision, applying the directives of Vatican Council II, the Constitutions of the Order are faithful to the recommendation of these means: “The interior man is aware that times of silence are requisites of divine love. As a rule he needs periods of solitude so that he may hear God speaking to his heart” (Constitutions 1971, n. 58).

Blessed John Soreth (†1471), when, in his *Expositio Regulae*, speaks of the Carmelite ideal and the means to attain it, emphasises, among other things, silence and solitude:

The cell protects the son of grace... it nourishes him, embraces him, leads him to the fullness of perfection and makes him worthy of conversing with God... The cell of the servant of the Lord is like the holy temple of God. As in the temple so in the cell, divine matters are dealt with, but in the cell, even more frequently... You will have an external and an internal cell: the external cell is the room of your soul and body; the internal cell is your conscience, where the God of your interior world must dwell with your spirit.

John of St. Samson (†1636) taught the novices the value of silence, calling the custom of keeping silence “the virtue of silence”, difficult to achieve for those who are poor in the gifts of the spirit. This quotation of his is precious:

It is often necessary to go to extremes in order to find the just mean. Hence one must exercise absolute silence. In order to achieve the necessary attitude of speaking well and with precision, silence and solitude are two brothers who hold hands to help each other. Interior silence is more perfect than exterior silence. It checks and controls the movements of all the passions. We must achieve interior silence by practising exterior silence... Silence is a very important cure for our blindness and all other spiritual defects (Spiritual sentences).

There are many other texts of our Carmelite brothers and sisters that speak of this important characteristic of our life. We can look them up. To conclude, we cite only two of our contemporary sisters: Elisabeth of the Trinity (†1906) and Edith Stein (†1942) who were great friends of silence and who proclaim it with their lives. The following texts are interesting:

On Mount Carmel, in silence and solitude, in uninterrupted prayer because kept up through the various occupations, the Carmelite lives as s/he would in heaven... Thus the soul yearns for silence in order to penetrate ever more the infinite being... S/he loves silence and prayer, because it is the essence of our life. The Virgin's attitude during the months between the Annunciation and Christmas is the model of interior souls, of those chosen by God to live an inner life, in the depth of the bottomless abyss... And this does not prevent them from giving themselves outwardly when charity demands.

(Elisabeth of the Trinity)

The visible events that renew the face of the earth are anticipated in the silent dialogue of the souls consecrated to God... Jesus gave himself to solitary prayer in the quiet of the night, atop the mountain, in the desert, far from people...

(Edith Stein)

4.3
**Carmelite
silence and
commitment**

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To live life fully means going to the root of one's being, to discover the truth about oneself, starting with contemplation and the search for the truth that is God, in order to realise God's plan. Carmelite spirituality presents nothing less than nor different than this, even though in the light of some ideologies the contrary may seem to be true. It offers us a global plan, complete, efficient, challenging and life giving. To accept it, one must understand that silence is achieved by going through the desert. This journey may begin with less than

perfect psychological and sociological motivations, but, as one progresses in one's search for God, the motivations are purified and the person is led to an increasingly full option for life, emerging in love of solidarity, even to achieving fraternal communion.

The desert for us begins precisely when we listen to the call and open ourselves to live it. Detachment from family, friends, work, social conditions, country, etc. are, in one sense, the gateway to the desert. It is the material, external "displacement" which may cost a lot at first, but which is indispensable for human maturity from the spiritual perspective. Human life, of its nature, involves the dimension of exodus, of search, of pilgrimage that brought St. Teresa of Jesus to define it as "a night spent in the worst hotel". Gradually we discover that we must change from inside: "Change your soul and not your place". Attitudes, criteria, feelings, thoughts, ways of being and acting must be increasingly overcome and purified from the ambiguity that they bear because they are born of selfishness.

The journey through the desert of learning silence and solitude in order to overcome one's limitations is not without its pains. But there is also a happy side to the celebration. Our Carmelite mysticism teaches thus! This is one of its most beautiful aspects. It does not bring us to the cult of purification or to the temptation of a sterile puritanism, but it reminds us that the journey through the desert is made in darkness and light at the same time. This is because the journey through the desert allows us to have a double and integrating experience of the relativity of all things, including ourselves, and of the knowledge of God. It will always be so: from the beginning to the end of the journey, sometimes darkness will dominate, sometimes light. We can never say definitely: "I

have now arrived". The further we go into the journey, the more we meet with light and the greater is our desire to advance further still.

Through the silence of the desert we discover our depth, solitude. We stand alone before God, and this presence is sufficient to fulfil and give meaning to our life. It is "the lone one facing the lone ones with the One alone". Then it is the "loud" silence that takes place in us and this brings us to constant adoration! Then, free and living in pure faith and in authenticity, the fruits of silence, the love of God with all our heart, all our strength, all our mind, become real. And so we shall love our neighbour as God loves him/her. It is from this that our commitment to the world originates. If in silence we meet our pettiness, meanness, mediocrity, our sin, we also discover joyfully that we meet true love in the merciful God, in the God who loved us first. Then we will have silenced the spirit of the world and there emerges in us the presence of God. We come to the experiential knowledge of the gratuitous generosity of God and the desire to identify ourselves with God in the love of neighbour.

That is why solitude has always held an important place in Carmelite life, which aims to live in deepest intimacy with God by following in the footsteps of Christ, the basis of its fraternity and service. This is an Elijan inheritance which was taught by the Fathers of the Church who, even before the birth of the Order, saw Elijah, our inspirer, as such:

Life in solitude is beautiful and bright and when my self-esteem refuses to accept it, Carmel and the great Elijah teach it to me (St. Gregory of Nazianzen).

Silence exists for the Word. If there is solitude without silence it is a silence without presence, without Word, it is not the Carmelite solitude-silence. This would impoverish

the person and not bring growth and fullness. Solitude does not deprive the person of anything in the spiritual life, but prepares the person for presence, leads to adoration, transforming relationships and service into signs of love. Blessed Titus Brandsma explained this clearly when he wrote:

Solitude is the journey that takes us directly to our ultimate search that is God.... For the Carmelite, solitude is the expression of detachment from the world and of belonging to God.

Only life in the PRESENCE of GOD can give us a privileged place to observe reality, allowing us to see each thing in its right place and in its right proportion, and to discover in the light of this supreme truth its authentic meaning and value. Only then is it possible to follow consciously the call of God, in a full realisation of ourselves:

Silence promotes justice, and, more, your strength lies in silence and hope...and seek attentively and prudently to keep the silence that promotes justice” (RA 21).

Unless we dedicate ourselves to reality, starting from God and God’s justice, we shall live at the mercy of pragmatism, at a superficial level; and we not only compromise ourselves, but, through our human way of reckoning, we weaken our service for the Kingdom. The solitude born of silence separates our being, our interior world from all concrete matters and situations, leading us directly to union with the ONE who is the source of our existence. From this solitude it is possible to order our whole life, and hence, to commit ourselves to reality, purified from selfishness and rightly turned towards God. Without silence-solitude our being cannot be open to the divine dimension, to the point of really achieving God’s plan for us and for the world. This is the Carmelite way of preparing for and realising mission. That is why only a mystic succeeds in living on the frontier

between created reality and God; succeeds in maintaining the fight and contributing efficaciously to the transformation of the world.

