

THE ACTIVE PURIFICATION OF SILENCE

(THE ANCREN RIWLE, PART III)

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IN discussing the purification of the exterior senses the *Ancren Riwle* naturally goes into the matter of the mortification of hearing. We may well anticipate that silence should play a large part in the life of a recluse, both as a mortification and penance in itself, and as a way to the full flowering of the love of God. For though it be only a means, and a negative one at that, silence does in fact lead the soul forward to contemplation in a very direct way, so direct that it provides a special foundation for the theological virtue of hope:

'Keep well my tongue, I may well ho'd on in the way toward heaven. For, as Isaiah saith, "The tillage of righteousness is silence". Silence tilleth her, and she being tilled bringeth forth eternal food for the soul. . . . Therefore Isaiah joins together hope and silence. . . . "In silence and in hope shall be your strength".' p. 60)¹.

For prayer is the breath of hope, and it is impossible to ask God for anything or to raise the mind to him without this theological virtue. On the other side, prayer cannot be without some sort of silence and quiet. Hope departs with prayer in much talking and in an undisciplined mind, a fact that has become evident in the modern world of noise and ceaseless talk. The increase of despair does not arise simply from the foolishness of human wars, but in some measure from the vapid mouths of those who cannot learn silence. Consequently the sins which flow from the tongue, heresy, backbiting, flattery (pp. 62 seq.), grow quickly unless curbed by this discipline, which has a very great ascetic value. And with silence is linked solitude: 'Let her never wonder, therefore, though he shun her, if she is not much alone; and so alone that she exclude every worldly thing, and every worldly joy from her heart, for it is God's chamber' (p. 69).

The third part of the *Riwle* is therefore devoted mainly to the practice of solitude and silence in the life of an anchoress (pp. 89-132). The author amuses himself and his readers by elaborating the simile of certain birds, some anchoresses being likened to the pelican who is easily drawn out of itself by anger, killing its young as the wrathful anchoress kills her good works with ill-tempered

¹ The quotations are from the modernised version by James Morton (Chatto and Windus).

words. For the generous Christian a practical truth lies under this almost facetious simile, for one of the easiest ways to the breaking of silence is along the road of impetuosity and impatience. Irritation with others, often rising from pride or a wrong attachment to solitude and a man's own manner of life, will lead to many, not merely idle words, but words of abuse and swearing. A strong determination to preserve silence will often master this impetuosity and tranquillise the soul so that it does not lose the presence of God. The sparrow again, according to the Psalmist, sits alone, watching upon the housetop; and so the good Christian must use his silence and solitude to sharpen his watchfulness, for the noise and racket of the world will easily obliterate any other sound and leave the soul deaf and unguarded.

The great work of God is performed in silence, and in fact God's own life within the infinite power of the Trinity is lived in utter silence. People of little character or power make a great noise in their deeds; they are dissipated and given to a restless activity which fills them externally and internally with noise: 'While all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course' the Word leapt down from heaven. The anchoress too is a night-raven upon the housetop (p. 107); she returns in the same silence back to heaven:

'The night fowl flieth by night, and seeks his food in the darkness; and thus shall the recluse fly with contemplation, that is, with high and with holy prayers, by night toward heaven, and seek during the night nourishment for her soul' (p. 108).

Though the *Riwe* speaks literally here of rising at night for prayer, the principle involved stretches beyond the physical night to the silence which must descend on the soul in every great work, joining her actions with the silent creative work of the divine power, not only in making the world and all within it, but also in working by grace so quietly in the soul. This means in practice, not only refraining from unnecessary talking, overcoming the natural tendency to become a chatterbox by a real discipline in our relation to others, but also in an asceticism regarding what we read (particularly in respect to the noise of the daily paper with its shrieking headlines) and what we see. For noise enters the imagination as much by the eyes as by the ears, and stirs it up with exciting or romantic pictures, to a restlessness which makes it hard to remain within the cell of the heart.

God, however, does not leave a man to struggle against noise by his own efforts alone. He takes the generous person through stages of spiritual silence which are intended to bring rest and prayer. Thus the misunderstandings and the unjust words of others tempt

a man to cry out in his own defence. Christ not only descended into the womb of Mary in the silence of divine power, but he also ascended the cross to make the divine offering in silence: Scripture insists, both in prophecy and in the evangelical accounts, that he spake never a word (p. 92). The words of others then may become a great occasion of quietening the soul instead of disturbing it:

'All that the base and wicked doth for evil is good to the good, and is all to his behoof and his advancement toward his felicity' (p. 93). A 'wrongful word or deed' will thus help the soul greatly in its ascent toward heaven, if used as God intends. It is noticeable in the life of anyone striving for perfection that God allows him to become isolated and cut off from his fellow creatures and misunderstood by them. And this increases from the time when all is easy and the beginner is surrounded by kind and charitable Christians with whom he can frequently talk about common things, until he finds himself persecuted by legitimate authority, particularly ecclesiastical authority. Opposition comes from all sides and he is tempted to allow these difficulties an entrance into his interior peace. But if he can resist them and commit all, whatever may emerge, into God's hands then he is progressing towards that desirable peace and quiet necessary for contemplation.

