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A Whisper in the Soul: the Silence of God

"With his silences, God makes the faith and hope of his own people grow. He makes them new, and with them He makes all things new." A new article in the series "Light of Faith."

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The book of Exodus recounts how God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai in the splendour of his glory. The whole mountain shook violently;

Moses spoke and God answered him amid thunder and lightning (*Ex* 19:16-22). All the people listening were overwhelmed by God's power and majesty. Although Israel's history is marked by other similar theophanies,^[1] God usually showed himself to his People not in the splendour of his light, but in silence, in darkness.

Several centuries after Moses, the prophet Elijah, when fleeing from Jezebel's persecution, went again to the holy mountain, led by God. Hidden in a cave, the prophet sees the same signs of the Exodus theophany: the earthquake, the violent wind, the fire. But God was not there. After the fire, the sacred author says, there was "a sound as of a soft breeze." Elijah covers his face with his mantle and goes out to encounter God. And it was then that God spoke to him (cf. *1 Kings* 19:9-18).

The Hebrew text literally says that Elijah heard “the sound or voice of a soft *silence* [*d^emama*].” The Greek version of the Septuagint and the Vulgate translate this phrase as “a soft breeze,” probably in order to avoid the apparent contradiction between “sound or voice,” on the one hand, and “silence” on the other. The Revised Standard Version translates it as “a still small voice.” But what the word *d^emama* really means is precisely silence. With this paradox the sacred author implies that silence is not empty, but rather full of the divine presence. “Silence guards the mystery,”^[2] the mystery of God. And Sacred Scripture invites us to enter into this silence if we want to find Him.

How small a whisper do we hear of him!

This way of speaking about God is nevertheless difficult for us. The

Psalms manifest it eloquently: *O God, do not keep silence; do not hold thy peace or be still (Ps 83:1). Why dost thou hide thy face? (Ps 44:25). Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” (Ps 115:2).* Throughout the Sacred Text God himself puts these questions on our lips and in our heart. He wants us to meditate on them in the forge of our prayer. They are important questions. On one hand, because they point directly towards the way God ordinarily reveals himself, his “modus operandi,” as it were. They help us understand how to seek his Face, how to listen to his voice. On the other hand, because they show how the difficulty in grasping God’s closeness to us, especially in the trying situations of life, is an experience common to believers and non-believers, though it may take different forms in each case. Faith and the life of grace do not make God

evident to us; the believer too can experience God's apparent absence.

Why does God keep silent? Scripture often presents his silence to us, his remoteness, as a consequence of mankind's infidelity. As we read in Deuteronomy: *Behold, this people will rise and play the harlot after the strange gods of the land, where they go to be among them, and they will forsake me and break my covenant which I have made with them ... And I will surely hide my face in that day on account of all the evil they have done, because they have turned to other gods (Deut 31:16-18)*. Sin, idolatry, is a "veil" that makes God opaque to us, that hinders our seeing Him; it is like a noise that makes his voice inaudible. But God waits patiently behind this screen that we put between us and Him, watching for the right moment to seek us out anew. *I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful (Jer 3:12)*.

Rather than God remaining silent, then, what often happens is that we do not let Him speak, that we do not listen to Him, because there is too much noise in our life. “There is not only physical deafness, which to a great extent isolates man in social life. There is a hearing defect in relation to God, and we suffer it especially in our time. We are simply no longer able to hear Him; too many diverse frequencies occupy our hearing. What is said about Him appears pre-scientific to us and no longer seems adequate for our times. With this hearing defect, or even with deafness towards God, naturally we also lose our ability to speak with Him or to Him. Nevertheless, in this way we lack a decisive perception. Our interior senses run the risk of atrophy. On lacking that perception, the radius of our relation with reality in general becomes drastically and dangerously limited.”[3]

Nevertheless, sometimes it is not we who are deaf to God's voice; rather it seems that He isn't listening, that He remains passive. The book of Job, for instance, shows how the prayers of a just man suffering trials can seem for a time not to receive a response from God. *How small a whisper do we hear of him!* (Job 26:14). Each person's daily experience also shows how our cry to receive a comforting response from God sometimes seems to confront a vacuum. God's mercy, of which Scriptures and Christian teaching speak so much, can at times be difficult to perceive by someone who is going through painful situations, marked by sickness or injustice, where prayer seems to elicit no response. Why doesn't God listen? Why, if He is a Father, doesn't He come to help me, since He can do everything? "God's aloofness, his darkness and the problematic about Him, are today more intense than ever; even we, who strive to be

believers, frequently have the sensation that the reality of God has escaped our hands. Don't we often ask ourselves why He seems hidden under the immense silence of this world? Don't we sometimes have the impression that, after much reflexion, we are only left with words, while the reality of God is more distant than ever?"[4]

