

Silence

Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani

June 2017 Retreat

Selected Quotations for Silent Meditations

Max Picard, *The World of Silence*:

“Silence is nothing merely negative; it is not the mere absence of speech. It is a positive, a complete world in itself.

Silence has greatness simply because it is. It is, and that it is its greatness, its pure existence.

There is no beginning to silence and no end; it seems to have its origins in the time when everything was still pure Being. It is like uncreated, everlasting Being. When silence is present, it is as though nothing but silence ever had existed.

Where silence is, man is observed by silence. Silence looks at man more than man looks at silence. Man does not put silence to the test; silence puts man to the test.

One cannot imagine a world in which there is nothing but language and speech, but one can imagine a world where there is nothing but silence.

Silence contains everything within itself. It is not waiting for anything; it is always wholly present in itself and it completely fills out the space in which it appears.

It does not develop or increase in time, but time increases in silence. It as though time had been sown into silence, as though silence had absorbed it; as though silence were the soil in which time grows to fullness.

Silence is not visible, and yet its existence is clearly apparent. It extends to the farthest distances, yet is so close to us that we can feel it as concretely as we feel our own bodies. It is intangible, yet we can feel it as directly as we feel materials and fabrics. It cannot be defined in words, yet it is quite definite and unmistakable.

In no other phenomenon are distance and nearness, range and immediacy, the all-embracing and the particular, so united as they are in silence.

Silence is the only phenomenon today that is ‘useless.’ It does not fit into the world of profit and utility; it simply is. It seems to have no other purpose; it cannot be exploited.

“There is also more silence in one person than can be used in a single human life. That is why every human utterance is surrounded by a mystery.”

Guerrić of Igny, *Liturgical Sermons*:

“Happy is the man who shall abide in wisdom and shall meditate on holiness and shall be mindful of the all seeing eye of God” {Sirach 14:22}....In other words, this is happiness, this is wisdom, if you continue in wisdom, holding fast to the end...lest a man think that merely to have found wisdom is enough for happiness.

“Now to achieve this wisdom of continuing in wisdom, it is most important, I think, not readily to allow restlessness or any kind of slight provocation to keep you away from any of the exercises of wisdom: the divine office, private prayer, *lectio divina*, the appointed daily labor or the practice of silence.

“And of course when we come to silence a promise is given by the Prophet when he says: ‘In silence and in hope your strength will be’ {Isaiah 30:53}. For if you cultivate holiness in silence and, following the advice of Jeremiah, you wait in silence for the salvation of the Lord, then secretly in the midst of the silence the all-powerful word of God will leap down to you from his royal throne {Wisdom 18:15}. The waters of Siloe which flow silently will inundate the valley of your quiet and peaceful heart like a gently flowing stream. And this you will experience not once but many times, if only your silence is the cultivation of holiness” {Isaiah 32:17}.

Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*:

“The key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God. The quality of attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it. The highest part of the attention only makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established, but the whole attention is turned toward God.

“We live in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence. A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility.

“In our acts of obedience to God we are passive, whatever difficulties we have to surmount, however great our activity may be, there is nothing analogous to muscular effort, there is only waiting, attention, silence, immobility, constant through suffering and joy. The crucifixion of Christ is the model of all acts of obedience....There are people who try to raise their souls like a man continually taking standing jumps in the hopes that, if he jumps higher every day, a time may come when he will no longer fall back but will go right up to the sky. Thus occupied he cannot look at the sky. We cannot take a single step toward heaven. It is not in our power to travel in a vertical direction. If however we look heavenward for a long time, God comes and takes us up.”

Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*:

“If you go into solitude with a silent tongue, the silence of mute beings will share with you their rest. But if you go into solitude with a silent heart, the silence of creation will speak louder than the tongues of men or angels.

“God is present, and His thought is alive and awake in the fullness and depth and breadth of all the silences of the world. The Lord is watching in the almond trees, over the fulfillment of His words (Jeremias 1:11).

“We receive Christ’s silence into our hearts when first we speak from our heart the word of faith. We work out our salvation in silence and in hope. Silence is the strength of our interior life. Silence enters into the very core of our moral being, so that if we have no silence we have no morality. Silence enters mysteriously into the composition of all the virtues, and silence preserves them from corruption.

By the ‘silence’ of virtue I mean the charity which must give each virtue a supernatural life and which is ‘silent’ because it is rooted in God. Without this silence, our virtues are sound only, only an outward noise, a manifestation of nothing; the thing that virtues manifest is their own interior charity, which has a ‘silence’ of its own. And in this silence hides a Person: Christ, Himself hidden, as He is spoken, in the silence of the Father.