The Carmelite Family does not lack examples. One of the most topical is our brother Titus Brandsma who, in his supreme suffering for the redemption of humankind, found, in his silent and solitary life, the strength to pray and give himself in a cheerful and adoring manner:

*Dear Lord, when looking up to Thee,
I see Thy loving eyes on me;
Love overflows my humble heart,
Knowing what faithful Friend Thou art.*

*A cup of sorrow I foresee,
Which I accept for love of Thee.
Thy painful way I wish to go;
The only way to God, I know.*

*My soul is full of peace and light;
Although in pain, this light shines bright,
For here thou keepest to Thy breast
My longing heart to find there rest.*

*Leave me here freely all alone,
In cell where never sunlight shone.
Should no one ever speak to me,
This golden silence makes me free!*

*For though alone, I have no fear;
Never wert Thou, o Lord, so near.
Sweet Jesus, please, abide with me!
My deepest peace I find in Thee.*

Only the one who has discovered LOVE, present ever so deep within the self, can come to the full giving of self in PEACE and JOY; but it is impossible to perceive this love without silence and solitude.

4.4 Silence-solitude introduces us gradually to our most intimate nature, that which our Carmelite language calls “the summit of the mountain that is Christ”, “the interior castle”,

Practical changes worked by silence-solitude

the “aim of the little way”, “life in God’s presence”, “finding heaven on earth”, “the Marian way of life”, etc. This is realised in practice because silence-solitude leads us to live at a deep level even to the fullest communion with God.

Phenomenologically too, a great change takes place in us, not always evident at first sight, but which gradually shapes our being and gives it an interior look, so deep and clear, so strong and natural that it actually transforms us “in the image and likeness of God”. Our interior attitude changes because the centre and source of our life is God revealed in Jesus. We acquire his way of thinking, his criteria, his values and his love. Our being acquires substance and identity.

Our external attitude also is changed by our convictions: “The mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart”. The spiritual life, the life of the new person, acquires almost visible outlines. It is no longer the good that directs our small actions, but the SUPREME GOOD. We are rooted in the unique and perfect essence of LOVE that is God. We are thus, “naturally” spiritual and this becomes our way of acting.

Among the main changes which silence-solitude (or life in the desert) work in us, and which are easy to discern in our lives, are the following (not necessarily in this order):

- life from the exterior to one’s interior;
 - disintoxication of the person and genuine satisfaction;
 - going from possessiveness to freedom;
 - open to the universal merciful love;
 - life of discernment;
 - going from the memory of God to living in God’s presence.
-

4.4.1 Life from the exterior to one’s interior

The basic psycho-biological needs of a person are well known. We achieve our integration when we accept them as an integral part of and direct them according to the plan of the creator God for the body and for the psyche. Integration, in fact, is the fruit of the clear knowledge of oneself and the circumstances of life, and accepting them in the light of God. It is thus, and only thus, that we shall reach personal perfection and life acquires full meaning. The sense of guilt, sadness, distress, all the things that cause neurosis will disappear. It is in living in depth that our being rests and finds PEACE and JOY. Our commitment to the diaconia will be a joyful witness of the presence of God in us.

4.4.2 Disintoxication of the person and genuine satisfaction

If we are distracted, our natural tendency often strongly draws us towards an attachment to the necessities of life, which are also contingent. We are absorbed by the environment. Our mind, memory and heart lead us to anxiety, insatiability, and fear of losing little things. We place our interior substance more in material things than in ABSOLUTE LOVE. In solitude-silence, we intuit that the passions and desires are taken for granted and understood and gradually lose their false sense because we listen more to God who transforms us from the “old person” into the “new person”. Then our commitment to reality will be truer because it will be free from attachments and slavery.

4.4.3 Going from *possessiveness to freedom*

As our brothers and sisters from the past tell us, silence-solitude introduces us gradually into the freedom of the children of God. Through purification we pass from attachment and possessiveness to the process of liberation from ties. Going from the many to the one, from the ephemeral to the eternal, from the contingent to the essential – a real journey through the desert – and this results in the fullness of freedom! And, clearly, even though not fully in this life, this purification leads us to an experience of the joy and beauty of life in the “all-nothing”, a little heaven on earth.

4.4.4 Open to the universal *merciful love*

If we dwell on the Rule meditated with love, it will grow in value. The deep consciousness of our fragility taken up by the ever-present LOVE of GOD opens us to merciful love towards our brothers and sisters. The capacity to love, because freed from passion and the worship of self, manifests itself in welcoming every person joyfully, kindly and gently. Thus, one of the more evident fruits of silence-solitude is meeting the brothers and sisters and getting out of the narrow circle of oneself. Personal assurance, based on the intimate and constant presence of God, allows us to say to the other without any fear: “Come in, the dwelling of the heart is yours”.

4.4.5 Life of discernment

A loving devotion to God, the only aim of silence-solitude, leads us to examine God’s plan for the world

all the time and exclusively. It is not possible to think of other matters. Constant discernment, which purifies the motivations and means of our actions, will be our daily guide in every situation. Then, silence gives rise to an attitude of adoration and so, more than any ideology, to the capacity of giving, of faithfulness, of perfection, of honesty and of a complete giving of self, even to the cross. Action will be without many words, because it arises from the relationship with the Lord, and is not based on weak motivations, but only on the plan of God. The light of God will be sought constantly in discernment, which is the true guardian of silence.

4.4.6 Going from the *memory of God to living in God’s presence*

Union with God touches one’s most secret roots, embracing one totally. Union with God reveals to us whatever was obscure in life: “I no longer call you servants...” The certainty of one’s love takes on an unmistakable character, demanding more and more loving silence-attention and experiencing an ever growing thirst for God. One experiences a certain “natural” living together with God and naturally one takes one’s eyes off vanities, formalisms, wordiness, worldliness, etc. It is the possession of the INFINITE GOOD that gives endless rest and happiness. In one’s life, one feels the TRINITY as the “parental home” where one wishes to live for ever. And so silence in practice becomes praise: “For you, O God, silence is praise” and solitude becomes “loud”. It becomes COMMUNION with the SUPREME GOOD and, in the SUPREME GOOD, peopled with the brothers and sisters and with reality. One achieves life in *vacare Deo*,

which is what the Rule invites us to aim for.

4.5 *Biblical texts for internalisation:*

Further reading

Ps 1 – Ps 15 – 1Kings 19
– 1 Pt 1: 18-24 – Gen 3 –
Ex 2: 1; 3: 3.

Careful reading of the text:

- 1 Look up the biblical texts in number 21 of the Rule and examine them in their context in the Bible.
- 2 Based on the text, define silence, solitude, the desert, and establish the relationship among the three elements. (Distinguish their geographical, psychological and spiritual aspects.)
- 3 Research the witness of brothers and sisters whose thoughts are presented by the text. Copy other quotations from them and from other Carmelites.
- 4 In your reports, have you come across the characteristics of a life of silence as presented in 4.4 above? Describe these and show how they manifest themselves.

