

On Interior and Exterior Silence

10th August 1873

My dear Daughters,

In a recent Chapter on Regular Observance, I made a special recommendation on Silence. Today I come back to it because, silence faithfully kept is the foundation of all interior life.

There are certain people who, on one hand have an attraction for prayer, but who on the other hand do not receive all the light on Religious perfection or on their behaviour they expect from prayer. If they will examine themselves they will perhaps see that the cause of their little progress in prayer and the spiritual life, is silence kept badly. St. Francis of Sales, speaking of lax communities in his times said, that to establish Regular Observance, the first thing was to have Silence kept, and that with Silence, all the rest would little by little be set right.

But exterior silence laid down by our rules is not enough. We must also keep interior silence. We must accustom ourselves to speaking to God about the great topics that concern Him, and our mind should be occupied with Our Lord.

Cardinal de Berulle expressed his surprise, and rightly so, that God's only Son, the eternal occupation of His Father, is given to us to be the central concern of our minds,

and we nonetheless fill our minds with empty and inferior things that pass away. Our Lord becomes our centre by prayer and meditation. After contemplating Our Lord Himself we ask Him for abundant graces for His Church and for ourselves. Then we can look for ways to let Him live in us more and more, to become more like Him, to be more in harmony with His Gospel.

The great concern of the life of a Religious, the one thing that must be before her mind in all circumstances is the question whether, in her place, Our Lord would have said or done what she says and does. She must be set to imitate Him in her external behaviour, in the way she carries herself, in her work, in her relationship with the sisters, with the Superior, in such a way that all her thoughts and feelings and affections, even her tastes, will be in the likeness of her Divine Model, and that she desires nothing that does not directly aim at pleasing Our Lord or that does not lead her to God.

Do not think that this interior occupation will prevent us from attending to our duties. On the contrary, such attention is pleasing to God, and belongs to the order of things that He wills. For instance, a linen room Sister must take care to give each Sister what she needs; a class mistress must think of what books she is going to give the children to read; she must prepare her lessons, look up a question of history, a certain detail of her French lesson, a problem of Arithmetic. And I repeat, such thoughts are part of the duties of your state of life, not an escape from being

occupied with God. What must be cut down is all self-seeking, all thoughts of what you have been in the past, of what you are at present, of what you will be in the future, all forms of self-love which are both useless and harmful.

So interior silence is not the absence of all thoughts and words. That would be impossible, because our mind is alive and must feed on something. The proper food for it is thoughts of the Gospel and heavenly things, thoughts in keeping with our vocation and our employment. Let the conversation in your mind be with the angels and Our Lady and the saints, and sometimes with yourself to encourage your soul.

Now that I have said all this about interior and exterior Silence, which is a fundamental point of Religious life, I suggest you read the Chapters on mutual relations and on parlours, so as to imbue yourself with the spirit of the Rule. It would be a mistake to think that we keep silence by not talking in the regular places - in the cells, the refectory, the cloister, even in our dealings with the Sisters in our work - if, as soon as we can, we pour ourselves out to lady boarders, to people to whom we have to give some information. It is the same thing if we meet one of the children, or a lay mistress and then have quite an unnecessary conversation; and so on. These occasions turn up constantly and that we must avoid them. We can answer graciously, politely, but shortly, in a way that makes it obvious that we are recollected and habitually occupied with God, which is the foundation of our vocation.

You can easily understand that it is impossible for Superiors to spell out for each one a way of behaving in this matter. She cannot be on your back to say: "On such and such an occasion in the parlour you said seventy words when four would have been enough". Each one must discover her own way of perfection, watching over herself to say what is necessary and cut down what is superfluous, so as to be given to her neighbour without dissipating herself.

Dear Daughters, you will succeed, if you faithfully foster your interior life, filling your mind with thoughts of Faith, with the Gospel spirit. These give peace, whereas a lot of thoughts and words concerned with the things of the world are a source of disturbance.

It is always in Our Lord's Heart that we must seek peace. We must train ourselves to have His sentiments and inclinations. For this end we must make an effort to cut down useless thoughts and words, and not to give way to them. Ask God often for this grace. This is the first thing I felt I ought to underline.

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