

Internal Silence¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Friday, July 20, 1860

We have spoken about external silence as the soul of religious life. Now, we will speak about internal silence as the soul of recollection, of union with God.

Silence that is exterior would be useless without interior silence. Through our imagination we can recall objects as though they were present: the world, pleasures, sorrows – all can come back to us through our imagination. We must control it, so that we can be its master. Memory is similar: it recalls the past and brings it before us, as an interior word. The devil acts through these faculties, disturbing us internally, presenting us with thoughts and pictures. God is also present with his angels. We live in the midst of an invisible world.

What is silence? It means to say nothing, interior silence is interior freedom, absence of activity, in calm and tranquility. To reach that point, we must set aside images, pictures, and everything that we can see. All the masters of the spiritual life affirm as a rule that we must clear ourselves of these images in order to attain pure truth. I know that images can be somewhat helpful, but God is spirit, and true adorers adore him in spirit (cf. Jn 4:24), and not in images. As long as a thought is not well rooted, as soon as a picture comes in, we must get rid of it quickly. As soon as a person is impressed with pictures, she is not the mistress in charge. I've told you often: be free when you go to God. Leave behind all this interior slavery, tie up everything that might come to you: no one except God has any right to our interior life. If we are not free, it's our fault. I'm not talking about passing things, but what has become a state. Avoid all thoughts that you notice are becoming fixed, as they might enslave you. Later on, you will need a lot of effort to get rid of them.

If these things had been explained to many people, they would not have gone into mental houses, they would not have become scrupulous. Round stones roll easily, but big boulders cannot be budged. As soon as you notice, my Sisters, that you have a recurring feelings or antipathies, as soon as some thought is bothering you, it will tie up your wings of love, an imperfection is present. What should you do? Do not be a slave; let the soul start working in true freedom. Are you free when you go to the Good Lord? Do you have some preoccupations, are you anxious about something? Go to the Good Lord, and he will close these doors.

What is this interior silence? I'm afraid that I might not explain myself clearly – every time I touch on the intimate life of the person with God, I find it hard to explain. Interior silence consists in loving attention...but wait... I shouldn't go so fast. It consists in being attentive to a truth, or a duty, or a virtue. It is also a loving attention to God, to his holy will, to his adorable truth. Here's a comparison: a child keeps its eyes on its master, its ears are attentive to what the master says in order to hear him, and to eat, so to speak, every word that comes from his mouth. Such is the recollected person, attentive to God. She is like *the servant whose eyes are on the hands of her mistress*, as the prophet says (Ps 122:2). She does not want to do anything else, in order to know and to discern the will of God, because she wants to penetrate it. She lives more attentive to God than to herself, as the pupil lives more in the word of the master than in himself.

¹ Number 227. *Silence intérieur*.

My Sisters, it is important to develop this interior silence, in order to be ready when God comes to inspire you and talk with you. You are told to remain attentive, avoid all daydreaming, remain in interior silence. But if this attention is forced, it will not last. Notice children studying some difficult science, like mathematics or something abstract; they cannot listen for a long time. The same is true of virtue, which one finds heavy. We cannot live by duty alone, because duty is a sacrifice.

How is it possible to reach serenity and live in the presence of God? A loving silence is needed. If love does not nourish, one cannot remain in this state for long. Those who don't know the power of love will strain their reasoning power as they imprison the soul and blow their mind. Perseverance becomes easy when all truths and virtues are cast into the love of God, for the heart will not burst. While a man may be small-minded, his heart is all-encompassing. God does share something of his own infinity with us, but not in our own minds which must submit to faith. What is needed is the heart's attention, which becomes habitual, for the heart will not grow weary. [...].

How is this attention attained? Merely through an act of recollection, gathering together all our faculties, bringing everything into a unity in the presence of God. Since everything within the person can see and hear, everything must be submitted to God and his constant inspiration. God does speak through one of David's psalms, [*Hear, O daughter, and see; turn your ear*] (Ps 44:11). *Audi, filia, et vide, et inclina aurem tuam. See, and incline your ear.* This is what God wants, that we look at him and listen. Lend your ear because my voice is soft.