Thus God leads the soul on to solitude and retirement; not that these things are good in themselves. They are pure means which can be abused and become the cloak for hideous selfishness if not of lust and other evils. The author of the *Rivle* contrasts the true anchoress as the bird to the false who is the fox—'Foxes have their holes, and birds of heaven have their nests' (p. 97). The fox is a thief and takes the good things of others into his hole; the fox is full of guile and deceives others. So it is possible to deceive men by a love of being alone, which they take to be the love of being alone with God whereas it is the love of being alone with self. The beginner must beware of this temptation to escape responsibilities as regards other people, for it is sometimes self-centred egotism which prompts a man to shun his neighbours. There are some temperaments that cannot bear the modern racket of wireless and talkies, aeroplanes and speak-easies, and they are drawn to forsake that world as much as possible simply for their own ends. They hate people in crowds and they begin to look with loathing on the intruders who come to disturb their self-made peace and quiet. Certainly they do not seek themselves consciously, but it is dangerous to make a vacuum without being quite certain with what you are going to fill it. A vacuum will suck in the nearest object to fill the space, and, as a rule, the object nearest to this vacuum is the ego which surrounds it. The method of renouncing the unpleasant rowdiness of the world for its own sake is

the method of making a vacuum, the shirking of responsibility, trying to escape from the duties of state which involve each member of society. The principle that the active life prepares for the contemplative has its application here, for the contemplative religious life always begins by increasing the social duties. There is a strict rule of silence, but community life makes constant and tiresome demands on a man's generosity to others. Those who enter a contemplative cloister thinking they are to be left alone to pray and not be troubled by other people are always disappointed and often leave; they were looking for time for *themselves*. It would therefore be dangerous for the Christian living in the world to ape these solitaries of medieval England and build himself a kind of anchorage, shutting out contact with the world by refusing, in effect, to exercise the social virtues. True silence will only come to those who practise the virtues proper to their station in life; if they seek solitude for its own sake, if they try to imitate the life of an anchoress from some romantic self-satisfaction, they will become the fox dragging his prey into his lair and encouraging wickedness.

But if God himself is drawing the beginner, *through* the racket of busy modern life, to an inner solitude, there will be no question of a vacuum. For progress to silence will be progress to the fuller possession of God, the solitude will be the loneliness of being with the Only. His silence will be broken by spiritual songs in his soul:

'True anchoresses are indeed birds of heaven, that fly aloft, and sit on the green boughs singing merrily; that is, they meditate enraptured upon the blessedness of heaven that never fadeth, but is ever green, and sit on the green, singing right merrily; that is, in such meditation they rest in peace and have gladness of heart, as those who sing' (p. 100).

The only justification for solitude is that it be filled with the presence of God; it must be directed in anticipation to the vision of heaven; it is a means to that end. Such a solitude is no mere escape from noise; the soul follows the example of St Catherine of Siena and builds an inner cell which is impregnable from without, but within holds all reality because it holds the Lord himself. And so having all being in her embrace, these other people and things, these things of the world, fall into true perspective, and it becomes possible to return to them, as St Catherine went back, to carry new life into the world of hatred and constant struggle. The *Riwle* teaches these truths under the simile of another bird, the eagle, which was supposed to place the precious agate stone in its nest, a stone which wards off all harm. So the anchoress must place Jesus Christ in the centre of her solitude:

'This precious stone is Jesus Christ; a faithful stone, and full of

all might, above all precious stones. He is the agate which the poison of sin never approached. Place him in thy nest; that is, in thine heart' (p. 102).

And when he also withdraws himself in order to wean the soul from the wrong sort of attachments, till there seems to be an absolute solitude and loneliness, the *Kiwle* advises the anchoress to fall back on the external things of religion, particularly upon the crucifix (p. 103) wherein she can see the image of him who reached the absolute solitude of the desolation of *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani*. At this stage it would be dangerous to be too passive, even in the type of loneliness which has been effected by God's direct intervention. The soul is not yet strong enough to remain just in darkness, waiting upon the good will of the Lord when he shall choose to return; while she is waiting the soul must occupy herself, and so she must seize the crucifix or take up the breviary and so follow the Lord into the further desert without losing the spirit of silence in stress and worry at the sudden absence even of God.