“If we fill our lives with silence, then we live in hope, and Christ lives in us and gives our virtues much substance. Then, when the time comes, we

confess Him openly before men, and our confession has much meaning because it is rooted in deep silence. It awakens the silence of Christ in the hearts of those who hear us, so that they themselves fall silent and begin to wonder and to listen. For they have begun to discover their true selves.

If our life is poured out in useless words we will never hear anything in the depths of our hearts, where Christ lives and speaks in silence. We will never be anything, and in the end, when the time comes for us to declare who and what we are, we shall be found speechless at the moment of the crucial decision: for we shall have said everything and exhausted ourselves in speech before we had anything to say."

Denise Levertov, *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems:*

"Aware"

When I opened the door
I found the vine leaves
speaking among themselves in abundant
whispers

My presence made them
hush their green breath,
embarrassed, the way
humans stand up, buttoning their jackets,
acting as if they were leaving anyway, as if
the conversation had ended
just before you arrived.

I liked
the glimpse I had, though,
of their obscure
gestures. I liked the sound
of such private voices. Next time
I'll move like cautious sunlight, open
the door by fractions, eavesdrop
peacefully.

References

Guerric of Igny [d. 1157], "Sermon 22: The First Sermon for St. Benedict," *Liturgical Sermons, Book 2*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1972, 1, 6-7.

Denise Levertov [1923-1997], "Aware," *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems*. NY: New Directions, 1999, 62.

Thomas Merton [1915-1968], "Silence," *No Man is an Island*. NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955, 154-164.

Max Picard [1888-1965], *The World of Silence*. NY: Gateway, 1948, 17-18.

Simone Weil [1909-1943], *Waiting For God*. NY: Harper & Row, 1951, 105, 159, 194.

Also Recommended:

Kamo No Chomei [1155-1216], "Hojoki" in *Kenko and Chomei: Essays in Idleness and Hojoki*. NY: Penguin, 2013, 5-18.

Thich Nhat Hahn, *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise*. NY: HarperCollins, 2015.

Raimundo Panikkar [1918-2010], *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989

David Steindl-Rast, *The Way of Silence: Engaging the Sacred in Daily Life*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2016.

Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise*. San Francisco, Ignatius, 2017.

A Meditation on Silence

I. The World of Silence: Enter Here

A. Max Picard on the nature of silence (*The World of Silence*, 1948)

1. Consider this: Each of us is filled with silence. And every word we ever utter is surrounded by the mystery of silence.

II. Enter and Keep Going

A. Guericke of Igny links silence to wisdom and wisdom to happiness and all of this to the Word of God. He counsels us, though, to persevere, not just enter silence, not just hear God, not just taste wisdom or experience happiness—Guericke admonishes us to study and learn from wisdom by practicing silence as the cultivation of holiness, and never stop. To enter the silence, therefore, means to continue deeper and deeper and keep going. *Listen to & Learn from* all this silence within us and all this silence surrounding us!

III. How Long? A Long, Long Time with Whole Attention

A. Simone Weil equates attention with prayer and counsels us to wait for God in silence and practice attention, practice our whole attention. Become attention.

IV. Wait for the Silence to Enter You

A. Thomas Merton writes that God's silence enters us, enters all the virtues we practice, which makes them virtues. He cautions us, though, about becoming closed, impatient, noisy and empty because we cannot wait or live with silence. We must learn!

V. Wait for the Next Time because Awareness Grows

A. For the poet Denise Levertov, attentive awareness in silence helps us listen and learn from the silent world surrounding us. May we learn to open the door to such silence and enter its sacred realm like cautious sunlight! Waiting, listening, attending, loving, learning.

VI. Conclusion: Follow Christ and the Spirit's Lead

- A. Gospel of John 14:10 – Christ silently listens to the Father and does not speak to us on his own, as the Father speaks through his Word to us.
- B. John 16:13: The Holy Spirit silently listens, does not speak to us on his own, but tells us only what he hears. May we learn to follow the Trinity into holy silence, waiting with our whole attentive being, transformed, peacefully.
- C. Meditation on the Silent Holiness of Christ (painting by Mihaly Munkacsy (1881)

June 24, 2017

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"Christ in Front of Pilate" (1881)
Mihály Munkácsy [1844-1900]