

# Silence for Life and Worship

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For busy folk, time flies by so quickly! It is almost ten years since my first comments on silence were posted on the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship website (see "[Silence's Scintillating Divine Speech](#)," June 1, 2004). I still get comments and responses to that brief article, which tells me that silence is a topic on many people's minds. In that article I spoke about different "levels" or kinds of silence. The easiest to understand is silence as a lack of sound—something very difficult to achieve in our age of ear buds for non-stop music, cell phones with incessant ringing, roaring traffic, and myriads of other noises that constantly come crashing down upon us. But this is not all there is to silence. I also spoke about "personal silence," when we stop our multi-tasking, our racing minds, our perpetual motion bodies. There is yet another kind of silence that I only indirectly addressed in that previous article, and over the last decade have become convinced that it is perhaps the most important kind. That silence is "soul silence" which improves the quality of our life and worship.

## Silence As a Requisite for Life

Many people get through life well enough without thinking about silence at all, let alone actually choosing to be silent on occasion or even daily. Others of us, however, feel something is lacking in our daily living—a "something" that cannot be filled by more noise or activity. We sense that silence is actually a requisite for the kind of life we want to live. We are not interested in simply getting by, but in embracing life in all its mystery and fullness. Silence helps us do this.

First of all, silence *frees us* from being tethered to the here and now and all that comes crashing down on us. Most of us admit that we are too busy, that our lives are simply too full. By taking time—even just five minutes each day—to go off by ourselves, shut out all the noise we can, calm our bodies and minds, and sit with ourselves in relaxation, we can open ourselves to our own goodness, graciousness, and well-being. Silence is a time for soul-searching and soul salving. By freeing ourselves from whatever surrounds us, we actually become better able to engage more fully with life when we end our period of silence. Silence, then, is an exercise in wholesomeness.

Second, silence unleashes in us *creativity*. By freeing ourselves from being tethered to immediate surroundings and concerns, we are able to let ourselves go, to dream and imagine new possibilities for ourselves. While many of us would never claim to be an artist, in fact the creativity that silence unleashes makes all of us artists. We may not produce a piece of music like Bach or a sculptor like Michelangelo, or a painting like Picasso, but we may well produce *something new*: a new thought, a new insight, a new way of being. Art in itself is something undertaken for its own sake; art lets what is inside become visible in some medium outside. The creativity of silence enables ourselves to

become more visible, more beautiful, more who we are meant to be for ourselves and others.

Third, silence enables us to experience ourselves to be like our divine Creator. It was out of nothing—in the void of absolute silence—that God created the world and ourselves who are made in the divine Image. God’s grace is freely given to those who choose to be faithful to God’s ways, thus recreating us to be ever more like our divine Creator. In our silence we encounter that divine Image and recognize God’s call to be graced beings, to live the divine Life our Creator has bestowed upon us.

In being free, in being creative, in being more deeply aware of ourselves as a trace of God’s image in our world, our lives take on new meaning. We were not given life simply to do, to produce, to work. We were given life to image our divine Creator, which we do when we ourselves are free to create. When we take time for silence, we bring our lives into a different perspective, one not determined by our accomplishments or possessions or even our virtuous living, but a perspective determined by an ever-deepening awareness of God’s goodness and abiding divine Presence.

### **Silence As a Prerequisite for Worship**

When we regularly take time for silence in our daily living, we cannot help but be led to prayer and worship. As we experience ourselves more deeply, we also open ourselves to a deeper experience of God—we are filled with awe, wonder, and immense gratitude. These feelings spill over into prayer and worship. If silence can be so rich for our daily living, then it is even more so for our worship. Without a practice of silence in our daily living, our worship is diminished: we are not so ready to encounter God, to offer praise and thanksgiving, to be open to whatever God might be asking of us.

Another way to approach the notion of silence as a prerequisite for worship is to examine our worship services themselves. For too many congregations worship is an endless cacophony of sound, movement, interaction. What happens when we introduce profound moments of silence into the very act of worship itself?

First of all, silence during worship invites from us a necessary self-emptying. During the “unsilent” times of worship we are being filled. During the silent times of worship we are invited to self-emptying. This is an act parallel to that magnificent early Christian hymn as recorded in the Letter to the Philippians (2:5-11): the Second Person of the Holy Trinity did not cling to being God, but let go of divinity to be incarnated. Jesus took on human flesh and became like us in everything except sin, even accepting disappointments and rejection, suffering and death. In his humility Jesus was exalted. In our own self-emptying—in letting go of our own inordinate ambitions, overwhelming concerns, puffed up sense of self—we become more Christ-like, more attuned to the Father’s will and Spirit’s promptings, more open to how God leads us. The self-emptying that silence during worship invites leaves space within us for God to come to us in a whole new way. Silence during worship paves the way for an experience of ourselves as mystics.

When we hear “mystic,” we usually think of great saints like John of the Cross or Theresa of Avila or Catherine of Siena. Mysticism is an unmediated and overpowering experience of God’s divine Presence. “Unmediated” means that mysticism is direct—we do

not need anything to experience God.

Baptism in Christ grafts us onto Christ—we are the Body of Christ. Just as Christ had a constant awareness of his Father's Presence, as baptized members of the Body of Christ so, too, do we strive for this same awareness. With us, however, these moments of heightened awareness are fleeting and not constant. Yet, we do have mystical moments in our lives. Who is not overpowered by God's Presence at the birth of a child? Who is not acutely aware of God's Presence while gazing at a magnificent sunrise or sunset? Who is not immediately aware of God's Presence at the moment of the death of a loved one? Who is not transformed by a sense of God's Presence when a small child's face lights up radiantly because of some small act of kindness? Who is not touched deeply by a gaze of love of spouse or dear friend? In all these experiences and many others, we are engaging in a mystical moment. Although our mystical moments may be quite fleeting, nonetheless they are profound experiences of God's unfailing and ever-faithful love of us and desire to be one with us. Silent times during worship increase the likelihood of mystical moments.

Silence during worship promotes a rhythm of God and us, of Other and other. The rhythm of sound and silence, movement and stillness, interaction and solitariness during worship prepares us for all the possibilities of encounter that make present God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is neither a place nor a future event. It is the now of our choosing to do God's will, of our choosing to respond to others in love and charity, forgiveness and mercy as God has shown us. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done." This is fostered during our profound moments of silence in our daily living, during our worship.