Evaluation

- 1 Experience a “time” of silence. Look for a suitable time and place. Try to spend the time alone in the presence of God.
- 2 Some other time, evaluate the time spent in silence:
 - a) Where was my heart?
 - b) What did I notice occupied my mind?
 - c) Look for the qualities you came across in your silence
 - spontaneous or forced?
 - happy or sad?
 - enriching or impoverishing?
 - quiet or tense?
 - loud or silent?
3. What do you think of all this? What have you discovered? What have you learnt?
4. At some other time, repeat the experience.
5. Share your thoughts, feelings, and conclusions with your spiritual director.

NOTES

5

Learning Silence

5.1 Introduction

*That is why Carmelites are modest in their gait, do not talk loud, seek not to make noise and so always keep the silence... But there is another silence that is interior silence... This is the silence the Carmelite must practise in order to acquire the proximate disposition for mystical union with the heavenly Spouse and for a life of intimacy with **him**...*

Every Carmelite must be convinced that the second sign of the Carmelite spirit is solicitude in observing silence. The first is love of solitude.

(Michael of St. Augustine)

In the quotation above, the form that must characterise the attitude of a Carmelite is well defined. It is not just a formality, a manner of appearing, of a cultural prescription, but much more! It is not a matter of looking at a model and imitating that model, nor is it a mere external attitude or an imposition of the law. It is a way of behaviour, which must absolutely derive from a fuller human maturity, and at the same time be an expression and guardian of contemplation. We all have a verbal and non-verbal language. Both must come from the heart and, as far as possible, be in harmony. Only those who are immersed in contemplation naturally detach themselves from the vain needs that focus on things in the insatiable search for more things that are felt to be missing... Only they, moved by God, can be discreet, putting themselves, other persons and things in the shadow, in order

to leave room for God: “I must decrease and he must increase”. They know how to create space to dispose the heart for the divine explosion. They, therefore, live as though they saw the INVISIBLE (Heb 11: 27). It is by harmonising language and expression that they become ever more coherent in their project of life.

5.2 Silence and being

Freedom from isolation for an authentic communication is obtained only by teaching the heart at the “school of solitude and silence”, that is, to “acquire the enduring attitude of renouncing the temptation of reducing others to ourselves and our needs and instead permit each one to be himself in his uniqueness and in his openness to others” and to “dialogue in its deeper sense, where one knows how to hear the other as such” (Gen. Congr. 1974, *The Carmelite Today*, n.2).

In this “school of solitude and silence” one goes from the need of the other as object of love to true love, which comes from an understanding of the other and of love purified from selfishness. One no longer reduces the other to oneself and one’s image, but one begins to contemplate the other as such, welcoming and respecting his/her mystery. Our silence must teach us to listen to the other and to accept him/her as s/he is. Solitude, the companion of silence, must express itself in the renunciation of all that reduces the other to one’s image, misunderstanding his/her individuality, his/her material and spiritual gifts. In this way, silence will be truly “the cult of justice”. Only the “school of silence and solitude” teaches us this.

The Carmelite tries to learn silence, creating his/her own environment, since it is only in such an environment that intimacy with God

can grow. Growing in this school, the Carmelite understands existentially that silence, apart from contributing to rest, to a very human life, to being beneficial to one's work and, sometimes, to being a psychotherapeutic element, it also becomes a freely chosen attitude of heart, a habit, something conquered and, according to the invitation of the Rule, something which comes from inside and is not imposed as a bridle on the soul. This journey may be difficult at first, but awareness of its value and of its practical aspect will gradually make it natural.

The Carmelite, immersed in silence, presents an interior and exterior bearing proper to one intimate with God, grows in contemplative sensitivity, is capable of waiting on God, seeing God, listening to God in the "gentle breeze" (1Kings 19: 12) and of speaking to God intimately, all the time. Because for the Carmelite, to live is to "communicate with God from morning till evening and from evening till morning" (Elisabeth of the Trinity). To achieve perfection on this journey, it is essential to opt for silence, know it, experience it and make it a natural way of life. We are complex beings and we have a life *ad intra* and a life *ad extra*. In each of these there are immense possibilities. We become whole beings when we succeed in integrating all the spheres broken by our weakness. This is achieved slowly...sometimes more demanding, sometimes less. The journey towards the conquest of perfect silence is long. One must make a start... Didactically we must pass through the school of exterior and interior silence, gradually integrated and mutually influencing each other until they become fused.

Exterior silence is connected with the external bearing of a person; it controls physical movements, which are the expression of its life *ad extra*. Interior silence lies at the most

intimate level and creates conditions conducive to peace, purification, self-understanding and self-expression. It leads to authentic speech. Without this silence, life is lived at the periphery of one's self, leading even to an inhuman existence. Without silence the heart becomes a public place and falls into relativism, violence, greediness, consumerism and materialism. The multiplication of noise, "words", leads one to lose the ability to perceive reality and the substance of the word as its expression. Much is said, little is communicated.

The lack of silence in a person weakens that person because of the dispersion of forces, interior fragmentation, leading one to multiplicity at the expense of unity and simplicity of being for whom "only one thing is necessary" (Lk 10: 42). It may be said that for us Carmelites, who are invited to "meditate day and night on the law of the Lord", silence is the factor that unites all the interior forces and directs them to God, allowing us to live this process of Internalisation of the LOVE OF GOD, revealed in Jesus Christ. Children of pilgrims, heirs of the spirituality of the Exodus and descendants of the hermits, our life is a journey and a remaining in the Lord:

- who is eternal truth (cf. Mt 24: 35);
- whose depths are unfathomable (cf. Jn 6: 64);
- whose substance satisfies (cf. Es 3: 1 ff.);
- who alone can be kept in one's heart (cf. Lk 2: 19);
- who comforts and strengthens us (cf. Rom 15: 4);
- who leads us to perfection (cf. 1Tim 3: 16-17).

To live in silence is to stay ever closer to one's identity (heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ), ever more free from the consequences of sin, ever more open to love and to being loved, in order to internalise ever

more the plan of God and realise it. Silence makes us attentive to the ABSOLUTE all the time, leading us to discern and practise more and more the will of God. The silent person learns to seek and rejoice increasingly in truth. Silence helps us to distance ourselves from talkativeness, from those things which prevent growth; becomes a source leading to transcendence; facilitates communion among us, with others and things; is the source of deep enrichment; guides the journey which brings us and keeps us before God; sharpens our receptivity; promotes our general calm, which is the prelude of LOVE and a full realisation of being. Silence will know how to keep the WORD: “Consecrate them by means of truth – your word is truth” (Jn 17: 17).

5.3 The school of silence

Silence is acquired and demands from us a process that includes motivations, content and exercise.

The true motivation for silence lies in our option to seek God in an Order that has experienced silence in its tradition of seven centuries. This is not a theoretical experience, but the experience of Elijah, of John of St. Samson, of Magdalene de’ Pazzi, of Michael of St. Augustine, of Teresa of Jesus, of John of the Cross, of Elisabeth of the Trinity, etc. If Carmel is my vocation, I can never question the value of silence in its various phases, of that silence which leads to *vacare Deo* and to its practice.

