

FROM  
SILENCE  
TO  
SILENCE



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TO  
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A BENEDICTINE PILGRIMAGE  
TO GOD'S SANCTUARY

FATHER FRANCIS BETHEL, OSB

Foreword by Joseph Pearce

*Be still, and know that I am God.*

—Psalm 46

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*To the Sunday night class*



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## Foreword

THERE IS SOMETHING paradoxically perplexing about feeling honoured and humbled at the same time. The feeling of being honoured seems to be a temptation to the sin of pride, whereas feeling humbled is the experience of humility, the very antithesis of pride and the antidote to its poison. This perplexity of apparent contradictions was what I experienced when Father Francis Bethel asked me whether I would be willing to write a foreword to his book on silence. I was both honoured and humbled in equal measure that he should feel that I was worthy of such a task. In response, I can only say that I feel towards this wonderful Benedictine monk what G. K. Chesterton felt about the great Dominican, Father Vincent McNabb, that he “is walking on a crystal floor over my head” or what T. S. Eliot said about the great poet, Dante. Referring to an article that he had written on “Dante as a Spiritual Leader” for the *Athenaeum* on April 2, 1920, Eliot had informed a friend that “I feel that anything I can say about such a subject is trivial. I feel so completely inferior in his presence [that] there seems nothing to do but to point to him and be silent.”

It is delightfully apt that my response to a book by Father Bethel on silence is the desire to point to him and be silent. Were I to do so, however, I would fail to fulfill Father Bethel’s request. I will therefore venture to say something in the

hope that it will not be trivial in comparison with the wisdom to be found in the rest of this volume.

I will approach Father Bethel's wonderful meditation on the connection between silence and sanctity by following his approach to the theological virtues. In Part III, "Approaching the Sanctuary: The Theological Virtues", he precedes the three separate chapters on faith, hope, and charity with a chapter on humility. In doing so, he is following other great thinkers of the Church, including St. Thomas Aquinas, in insisting that humility is the beginning of wisdom because it is the necessary prerequisite for our eyes being opened to reality. One who has humility will have a sense of gratitude for his own existence and for the existence of others. This gratitude enables him to see with the eyes of wonder. The eyes that see with wonder will be moved to contemplation on the goodness, truth and beauty of the reality they see. Such contemplation leads to the greatest fruit of perception, what St. Thomas calls *dilatatio*, the dilation of the mind and soul. It is this dilation, this opening of the mind and soul to the depths of reality, which enables a person to live in communion with the fullness of goodness, truth and beauty. To summarize what I like to call the five metaphysical senses: *humility* leads to *gratitude*, which sees with *wonder*, prompting the *contemplation* that leads to the *dilation* of the mind.

It is little wonder that Father Bethel should have this wonder-filled approach to reality, considering that he studied under John Senior in the celebrated Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas, a program which sought to show students the great texts of civilization in the light of the goodness, truth, and beauty of the cosmos.

Father Bethel and the other students in Senior's Integrated Humanities Program did not only look down at the text on the page but also cast their eyes upwards at the stars in the sky, seeing the former in the light of the latter.

The one thing that is equally necessary for the reading of books or the reading of the stars is the gift of silence, which might be defined as the absence of distraction.

The gift of silence is difficult to attain in our techno-addicted culture in which we are being incessantly tempted to distraction. Techno-addiction lulls the mind into a comfort zone of banality, narcissistically self-centred and self-gratifying, disconnecting us from the reality that surrounds us. At the same time, even as it lulls us from reality, it agitates us into a state of restlessness, which is one of the defining traits of addiction. Thus, we find ourselves in a state of soporific agitation, unable to awaken ourselves from virtual reality to veritable reality and yet unable to find any rest in our narcissistic escapism.

This modern obsession with technological media might be seen as an infernal inversion of the true order of perception, predicated on humility. If humility opens our eyes to reality, pride shuts them, blinding and binding us with the arrogance of our own ignorance. Pride, or narcissism, sees only itself, or more correctly, it sees everything in the light or darkness of its own self-centredness. It is myopic. It cannot see beyond its own self-centre of gravity. It lacks gratitude. Such ingratitude leads to the cynicism which cannot experience wonder nor see the beauty inherent in reality. The lack of wonder makes contemplation on the goodness, truth and beauty of reality impossible and therefore makes *dilatatio*

unattainable. To put the matter succinctly, pride leads to ingratitude which lacks wonder, preventing contemplation and therefore the closing instead of opening, the mind.

Another way of saying the same thing is to say that humility *takes* time while pride merely *wastes* it.

Truly humble souls, filled with gratitude and wonder, *take* the time to stop in the midst of a busy day to sit in the presence of beauty. They open their eyes to the glories of God's Creation and to the reflected and refracted glories of man's sub-creation in art and literature, or else they close their eyes from all distraction so that they can listen to the singing of birds or the singing of choirs, or the saying of prayers. Such time *taken* is the most joyful part of the day, a time when the mind communes with the reality of which it is a part.

Prideful souls, lacking both gratitude and wonder, *waste* their time with mindless distraction after mindless distraction, filling the vacuum that their mindlessness has created with whatever trash and trivia that their fingers or thumbs can deliver on the gadgets to which they are chained. For such people, these gadgets have become godgets, pathetic and petty gods which command their attention and rule and ruin their lives. Such people spend much more time with their godgets than with their God.

If we wish to have minds open to the presence of God, we need to *take* time and not *waste* it. We need to take time in the silence of prayer or the silence of poetry. We need more time with trees and less time with trash and trivia. A tree, or a flower, or a sunset are priceless gifts for which a lack of gratitude is a sin of omission. We cannot ever be *wasting* time when we're *taking* it in wonder-filled contemplation.

To be or not to be. That is the question. To be alive to the goodness, truth, and beauty which surround us, or not to be alive to it. To delight in the presence of Creation so that we might dilate into the presence of the Creator, or to distract ourselves to death.

Father Bethel once asked me for some suggestions on great poetry which offered the gift of silence by inviting the reader to plunge into the tranquility of quietude. As a means of contributing something to Father Bethel's own wisdom on the subject of silence, I'll conclude my introduction to his deeper musings on the topic with a few poetic pointers of my own.

The first poem I suggested was Wordsworth's "Daffodils", with its unforgettable and unmistakable opening line: "I wandered lonely as a cloud." This poem, which is wonderful in the literal sense of the word, being full of wonder, engages silence in two ways. The first half engages silence in the moment of experience; the latter half in the memory of experience. The poet is wandering alone in the hills when "all at once" he sees a field of daffodils "dancing in the breeze". He is astonished at the swaying sea of gold and finds his breath taken away by the sheer beauty of the gift of the moment. Yet the deeper gift was not the astonishment of the transient moment, but the lingering contemplation in moments of solitude of the memory of the gift:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude,

And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the Daffodils.

