

Silence and Prayer – Kenneth Leech

One of the most popular comedy shows in Britain in the 1950s was 'The Goon Show'. I recall one incident in the series which involved a telephone call: the Goon who answered said, 'Who is speaking? Who is that? Who is it? Who is that speaking? Who is speaking?' Eventually a voice answered, 'You are speaking.'

Much of our life and prayer is such continual talk-talk, but not necessarily conversation, not necessarily dialogue. For real conversation involves listening and, conversely, authentic listening can only occur in the midst of a conversation. Without conversation 'listening' comes too late, and, whether in prayer or in life as a whole, such listening becomes emptiness.

Fr Austin Smith, a Passionist priest living in the Toxteth area of Liverpool, the scene of the 1981 uprisings, wrote in an article of 1985:¹

When the smoke has cleared and the sun has set over the debris and the last siren screamed its way into the night, they usually arrive. Important people they are. If they are not from the very top of the pyramid, though they too sometimes come, they are certainly from around the top of the middle half. Document cases under their arms, looking very serious and intent, engaging from time to time in snatched bits of conversation with attentive underlings, they tour the streets, stop from time to time for a few words with a bewildered resident, simultaneously reject and invite the press and the TV cameras, and make for the 5.50 back to the centre of power. I do not doubt their sincerity, at least some of them, for they have been known to weep. ...

There is a piece of language which always fascinated me. When an argument explodes during one of the many consultations, it is usually silenced by the chief amongst the 'theys' with the words, 'Look, we have really come to listen.'

This listening is detached from conversation, however, so it is *deaf listening*. Listening and conversation must go together. There is a necessary dialectic of word and silence in all human conversation, in Christian liturgy, in our brooding on Scripture, and in our own interior dialogue of the heart.

But in prayer and in life, silence is often experienced as threatening –

or at least, difficult and embarrassing. And some silence is embarrassing. There is a silence which is the result of awkwardness, of uncertainty, of a sense of our rootlessness. There is an angry silence. There is a silence of coldness, of fermenting resentment and cruelty. And it is to protect ourselves from such disturbing silences that we get into the habit of surrounding ourselves with external noise. But then, when this external noise is taken away, as in a retreat or in the atmosphere of enforced solitary confinement, in sickness or in prison, we are confronted with our own internal clamour. The real threat to authentic inner silence is thus revealed: it is not external noise, but the noises in our heads. When, after living on main roads since 1939, I moved in 1971 to Canterbury where my only immediate neighbours were the dead Saxon kings, I realized that the real obstacle to silence and prayer was the noise within me. I understood how at times the internal clamour becomes so unbearable that we 'go to pieces'.

A major element in the preparation for a prayerful life is learning how to respond to our internal clamour, to the confusion of images and ideas, the turmoil of concern, the brooding anger and bitterness, the sexual fantasies which distress religious people, the multiplicity of thoughts: and, most subtle and most deflecting of all, the thoughts *about* God which detract from the encounter *with* God. But the time spent on this process is not wasted time. Archbishop Michael Ramsey, when asked on one occasion how much time he spent each day in prayer, replied, 'Two minutes—but I spend an hour preparing.'

Most spiritual guides within the classic tradition warn against wasting our energy combating these noises. Instead of engaging in a direct warfare, they advise, in the words of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, that the distracting thoughts are placed beneath a 'cloud of forgetting', combined with an oblique method of attack: piercing through the distractions with short, directed prayers. 'Short prayer pierces heaven.' A major part of our prayer time must be devoted to this process of reducing the range of activity, the range of images within our heads. The value of the Jesus Prayer, of visual images, of the use of phrases of Scripture, lies here.

Some writers, such as Robert Llewelyn and the Ulanovs, suggest that instead of responding negatively to our inner noise, we approach all distractions, fantasies and fragmented thoughts with a more positive response.² They say we need to experience those parts of ourselves which surface in prayer, to accept them as integral elements of the person who prays, and yet to move beyond them. Only by accepting these distractions as a part of us can we escape from captivity to them.

Nevertheless, this process of integration cannot be begun or develop without opportunities for sustained, reflective, penetrating silence. It is in silence that we make progress in the inward journey.

Silence, then, is a vital dimension of our lives, of our self-knowledge. Without it we are only partly alive, living on the surface of consciousness. The mystics tell us that self-knowledge is akin to God-knowledge. Thus Julian of Norwich tells us that it is easier to know God than to know ourselves, for God is the ground in which we stand.³ Similarly, St Augustine speaks of the 'return to the heart', of the need to seek God within, at our own true centre:

Crying to God is not done with the physical voice, but with the heart: many are noisy with their mouths, but with their hearts averted, are able to obtain nothing. If then you cry to God, cry out inwardly where he hears you.⁴

There are many pastoral tasks for which the segregated atmosphere of the theological college or seminary is highly inappropriate. But using this experience for the cultivation of inwardness, of real inner prayerfulness, of interior silence, seems sensible to me. This is a good use of time, and one which will be of permanent value in our future ministry. I suspect the only real purpose of the residential seminary in the church of the future lies in the area of cultivation of silence, of contemplation, and of theological reflection in stillness and attention.

In a society and in a church which neglects silence, we are going to need solid chunks of silence and solitude if we are to recover a balance. Hence the importance of retreat in which we maintain an external silence and seek an internal silence. The external silence is not difficult. The difficulty lies in effecting a transition from the concentrated period of external silence to an interiorized silence during the other days. It calls for what the Eastern ascetical tradition calls the 'binding of the mind', in order that the heart, the total personality, may be liberated. Silence and solitude are necessary ingredients in the process of liberation, and as I suggested earlier, they are the preparation for our ability to listen, they are the preparation for dialogue.

A society, or a church, which has ceased to listen to the neglected voices within its own boundaries, a society in which lines of communication between the poor and the powerful, between women and men, between city and suburb, have broken down, will not find it easy to listen to the word of God. Communication, inward and outward, is

indivisible. As we seek to grow in silence, in communion, in solidarity with one another, with our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, may we grow also in communion with God whom we have not seen.

Notes

1. Austin Smith CP, in *The Bishops and the Economy*, ed. Kenneth Leech, Jubilee Group, 1985, p.38.
2. Robert Llewelyn, *The Positive Role of Distraction in Prayer*, Oxford, SLG Press, Fairacres Publication 65, 1977; Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982.
3. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Ch. 63.
4. Thomas A. Hand, *Augustine on Prayer*, Westminster, Newman Press, 1963, p.70.

This reflection is the first of three reflections with the overall title, *Silence and Ministry*. The other two are 'Silence and Conflict' and 'Silence and Ministry', both included in this journal. They were given originally at Seabury Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, during a Quiet Day at Eastertide 1986 and subsequently published by SLG Press, Oxford (Fairacres Publication 102) in 1987. Reprinted by permission. ©The Sisters of the Love of God 1987

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