The content of silence needs further reflection. It is good for us to begin learning silence remembering always that it is necessary for the spiritual life, and that deeper silence in the Carmelite life is not simply the absence of or the distancing oneself from noise and talkativeness. It is not some kind of inhibition or form of atrophy of words, gestures

and means of communication. It is not the lack of communication or fear of others. Silence is not a synonym of dumbness, of death or of funeral. It looks like distancing oneself from the world, but it cannot be identified with it. It is the ordinary climate and common environment for the development of loving intimacy with God. That is why, even though the Rule establishes times of greater silence, for the Carmelite there are no places where one can talk more or less (excepting the needs of community). Every hour is a time of silence for the Carmelite, because the life of intimacy and dialogue with God is uninterrupted. It is important to look at the silence of Jesus. He was incarnated in the midst of people to redeem them and to announce to them the “good news” (the same commitment as for his disciples), yet he lived in the spirit of the desert. Silence did not weaken his power of communication, nor did it take him away from his mission: “He speaks as one having authority” (Lk 4: 22). Flight from commitments as an excuse for silence is a perversion of silence: “The crowds followed him” (Mt 4: 25).

The first absolutely necessary step at the school of silence is keeping the heart in the desert and, at the same time, in solitude. We must meet the world, live in the world, but not let the world overpower us in any way: “I am in the world no more, but these are in the world” (Jn 17: 11). In practice we can try to exercise:

- silence in our speech
- silence in our bearing (our expressions, our actions).

5.3.1 *The relationship between silence and word*

The word is a great gift. It gives us the power to express our being, and, at the same time, as in a circle,

to capture reality. There are long psychological-anthropological discussions concerning the question: does one speak because one thinks, or does one think because one speaks? There is still no answer to this question. In any case, experience shows us that there is a close connection between word and thought. It is good to remember our childhood, how it was that gradually we produced sounds to interpret life and our environment. Then we elaborated on that and continued to express ourselves...to this day.

It is the word that distinguishes humans from beasts. It may be said to be at the service of humanity's freedom because it allows people to tend towards TRUTH and to settle there: "Let your yes be yes, and your no, no". The word is of immense importance! Consequently, those who seek maturity and fullness of life must learn to use this implement.

So great is the value of the word that God communicates with us by means of the WORD. It is through the Word that God created heaven and earth (Gen), and sent us the incarnated Word, Jesus Christ. When the Holy Spirit came to confirm the faith of the Apostles it was in the form of tongues of fire (is this a symbol of the purified tongue?). Thus, the word needs silence to be conceived, nourished and matured to express reality intensely and truthfully. Otherwise it would be an empty word without meaning. To speak much, without the necessary interior deepening (deep understanding of that which one wishes to express, its sense, what it implies, possible consequences) is to run the risk of saying useless, superficial, empty things. These are the idle words, which the Rule warns us "will have to be accounted for".

Speaking without the support of silence produces also an emptying of oneself, the alienation of one's es-

sential part. This weakens the capacity for perfection to which we are called. By making the word absolute, one transforms it into "idle talk", into a talking mania. In order for the word to achieve its aim of expressing LOVE-TRUTH, of promoting and celebrating COMMUNION, the word must be purified from the contagion of sin, which renders it ambiguous. "The tongue can be our damnation" (cf. Jn 22: 27; Jas 3: 1-12).

The Rule teaches us that the strength of the word comes from silence. To be silent for us Carmelites is to immerse ourselves in the mystery of Christ, learning with him to "see" and "love", hence to express ourselves. Only contact with the incarnate Word of God can purify us and give sense to our word. We must penetrate the depths of our reality and that of the world in order to understand the meaning of events, messages and situations and thus to give "weight" to our verbal expression and produce fruit: "Happy the one...who finds pleasure in the law of Yahweh and murmurs his law day and night. S/he is like a tree that is planted by running streams, yielding its fruit in season, its leaves never fading; success attends all s/he does" (Ps 1: 1-3).

Only in the school of the Wisdom of God will we be able to have a word that builds, a word that merits to be heard because it comes from a heart united with God. It is not just sound, but, in fact, experience of truth, of the essence of being. And it will be a valuable word that creates challenge and arouses admiration:

*They will wait on my silences,
and pay attention when I speak;
if I speak at some length, they will lay
their hand on their lips.*

(Wis 8: 12)

Nobody must imagine that s/he is religious while s/he still goes on deceiving him/herself and not keeping control over

his/her tongue; anyone who does this has the wrong idea of religion.

The only person who could reach perfection would be someone who never said anything wrong – s/he would be able to control every part of him/herself.

(Jas 1: 26; 3: 2)

Beware of idle words, that is those that are not used to give glory to GOD and for the good and the benefit of the neighbour or of oneself...

Be faithful to your observance of silence, because unnecessary speech is rarely without fault.

If you do not like sweet silence, it is impossible for you to taste the things of God, and so you will always be afflicted and anxious.

From not knowing how to restrain the tongue, come many evils that are the cause of anxiety.

(Mary Magdalene de'Pazzi)

But if you, Lord, do not watch over my house, in vain would I keep watch, so I beg you with all my heart: restrain and moderate my tongue, watch over my eyes that they may not feed on vanity. Deign to direct, sanctify, rule and govern my heart, my body and my senses, my words and my actions in your law and in the fulfilment of your precepts. (B.R.)

It would be a grave mistake to think that one could explain, with whatever kind of word, that which the love and the secrets of God suggest. Who would be capable of describing what God says to the souls in whom God abides? Who could reveal in words the feelings that God arouses?

(St. John of the Cross,
Spiritual Canticle)

5.3.2 Silence and service

Work is one of the richest and liveliest expressions of the person, of his/her reality and ability to give of self. Even God revealed God's self in action, creating us, sustaining us, calling us to life, loving us first, sav-

ing us. God's action has the quality of God's love, this is why it is perfect, creative and universal. Our action then should have:

- this same quality – evangelical effectiveness;
- the same motivation that makes the heart of God act – the creative-redemptive-sanctifying mission;
- the same objective – God's LOVE reflected in ourselves, our brothers and sisters, the world.

For the Carmelite, action consists in allowing God to be God in us, who seeks to transform us ever more into God's image and likeness; in taking on the mission of helping our brothers and sisters and the world towards that same transformation. Only the WORD heard in silence can render us capable of a liberating and transforming action. That is why our work must be done in an atmosphere of recollection, so that it may spring from our inner being as an answer to the Word heard in silence. Moreover, our action must be constantly united to the Word so that action may not just be activity or just for our satisfaction. Our contribution towards serving and sanctifying the world will be to exclude from our action-being: noise, distractions, whatever may take away from the plan of God or delay God's plan of love.