The next poem I selected as a celebration of silence was “The Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” by Wordsworth’s collaborator and fellow Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As with “Daffodils”, this poem also engages silence in both the moment and the memory, but it does so in very different circumstances. Coleridge finds himself unable to go walking through the beauty of the countryside with his friends because of an injured foot. Forced to sit beneath the shade of a solitary lime-tree, he uses his memory of previous wanderings through the vistaed landscape in which he knows his friends are walking to imagine himself being with them and enjoying the same views; then, however, he is drawn to the beauty of the present moment in the beauty of his present surroundings. Unable to experience with his friends the telescopic splendour of the panoramic panoply of a sprawling landscape, except in memory, he contemplates the microscopic splendour of the few things he can see from his imprisoned and stationary perspective in the present moment. He notices the individual leaf, “broad and sunny . . . dappling its sunshine”. Later, as the blaze of the day gives way to the gloaming of the day’s end, more solitary pleasures are bestowed on him:

. . . now the bat  
Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,  
Yet still the solitary humble-bee  
Sings in the bean-flower!

In another Coleridge poem, “Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni”, the poet finds himself in the presence of that moment which is given as a free gift every single day, inviting silence and the contemplation which is its fruit. Every rising of the sun, and every setting, is a unique work of art, inviting the heart and soul to dilate into the glory it presents. In his “Hymn Before Sunrise”, Coleridge gazes at the majestic alpine peak of Mont Blanc and is moved to meditation:

O dread and silent Mount! I gazed upon thee,  
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,  
Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer  
I worshipped the Invisible alone.

The poet, wrapped in the moment and enraptured by the experience, is prompted by the beauty of art to sing a hymn of praise to the Artist:

Thou too, hoar Mount! With thy sky-pointing  
peaks . . .  
Rise, O ever rise,  
Rise like a cloud of incense, from the Earth!  
Thou kingly Spirit throned among the hills,  
Thou dread ambassador from Earth to Heaven,  
Great Hierarch! tell thou the silent sky,  
And tell the stars, and tell yon rising sun,  
Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God.

Many will be reminded in reading these lines of “The Canticle of Brother Sun” by St. Francis of Assisi who speaks of the beauty, radiance and splendour of the sun as “a sign

that tells, All-highest, of you". If we have the humility of the saint and the eyes of the Romantic poet, we will be grateful for the gift of beauty, being rendered speechless in its presence, that we might hearken to the silence and its visual music. It is through this silence, born of wonder, that we are moved to the contemplation that opens us into a closer communion with God.

—Joseph Pearce



## PREFACE

# Two Silences and the Path

*“And as we talked and panted for [eternal wisdom], we touched just the edge of it by the utmost leap of our hearts; then, sighing and unsatisfied, we left the first-fruits of our spirit captive there, and returned to the noise of articulate speech, where a word has beginning and end.”*

—St. Augustine<sup>1</sup>

I VIVIDLY REMEMBER my first visit to the Benedictine abbey of Notre Dame de Fontgombault in France. I had been told that Fontgombault had ancient, beautiful buildings, but, as that information had not entered my imagination, I was surprised as the taxi pulled alongside the ten-foot stone wall that enclosed the abbey grounds and then drove around to the grand portal of the twelfth-century abbey church. My three companions and I went in and were instantly captivated by a place drenched with centuries of prayer and silence, vaulted high and arched, shadowed in mystery.

We arrived just in time for Vespers and sat down in the front row. The stillness of the place enveloped us. Suddenly,

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Mary Boulding (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), IX, ch. 10, no. 24.

a monk appeared in the sanctuary and grasped a rope that reached all the way up to the lofty bell tower. He began pulling the rope, and we heard the calm sound of a bell ringing regularly and slowly: bong . . . bong . . . bong. A long line of eighty monks entered the sanctuary two-by-two, serenely, graciously. The bell eventually stopped, the monks knelt for a moment, and then, all together in one movement, quietly got to their feet. Next, rising out of the silence, I heard for the first time a single voice chant: "*Deus, in adiutorium meum intende.*" Eighty voices responded: "*Domine, ad adiuvandum me festina.*" Then the psalmody began.

Here were men accomplishing what is essential for human life, praising God, unperturbed by the tumult of the world. I especially remember the refrain of psalm 136 jumping out at me, echoing in my heart: "For His merciful love endures forever." The silence continued to underlie the singing of the calm, simple, attractive Gregorian melody. At the end, when the singing was over, the silence had become palpable, enriched somehow.

Afterwards, we were shown our rooms. In mine, I found on the wall a little engraving of the Blessed Virgin holding a finger to her lips; it was titled *Notre Dame du silence*—"Our Lady of silence." The title intrigued me, and it still does. Soon, we were ushered to dinner in the monks' refectory. Things remained quiet, with the monks in service smoothly accomplishing their tasks, and the only vocal sound being that of a monk reading out loud from the life of a saint. Lastly, we experienced the serenity of Compline in the dark church, lit by only a couple of lamps. At the end of the office,

a monk lit also two candles in front of a statue of Our Lady, and the monks sang the *Salve Regina* to her.

When the last words had been sung, a bell peacefully sounded again in the silence, this time for the Angelus. Then all was quiet for the night, as if all the singing and praying had been building up to that silence. I tiptoed up to my room; it felt like the whole monastery was dripping with a silent presence. I remember hearing the church bell ringing the hours during the night, rising out of the silence then fading back into it. This only increased the feeling of a dense presence. That was my first experience with silence, you might say. I entered Fontgombault a year later in order to enter more deeply into that mystery. Twenty-five years later, Fontgombault began our monastery here in Oklahoma, Our Lady of Clear Creek.

There were two silences in my experience that first evening at Fontgombault. The first was the monks' attention, which I am going to call here subjective silence. The second was what they were attentive to, an objective silence, one might say. Singing the psalms, ringing the bells in that magnificent church, all was ordered to a contact with God's mysterious presence.

*Subjective* silence, an attentive receptivity, is essential for a truly human life. To observe events, to listen to a lecture, to read a book, to speak with a friend, we must not be distracted by noise, especially by interior noise—that is, extraneous preoccupations and wayward imaginings. We need to cultivate a certain interior calm beyond the hubbub of superficial impressions and drives if we are going to really reflect, make personal decisions, and be able also to give

ourselves to others instead of blindly following egotistical impulses. We need an interior place of silence to receive Our Lord's word.