All this is necessary to bring the practical knowledge of the incommunicability of the human person, to make the beginner realise that though all are one in the mystical body, yet each individual is utterly unique and distinct. Mixed with the modern terror of silence which has grown up from the emptiness of men's hearts, there exists a desire to give one's self unreservedly to others. And this increases the noise; for people without depths to their characters can find a common basis for sharing with others only on the most superficial level of eating, drinking, dancing and such entertainments that require little thought or effort of will. On that level they endeavour to give their whole being, flinging themselves into a life of dissipation as though they would communicate to others their very being. But in truth the individual person is ultimately incommunicable and, in such metaphysical depths, dependent only upon God who gives him individual being. God is more intimate to the human person than it is to itself, and he knows it more intimately. Consequently the Christian must at first establish his relations with his Creator and the Author of grace, relations which are unique and not social or dependent upon others. He cannot communicate himself to other men, yet in all but a complete identification he can communicate the most intimate part of himself with God, he can share all for he has all from God. The soul possesses no mysteries for God, but to everyone else it is a mystery that is never fully comprehended. In this sense the soul is utterly alone with God, even though in grace he shares the divine life of the Trinity with other men, his share is his own share direct from God. We are not denying that he has also a social nature and that he cannot live even supernaturally without

his fellow human beings, but this basic element of incommunicability can never be transcended, and in that sphere the soul remains in an unassailable solitude where he can meet God with no interference from the world.

It is for this reason that watching and retirement of some type are of the essence of the spiritual life; and once the obvious dangers of self-centred introspection have been pointed out, the principle of the anchoress's life may be applied to every Christian really intent upon growing to the stature of grace. The lonely sparrow, says the *Rivle*, referring to the Psalm, lives under the roof watching, as the anchoress watches in her cell under the eaves of the church. She passes nights busy about her spiritual attainments. She will 'shake off her sleep of vicious sloth in the still night, when nothing is to be seen to hinder prayer' (p. 110). Her prayers and good actions are thus performed primarily in secret, because being awake she is conscious of the approach of evil and there is no distraction of publicity to deaden the sound of that approach. This means that the good Christian beginner must be careful to avoid sloth on the one hand and publicity on the other, for these things confuse his soul so that he ceases to be able to distinguish evil from good. It does not mean that he must rise in the night, but it does mean that certain times must be set aside for prayer, for his watching, not only for the approach of evil, but for the coming of the Lord. And these times of watchful prayer must be truly solitary, unknown as far as possible to all but the director. In the Old and New Testaments we find that:

'God revealed his secret counsels and his heavenly mysteries to his dear friends, not in the presence of a multitude, but when they were by themselves alone. And they, themselves also, as often as they would meditate solely on God, and pray to him sincerely, and be spiritually elevated in heart toward heaven—it is always found that they fled from the strife of men, and went apart by themselves, and that God visited them and granted their requests' (p. 116).

And the *Rivle* quotes the examples from the Patriarchs and Prophets, from John the Baptist, from our Lady and our Lord, and finally from the Fathers of the Desert. All this praise of the solitary life should not be taken literally by the ordinary Christian reader, but the principles are important. The practice of the true solitary life in the midst of the world must be highly recommended. But the literal solitude of the anchorhold is for the very few, and they are well trained.

The author concludes this third section by summarising eight reasons for retirement. Firstly to seek *security* against the wiles of

the devil—few who now clamour for social security for all would recommend as the best way retirement from the world into an anchorhold. Secondly, because we have our treasure in earthen vessels which are brittle. Thirdly, the anchorite leaves the world in order to gain heaven, making the world a footstool. And so beginning with the negative reasons for retirement the author becomes increasingly positive. A Christian retires from the world, casting his bundles and packages aside by the spirit of poverty and giving all in alms to the poor that he may be free to follow the Lord.

‘The seventh reason is that ye may be the brighter, and may behold more clearly God’s bright countenance in heaven; because ye have fled from the world, and hide yourselves here for his sake. Yet more, there ye shall be swift as the sunbeam; because ye are shut up with Jesus Christ as in a sepulchre, and imprisoned, as he was, on the precious cross’ (p. 126).

And finally the need for retirement is fulfilled by going back to the world at least in prayer, saving many souls by being alone in prayer with Christ while they struggle in the world (p. 127); the anchoress is in fact the anchor of the ship of Mother Church, holding her firm against all the storms of the devil (p. 107). Such is the power of the true solitude, which is in principle open to all who will forsake false attachments, quieten the inner depths of their soul and live at rest in the presence of God.