

## Carthusian spirituality

**THE KEY ELEMENT** of Carthusian spirituality is **SOLITUDE**, which is required for a total and absolute dedication to God alone. As his name implies, the "monachos" devotes himself to one purpose only: God. He makes himself completely available for God, in a life of prayer and penance. He renounces social contacts, travelling, newspapers, radio and television, telephone, adlib conversations, correspondence, even spiritual, instrumental music, writing and intellectual work, as much as is feasible within the limits of psychological balance and Christian charity, all this to be alone with God. Solitude implies **SILENCE**. **Silence is the other key element** of Carthusian spirituality. Silence is not lived in any absolute way in the charterhouse. Carthusians speak with their brothers and their superiors when they need to, they speak whenever material life, work or their soul require it. The text that follows explains that the silence of solitude is lived in the charterhouse as an inner requirement **in order to be able to hear and to listen to God alone, and to let Him utter a Word in our soul, a Word that transcends all human discourse.**

### Silence in the Statutes

*What benefits  
What divine exultation  
The solitude and silence of the desert  
Hold in store for those who love it!*  
(Saint Bruno to Raoul)

Saint Bruno wrote his letters with all the warmth in his heart and they are filled with indirect indications of what the Lord had given him to see and to know. This is especially true of the impassioned praise of the benefits of silence he sends to Raoul: "*only those who have experienced them can know*". And immediately he goes on to show how much he himself knows about it. Saint Bruno was a man of silence. He knew its secret. The Carthusian Statutes contain many references to the beauty of silence and to its sacredness in our life. Let us explore what they say.

Keeping silent is not a spontaneous or natural attitude. It demands a decision and a purpose. To enter into silence, we must want it, and we must know why we want it. If we intend to become men of silence, we must assume responsibility for our quest.

First of all, we have the responsibility to observe silence towards others. "*Love for our brothers should show itself firstly in respect for their solitude*" (St 4.4) Each and every one of us is entrusted with the exterior and even interior silence of those he associates with. Silence is rarely a purely personal affair. Our role towards our brothers is firstly concerned with exterior silence; whether the places where we are help recollection or induce dissipation depends on a careful attitude on our part that radiates a genuine concern for peace and silence. "*The places where they work, like those where they live, should be so arranged as to be conducive to interior recollection... it should be quite apparent that they are a home where God dwells and not mere secular buildings.*" We can make a difference also by the number of words we utter, and first of all the quality of these words, so that these words coming from us contribute to recollection and not to dissipation. "*if, by chance, we come to know something of events in the world, we must be careful not to pass it on to others; news of the world should rather be left where it is heard.*" (St 6.7).

This responsibility towards our immediate brothers, however real it is, remains only a sign of an even greater and far heavier one - the responsibility we take on towards humanity. "*in embracing a hidden life, we do not abandon the great family of our fellow men; on the contrary, by devoting ourselves exclusively to God we exercise a special function in the Church*" (St 34.1). This means that the quality of our silence is not just a private affair between God and ourselves; a source of silence and divine intimacy must spring forth from our heart and spread over the entire universe. If we sometimes complain about the noise which dissipates the hearts in the world, let us ask ourselves if it is not partly our fault, when we are not assuming our role as source of silence.

If our responsibility towards others is so important, it is because in the end we are

responsible towards God of the share of silence entrusted to us. "*Devotion to the Spirit dwelling within them, and love for their brothers, both require that, when it is lawful to speak they should weigh their words well and be watchful of the extent to which they speak*" (St 14.4) The temple of the Lord that we ourselves are cannot be desecrated, all the more that we are aware that God has chosen us to worship him in this sanctuary. It is therefore in God's presence that we must refine our sense of responsibility. "*Let each one, therefore, listen to the Spirit within him, and determine what he can admit into his mind without harm to interior converse with God.*" (St 6.6). God is Himself silent: in this He is our model. But inasmuch as this divine silence is deep, it lets us to our free choice: "*Now no longer a child, but a man, let him not be tossed to and fro and carried about with every new wind, but rather let him try to find out what would please God and do it of his own free will, enjoying with sober wisdom that liberty of God's children, concerning which he will have to render an account before God.*" (St 33.2).