Entering into *objective* silence is the main purpose of the subjective one. We need to recollect our faculties around more important thoughts in order to be attentive to what really counts in life. Now, what really counts in life are mysteries, such as friendship, love, beauty, and, most of all, God. A mystery is not merely something that we have not figured out. Rather, it is something we do know but only obscurely and will never get to the bottom of. Knowledge of mystery is like being plunged into the ocean: the mystery penetrates us, surrounds us; we know we are in it, but we cannot embrace it all. Mysteries are thus imbued with a sort of silence, something beyond our clear knowledge.

Msgr. Romano Guardini stresses the importance of interior silence to hear the objective one: "Silence or stillness is the tranquility of our inner life, the quiet at the depths of its hidden stream. It is a recollected, total presence, where one is all there, receptive, alert, ready. It comes only if seriously, earnestly desired. We must be willing to give something in order to establish a quiet area of attentiveness in which the beautiful and the truly important reign. Once we have experienced it, we will be astounded that we were able to live without it."<sup>2</sup>

He speaks of beauty and truth. By Christian revelation, we know even more tremendous mysteries: the incarnation

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<sup>2</sup> Romano Guardini, *Meditations Before Mass*, trans. Elinor Briefs (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1956), 3–4.

of Our Lord, the Redemption, His presence in the Holy Eucharist, the Church, Our Lady, and most of all, the ultimate mystery, infinitely greater than all created mysteries, than the entire universe, that of the most holy Trinity. To participate in the silence of the Blessed Trinity is the ultimate goal of our interior silence, as St. John of the Cross intimates in a famous text: "The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul."<sup>3</sup> During the course of this book, we will try to understand better what St. John is saying here.

Subjective silence itself is not emptiness. It is attention and receptivity. It is also a light, for the soul is ordered to objective silence, to great mysteries in which we participate. Cultivating interior silence consists, firstly, in taking away obstacles that distract our attention from that light. Secondly, we enrich this interior silence with all we have learned that attunes us to the mysteries. For example, we learn about the mystery of beauty, we acquire a sense of it, and become able to enter into it. Ultimately, our understanding of beauty points us toward God's inconceivable Beauty.

The epigraph of this introduction evoked the two silences and the path from one to the other. Concerning his famous ecstasy at Ostia with his mother, Monica, St. Augustine described how, through a meditation, the two rose to a great concentration and contact with God's eternal Mystery, His

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<sup>3</sup> St. John of the Cross, "Sayings of Light and Love," no. 100, in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 92.

Silence. The meditation, like the meditation of the psalms, by the Fontgombault monks and the praying of the psalms, caused a certain enriching that attuned to the great object.

We monks enter the monastery to cultivate interior silence in order to participate better in God's silence. Not only monks, but everyone must make space in themselves to give place to God. A deep, rich silence, receptive to truth, goodness, and beauty, has never been easy. But special reflection and deliberate effort for it are required today, because our world is a culture of noise, both interior and exterior. It fosters diversion from God, from the true meaning of things, and from our authentic selves. A century ago, it was said that the modern world is a conspiracy against contemplation, against silence. And even two centuries ago, during a time which seems peaceful and silent to us, Soren Kierkegaard describes what corresponds amazingly well to our situation. The world has simply gone further in the same direction:

Create silence. Ah! everything is noisy; . . . everything in our day, even the most insignificant project, even the most empty communication, is designed merely to jolt the sense or stir up the crowd—noise! And man, this clever fellow, seems to have become sleepless in order to invent ever new instruments to increase noise, to spread noise and insignificance with the greatest possible haste and on the greatest possible scale. Everything is turned upside down. Communication is brought to its lowest point with regard to meaning, and simultaneously the means of communication are

brought to their highest with regard to speed and overall circulation. O! create silence!<sup>4</sup>

I invite the reader to join in the adventure of silence. I propose that we make a pilgrimage together to the Sanctuary of Silence, where Our Lord dwells. I have called this book *From Silence to Silence*—that is, establishing interior silence and then proceeding toward contact with God's silence. I will begin with considerations on how to cultivate the first silence: an interior, receptive calm. Then we will be ready for a second stage, in which we will meditate on some mysteries that advance us toward God's infinite and silent mystery. Lastly, we will try to see how we can reach His silence through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which ultimately means through prayer.

In the text above, Augustine referred to normal speech as noise in comparison with God's transcendent silence. The dictionary defines noise as an unpleasant or undesired sound, as an annoying, irregular one. Noise, for us in this book, will be whatever is disharmonious with our deep life, whatever at some level impairs our attention to great truths, and, in the last analysis, anything that hampers our progress toward God.

We will keep in mind Our Lord's silence. During His earthly life, in the bottom of His soul, He was in silent communion with His Father. He spent most of that life in the quiet home of Nazareth, began His public life with the

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *The Power of Silence* by Robert Cardinal Sarah, trans. Michael Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 86. The cardinal's book is a treasure of wonderful quotations on silence.

silence of the desert, and even during those three years of preaching would regularly sneak off to be alone with the Father. He was mostly silent during His passion. Finally, He returned to the silence of the Father.

We will also think of Mary's silence when she bore Jesus in her womb and waited to see His face, of her adoring silence at Bethlehem, the silence of the separation during Jesus's public career, her silent pondering of her son's words and the events around Him, the awful silence at the cross, the silence of Holy Saturday in a calm expectation of her son's resurrection, and then after the Ascension, the silent waiting in her heart for Him to come to take her.

I subtitled this book *A Benedictine Pilgrimage to God's Sanctuary*. I have not, in view of this book, done research on the Benedictine tradition concerning silence, nor will I particularly comment on the Rule of St. Benedict. I simply put forward my meditations, the fruit of almost half a century of Benedictine life. I have been formed in the great Solesmes tradition, especially through Dom Paul Delatte's writings and through my master of novices and later abbot, Dom Antoine Forgeot, to whom I will often refer in these pages.<sup>5</sup>

I address primarily the lay faithful and families, but I hope that priests and those of the consecrated life, especially contemplatives, will be able to find some nourishment in this writing. My reflections mainly aim at fostering our life of prayer. I am not on the summit next to the sanctuary, beckoning to those below; I am, rather, on the slope with

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<sup>5</sup> Other Benedictine authors I have frequented are St. Bernard, St. Gertrude, Blessed Columba Marmion, Dom Prosper Guéranger, and Lady Abbess Cécile Bruyère.



the others, striving to put one foot forward at a time. I have, nevertheless, thought deeply and at length on what I write here, and hopefully, have put it to the test in my life.

I want to thank those who have looked over this manuscript: Anne Calovich and Galina Bedyulina, plus a couple of monks here at Clear Creek. I thank Joseph Pearce for his foreword and Jason Gale of TAN Books for his great patience with me.

