

go on to show how Sunday must be a great doorway letting the life of heaven into everyday life, and giving strength for the work of the whole week; and how the great feasts, festal seasons and fasts, lived in the spirit of the Church, help the soul to ripen year by year towards the eternal sabbath rest.

It will be an essential task for each individual to consider how she must arrange her daily and yearly life, in accordance with her own talents and circumstances, to make ready the way for God. The outward divisions of time will have to be different for each and in course of time be adapted to changed circumstances. But the spiritual situation likewise is different with different people. The means of establishing our link with the eternal, keeping it alive or re-infusing life into it—meditation, spiritual reading, taking part in the liturgy or popular devotions—are not all equally fruitful for all persons and at all times. Meditation, for instance, cannot be practised by all nor always in the same way. It is important to find out what is effective at each particular time and to make use of it.

If we meditate upon the road God's mother followed from Candlemas to Good Friday, we shall find roads through her to interior silence.



THE SILENCE OF THE CLOISTER

BY

A RELIGIOUS

The Father utters one Word and that Word is his Son. He utters him in everlasting silence and in silence the soul has to hear him.

—St John of the Cross.



IF we want to find the ultimate explanation and full meaning of anything we must go back to the Beginning, End and Reason of all things—the Blessed Trinity. And this is true of 'the most holy rule of Silence' which is called somewhere 'a beautiful and most useful observance, conducing much to the formation of the religious spirit, to peace of soul and to the love of prayer'.

What do we mean by silence? Several quite different things which we may understand better if we consider the various words which we use as synonyms for silent: quiet, still, tranquil, noiseless, speechless.

The widest and most fundamental form of silence is the mere absence of noise—the sort of silence of the country which some-

times makes sleep impossible to those who are accustomed to the din and roar of traffic of a modern town. This is very exterior and elementary but very necessary in our life. Movements which would be almost noiseless in a curtained, carpeted and upholstered room become astonishingly noisy and reverberant in the comparatively empty rooms round the cloister with their wooden floors. And again, we sometimes forget that in a community noise is cumulative and, one might add, infectious. The perhaps insignificant amount of noise made by a single brother becomes a formidable thing when multiplied by the total number of the community. And we surely know from experience how we tend to take our cue from our neighbour—if he whispers, we whisper too: if he raises his voice, so do we!

And so this merely material silence becomes a thing of immense importance even from a purely physical point of view, let alone as the aid to recollection and the expression of it, of which more will be said later. Each one of us should, therefore, keep a continual watch over ourselves in this matter of silence in movement, listening to ourselves walking about, in our cells at night, in choir, in the refectory, to see whether we really are trying to control our movements and to make them as noiseless as possible. It seems to be a curious paradox that some of those who believe themselves to be most observant in the matter of silence are among the noisiest in this way! For them, silence seems to consist solely in the *absence of speech*.

This is certainly the next degree and one which is interpreted in an absolute and universal fashion by the Cistercian rule, so that those Orders, such as the Dominican one, which were influenced by their spirit, may sometimes find in the Cistercian Constitutions pointers to the interpretation of their own ancient observances.

This absolute silence is not, however, laid down by most rules, though it is with the silence of the tongue that they are chiefly concerned. Speech is not necessarily a breach of silence, so that brief and necessary conversation is permitted even during silence time, while a time of recreation when talking is not only allowed but made a community duty, is expressly provided for. But all talking in silence time should be silently and in a few words, while even at recreation uncontrolled hilarity is out of place and unbecoming in a religious whose soul should be 'always in his hands'.

Silence in speech, like that in movement, is an exterior discipline which can remain such and be fairly successfully applied from without. And yet one may well be quite observant in these ways

while remaining very far removed from the 'soul of silence' which every true contemplative *must* be.

Noise is opposed to silence; words are not necessarily so. They may even spring from it and enhance it as the stars stand out against the background of the midnight sky, or as the flutter of the wings of birds emphasises the hush of dawn, or the sounds of insects or animals enhance the stillness of a summer afternoon.

Interior silence is a spiritual thing and therefore far different from the mere absence of sound. It includes stillness, peace, tranquillity, a gathering together of the powers of the soul so that they are controlled and can be focussed wherever we wish. 'Sit still' (Isaiah, 30, 7); 'return and be quiet' (ibid, v. 15); 'listen and see' (Ps. 44); 'be still and see that I am God' (Ps. 45, 11)—all these injunctions of the inspired writers are like a mother's directions to her child: 'Sit still, be quiet, listen', and we all know a child's rapt silence when its attention is really engaged. That is what we want in the spiritual order, and it can be had in its perfection only when the gaze of the soul has been caught and held by the eyes of the Beloved. But before that happy state is reached we can do something towards attaining it and calling forth such a priceless gift.

The old Carmelite rule says: 'If two words will suffice, we owe our Lord the obligation of not using three'. We might well bear that in mind in our necessary conversations and still more so if we are inclined to indulge in unnecessary ones. Irrelevant digressions from legitimate topics, remarks after bells, conversations in times and places of silence, remarks during silence time which are just 'letting off steam' or sharpening our wit, or giving rein to our curiosity—all these are proof positive that our soul is not always in our hands, that the imagination is dissipated and uncontrolled. But if we could see our silence at these times as a sacrifice or gift we offer to the Beloved, we should not give way to this particular form of self-indulgence, and not only would the peace of the community be furthered, but our own spirit of silence and prayer would deepen immeasurably.

For that is the end of our life—that in whatever we do the powers of our soul may be pacified and centred in God, mind, heart, will, resting only in him. And even the imagination, though it can never be wholly controlled save by a special grace from God, can, as often as it becomes noisy or wandering, be gently calmed and quietly brought back to him. It is not a question of tension or strain, of fiercely trying to *think* always of God, to *drive away* whatever shatters the interior silence of our soul. Rather it is the

gentle relaxing, the dropping of everything save him so that in the end, like the sinful woman of the Gospel, we are left alone with him, face to face. And once we have really fallen in love with God so that nothing save he has any attraction for us, this becomes easy and the desire and need to be left alone with him in the silence of love becomes an almost unbearable craving.

But this is mostly his gift, perfected only in heaven but which we begin to enjoy when he draws us back into that creative silence of which we are often reminded. All things had their beginning in this infinite, eternal Silence, Peace, Tranquillity, Immutability which is the life of the Blessed Trinity and there alone do they find their perfection and consummation. It is solitude, yet not loneliness, for there is the companionship of the three divine Persons and in them, of all things: there is silence, but not absence of speech since from all eternity the Father utters his one Word expressive of himself and all things, to whom the soul delights to listen: there is peace and stability and tranquillity yet not idleness, not 'quietism', since God is Pure Act and we are caught up and as it were identified with the ceaseless activity of his infinite Love.

This is the divine calm and peace and tranquillity to which all the discipline of silence is directed and which should in the end become the inspiration of these observances so that they are a necessary expression of our inner, silent union of love with our eternally silent Lover. How can we be given to 'much speaking' when his silence is speaking to the ears of our soul? How can we be restless and noisy when the peace which flows from his presence has stilled our whole being? And all the time our silence is helping to redress the noisy clamour of a restless world, our stillness acts as oil on its tempestuous waters, our peace and serenity help to anchor it in God. Is not a reward such as this a sufficient incentive to embrace generously whatever sacrifices the strict observance of our rule of silence may entail?

May God give us all this generosity, so that through it he may draw us and with us many others, into the divine silence of his own life and love in the depths of the adorable Trinity. Amen.