

## Silence and Ministry – Kenneth Leech

St Gregory Nazianzen tells us that the madman is one who is *breathless*, and the theologian, he says, stands in contradiction to such mad breathlessness.<sup>1</sup> I want to suggest that interior silence and the contemplative perspective are vital to a truly pastoral ministry, and I want to point to three aspects of this reality: the nature of theology itself; the need for listening within pastoral ministry; and the need for an interior silence and solitude as part of the very nature of priesthood.

The word ‘theology’ has, in the West, come to be identified with academic, abstract thinking about religion; thinking which is often seen as a preparation for some other form of activity such as pastoral work. Theology is thus something we study in order to do something else better. Or, in common secular usage, theology is a synonym for theoretical irrelevance, archaic dogma — in this sense, of course, there is a lot of theology about in Britain and the USA.

But the original sense of *theologia* was quite different. It was seen and is still seen within the Eastern tradition, as a spiritual discipline, a quest for purity of heart and for union with God. According to this tradition, no one can be a theologian who has not undergone a *metanoia*, a real inner transformation.<sup>2</sup> Theology is inseparable from personal holiness and inner prayerfulness. A theologian is one whose prayer is true. Hence, says St Gregory Nazianzen, the enemy of theology is breathlessness, and I note with interest that Leonardo Boff has also written that theology which is not rooted in spirituality is no more than ‘religious breathlessness’.<sup>3</sup> For it is the spirit which gives life and breath. So if we are to carry the theological task, the task of discerning the activity of God in the world, into our communities, we will need to be people of interior reflection, people of silence, people whose lives are not swept off course by breathlessness or by every wind of doctrine.

There is a second aspect to the place of silence in theology. In Eastern thought, and in Western understandings until Aquinas and Bonaventure, theology is not a closed speculative system, but moves towards the silence of the vision of God. Josef Pieper, in his small and neglected study, *The Silence of St Thomas*, points out that the last words of St Thomas — ‘All that I have written seems to me nothing but straw ... compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.’ — emphasized the centrality of silence and of the unknowable:

The last word of St Thomas is not communication but silence. And it is not death which takes the pen out of his hand. His tongue is stilled by the superabundance of life in the mystery of God. He is silent, not because he has nothing further to say; he is silent because he has been allowed a glimpse into the inexpressible depths of that mystery which is not reached by any human thought or speech.<sup>4</sup>

Theology, then, moves towards silence, towards the *via negativa*, the way of ignorance.

It is out of such interior theological reflection that we will find ourselves moving away from models of pastoral ministry which are rooted in concepts of skill, technique and know-how, towards a vision which is rooted in the old, but recently revived, idea of *character*. And the character of the pastor involves, at its centre, the posture of attention, of waiting both upon God and upon the voices of the people whom we seek to serve. Pastoral care, in other words, begins in silent contemplation.

When I worked in the parish of St Anne, Soho, there was a famous character called Harry Trinder. He was involved in running a number of all-night clubs in the Berwick Street area. Most of the day, and a large part of the night, you could find Trinder leaning on a bollard at the corner of Berwick and D'Arblay streets. It became known as 'The Leaning Bollard of Trinder'. If you ever asked him what he did, he said, 'I'm a borough surveyor.' And that was exactly what he did! He surveyed the borough, watched what was going on with great precision. Nothing passed him by. Trinder was a godsend in pastoral work because he knew everything that was going on, where everybody was, and he missed nothing. Pastoral ministry has to begin at this level of watching and listening to the hidden voices of the streets.

In the understanding of the total place of listening within, and as an aid to, activity and struggle, I have been much helped by the writings of the English feminist Sheila Rowbotham. In one of her books she speaks of the negative, powerless aspect of silence. Among oppressed and neglected communities silence normally indicates a sense of hopelessness. But it is often misinterpreted to indicate contentment, hence the need to 'listen carefully to the language of silence'.<sup>5</sup> Rowbotham's description of her experience of many political activists sounds like a description of much Christian pastoral activity:

They had all those certainties, as if everything was known, the whole world and its history was sewn up and neatly categorised.<sup>6</sup>

Any genuine pastoral practice has to begin with attention to the inarticulate, to the ignored and suppressed voices from the back streets. And this involves cultivating a capacity for listening carefully to the language of silence.

Pastors who have acquired skills but who lack the capacity to listen are capable of doing great harm to those who are the victims of their craft. I have suggested that listening to God in prayer, and listening to the voices of the world, depend upon the cultivation and nourishing of the capacity for silence and attention. I want to conclude by suggesting that this requirement of interior silence is also basic to the understanding of the nature of priesthood.

Fundamentally, the priestly office is the office which inwardly, ritually and ascetically shares the dying and rising of Christ.<sup>7</sup> The priest is a 'walking sacrament' of the Paschal mystery itself. What the priest *does* is therefore of far less importance than what the priest *is*. At the heart of priestly identity is the inner identification with Christ's sacrifice. In this, sacramental priesthood is no more than a symbolic concentration of what is true of every Christian: we all bear in our bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus, we are all icons of Christ. And this identification with the Word made flesh involves an ever deepening inwardness, constantly nourished and renewed by silence and solitude.

Our society is filled with functionaries. And the church has conformed to, and colluded with, the managerial, secular models, so that priests and ministers come to be seen as religious functionaries. On this model, prayer, silence, fasting, and the study of theology are valued, if they are valued at all, only as aids to a more efficient pastoral functioning. But priesthood is not a function: it is an identity, a solidarity with Christ crucified and risen. The only kind of priests who can be of true Christ-centred service in the world are those whose priesthood is interiorized, integrated into their humanity, and constantly strengthened by prayer.

Many years ago Jung said that the main work of the priest was to teach people the art of seeing. The quest for clarity of vision, for discernment of the signs of the times, is central to the priestly task. It is also deeply prophetic, for it is out of vision that prophecy arises, and without vision the people perish. But vision depends on contemplation,

on silence, on solitude, on inward struggle. It is more important to see clearly than to behave well: vision determines ethics.

If you forget everything else, remember that any authentic priesthood must derive from an inner core of silence, a life hid with Christ in God. It is of this interiorized priesthood that Ulrich Simon writes in *A Theology of Auschwitz*. In the context of the concentration camp, where ceremonies and outward trimmings are out of the question. the priesthood is mediated only, but supremely, through its essence:

The priestly ideal uses and converts the nothingness which the world of Auschwitz offers. Here the priest's sacerdotal dedication encounters the vacuum with self-sacrifice. ... The priest at the camp counts because he has no desires of self-importance and gives life because he stands already beyond extermination. ... The hour of darkness cannot take him by surprise since he has practised silence in darkness.<sup>8</sup>

Only those who are at home with silence and darkness will be able to survive in, and minister to, the perplexity and confusion of the modern world. Let us seek that dark silence out of which an authentic ministry and a renewed theology can grow and flourish.

## Notes

1. *Theological Orations*, in E.R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1954, p.136.
2. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clark, 1957, p.39.
3. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1979, p.2.
4. Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St Thomas*, London, Faber and Faber, 1957, p.45.
5. Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings*, Virago, 1983, p.8.
6. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, Merlin Press, 1979, p.23.
7. Ulrich Simon, *A Theology of Auschwitz*, Gollancz, 1967, p.124.
8. *A Theology of Auschwitz*, p.127.