Let us ask Our Lady to show us the way and accompany us on our journey. Let us also pray to St. Joseph, that man who silently served his two beloved companions. I entrust this work especially to the prayers of that other man of silence, our Blessed Father St. Benedict.



## INTRODUCTION

# Taking Stock for the Journey

*“A person possesses absolute dignity because he is in direct relationship with the realm of being, truth, goodness, and beauty, and with God, and it is only with these that he can arrive at his complete fulfillment. His spiritual fatherland consists of the entire order of things which have absolute value, and which reflect, in some manner, a divine Absolute superior to the world and which have a power of attraction toward this Absolute.”*

—Jacques Maritain<sup>1</sup>

ST. BENEDICT OPENS his Rule with the words “Hearken, o my son . . . that you may return . . . to Him from whom you had departed.”<sup>2</sup> Our unique goal in life is to return to the Father; that is the one thing necessary. In this introduction, I want to consider how the culture of silence fits into that journey back to God. We need to understand our basic condition before we depart on our pilgrimage.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 8–9.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Rule of St. Benedict are taken from *A Commentary of the Rule* by Dom Paul Delatte, trans. Dom Justin McCann (London: Burns and Oates, 1921).

## The paradox of man

Pascal wrote: "By space the universe encompasses and swallows me up like an atom; by thought I comprehend the world."<sup>3</sup> The greatness of man is not in size and strength. In the epigraph above, Jacques Maritain told us that we are at home in the realm of the absolute, above the ups and downs of this world. The human soul is, in a way, larger than the universe since it is open, by its intellect and will, to more than anything creation can provide. Man naturally reaches beyond the world both in thought and desire.

Indeed, since the intellect is ordered to truth as such, it tends farther than the things we encounter, for they do not completely explain themselves; they do not provide the full truth. We realize that this changeable, limited world cannot suffice as the ultimate truth. The mind naturally rises to the first truth upon which all other truth depends—that is, to the cause of this world, the first being.

Similarly, since our will is ordered to the good, it cannot be satisfied with a limited good. When we perceive something good, it stimulates in us a desire for something better, even of an absolute, pure good. Our mediocre happinesses stir up in us a yearning for happiness without limit, for all possible happiness. We witness this in the book of Ecclesiastes, where King Solomon, who had drunk from all earthly pleasures, concludes that all is vanity. He had everything, yet his heart was unfulfilled; it needed more.

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<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. William Finlayson Trotter (New York: Collier and Son, 1910), 120.

Only God, who is truth and goodness, perfection and beauty, can adequately correspond to this ordering of both the intellect and the will to the absolute. We are made in the image of God, launched toward Him. We naturally desire God; we unconsciously seek Him in the sense that our intellect and will are inherently aiming in His direction. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that “the desire to see God is our deepest desire.”<sup>4</sup> In Him alone can we find ultimate, total rest. There alone is silence for our soul.

Our natural strength, however, does not suffice to reach God. We are finite, and He is infinite. This is the paradox of human nature: only God can fulfill our intellect and will, yet He is out of proportion to them. We can admire Him as the cause of the universe, but He is too far above us and our natural faculties for us to directly know Him or be in loving communion with Him. Trying to reach Him would be like jumping to the moon: we are propelled in the right direction but are unable to arrive at the goal.

It might seem, therefore, that we would have to resign ourselves to a life of limited happiness. We would have to consider our reaching the Sanctuary of Silence as only a sad, impossible wish. In fact, however, God has graciously elevated our quest for truth and happiness so that we may attain Himself, absolute truth and goodness.

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<sup>4</sup> No. 2557. All quotations from the *Catechism* will be from the second edition, 1997.

## Communion with God in Christ

Divine Revelation informs us that our first parents, Adam and Eve, were gratuitously lifted up into friendship with God. He proportioned them to Himself—their jump to the moon was carried all the way to the target. Human history thus began in personal communion with God. This divine friend even gave Adam and Eve a special gift, what is known as Original Justice, which is the full submission of the inferior parts of the soul to the superior part. Their sensible faculties were in complete harmony with the spiritual. In terms of this study, Adam and Eve were in contact with God's silence and also possessed an interior, lower silence, so that they could be attentive to God's.

There was, however, noise already present in creation. In the midst of the beautiful music of the angels, Satan had inserted discordant notes. He wanted to make himself the end, instead of moving harmoniously with the rest of creation toward God. He desired to twist reality so that it no longer led others to God, no longer glorified Him. C. S. Lewis, in his *Screwtape Letters*, has Satan give as his fundamental project to “make the whole universe one big noise.”<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the devil told Adam and Eve that God is a liar and put before them the dream of becoming like God, of deciding for themselves what is good and what is evil. They listened to him and turned their desire toward the forbidden fruit. They sought happiness in a perverted way, by grasping for it rather than receiving it as a gift in trust and

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<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 103.

love. They did not want to receive from God truth, goodness, and beauty, but they wanted to create their own. They sought to be in charge, autonomous. Thus, our first parents broke off from their divine friend and, by the same token, lost God's special gift of Original Justice. Their minds, deliberately turned away from God, no longer held full dominion over the inferior parts of the soul, and the body was given over to its natural corruptibility. Noise, thus, broke out also on our planet.

Since, in its representative head, the human race had fallen, Adam and Eve passed on a humanity that is in rupture with God, a state we call Original Sin. Man, made for God, was now congenitally turned away from Him. We have become prodigal children in exile. The human nature we all receive is also deprived of Original Justice; its inferior powers are strongly and unreasonably attracted to limited and especially sensible goods. That is, man, having forfeited his contact with God's silence, consequently lost his interior silence.

God, however, did not abandon mankind. Eventually, He sent His Son Jesus Christ who, by His death and resurrection, reopened the path to the Father, building a bridge for all of us to take. Or rather, He is the bridge. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. To follow Him on the path to the Father, we must be united to Him. Christ instituted the sacrament of Baptism as the means of our vital insertion in Him.

St. Paul taught that at Baptism, we die and rise in Christ: we die to the world of sin, and we rise to the life of a child of God. Like adopted children in a family, we are not naturally members of the Blessed Trinity but act and are treated as

though we were. We have received, as a gift from God, the power to live as His children. The Spirit of sonship enables us to cry to God from the bottom of our hearts, "Abba, Father." Nevertheless, we are not yet in heaven, as we have all noticed. We do not have clear, jubilant, and permanent possession of our heritage. We have a pilgrimage to make.