The work of the Carmelite must be done with a pure heart so that it may become a perfect act of adoration. This will happen if our action is the fruit of silence, because only silence leads the person to perceive the LOVE of GOD, to keep it in one's heart, to live attentive to this love and to be moved to action by God's project and not by our own desire. Silence matures through action that is in harmony with the ABSOLUTE, and acquires the full meaning of "To serve God and the brothers and sisters". Carmelite action, as recommended in the Rule

(no. 20), aims at making the person grow into being responsible for his/her life and announcing the “Good News” to the brothers and sisters. But when the Rule orders Carmelites to work, it recommends that they “earn their own bread by silent toil. This is the way of holiness and goodness...” Here is a good Carmelite example:

With what peace and recollection did Mary work, giving herself in everything! In her, even the most insignificant actions were rendered divine because in all things she was in constant adoration of the gift of God. Nothing stopped her from giving herself to external work because she worked for love.

(Elisabeth of the Trinity)

The work of a Carmelite can never be separated from his/her “centre”, from that intimate nucleus where communion with God takes place ever more completely and permanently. It is from there that Carmelite action must spring and converge: “Without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15: 5). This is a deep truth and guide for our work. It is necessary to feel and root oneself in the “remain in me” (Jn 15: 4).

In his/her life of work, the Carmelite seeks the silence that lends itself to purification of motives and the true disposition of one who gives him/herself completely to the Reign, conscious, nevertheless, that “we are but useless servants”. The Carmelite avoids dispersion, activism, social climbing, and action born more of one’s own passions than from the loving plan of God. Such action can be sustained “until death, even death on the cross” only by one who has entered the dynamics of salvation-liberation of humankind and the world.

Silence reveals to us our ambiguities and lets us move ahead with assurance, able to overcome that to which, usually, the distracted person is drawn: unrest, unnecessary noise,

violent movements that break the harmony of one’s being, passions, attachments, self-comfort, the seeking of personal advantages and interests, sensuality, neglect of poverty, exaggerated attention to oneself, giving up the cross for comfort... By neglecting silence, one compromises one’s human-spiritual maturity, because:

- this weakens or even takes away the deep motivation for one’s action: the liberating plan of God;
- one experiences stressing conflicts, one is disturbed, living an increasingly material life;
- one increasingly adopts worldly criteria that substitute for the voice of God, which is no longer heard... One’s criteria become: technical efficiency, personal and financial advantages, utility (statistics), taking on whatever ideology is popular at the present moment, popular fashion, loss of the evangelical style, deviation from the aim of human action, namely, “to be and to build the new person for a new world”. “O God, grant that I may understand that if the most brilliant actions (even religious ones) do not proceed from deep UNION with YOU, they are but vain and useless commotion... Empty commotion and motion without meaning have been the cause of so many activities devoid of evangelical value, without bringing the grace of conversion.”

Silence, understood as a means of standing before God, offers the Carmelite the conditions for fruitful action, whatever his/her field of work: health, education, parish, promotion, exercises. It is for this very reason that Carmelite life is not differentiated by a charism limited to one type of work or one profession. The mission of the Carmelite, whatever his/her status in the Church (priest, religious, lay person) consists in living intimately with God and to lead those whom s/he

serves to this discovery and to a consistent style of life. The Carmelite's essential charism is participation in the saving work of Christ, as witness of joy, hope, reconciliation and peace. The special vocation of Carmel in the Church is "to live and communicate contemplation" through the witness of life and the various activities of its members, who by their personal gift and community commitments respond to the needs of the world.

The aim of the Order...is to offer to its members the possibility of achieving the summit of contemplation...and to lead others to the same end...There is no member of the Church who does not owe something to Carmel.

(Thomas Merton, *Ascent to Truth*)

The silence that nourishes the life of the Carmelite and allows him/her to act in conformity with the plan of God, opens him/her to contemplative sensitivity which is leavened and expresses itself:

- by means of knowledge of and adherence to TRUTH-LOVE and working according to this love: always and only according to the heart of God, renouncing radically any contrary affection;
 - by accepting the CROSS, which our commitment always places on our shoulders, even to the supreme immolation. Experience (and not just demagogic homily) of the mystery of the Incarnation, in solidarity with all our brothers and sisters in need of life. Those who live do not need to proclaim, they themselves are the epiphany of their values;
 - through one's own work founded in faith, hope and charity, seeking one's own liberation and that of one's brothers and sisters from all that would take the place of the relationship with God;
 - through constant vigilance not to usurp the place of God in the hearts of people, also by not co-
- operating in the alienation of people's responsibility to opt and respond to live for God;
 - by constantly reviewing aims and methods that bring us closer to God: Discernment that guarantees a pure heart and a right conscience. Readiness to change in order to be faithful to God, when God's plan points us in a new direction or tells us to let go of something. Ready to be faithful to God "unto death, even death on the cross" if necessary. At the same time understanding with simplicity "the sword of suffering" (Lk 2: 35), remaining standing at the foot of the cross (Jn 19: 27) and being able to sing joyfully: "My soul glorifies the Lord, because he has done great things for me" (Lk 1: 49);
 - by growing in personal harmony, in the complete maturity of a liberated being in the relationship FAITH-LIFE, action-contemplation. Then one always has to have the attitude of one who keeps all things in one's heart (Lk 2: 51), always being able to say with this same heart: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1: 38);
 - by recalling in an increasingly dynamic and responsible way that happiness and maturity, as well as the transformation of the world and society, are not the fruit of our labour, although we are not dispensed from labouring, and do not come from any system or ideology as such, even though these are necessary for any social organisation;
 - by a life of witness, true following of Christ. Christ was not a learned man who taught some doctrine, nor was he a theoretician who invented ideologies and programmes. He is God incarnate to bring about the transformation of the world. We share in his nature in our being and action.

Silence, then, is the means that teaches us to act in harmony with the heart of God. The more a person is silent by way of contemplation, the more that person becomes capable of transforming actions. Our work acquires meaning through silence because silence leads us to transcend pure action and its results to the “one thing necessary”, the “better part”, which will not be taken away because this silence grows to its fullness: the mystical life, prelude to the beatific vision. That is why only the mystic is capable of a concrete, faithful, substantial transforming action: “I came that they might have life and have it to the full” (Jn10:10).

5.4 *Biblical texts for internalisation:*

Further reading

Isa 6: 1-8; 55; Ps 48; Qo. 20; Jn 1: 1-17; 17.

Other texts cited above.

Careful reading of the text:

- 1 Extract from the text the expressions you think are fundamental.
- 2 What is the reason behind the “school of silence”?
- 3 How do you explain the relationship “Silence-Word”?
- 4 Is it paradoxical to say that effective human action must arise from and be nourished by silence? Explain and give reasons for your answer.
- 5 Look in your Constitutions for articles on the contemplative, fraternal and serving dimension. Do they suggest some connection with silence? How?
- 6 Check in the biography of some Carmelite the experience of the dimension of silence.

For self-evaluation:

- 1 Do you know of some silent environment of life and work? Describe your impressions, compare them with those of an agitated and noisy environment.
- 2 Have you ever met a person to whom applies the expression s/he “is worth his/her weight in gold” because of his/her consistence, circumspection and uprightness? Look for such persons and observe their behaviour, their criteria and values.
- 3 Choose a day to write a report on:
 - a) your relationships,
 - b) your activities,
 taking as your starting point the exercise of silence-word-action.
- 4 Check how you usually use the gifts of word and action.
- 5 Confide to your spiritual director your discoveries, progress, difficulties and resolutions.