Some complain that solitude is progressively depriving them of the capacity to fulfil their responsibility as man. Is this not an indication that they have not yet engaged in the search and practice of silence? When the Statutes ask us to avoid readings that may trouble our inner silence, they add "*this exhortation presupposes a mature mind that is master of himself, and knows how to embrace honestly all that follows from the best part that he has chosen -- the part of sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his words.*" (St 6.5). Such is our true responsibility as men, it is as great and as restrictive in the secret of our cell as it is in the middle of a crowd: it lies in the honesty with which we decide to honour our commitment, in the seriousness with which we consider ourselves before God, who speaks to our heart.

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We speak of entering into silence, but what is the silence of the contemplative made up of? Is it like a stone falling in a big gaping hole? It is possible that we may confuse true prayerful silence with this kind of event of the material world. In reality silence is "*a tranquil listening of the heart that allows God to enter through all its doors and passages.*"

(Cf. St 4.2). Silence is a kind of listening: not a feverish waiting for some word that would come and knock on our ear or fill our heart, but a peaceful waiting, in a state of availability for the One who is present and who works in our most intimate selves. This is why it is said that our solitude "*is holy ground, a place where, as a man with his friend, the Lord and his servant often speak together; there is the faithful soul frequently united with the Word of God; there is the bride made one with her spouse; there is earth joined to heaven, the divine to the human*" (St 4.1). Silence associates the absence of words, on the lips and in the heart, to a living dialogue with the Lord. We do not need to explain this at length. We simply need to turn to Saint Bruno who noted: "*only those who have experienced it can know...*" And "*God has led us into solitude to speak to our heart.*" (St 4.11). **Here is what silence truly is: to let the Lord utter within us a word which is equal to Himself.** It reaches us, we don't know which way it followed, we cannot discern its traits with any precision, the very Word of God comes and resonates in our heart.

This is why we can never be content with only the silence of the lips. It would "*be merely pharisaic, were it not the outward expression of that purity of heart, to which alone is it promised to see God. To attain this, great abnegation is required, especially of the natural curiosity that men feel about human affairs. We should not allow our minds to wander through the world in search of news and gossip; on the contrary, our part is to remain hidden in the shelter of the Lord's presence*" (St 6.4). It is indeed so easy to just remain in cell, while the mind is roaming all over the world. Who has not experienced this? We are still not in silence, even if our lips are closed and our hands rest on our lap. "*On the contrary, our part is to remain hidden in the shelter of the Lord's presence*" (St. 6.2) Recollection does not require only a rigorous control over our imagination: we must quiet down all our tumultuous and undisciplined faculties of knowledge and of speech.

When we read, "*Intent, then, on the rich substance of truth rather than the froth of words, let us scrutinize the divine mysteries with that desire to know which springs from love and in turn inflames love.*" There hides great wisdom: the activity of our mind, however lofty and sublime they may be will not be 'silent'

as long as it does not mould itself in a loving listening and does not let go of explaining everything. *"For in solitude we read, not to be informed about the latest opinions, but so that faith may be nourished in peace and prayer fostered"* (St 23.15). It does not matter that an idea be new or brilliant; what matters is that it sheds a greater light on God, a light borne of peace and in peace. Silence is precisely this quality of listening that makes us delight in God, without having to add anything new.

Such an attentive listening to God can only be the fruit of a general appeasement of our whole being. Passions that are not yet under control, that still cross our feelings, our worries, our excessive joys: all these must progressively be set in order, with God's help, and with the help of wise means. *"By working with his hands, the monk practices humility; he also brings his whole body under control so as better to attain stability of mind. [...] It sometimes happens also that the very weight of our work acts as a sort of anchor to the ebb and flow of our thought, thus enabling our heart to remain fixed on God without mental fatigue"* (St 5.3). Listening to the Lord then is not a mental or emotional activity, but a kind of communion where our whole being participates in the presence of the One who sustains us and gives us life in His love.

If we succeed, thanks to the kindness of the Lord and through our own persevering efforts, in stabilizing our attitude in this way, we will be close to the solitary soul who is *"like a tranquil lake, whose waters well up from the purest sources of the spirit and, untroubled by news coming from outside, like a clear mirror reflect one image only, that of Christ"* (St 13.15) This is the ultimate word in the dialogue that God wants to have with us : He wants to transform us in the very simple image of His own Son.