We Christians are, through and in Christ, on the road to the Sanctuary of Silence. But Baptism does not give us back Original Justice in the full sense. The divine life is grafted on our weak and disordered nature. We have especially an unruly sensibility that hinders our intellect and will. We are still sheep lost in the noisy valley of the shadow of death. We, too, tend to want to create our own happiness outside of God. There are noise and battles in us, because we are made for the absolute and yet stop at less, making idols out of creatures.

We, therefore, have some rough going in our pilgrimage. Christians participate in Christ's victory over sin. They belong by right to a world without sin, a kingdom of life and light, but they live in a corrupt world and bear in themselves a certain complicity with evil. There is noise around and in us. We must establish harmony and silence in us in order to connect with God's silence. By God's gift, we have turned back to Him. We are fundamentally rectified, but we must perfect that basic justice. God first takes hold of the high point of our soul, so to speak, but we need to collaborate with Him in converting our whole self to Him so that we think, will, and love in union with Him, until we enter into our ultimate life toward which Baptism launched us, into the full life in the Trinity as the full fruit of the Redemption.



This voyage consists in cultivating receptive silence and entering more and more into God's silence.

### **Supernatural equipment for the journey**

The spiritual life, all the way to heaven and the Beatific Vision, is an unfolding of the powers given to us at Baptism. What establishes us as children of God is sanctifying grace, a quality inserted in the depths of our being that furnishes us with what we need to actively participate in the intimate life of the Trinity, to live as a child and friend of God.

In itself, grace is a participation in divine life, but in fact, in God's plan, in the present economy, it is a "Christic" grace, an extension to us of Christ's grace. It reproduces the filial character of His grace. Our union with God is accomplished in Christ, according to Christ. Our Christian life is a communion in Christ's personal life, in intimate and constant dependency on Him. Our Lord infuses His vital strength and light into us, touching our soul in its depth. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me," wrote St. Paul (Gal 2:20). We are holy in the measure that we live of His life, of His filiation.

Grace, then, is the radical principle of our supernatural activity. Its potentialities flow out into the intellect and will in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. These virtues are what immediately give us the capacity to behave as children of God. They produce supernatural acts that have God as their formal object: I believe Him and in Him, I hope for Him and by Him, and I love Him. They

are ordered to Him as eyes are to light and ears to sound. We participate through them in God's own knowing and loving.

The essence of the spiritual life consists, therefore, in the exercise of the three theological virtues that alone bear directly on our end, God in Himself. We call moral virtues those that have for their object regulating our relations with created things. They serve the theological virtues. They help cultivate silence in the soul so that we can better believe, desire, and love God. For example, the virtue of temperance governs our sensible desires according to reason. It keeps us from being distracted and pulled in all directions toward lesser things so that we can, by the theological virtues, hear God's calls and taste His goodness and beauty. We are like candles. The wax is our body, and the wick our soul. They exist for the flame, which is the high point of our soul, in communion with God by grace and the theological virtues. All our faculties and all our activities should work together for the perfection of our faith, hope, and charity.

Grace also provides us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, dispositions given at baptism that help achieve the exercise of the theological virtues. They liberate these virtues from the weight of our earthly ways. By the gifts, we act according to a more supernatural and filial modality, as St. Paul wrote: "Who is moved by the Holy Spirit, those are the sons of God" (Rom 8:14). They make us sensitive to the Holy Spirit's promptings and lights. From the point of view of the gifts, our spiritual life can be compared to a boat: We row under the regime of reason and will, but we have sails that can move us along by the wind of the gifts, under a more direct intervention of God. The Spirit blows when, where,

and how He wills, but we need to have the sails of the gifts ready to receive His impulsion. The gifts, by their higher modality, more directly under divine influence, especially bring us into God's mystery and silence.

In conclusion, we are ordered to God's silence but are full of noise. Our pilgrimage aims to diminish that noise and fill the place with God's riches in order to ultimately enter into His silence. Knowing now what it is all about, having appreciated our strengths and weaknesses, we can begin walking, by God's grace, toward the Sanctuary of Silence. The first objective will be to cultivate a receptive, interior silence.





## PART I

### First Steps: Cultivating Receptive Silence

*“Human beings are called to live in their inmost region and to have themselves as much in hand as possible from that centrepoint.”*

—St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross<sup>1</sup>

IN PART I, we want to consider how to foster a calm and deep interior life for an attentive receptivity to God’s word and action. We have to discipline ourselves so that we are not like a reed that blows in the wind or a computer that functions mechanically, but a responsible person who chooses the true and the good. We want to be silent interiorly so that we can hear the calls of truth, goodness, and beauty. The three major domains of effort for this are our exterior environment and senses, our interior faculties, and our speech.

I do not mean to say that the spiritual life begins with this discipline of interior silence. We have first to know and be attracted to Our Lord if we are going to take up spiritual combat. Then, we can exercise ourselves in interior silence, as well as in the other parts of this book, learning about the

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<sup>1</sup> St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), *The Science of the Cross*, trans. Sr. Josephine Koeppl (Washington, DC: Carmelite Studies, 2002), 160.

Christian mystery and prayer. These efforts are simultaneous, but the first focus can be interior tranquility.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Exterior Silence

*“The silence of nature is permanent; it is the air in which nature breathes. The motions of nature are the motions of silence; the pattern of the changing seasons is covered by silence. The silence of nature is the primary reality. . . . Things of nature are full of silence, they are reserves of silence.”*

—Max Picard<sup>1</sup>

THE FIRST CONTEXT for the culture of silence is the exterior world. We are rational beings, but the spiritual in us is incarnate, deeply rooted in sensible reality. What is in the imagination issues from sense perception. So, discipline begins by regulating your eyes and ears. Furthermore, harmonious sounds and sights favor our psychological balance and recollection, whereas disordered, unpleasant, and unfitting ones agitate us and disturb our ability to focus.

Our Lord chose to be born in a quiet, little village near a beautiful inland sea with hills round about, in a peaceful home into which telephones, television, and internet did not invade. It was in the Galilean countryside that He

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<sup>1</sup> Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Godwin (Wichita, Kansas: Eighth Day, 2002), 137.

experienced the lilies of the field under the Father's loving care, as well as the shepherd with his flock, an image of that care.

I was born and raised in the city. My family played sports rather than hunt or fish. Our backyard was my forest when I was little; later, the nearby creek became the Mississippi. I did, as a boy, have some contact with larger nature on a few vacations in the mountains and, in later years, camping out with friends. These momentary, special experiences and the memories of them have been very important for me, both for finding God and cultivating interior peace. One of my attractions to the monastery was to be nearer to nature and its harmonious silence.

