

RB 6 ON SILENCE

¹Let us **follow** the Prophet's counsel: *I will **watch** my ways so as not to sin with my tongue. I placed a **guard** at my mouth. I was speechless and humiliated, refraining even from good speech* (Ps 38[39]:2-3)[Wisdom Psalm].

²Here the Prophet shows that **there are times** we sometimes ought to refrain from speaking good words on account of the intrinsic value of silence, so much the more ought we stop speaking evil words out of fear that it will be punished as sin. [first application] ³Therefore, due to the great importance of silence itself, **mature** disciples should rarely be granted permission to speak, even good, holy and edifying words [a particular deduction]. ⁴For it is written: *In **much speaking** [a flood of words], you will not avoid sin* (Prov 10:19). ⁵And elsewhere, ***The tongue holds the key to life and death*** (Prov 18:21)[second deduction vv 4-5]. ⁶It is the teacher's role to speak and teach; the disciple is to keep silent and listen [relationship between master and student].

⁷Therefore, if one must ask something from the **superior**, let it be done with great humility and **reverent submission** [draws the conclusion]. ⁸As for **crude** jokes and idle talk aimed at arousing **laughter**, we put an absolute clamp on them in all places. **We do not permit** a disciple to engage in words of that kind [a logical conclusion of the whole chapter].

General

- Benedict's overall use of reverence indicates that the word refers to a profound submission of spirit. RB 6 is also harsh and shows a lack of balance if it is not put in context of all of RB.

Deeper aspects of silence

- Silence and speech are inseparable
- Refers to a person who is sufficiently **serene and wise** so that **her/his words arise out of silence and her/his silence** itself speaks eloquently.
- There are important teachings on silence from the desert tradition. The Desert Fathers/Mothers have left us sayings that indicate that they sought the silence of the desert precisely as an atmosphere where the soul could find the quiet needed for **deep communion with God**.
- Benedict has nothing against pious talk but he seems more interested that the **talk of the monastics be "reasonable"**.
- A monastic in sensitive jobs must know how to speak in such a way as to **promote an atmosphere of love**.
- The prioress must know best how to give a good word.
- The porter must know how to speak and speak well a welcoming word for the weary traveler.
- The most prominent speaker in RB is Holy Scripture. Benedict wants life permeated with the spirit of Scripture.

Benedict has other passages on silence outside of RB 6:

- 4:51-54 a series of aphorisms on good and bad speech
- 7:56-61 steps 9 through 11 of the ladder of humility

The motivation for keeping silence is to avoid sin in order to listen, to find inner recollection and **to facilitate words that can be life-giving**.

We see different goals both in keeping silence and in speaking:

- Important is interior unity; we are to find peace and inner quiet.
- It is clear that silence nurtures a person's inner unity. In silence, we can recollect ourselves, be at one with ourselves. We are able to see more deeply as if looking into quiet, untroubled waters. Silence helps in controlling the passions, to be in control of ourselves. It has a healing power.
- Prayer will benefit from silence. Only in silence and recollection can we truly listen to Sacred Scripture, to the word of God, and to God's will; only in silence can we sense the attraction to pray. Silence is also necessary so that others can pray and to foster an atmosphere of silence in the community in which it is easier for all to pray as long as it is a loving silence.
- In prayer there are fewer and fewer words until prayer itself is silent presence before our great God. There is also the silence that expresses respect before the mystery. Words are too weak to share something of this mystery.
- Silence helps us to listen to one another and to empathize with others. Precisely for dialogue it is very important to listen to the words or the unexpressed concerns of the others. In this way it is easier to have compassion, to feel with the others. Then we will not simply prescribe remedies or sound advice, and will even less want to judge or dominate. Nouwen thinks that on the superficial level we often work out fear or irritation in order to satisfy our own needs. We also grow together in silence, not only when we communicate with each other. Bonheffer says: The word that creates a new community and unifies it is only a word that emerges out of silence.
- In the apostolate silence is also important. It is a great gift to guests who through silence can come to themselves.

Reflective Questions

- **How does silence help you to maintain inner unity, to truly listen in a life-giving way, to be present before God in deep communion, to dialogue with empathy, and to truly create community?**