6

Silence and “vacare Deo”

6.1 *O God, my silence seeks your **being**. How wonderful then is silence that allows me to discover the nothingness of beings and the “being” of nothingness, which are not you! Silence leads me to wonder, to adoration. I no longer need to ask questions concerning the essence of anything, nor to discuss and ask questions on the substance and consistence of any being. In silence I communicate with **being**. This communion is sufficient for me. It is purification, fullness, transfiguration, embrace in truth, fusion in love, enlightenment, and nourishment of life. The silence I desire is the silence-language of the homeland of heaven, full communication of the Trinity, generator of new life, enrichment of the heart, font of fullness, light to create and live in a new world, stimulus to transcendence.*

The apex of human life, the full maturity of the person, consists principally in intimate union with GOD, so as to be “transformed” into God, entering in full and conscious participation into the “secret” life of the Trinity. We have already said that this intimacy requires silence and solitude, which are also indispensable elements in any human relationship. It is only by these means that we can know the other, accept him/her, and understand him/her in love. By eliminating all noise, much speech, activism, confusion and distraction caused by things, one enters into the deepest

calm, concentrating wholly on one’s centre. This unity offers one the possibility of being in harmony with the other in the profoundest communion.

6.2 *Silence and the search for God*

When interior silence is cultivated in its peripheral zones, it helps in the search for personal integration and interior peace. This is the psychological aspect of silence. However, there is a deeper aspect, namely, spiritual silence, the silence indispensable in the search for God. The experience of this deeper silence is a determining factor on the journey towards spiritual maturity and it directs the person to an ever greater achievement even to communion with the ABSOLUTE, reaching ever newer dimensions of life by passing from:

- the exterior to the interior,
- the material to the spiritual,
- conditioning to liberation,
- the conscious to the super-conscious,
- the individual to the transpersonal.

This is interior silence: rich, fruitful, lived and recommended by our Carmelite brothers and sisters who preceded us in the search for God. When we live silence, we discover concretely that creation is a footprint for us, but not God. We become aware that the world of sense and reason has a more substantial value that goes beyond appearances. We shall see its hidden essential cause. A purified and concentrated heart is necessary, awake and attentive to taste the “sacramental vision” of reality. Only silence (deep interior availability and total openness) can give one this interior purification that allows one to see “beyond” and guarantees life on a new level in the VACARE DEO. PEACE, INNER HARMONY, JOY, CONSTANT COMMUNION with

the ABSOLUTE in the world and in the brothers and sisters in whom God reveals God's self become the natural components of life even when there is also incomprehension, abandonment, humiliation and death.

Inner silence, then, is serene, constant openness, full of hope in the divine intuitions. This is the silence in the life of Carmelites:

I shall remain silent, watching, and I shall remain safe in the castle and I shall listen carefully to what is said to me... It is not possible to receive this most high Wisdom and Language of God, that is contemplation, without being a silent spirit, far from fashions and news.

(St. John of the Cross)

Inner silence goes beyond psychology, transforming energies of dispersion into recollection, where the PRESENCE of GOD and concentration on GOD become our only centre of gravity and natural environment. Unwelcome guests are kept away to give full possession to the OWNER. It is, as Fr. Michael of St. Augustine said, "an immediate disposition and a very suitable preparation for the interior life; and it consists in one's fidelity to God, fighting the tumult and activity of both one's internal and external powers".

In order to understand this silence, we can look at its forms:

- Silence: purification of images and memories.
- Silence: perfecting of intelligence.
- Silence: a pure heart for God.

These forms of silence introduce us to God's action, because, alone, we could never even recognise the need for silence or find our way to God. It is a matter of experiencing the theological virtues:

- FAITH, which extinguishes natural lights and brings us to the supernatural knowledge of God;

- HOPE, which removes from our memory all that is vain and useless in Love;
- CHARITY, which purifies and fills our hearts for VACARE DEO.

6.3

Silence: the purification of images and memories

As St. Teresa, our sister, used to say, this silence grows from the exclusion of dissipations, purifies and clears the "palace" that is the most intimate depth of the person. It is liberation from images and memories that hold back freedom and an interior disposition: "Forget your people and your father's house; so shall the king desire your beauty" (Ps 44: 11-12).

This silence does not exist independently of the other silences. Perhaps it is the consequence of something deeper. Forgetting something is natural when some other object takes its place in the memory. Indeed, it is not just a question of mental gymnastics, of using a rigid method in order to achieve purification from images and memories of the past or of the present. It is no athletic effort that creates anxiety and adds to difficulties thus destroying silence. Above all it is necessary:

- to consider the images: expressions of the content of a reality. Hence, to purify these images means to seek their origins, the source from which they emanate. The things that have been internalised and are lodged in our conscience emanate as images. These are images and memories that are the fruit of experience and desires. They are the past connected to the present and the future. Silence will be achieved when we perceive that the benevolent LOVE of GOD is present in us and that this presence corrects all that was not good in our past. Thus it makes

no sense to be worried about any image or memory.

- to be aware that images and memories are intimately connected with the image of and the values assumed by our ego. Our memories are but reflections of those things that make an impression on us and, in some way, "govern" our being. They produce our actions and attitudes, and influence our life. The more the motto of Elijah, "with zeal I have been zealous for the Lord God of hosts", becomes part of our lives, the more we will have spontaneous memories and images connected with LOVE.

These reflections can help us a great deal. If we understand that the imagination and memory (especially affective memory) function almost always in a spontaneous manner, in order to know oneself it will be useful to observe their fruits (images and memories): "The mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart". The mind surely thinks that which fills the heart. Every attitude has its cause. Thus to silence our images and memories does not mean to strangle them. Hence to silence our images and memories consists in letting them flourish, to seek their causes and place them in the presence of God. Then, gradually, they will give place to God, immersing us in the silence of God's great love, which will fill the space of previous things in our hearts. Finally, we will consider all else as useless and our sole interest will be, "For me to live is Christ" (Phil 1: 21). On their own, external solitude and silence would be worth little if we allowed the noise of the world to dominate our internal "cell".

6.4 Purification of the intelligence

Intelligence is one of the most important faculties of human-kind. *Intus-legere*: to read into. It is by means of intelligence that we know reality and can "name" all things. It is by means of intelligence that we come to the knowledge of truth from a human aspect, even though our experience of God (our contemplative dimension) goes beyond reason and the light that comes from intelligence. However, it is by the help of this small light that we become aware of the presence of God and are able to communicate it to others.

Faith is the sole way to union with God, and is full of a light that goes beyond our intelligence in knowing God. Faith, says St. John of the Cross quoting St. Peter, is like a candle that produces light and intelligence is the candlestick that holds the candle; the candlestick does not produce light, but is necessary to hold the candle that throws light. To hold the candle in balance and allow it to spread its light, the candlestick must be ready and clean. Our intelligence (human reason) must be ready to receive the light of faith. Silence makes it ready, the silence born of stripping the spirit in matters spiritual, so that reaching God rests only on faith. This is the deep action of silence because it not only promotes an ever greater detachment from natural desires, but also from all spiritual explanations. It is the silence of "sure darkness", of full trust in the mysterious God, of the complete gift of self in purity and simplicity that refuses all pleasures and appetites, including spiritual ones ("neither earthly nor celestial goods"). In this silence, which is the "exercise" of faith, it suffices for the intelligence to know God, to love and accept God as God is revealed to it. This way is to come to God without images and representations.