In this chapter, I want to consider how the sensible harmony of the natural world fosters interior attention and intimates God's silence, then consider what we can do to promote a culture of sensible silence.

### **The pacifying silence of nature**

As Max Picard told us in this chapter's epigraph, and as we all can still experience in the countryside or a secluded park, the overall atmosphere in nature is silence. He spoke of "the motions of silence." Spring blossoms suddenly unfurl and fruits grow, the clouds come in, the birds fly over, the snow falls, all in silence. There are, of course, plenty of sounds in nature, as dogs bark, bees buzz, the wind gusts, but silence is first; it is "the primary reality"—natural sounds seem to be part of it. The sounds themselves usually converge in a soothing concert, like an evening when the crickets chirp in



chorus, the air breathes gently through the boughs of trees, and water gurgles in the nearby stream. This sweet harmony of sounds has a parallel in the sight of the layered landscape of green grass and blue sky, with brown tree trunks and all the colors of the flowers. There are, however, startling sounds, such as a violent storm, and ugly sights as when one animal mangles another. Nevertheless, these are momentary events that even bring out, by contrast, the underlying harmony.

The lovely, tranquil rhythms of sights and sounds favor interior calm and silence. When we live in this exterior order and beauty, we naturally and peacefully enter into their rhythms, and our minds quiet down. We are able to reflect more deeply. A poem from Yeats imparts the experience of the pacifying effect of nature's rich concord, if you read it slowly and receptively, and read it again:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And build a small cabin there, of clay and wattles  
made:  
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the  
honey-bee;  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.  
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes  
dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of morning to where the  
cricket sings.  
There midnight is all a glimmer and noon a purple  
glow  
And evening full of the lynnet's wings.  
I will arise and go now, for always night and day

I hear lake water lapping with a low sound by the  
shore;  
Whether I stand on the road or on the pavement  
grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

### **The world's silence points to God's**

The natural world, by its harmonious stillness, not only assists peace but also teaches us about what I have called objective silence. When we interact with nature, we learn about mystery, beauty, and the deep silence of things. Most of all, we are taught about God and His silence.

Picard spoke of things being “full of silence . . . reserves of silence.” We can consider a flower, see its colors and shape, feel its texture, and inhale its fragrance. These exterior manifestations fit with one another, and by the very fact, point to something deeper, toward the flower's silent depths and the mystery of its being. The flower also is interdependent with the objects around it, with the tree, the stream, the soil, and the bees. That mutual fitting also points to a mystery, a common silence for these various things. We perceive a certain oneness of nature beyond them. The silent depth and order of things direct us to a Maker. There is a mystery beyond this universe, from which the universe came. There is an intelligence behind the order of this world.

This ascension in silences seems to be what Simone Weil had in mind when she wrote: “Silence is not the absence of sounds, but something infinitely more real than sounds and the centre of a harmony more perfect than anything which a

combination of sounds can produce. Furthermore, there are degrees of silence. There is a silence in the beauty of the universe which is like a noise when compared with the silence of God's."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, being close to nature cultivates our interior silence and also leads to objective silence. The world expresses some of the fullness of God's silence; that is, the various creatures speak of His ineffable riches. As St. Paul wrote: "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:20). God charged the world with the task of relating Him, and He gave men the ability to read its message. The *Catechism* teaches that "each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection. . . . Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness."<sup>3</sup>

We need the visible creation to know and love God since we do not perceive Him directly. We draw our ideas of God from our experience of things. We need to taste the goodness of things in order to have some sense of God's goodness, as John Senior explained: "A child can't honestly admire the Maker until he first honestly admires the things He made. It's an insult to ignore the artist's work while praising him on hearsay. 'Taste and see.' This thing is good; it couldn't make itself; therefore we know He who made it is good. . . . If you jump from rocks to God without a long, sensible,

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *The Twelve Degrees of Silence*, by Sister Marie-Aimée de Jésus, ed. Lucinda Vardey, trans. François Reuter (Toronto: Novalis Publishing, 2012), 6.

<sup>3</sup> No. 339.

emotional, willful, thoughtful intercourse with them, your understanding and love of His goodness and greatness will be proportioned to the meager experience.”<sup>4</sup> The world serves our meditation, passing from silence to Silence.

### Contemporary challenges

Things of experience foster our recollection and help us look toward God’s plenitude, but there are hindrances to our contact with these things. Many of us have lost sight of the world as pointing toward God. In fact, we no longer even have much experience of natural things. These are the two negative aspects of our modern relationship to creation: our mental attitude causes us to miss the meaning of God’s handiwork, and our technology even cuts us off from that handiwork.

#### *Our mental attitude toward creation*

There is no need to spell out how progress in knowing and dominating the physical world is extremely useful. Science also has discovered many wonders that point to God. It detects ever more the intricacies of creation, notably in the so many systems and cycles that collaborate to make life possible on our planet. They say that the simplest living cell is as organized as New York City.

Nevertheless, although our modern physical and mathematical sciences are efficient and fascinating, they analyze only what they can measure. This has led modern man to focus on superficial aspects of reality. The prodigious success

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<sup>4</sup> *The Restoration of Innocence* (mss, 1994), 79.

of modern sciences has produced a general atmosphere of positivism that only accepts as sure what can be proven in a mathematical way or through experiment. This tendency has been seconded by a parallel utilitarian approach. Things of nature are regularly considered merely as objects to use for power and as a source of a sense satisfaction, to be greedily seized for maximum gratification at minimum cost.

The ascendancy in our society of such views cultivates mental habits that cause us to lose the sense of the rich and silent mystery of things. The visible world has become mute for our intellect, as if it had nothing to say. Its manifestations seem to be empty noise which points nowhere. Wordsworth lamented the modern reductive gaze in his poem “The world is too much with us”:

Getting and spending we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in nature that is ours;  
We’ve given our hearts away, a sordid boon! . . .  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.

### *Cut off by technology*

Even if someone has a healthy, respectful attitude in regard to natural reality and its mysterious, silent depths, it is with difficulty that he could find that reality anymore. Our experience is separated from God’s creation. The sensible world is now largely mediated to us through technology. To know the weather, to find our way around town, to do most of our

ordinary daily tasks, we attend only to electronic devices that tell us about reality. We know nature through our screens.

Or rather, even more often, technology does not mediate but instead puts up a wall between us and God's direct work. The sounds we hear, what we see, most things we touch, the scents are not only man-made but also disjoined from creation. We no longer see, feel, and smell fire; we experience only light bulbs. We do not hear the gentle breeze because of rumbling cars. We cannot perceive the stars due to the dominance of electric lights. We no longer live in a world of plants and animals but of cement and plastic, of computer screens and cell phones. I remarked earlier that the sounds of nature arise from silence. Today, however, silence in our experience is rather a momentary interruption of noise. Noise is omnipresent as the continual backdrop of our lives. It has broken into what used to be havens of silence, notably the home. Contact with the silence of natural things is rather a vacation from everyday life.

