

Silence

Silence in Benedictine practice is knit together with listening and prayer. The website of Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas tells us. "Modern monks like to point out that the first word in the Rule is to 'Listen,' which can't be done while talking! God gave us two ears and one mouth, so we should use them in that order. This emphasis on silence is so that we can learn to listen to God more acutely... This kind of sensitivity and awareness makes it easier to pray at all times." This article explains that silence is healthy for community life and fosters the learning of reverence for all creation. Benedictines are called to strive for silence and have a love for silence. (*23 Spiritual Practices Taught by The Rule of Benedict by Tracy Rittmueller*).

Let us do what the Prophet says: "I said, I will keep watch over my ways that I may not sin with my tongue: I have set a guard at my mouth, I was silent and was humbled, and kept silence even refraining from good words" (Ps 38[39]:2-3). Here the Prophet shows that there are times when good words should be left unsaid for the sake of silence. All the more reason, then, to abstain from evil words to avoid the punishment of sin. Because of the importance of silence, let permission to speak seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good, holy, or edifying their words, for it is written: "In much speaking, you will not avoid sin" (Prov 10:19), and elsewhere: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov 18:21). It is for the master to speak and to teach; the disciple is to be silent and to listen. Therefore, any requests of the superior should be asked with all humility and respectful submission. We absolutely forbid vulgarity, idle words, or speech provoking laughter in all places and we do not permit the disciple's mouth to be opened for such talk. (*Rule of Benedict, Chapter 6*)

From its first words, this chapter is problematic and easily misconstrued. One translator gives the chapter title as "Of Silence," another as "On the Spirit of Silence," another as "Restraint of Speech." Each of these different wordings points to the different nuances that can be implied. There are two Latin words that, although used somewhat interchangeably, might translate as "taciturn" and "silent," one indicating the limiting of words, the other physical absence of sound. Benedict deliberately chooses the former in contrast to the Master, who seems more concerned with the latter (RM 8 and 9). There is a great difference between angry silence that separates and the intimate silence that requires no words. There is even more difference between simply not talking and fostering an environment of peaceful quietness that prevails even when speech is permitted. We have all heard jokes about monks who rarely speak and misconceptions about monks taking a vow of silence, but the essence of this chapter does establish silence as a true monastic virtue.

Why does Benedict think silence is so important that it is included in the foundational first seven chapters of the rule, here between obedience and the culminating virtue of humility? It is the root and source of contemplation. Without periods of deep silence, it is almost impossible to stay attentive to what is going on inside ourselves or to give God a chance to speak. We have a responsibility not only to grant that silence to ourselves but also a responsibility to foster it in others. It is the opposite of a void that fosters loneliness and alienation. This silence is meant to

protect the contemplative solitude of those around us so that the whole group can be supported in their quest for God.

How can I make some time and space for real silence today?

Can I pay attention to what I say today that might be better restrained?

Can I make an effort to leave more things unsaid, whether negative, crude, or just unnecessary?

(St. Benedict's Rule: An Inclusive Translation by Judith Sutura, OSB)