Faith is not science acquired from outside, but it is, above all, the assent to that which is taught from inside by means of revelation. To live by faith is to be “ruled” by the Wisdom of God.

By silencing the images and memories of the senses or the internalisation of false idols, we shall use our intelligence in conformity with faith which is the only way to know God:

In this greatest perfection of faith, the infinite God becomes light of the soul, which is immersed in darkness, and covers it entirely with God’s truth. And at such an unintelligible moment, darkest night becomes day and faith transforms itself into the ability to understand.

To silence intelligence is to understand that it is impossible to come to God by our own efforts, to succeed in explaining God and to be certain of God’s presence and actions in us. This silence is supernatural openness:

Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on the human heart what God has prepared for those who love God (1 Cor 2: 9).

In this silence, the spirit acquiesces to all that God teaches it without sound or words, without the mediation of ideas our reasoning, although, ordinarily, one cannot explain this great human ability. This is using silence at the service of searching for the true meaning of the world and of life. This is crossing the dark road of agreeing with faith. Without faith we would neither be aware of ourselves nor of God’s presence in us. Revelation would have no meaning nor would it affect our lives.

Silence of the intelligence – discipline of thought, simplicity – openness to the gift of God – will facilitate:

- a return to interior harmony (redemption of sin);

- enjoyment of peace with oneself, with others and with God, by seeing them in the new light of Revelation in its real sense;
- shortening of distances within oneself:
 - between being, saying and doing;
 - between internalised values and one’s behaviour;
 - between God and neighbour;
 - between action and contemplation.

The silence of the intelligence becomes the deepest experience in one’s relationship with God in faith. It consists in fixing one’s gaze on Christ who became human to reveal the Father to us in our sharing by faith in God’s divine life.

6.5 A pure heart for God

We now come to the deepest silence, the silence of “watchful love”. This silence will bring us to freedom from every inordinate attachment, that is, from everything that may weaken or take the place of the ABSOLUTE-GOD.

*Only the well-beloved matters.
One dreams of such by day and by night;
The world ceases to exist.*

The silence of the heart or of attachments is the perfection of the other silences mentioned. It is the perfection of silence. Other silences prepare us for this. With this silence we enjoy “LOVE”. It may be a paradox, but most certainly it is evangelical: without the death of selfishness (the “nothing”) and the purification of faith and love (the “nights”), the Carmelite cannot achieve a “fulfilling” and freeing intimacy with God. As pilgrims in search of the deepest and fullest meaning of life, the ABSOLUTE, the INFINITE, people can only achieve this when they make God the deepest centre of

their feelings, desires and aspirations.

To love God and for God to divest oneself of all that is not God.

(St. John of the Cross)

The heart lives in silence when it succeeds in getting rid of all attachments that do not have God for beginning and end; when God is the only source of its aspirations, desires, affective tendencies; when it succeeds to silence the claims of attachments and inordinate tendencies in order to listen to the only true and fruitful voice: the WORD of GOD. The silent heart is the one that understands and lives the question and answer of the disciples: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”. This silence is achieved when:

- we switch off the sound of selfishness;
- we silence the spirit of the world;
- we educate and turn our passions towards LOVE;
- we educate our hearts so that silence may not be marred by indifference, contempt, pride, laziness, malice, weakness, cowardice, complicity, treachery;
- we cultivate in silence the authenticity of each situation: joy, reflection, respect, pain, purification, truth, charity, adoration;
- we direct all our inner energies, as in one reaction, towards God and God’s will, thus fulfilling our own mission in the world, always in conformity with God’s plan.

The silence of the heart has its roots and foundation in the ever greater and deeper need for honesty, purification and liberation. It becomes sharp in perceiving the subtle insinuations of selfishness, feelings that weaken the ties of love, desires that prevent or delay the fulfillment of God’s plans in ourselves and in the world. Only a silent heart is capable of the generous and complete gift of itself, of a response to God that becomes loving COMMUNION.

This means living always and everywhere the WILL of God, the fusion of one’s will with the divine will, even to the complete absence of the least movement that is contrary to God’s plan.

It is to our advantage to love

what God wants

as God wants it and

in the measure that God wants it...

I choose neither to suffer nor to die,

But only the divine will.

(Mother Bernardete, C.D.P.)

In our Carmelite language, this is the silence that leads us to embrace the “nothing”, to create absolute emptiness in our hearts in order to leave room for the ALL, the ABSOLUTE. This is the only possible way to embrace God: “Two contraries cannot occupy the same space”. It is indeed thus, to renounce all that one possessed (without compensation, “night of the senses”) and at the same time to embrace the One who is INEFFABLE, INTANGIBLE, ALL!

To come to enjoy, know and possess everything, one must desire not to taste, know, possess or be anything.

(St. John of the Cross)

Without this silence of the heart, which is the “house in perfect order”, we do not possess a happy life in the spirit:

- *Few are contemplative because few are those who free themselves completely from persons and things of this world.*
- *Whether the heart is bound by a rope or a thread, it has lost its freedom. One cannot welcome the light of divine union without detachment from creatures and passions.*
- *The heart rises or sinks, grows or diminishes, is stained or purified, according to that to which it is attached. If it is attached to creatures it cannot but share in their impurities and be incapable of loving the One who is infinite holiness and purity.*

- *The one who can die in all things will find life in all things.*
(Thoughts of St. John of the Cross)

We can learn silence of heart from Jesus “the way, the truth and the life”, by conforming our life with his, our way of acting to his. This means learning to let the human and divine co-exist in the unity of their being. In the search for silence of heart one may be active, that is, do what is necessary for purification – and passive, that is, consent and accept with love and freedom God’s work in oneself in concrete circumstances. The Carmelite will walk in FAITH, HOPE and CHARITY (OBEDIENCE, POVERTY AND CHASTITY), growing in intimacy with God, until s/he is transformed and identified with Christ:

Our whole being is attracted in one direction and becomes sensitive, like the needle of a compass, to the least influence of the pole towards which it instinctively turns. It gets to the point of identifying itself with the object of its desire ... The interior person has a sense of God, a sense of Christ ... This person knows God, seeks God, is nourished by God, is one spirit with God (St. John of the Cross).

A pure heart will bring one ever closer to God, even to a radical identity with God and to feel one with the Absolute and the Absolute’s manifestations. Thus one has reached one’s goal, has achieved holiness whereby one renders God present in the world, using God’s own criteria for being, living and acting. Detachment from corrupt passions towards persons or things, and concentration on the LOVE of GOD become natural. Even though there may be painful wanting moments, yet the fullness of the presence – VACARE DEO – will certainly be constant. One has achieved a true attitude of love and of listening to God in perfect peace. One lives in this presence without the aid of ideas, attachments or efforts. One is

alive in faith because one lives in deep silence in true “loud solitude”, faith being its only logic for guide, and peace and joy as permanent guests of the heart. To live with a pure heart and to take root in the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord, is to remain constantly in exodus and communion, in struggle and celebration, on the cross and fully alive. It is to be freed from every conditioning force and every impediment to “see God”. It is to taste freedom from ambiguity and to transform oneself into the being “dreamt” by God. It is to allow God to take over our whole being and to act in us, transforming us into love, since we have rejected all idols, namely all earthly attachments and passions. It is to become a mature person:

The centre of the soul is God. When it has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, it will have attained to its final and deepest centre in God, it will know, love and enjoy God with all its might (The Living Flame of Love, 1, 12).