Why are these artificial sounds and sights not as fitting, not as beneficial for us? First of all, the continual screeching of machines and the buzzing of devices are not harmonious. What they emit is not only loud but also grates on our nerves. These sounds fulfill the dictionary definition of noise. Sights also have their noise. Our roads are plastered with aggressive billboards and flashy lights that clutch our attention.

Secondly, artificial instruments do not point as readily to God as does nature. Our cars, our airplanes, and our devices rely ultimately on the First Cause, but they direct the mind before all to man who invented them. When we wonder at

the sight of an airplane flying above, it is rather to glorify man.

Furthermore, this unrelenting noise and these dazzling lights train us not to really listen or to look, incline us not to pay attention. Our senses are overwhelmed and overstimulated, as when our cars charge down the road, we cannot see anything in particular, there are just too many images going by too fast. Often, there is not much to see anyway, with bland, purely functional, machine-made things all around. We develop lazy eyes and ears.

Technology thus dulls our senses. It also takes away our ability to concentrate as we are tossed to and fro by the frenzy of modern life. We are pulled away from what we are doing as our phones chime in our pockets. We check text messages while we are in conversation or while we are reading. We become addicted to this stimulus. We develop an artificial need for these images and noise. Furthermore, there is so much good information, that we hardly have time for anything but a cursory run-through. We take in more than we can reflect on. There is no space, no leisure for calm, purposeful reflection. We end up living on the surface of reality and of ourselves, never building up an interior life.

The continual excitement and all these possibilities do not fulfill us and only make us restless. We easily pass from one stimulation to another in a feverish quest for sensations and news—that is, for noise. Our sensuality and curiosity overpower us. We are scattered, fragmented, according to impressions and impulses in all directions.

## What to do

In response to the challenges of a mental and technological separation from natural reality, in view of acquiring an interior silence opening toward God's silence, I would recommend four efforts: cultivating a contemplative gaze toward the underlying silence of reality, disciplining our use of technology—especially media devices—supervising our exterior senses, and fostering silence in our human environment.

### *Contemplative gaze*

It is easy to realize that the modern “scientific” mentality is inadequate. We cannot reduce all knowledge to what we can measure or even to what reason can fully grasp and manipulate. We must foster a humble, wondering look on visible creation, one that is receptive to the silence in the depths of natural things. We have to rediscover the beauty and appeal of mysteries.<sup>5</sup>

For a contemplative listening to the underlying silence, we must learn another language than that of numbers and even of clear ideas. Robert Frost, in his poem “Choose something like a star,” puts forward, on one hand, scientific information and, on the other, a more mysterious and patient and receptive type of learning, a listening. Speaking to a star, he first asks for its exact measures:

Talk Fahrenheit, talk centigrade,  
Use language we can comprehend,  
Tell us what elements you blend.

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<sup>5</sup> Permit me to send off to my book, *John Senior and the Restoration of Realism*, which deals very much with wonder, especially in chapters seven through nine.



Then he refers to a different gaze on the star, one that does not seek to explain but listens to the star's silence, waiting for it to speak in its own way. This listening is, in fact, a higher attention:

It gives us strangely little aid,  
But does say something in the end.  
And steadfast as Keat's eremite,  
Not even stooping from its sphere,  
It asks a little of us here.  
It asks of us a certain height.

We need, therefore, to cultivate a reverence for God's creatures, not considering them firstly as problems or as objects to exploit, but rather attending in awe to their beauty, to the very mystery of their existence. We cannot force the silent depth in things. To respect and listen to it, we must not be in a hurry, not always seeking excitement. It is not a waste of time to watch the stars, giving them the opportunity to teach us, or to sit by a lake in the afternoon, soaking up its beauty and peace. Louis Lavelle wrote that to be attentive, we must attain "a state of trust and abandon that prepares us to receive. This state . . . is in regards to the universe humility, an expectation, and at the same time an appeal."<sup>6</sup> We are in correspondence with reality and so can "trust" with a "humility" and an "appeal" that recognizes we are to receive, that this knowledge is a gift.

We must let ourselves be astonished, as Joseph Pearce tells us, speaking of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Lavelle, *Conscience de Soi* (Paris, Grasset, 1933), 58. The translation is mine.

Every time we see a tree, resplendent in countless shades of green and washed in sunlight, we see the presence of the goodness, truth and beauty of God. . . . Hopkins' greatest gift is the way that he shows us the grandeur of God in creation, teaching us how we are meant to see, with eyes wide open with wonder. . . . When Hopkins looked up, he did not just see stars, he saw the "moth-soft Milky Way" with its "belled fire" ringing forth God's glory, calling us to prayer and praise. . . . We are in the presence of a miracle, of which we are ourselves a miraculous part.<sup>7</sup>

My godfather and former professor Dennis Quinn presents the ancient Greeks as a model: "[Greek wonder] accompanies the most ordinary acts of life. Eating and drinking and dressing are all accomplished with effortless but intense attention . . . always fully alive and present to immediate experience. . . . How is it that these beings are able to sustain this keenness of experience? I ascribe it to a pervasive recognition that the world and human experience are at once strange and familiar, mysterious and intelligible."<sup>8</sup> Quinn is here commenting on the scene of Telemachus's last evening in his home before setting out in search of his father. About to leave, the young man feels a mystery in the little common activities and things of his home. He was so used to these things, but now that he may never see them again, they

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Pearce, *Literature, What Every Catholic Should Know* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019), 113–114.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Quinn, *Iris in Exile: A Synoptic History of Wonder* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 60. Dr. Quinn condensed into this book years of meditation on wonder.

touch him, and he considers them more closely. They are old and yet, somehow, new.

Paintings can teach us to appreciate the hidden mystery of concrete things, of a tree by the waters, of a peasant's wooden clogs, of a family harvesting hay. But in view of cultivating a contemplative gaze on reality, with Dr. Quinn, I want to especially mention here wholesome, usually older, literature. Stories, poetry, and songs are needed to form the wondering gaze; they can train us to look beyond the superficial, quantitative order. All good literature drawn from experience outside of an industrial context conveys a sense of the common mystery of reality, of a silence behind all things and ourselves. Such writing touches and expands our souls, teaching us that there is something more than getting and spending. We learn to listen to the voices of silence.