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True silence is not a flower that pops up in one day; it cannot be picked on the first day. It is a fruit that ripens slowly and costs long arduous efforts. Keeping quiet is quite some work, mainly in the beginning, as it contradicts the natural spontaneous tendencies of our nature, to which we are accustomed to yield. *"If we are faithful, there will*

*gradually be born within us of our silence itself something that will draw us on to still greater silence"* (St 4.3). On some days, it takes courage to tread the path to silence. We know that it amounts to introducing a sword in ourselves: peace will come up only when those who were opposing it will be thrown out.

*"The journey is long, and the way dry and barren, that must be traveled to attain the fount of water, the land of promise"* (St 4.1). Such images as used in the Statutes might sound disheartening, but they are not extreme. Let us not take lightly the road of true silence. It is a long drawn-out battle; hoping to get rid in one day of many habits which have become a part of our selves would be inhuman. But it would be dishonest to start treading the path to true silence without being firmly committed to walk the long dry expanses where nothing comes to quench our thirst. Different types of external communications, which were a source of comfort to us, have to wither and fade away. Many inner satisfactions which were a source of distraction and a source of security as well, are also condemned to perish in the arid lands where we are taking them. Israel in the desert, Jesus in His Holy Quarantine are the models which we must keep under our eyes not only in our solitude, but also in our walk into silence. Temptation and weariness will not be rare. They *"are wont to beset the followers of Christ in the desert; nor let him put his trust in his own strength, but in the Lord, who has called him and who will bring to perfection the work he has begun."* (St 8.16)

In the end, however, it is the Lord Himself who will be the greatest trial, if we accept to follow Him in the heart of Silence. The monk *"cannot attain to this repose except at the cost of stern battle; both by living austerely in fidelity to the law of the cross, and willingly accepting the tribulations by which God will try him as gold in the furnace"* (St 3.2) Who can hope to face the silence of God without being burned by the fire of His love? Entering into silence means walking to God in His abode - a wonderful ideal for sure, but also a fearsome one, given the transformations that must be carried out by it in us. However, we cannot but long for this ideal, since we know that *"In this way, having been cleansed in the night of patience, and having been consoled and sustained by*

*assiduous meditation of the Scriptures, and having been led by the Holy Spirit into the depths of our own soul, we are now ready, not only to serve God, but even to cleave to Him in love." (St 3.2)*

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The fierce battle we have just spoken of makes sense only if it is grounded in robust humility. The first sign of it will be our modesty in our attempt to get into silence. Silence cannot be reached on day one; we must have the humility of perseverance: *"It is good for a man to await the salvation of God in silence" Jeremiah said, and Guigo added: "The solitary will sit and keep silence, for he will lift himself above himself." (St 2.6)* which means that in order to penetrate into silence, we must patiently be seated, without any pretence or vainglory.

Another indispensable aspect of humility will be to consider true silence as purely a gift of God. We must of course make efforts, prudently and with perseverance, but let us not be in any illusion: pretending to reach silence on our own efforts would only lead us to self-destruction and miss the goal: *"God has led his servant into solitude to speak to his heart" (St 14.1)*. The starting point of our silence can only be God Himself calling; trying to build our collectedness solely by our own means would be a very dangerous venture. *"He alone who listens in silence hears the whisper of the gentle breeze that reveals the presence of the Lord" (St 14.1)* From the moment we become aware that the Lord is inviting us to follow Him in this direction, we must make ourselves available, but like Elias on the summit of Horeb, it is not in the din or in an earthquake or in a storm that we can expect to find silence. It will come to us in God's Will in the form of a light breeze.

Silence is wrought by God, but it is more than this, as we have said: it is the Word of God. This is the ultimate root of the humility we have to delve into, if we want to discover the source of silence in our heart. The example of Mary at the feet of the Lord is a light unto us: *"let Martha bear with her sister, as she follows in the steps of Christ, in stillness knows that he is God" (St 3.9)* Mary has truly entered silence: beyond the words uttered by Jesus, she truly perceives that He Himself is the Eternal Son. Her efforts

were not in vain : *"She purifies her spirit, prays in the depths of her soul, seeks to hear what God may speak within her" (St 3.9)* But this effort is in no common measure with the result, which is a gift that belongs to an entirely different order, totally beyond the grasp of a creature: *"... and thus, tastes and sees - - in the slender measure possible, though but faintly in a dark mirror -- how good the Lord is" (St 3.9)*. This is true silence, of which words cannot say anything more, the silence we shall reach one day, if God gives us both the strength of it and the sweetness in it. Amen.

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Saint Bruno