Anyone who does not learn how to be recollected will never learn how to pray, and will merely talk nonsense. If the Good Lord were not so good, he would not listen to him. How dishonest we are with the Good Lord! We act like children who are always talking. A prayerful soul, on the other hand, knows how to listen. My poor Daughters, what can you teach the Good Lord? It is better to listen to him, especially when we have nothing, when we can do nothing. A soul that listens receives, a soul that speaks gives. Martha spoke a lot – poor Martha! [Mary] said nothing. She chooses to remain at the feet of our Lord, where she is fed and listens. Follow her example until the Lord says: You have listened enough, go and talk, go and work for me. Besides, the spouse in the Canticle said: My soul has melted like snow before the rays of the sun, liquefied at the words of my beloved. Surely, it was not speaking.

Learn to keep silent with the Good Lord; **learn to suspend the activity of your faculties.** Remain an instant, a second in silence with God. I don't say a minute; that would be too long. How great it is to remain a moment in suspension before God, to do nothing else except to be vigilant. [...]

The more you practice this act of suspension, the better it will be. You are doing something heroic. To gather yourself quietly is worth more than whatever you might do. Be still, out of fear of losing everything. This could be a good practice, in your rooms; try it. Before the Blessed Sacrament, do as David advised: *Hear O daughter, and see; incline your ear because my voice is soft* (cf. Ps 44:11). Listen attentively, gather in from outside; don't miss a single word. The best meditation is done through interior silence. To maintain this silence is nothing else than an act of recollection, using Samuel's words: *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening* (1 Sm 3:9). God does not speak if the soul is too distracted; and he does not always speak in words, but in thoughts and affections.

My good Sisters, try to make a prayer of recollection. Always start with that: believe me, it is worth all the rest. If you have the joy of making an act of recollection, God will unite himself to you. He does not join himself to a dissipated soul. You will sense, so to speak, that you are full of God without having done anything. You may say: How nice this is! What did you do? – Nothing. I was at the feet of God, and watching him. The angels see him in glory, but you look at him in love. – I was saying nothing. –

But God was speaking and giving himself, like the sun, since God is light and heat. You merely have to feel his rays, my Sisters, and you will be filled, united with him.

To obtain interior silence, free yourselves from daydreaming, from things and persons, so as to be recollected. Gather in from outside; enter into a state of suspension, and be attentive to the presence of God. When in church, you are like the angels and saints in paradise; they don't speak, are always rejoicing, receiving, permeated with God, who gives himself. Basically, this means loving attention to the presence of God, **attention through the heart.**

How does this work? Personally, I don't know. You have a heart, and you know how it bonds with goodness and truth, with the completely loving good will of God. When we love someone, we love everything that pleases him; the eyes of the soul see better than those of our body that see only limited goodness. Our Lord improves this silence by his grace. The most perfect love is the one that says nothing. I believe it. Love expresses itself in the gift. A recollected soul cannot speak; it would, in a sense, divide itself, since the body is under divine influence. Become very small; don't act like a foolish person who is always talking. Poor idiot! We are no longer in a situation where we must move a lot. The less we do, the more we do; and the more we do, the less we talk. People in the world would not understand this, because they live by their senses. For us, to understand all this, it is enough to know God a little.

Do not climb up to his heart; when he wants it, he will place you there. Do not sit by his side; when he wants it, he will invite you. Remain at his feet.

I admit that I would not dare speak like this in the world, I would seem foolish, absurd. But you understand these things; study them by yourselves. You have often done violence to grace. As it took root, you crushed it, because you did not go along with our Lord who was attracting you in a rather obscure way. Whoever is not adept at God's ways might get caught. When action ceases, it seems that we are doing nothing. Outsiders may make a lot of noise, but not the children [of the family], not you.



Points for reflection:

There are different paths of spirituality. Here St. Peter Julian suggests the way without images. He calls it "interior silence". This way requires a mature spirituality in the life of prayer. St. Peter Julian explains that this silence of the soul must pass by the way of love that sustains it. It is a new stage of prayer. In your own words, describe this "Prayer of Recollection".