The soul has thus attained the light of DIVINE INTIMACY, on the summit of the mountain where “honour and glory” dwell. It is clear that in this life one will never attain the summit of the beatific vision: DIVINE SILENCE, ETERNAL BANQUET, and DIVINE WISDOM. One approaches this state in the measure that one lives silence-purification. Then, like Elisabeth of the Trinity, we can say with ever greater conviction:

*I have found heaven on earth
because heaven is God
and God is in my soul.*

The soul’s action – whatever its station in the world, its responsibility, its task – will acquire redemptive value and will play an essential part in the transformation of the world according to the heart of God. To learn this silence, which makes us

attentive to God (living in *the vacare Deo*), is to dispose oneself to live the main part of our Carmelite vocation.

6.6 *Biblical texts for internalisation:*

Further reading

Ps 140 – Ps 118 – Es. 15: 1-18 – Deut 6 – 1 Pt 1: 10-24.

Careful reading of the text:

1. Write an outline of the text.
2. Why do we say that *vacare Deo* is a “new level of life” and what is its connection with silence?
3. Explain what is silence of the imagination, of memory, of intelligence, of attachments. (It would be good to carry out a psychological research on these elements.) Consult a good manual in order to know the basic elements of memory, imagination, intelligence, attachment, will.
4. Why and how is silence of these faculties connected to the practice of the theological virtues?

For self-evaluation:

1. How do you see your being, the “source” of your being, your present life? Allow memories and images that need purification to surface.
2. Are you attached to some ideology? Which ideas obscure your actions? Write a report on persons, groups, and books that influence or once influenced your life. What is your connection to them?
3. Write a list of deep certainties or ideas – feelings, forces – which give direction to your life and provide dynamism to your life. Analyse them in the light of Faith, Hope and Charity.
4. Have you tried to write your history in the loving light of God? Try! Get hold of a good plan to help you.
5. Talk to your spiritual director concerning the results of your self-evaluation.

NOTES

7

Conclusion

Live on in me as I do in you. Live on in my love. You are my friends (Jn 15: 4, 9, 14).

Anyone who loves me...we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him (Jn 14: 23).

Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with me (Ap 3: 20).



In concluding this little study on silence, we can see that silence is of great value in our lives, because its aim is to make us sensitive to the voice of God (*ob-audire*) and to build the deepest relationship of LOVE with God. Life in silence will become completely a reality and made full:

*by means of the intelligence, employed in understanding that which is useful to fulfil the **beloved** (and oneself); by means of the will, seeking and loving that which pleases God, liking whatever God likes (and remaining free); by means of the memory, employed in being solicitous for the things are of service and are pleasing (enjoyment of Peace and Joy).*

Even the body, with its external senses, its passions, attitudes and actions, becomes habitually perfectly and spontaneously directed towards God. The intelligence, will and affections, the memory and senses become purified in the “new person” who lives according to the “dream” of God. Silence, fruit of FAITH, HOPE and CHARITY, and learnt with this in mind, will be the “guardian” of these virtues in our heart. It will lead us to understand and, above all, to experience the beauty

of the “delicate touch of the Word”, perceived only by those who succeed in developing the “contemplative sensibility”, the only valid motivation capable of sustaining the Carmelite commitment to the brothers and sisters, to the REDEMPTIVE mission of the world.

O enkindled love, with your loving movements you are pleasantly glorifying me according to the greater capacity and strength of my soul, bestowing divine knowledge according to all the ability and capacity of my intellect, and communicating love according to the greater power of my will, and rejoicing the substance of my soul with the torrent of your delight by your divine contact and substantial union, in harmony with the greater purity of my substance and the capacity and breadth of my memory!

*And this is what happens, in an indescribable way, at the time this flame of love rises up within the soul. Since the soul is completely purged in its substance and faculties (memory, intellect and will), the divine substance which, because of its purity, as the Wise Man says, touches everywhere profoundly, subtly and sublimely (Wis 7: 24), absorbs the soul in itself with its divine flame. And in that immersion of the soul in wisdom, the Holy Spirit sets in motion the glorious flickerings of His flame. Since the flame is so gentle the soul adds: **since now you are not oppressive.***

O You, then, delicate touch, the Word, the Son of God, through the delicacy of Your divine being, You subtly penetrate the substance of my soul and, lightly touching it all, absorb it entirely in Yourself in divine modes of delights and sweetnesses unheard of in the land of Canaan and never before seen in Theman! (Bar 3:22). O, then, very delicate, exceedingly delicate, touch of the Word, so much the more delicate for me insofar as, after overthrowing the mountains and smashing the rocks to pieces on Mount Horeb with the shadow of might and power that went before You, You gave the prophet the sweetest and strong-

est experience of Yourself in the gentle breeze (1 Kings. 19: 11-12)!

O gentle breeze, since You are a delicate and mild breeze, tell us: How do You, the Word, the Son of God, touch mildly and gently, since You are so awesome and mighty? Oh, happy is the soul that You, being terrible and strong, gently and lightly touch! Proclaim this to the world! But You are unwilling to proclaim this to the world because it does not know of a mild breeze and will not experience You, for it can neither receive nor see You (Jn 14:17). But they, O my God and my life, will see and experience your mild touch, who withdraw from the world and become mild, bringing the mild into harmony with the mild, thus enabling themselves to experience and enjoy You. You touch them the more gently the more You dwell permanently hidden within them, for the substance of their soul is now refined, cleansed, and purified, withdrawn from every creature and every touch and trace of creature. As a result You hide them in the secret of Your face, which is the Word, from the disturbance of men (Ps 30:21).

O, then again, repeatedly delicate touch, so much the stronger and mightier the more You are delicate, since You detach and withdraw the soul from all the other touches of created things by the might of Your delicacy, and reserve it for and unite it to Yourself alone, so mild an effect do You leave in the soul that every other touch of all things both high and low seems coarse and spurious. It displeases the soul to look at these things, and to deal with them is a heavy pain and torment to it.

(St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 1:17 and 2:17-18)

Those who learn this silence – in God and for God – are always ready to leave their solitude and silence and “their God” to meet and serve God in their brothers and sisters (fraternity) and in their neighbour, in their every need (diaconia, justice) when occasions demand. Then the zeal for the brother and sister and the choices that these demand are not the result of an ideology or the fruit of some passion of ours, but are transformed in real acts of love. Happy are we, if we attain this and understand that:

To keep silence

*is not to choke and inhibit the **word** and the **gesture**,*

but it is to learn to take everything in hand

in order to direct everything properly.

In this view,

silence is love,

“homeland language of heaven”.

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NOTES