For example, Willa Cather, in *My Antonia*, instructs our gaze by her description of the homely Nebraska prairie. She discloses a radiance of something higher than the sensible world. The scene is "strange and familiar." The "burning bush" is, of course, an allusion to God's presence, but more generally, it refers to the presence of a mystery overriding everything.

We drifted along lazily, very happy, through the magical light of the late afternoon. All those fall afternoons were the same, but I never got used to them. As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sun light that was stronger and fiercer than at another time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw

long shadows. The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day.<sup>9</sup>

Miss Cather speaks of a “transfiguration.” Christ's transfiguration, in fact, revealed His true depths. Perhaps this view of the prairie likewise is a deeper, more real one. Each day is glorious in its way. Its end is a celebration. This ending reveals the hidden glory of all the day.

Among this good literature is, of course, the Bible. Its reading will educate us in looking on creation in God's light, as God's work. “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! . . . I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou has established” (Ps 8:1, 3). “The heavens are telling the glory of God” (Ps 19:1). If I am gazing at the stars, I enjoy their beauty, but I need to remember Who made them, to be grateful for this gift, and dream how beautiful He must be. One can ponder how Jesus and Mary must have gazed on the stars together of an evening in Nazareth.

### *Disciplining our technology*

Although our technology impairs our exterior silence, it does not escape Divine Providence. The contemporary world remains in God's hands. God has chosen this period for us

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<sup>9</sup> Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, (New York: Dover, 1994), 22.

to live in, with its advantages as well as its poorer aspects. Nothing is perfect here below; there is no return to Eden in this life.

Thus, one should not be tense about the noise around us. Interiorly fighting it and getting angry will only bother that much more our recollection. There is a certain relativity in our experience of material silence. A friend of mine's grandmother lived near a train station, and when she visited her son's family, she could not sleep because she was used to the clamor of trains! One prays well, they say, in the noise of the battlefield. I remember a high school "study hall" that was, instead, more a riotous game room, but I simply accepted the chaos and relaxed and was able to focus on my reading.

Nevertheless, as Our Lord's servants, in our little place, we need lucidly to offset technology's disadvantages as we are able. We should humbly, patiently, and gently strive to make conditions favorable for interior silence and contemplation, doing what we reasonably can in our context to cultivate quiet and beauty for ourselves and others.

First, our habitual environment itself should be appropriately natural because our experience of creation needs to be part of our everyday life, not just a visit to the zoo once a year. If we live in town, we can try to inhabit a peaceful, usually older, and rather rustic neighborhood, maybe visit old parks regularly. One could have a place to get away to in the country, for vacations or in visits to cousins and friends who live in a rural area. Youth can belong to scout troops and take some camping trips in the wilderness.

Secondly, we should lean toward selecting what cultivates nature rather than crushes it; for example, drinking from a

ceramic cup rather than a plastic one, using physical books instead of a screen. Utensils, furniture, and other objects around us ought to be attractive and interesting, pointing beyond the utilitarian. It is beneficial to exercise some handiwork with natural material, perhaps gardening or woodworking. When buying new machines, we need to take into account sight and sound.

Thirdly, it is do-or-die to bridle our use of electronic devices so that they do not dominate us but instead serve our humanity, our deeper self. We need to realize that this media is largely fabricated to seduce us, to provoke our cravings. The internet is seeking our money by appealing to our lower instincts. It does not want our good, just our billfolds. Furthermore, online images are powerful, and one can blatantly stare as long as one desires. We become physically addicted to screens.

Media plays a significant part in forming our minds, so we must deliberately determine to what we open ourselves, just as we choose the friends to whom we give access to our minds. We should engage our gadgets only in the measure that they are indeed useful. Even when dealing with valuable and healthy content, we need to restrict usage. We must mortify our yearning to see and hear, to be totally informed, to be continually excited by this electronic world—otherwise, we will have no interior life with Our Lord. If we realize that God abides in silence, we will more easily choose to remain with that silence rather than click a button to fulfill a curiosity.

In view of this discipline in the use of media devices, it is necessary to set up some rules for ourselves and our

families. It would be good, for example, to restrict to certain moments plugging into news. We could avoid getting on the computer in the evening, perhaps also in the early morning. We ought to give ourselves only a precisely defined length of time for shopping online—we do not need to exhaust every possibility in order to find the “perfect” item. One could probably have a simpler cell phone and avoid carrying it all the time. One should usually turn off its warning noises and notifications so that one is not constantly on edge for a call.

### *Custody of the senses*

Governing the use of electronic instruments is only part of controlling data that enters us via our senses. We are to be generally moderate in the use of our hearing, touch, taste, smell, and especially sight. We must not let greedy eyes go in all directions, trying to drink in everything. Whatever may be our milieu, we need to guard the very entrances to the soul. One does not open the home to all comers. If we are careful about what we eat, what we let into our stomach, all the more should we filter what we let into our soul. St. Bernard tells us that it is no use sweeping up the inside if you leave the doors and windows open to dust coming in from the outside.

We do need to know how to look closely at something when it is useful and proper to do so, but if we look at most everything that comes in our path, we will not be able to think about important things, we will not be attentive to the silence of reality, to the presence of God in the depths of our soul. We need to know how and when to stop, even in the use of good things.

*Silence in the home*

If we cut out time chasing after superficial information, we will be able to find more leisure for quiet moments with the Lord as well as with our family and friends. We will be able to read and pray and have interesting conversations and healthy recreation with our loved ones. With less input from screens and devices, with some habit of silence, we begin noticing so much more of the wonder that is right in front of us, and we will be more attentive to those around us. And of course, we are able to remember God, to listen to Him and His will. We more easily recognize Him silently and lovingly at work.

It is much better to read aloud as a family in the evening or sing around the piano than watch television. A few years ago, an ice storm knocked out electricity in our area for about a week. Several of our neighbors told me what a refreshing time they had as a family gathered for an evening around the fire, talking, reading, and singing together. That is more in harmony with human nature, does not overload the senses or deaden the imagination, and it does not introduce unhealthy images and scenarios into the sanctuary of the home, into the sanctuary of minds.

Along these lines, we can remark how an orderly day fosters focus and calm. There should be quiet times. Mothers could perhaps set aside short periods each day for silence so that the children become habituated to it and acquire a taste for it. Once in a while, for an hour in the afternoon, all could be still, perhaps with everyone alone reading in different rooms. Also, one should regularly take family and



friendly walks outside, where one can leisurely look and listen. We monks are taught to walk lightly, shut doors softly, and govern the tone of our voices. Even in a home with children, one can learn to be attentive to these little activities.

All this effort to discipline our exterior has interior silence as the immediate goal—that is, our interior faculties in peace and order, receptive to God’s mystery, nourished by His silence.