But more than in any of our own experiences, it is in Revelation, in the history of Jesus Himself, that we grasp with greater depth the mystery of God's silence. Jesus, who is the true Just One, the faithful servant, the beloved Son, is not sheltered from the torments of the passion and Cross. His prayer in Gethsemane is answered by an angel who comes to comfort Him, but not to liberate him from his imminent suffering. That Jesus prays on the Cross these words from Psalm 22 is also striking: *My God, my God, why has thou forsaken*

me? Why are thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? (Ps 22:2). The fact that He who knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21) experienced suffering so intensely shows how pain and sorrow, which often marks the life of men and women in a dramatic way, cannot be interpreted as a sign of God's rejection, nor his silence as absence or aloofness.

God is known in his silence

When the Apostles passed by the man born blind, the question they ask reflects the mindset of many people of that time: *Who sinned: this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* (Jn 9:1). Although it would seem strange nowadays to hear someone say this, in fact the question is not so far removed from the way many people think, where suffering is seen as a blind "destiny" to which one has to be resigned, once all attempts to prevent it have failed.

Jesus corrects the Apostles: *It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him (Jn 9:3)*. God sometimes remains silent, apparently indifferent to our situation, because He wants to open a path for entering our soul. Only thus can we understand, for instance, his permitting Saint Joseph to suffer because of the uncertainty of Mary's unexpected pregnancy (cf. *Mt 1:18-20*), when He could have easily arranged things otherwise. God was preparing Joseph for something great. "He never disturbs the joy of his children, unless to prepare them for a greater and surer joy."[5]

Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote that "whoever has understood our Lord's words, understands his silence, because God is known in his silence."[6] God's silence is often the "place" for our possibility to listen to

God, rather than to ourselves. Without God's "silent voice" in prayer, "the human 'I' ends by withdrawing into oneself, and the conscience, which should be an echo of God's voice, risks being reduced to a mirror of the self, so that the inner conversation becomes a monologue, giving rise to self-justifications by the thousands." [7] Moreover, if God were to speak and intervene continually in our life to resolve our problems, wouldn't there be the danger that we could easily trivialise his presence? Wouldn't we end up, like the two sons in the parable (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*), seeking what He can give us rather than the joy of living with Him?

"Silence can carve out an inner space in our very depths to enable God to dwell there, so that his Word will remain within us and love for Him will take root in our minds and hearts and inspire our life." [8] By

realizing our need to seek God with trusting prayer when faced with difficulties, we are freed from our self-sufficiency. All our inner resources are put into play, and our communion with those around us is strengthened. God's silence, the fact that He does not always intervene immediately to resolve our problems, awakens the dynamism of human freedom; it summons us to take charge of our own life and realize our responsibility for those around us, for their specific needs. "The power that changes the world and transforms it into the Kingdom of God, in silence and without fanfare, is faith—and prayer is the expression of faith ... God cannot change things without our conversion, and our true conversion starts with the 'cry' of the soul imploring forgiveness and salvation."[9]

In Jesus' teaching, prayer is always seen as a dialogue between a child

and his heavenly Father, in which petition holds a very important place (cf. *Lk* 11:5-11; *Mt* 7:7-11). A child who knows that his Father always listens to him, but that what is promised is not so much an escape from suffering or sickness, but rather the gift of the Holy Spirit (*Lk* 11:13). The answer with which God always comes to our help is the Gift of the Spirit of Love. This is a much more precious gift than any earthly solution to our problems. It is a gift that ought to be accepted with filial faith and that does not cancel out the need for human effort in confronting difficulties. With God the *dark valleys* that we sometimes have to cross aren't automatically illumined with light; we continue walking, perhaps still fearfully, but with a trusting fear: *I fear no evil for thou art with me* (*Ps* 23:4).

This way of acting on God's part, which stirs up our determination

and trust, can be seen in the way God has accomplished his Revelation in history. We can recall here Abraham, who leaves his country and sets out for an unknown land, trusting in the divine promise, without knowing where God is leading him (cf. *Gen* 12:1-4). We see the trust of the People of Israel in God's salvation, even when all human hope seems lost (cf. *Esther* 4:17). We witness the serene flight of the Holy Family to Egypt (cf. *Mt* 2:13-15), when God seems to submit to the caprices of a provincial monarch. Moreover, thinking that those who were eye-witnesses to Jesus' life found it easier to believe does not correspond to reality, because not even those who saw Christ in person were spared the serious choice of either believing or not believing in Him, of recognising in Him God's presence and action.

[10] Many passages in the New Testament show us how that decision was far from obvious.[11]

Yesterday as today, in spite of Revelation offering us authentic signs of credibility, the veil of God's inaccessibility is not completely lifted. His silence continues to challenge us. "Human existence is a path of faith and, as such, occurs more in half-light than in full light, with moments of dusk and even of darkness. While we are here, our relation with God is accomplished more in listening than in vision."[12] This is not just an expression of the fact that God is always greater than our intelligence. It also shows us how closely connected are the way God reveals Himself and the freedom we have as human beings created in his image. God's Revelation remains in a light-filled obscurity that allows our freedom to choose whether we will open ourselves to Him or remain enclosed in our own self-sufficiency. God is a "King with a heart of flesh, like yours; he is the author of the universe and of every creature, but

he does not lord it over us. He begs us to give him a little love, as he silently shows us his wounds.”[13]

The cloud of silence

With his prayer on the Cross, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Mt 27:46), “Jesus made his own this cry of humanity that suffers from God’s apparent absence, and carried this cry to the Father’s heart. By praying in this ultimate solitude together with the whole of humanity, he opens the Heart of God to us.”[14] In fact, the psalm Jesus uses to cry out to the Father, after the laments, opens up to a broad hope-filled horizon (cf. Ps 22:20-32).[15] Even in the midst of his agony, Jesus never loses sight of this hope: *Into your hands I commend my spirit* (Lk 23:44). Jesus knows that the giving up of his life on the Cross will change history forever, even if evil and death seem at times to have the last word. His

silence on the Cross overcomes the shouts of those who condemn him. *Behold I make all things new* (Rev 21:5).

“Faith also means believing in God, believing that he truly loves us, that he is alive, that he is mysteriously capable of intervening, that he does not abandon us and that he brings good out of evil by his power and his infinite creativity. It means believing that he marches triumphantly in history ... that the kingdom of God is already present in this world and is growing, here and there, and in different ways.”[16] With his silences, God makes the faith and hope of his own people grow. He makes them new, and with them He makes *all things new*.

It is up to each one of us to respond to God’s “gentle silence” with an attentive silence, a silence that listens. “Each of us knows how

mysteriously the Lord works in his or her heart and soul. And this is the overshadowing, the power, the Holy Spirit's style, as it were, for veiling our mystery. This overshadowing in us, in our lives, is called silence. Silence is the cloud that veils the mystery of our relationship with the Lord, of our holiness and of our sins. It is a mystery that we cannot explain. But when there is no silence in our lives, we lose the mystery, it goes away.”[17]

Marco Vanzini - Carlos Ayxelá

Suggested readings to go deeper into the topic:

Pontifical Council for Culture:
"Where is Your God? Responding to the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today"

Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 20 December 2013

Benedict XVI, Homily, 6 October 2006

Benedict XVI, Audience, 7 March
2012

John Henry Newman, “Christ Hidden
from the World”, *Parochial and Plain
Sermons* 4)

John Henry Newman, “Christ
Manifested in Remembrance”,
Parochial and Plain sermons 4)

The Power of Silence, by Robert
Sarah, Ignatius Press

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[1] Cf. for example *Gen* 18:1-15; *1 Kgs*
18:20-40; *Is* 6:1-13.

[2] Francis, Homily in Santa Marta,
20 December 2013.

[3] Benedict XVI, Homily, 10
September 2006.

[4] Joseph Ratzinger, “Are we saved? Or Job speaks with God,” in *Ser Cristiano*, Sígueme 1967, p. 19.

[5] Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, ch. 8.

[6] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, XV, 2 (*Sources Chrétiennes* 10, pp. 84-85).

[7] Benedict XVI, Homily, 6 February 2008.

[8] Benedict XVI, General Audience, 7 March 2012.

[9] Benedict XVI, Homily, 21 October 2007.

[10] Cf. Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, IV.6, “Revelation and mystery.”

[11] Cf. for example *Jn* 6:60-68; 8:12-20; 9:1-41.

[12] Benedict XVI, Angelus, 12 March 2006.

[13] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 179.

[14] Benedict XVI, Homily, 6 February 2008.

[15] This happens frequently in the psalms. The psalmist complains before God, *How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me forever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?* (Ps 13:2-3)—but does not lose his faith in God: *I have trusted in thy steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me* (v.6).

[16] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 278.

[17] Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 20 December 2013.

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