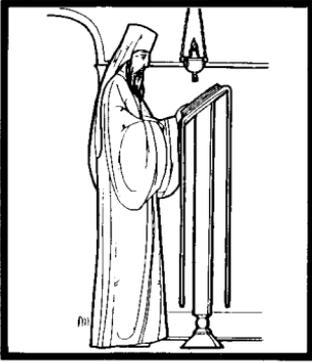


Chapter 6



Hesychasm - The Practice of Silence

The heart of Eastern Orthodox prayer teaches inner silence. Body and mind are brought to solitude and quietness in order to experience the peace and silence that surround the presence of God. The ultimate aim is a mystical union with God within a context of silence. As Bishop Kallistos Ware writes, “The hesychast, the person who has attained *hesychia*, inward stillness or silence, is *par excellence* the one who listens. He listens to the voice of prayer in his own heart, and understands that this voice is not his own but that of another speaking within him.”³²

Since solitude, or silence, is one of the rungs on “The Ladder of Divine Ascent,” we shall consider it as one of the symbols to be studied in this book.

Inner Attention

Hesychia is defined as quietness, stillness, tranquility. It is one of the central considerations in the prayer of the desert fathers. It signifies not just the individual living as a solitary but the possession of inner quiet and peace. It may be used to describe not just the hermit but anyone who guards the mind, practices constant remembrance of God, and possesses inner prayer.

The hesychastic Fathers, like St. Paul, affirmed and taught that man is a Temple of the Holy Spirit. God is present within. What is needed is constant inner attentiveness to the Word of God that is constantly speaking within our hearts of the Father's infinite love for us. For this they teach the necessity of inner silence, of hesychia or resting in active self-surrender to God's love.

Hesychasm Is For All

The practice of hesychia is not just for the monk or hermit. It is meant to be practiced by all. St. Nicolas Cabasilas was a layman who lived in the 14th century. Yet he lived the same hesychastic life in the world as the monastics did in the monasteries. He described this as follows:

“And everyone should keep his art or profession. The general should continue to command; the farmer to till the land; the artisan to practice his craft. And I will tell you why. It is not necessary to retire into the desert, to take unpalatable food, to alter one's dress, to compromise one's health, or to do anything unwise, because it is quite possible to remain in one's own home without giving up all one's possessions, and yet to practice continued meditation.”³³

A Prayer of Rest

The word *hesychia* in Greek also means rest. Thus the prayer of the hesychasts is a prayer of inner peace; a peace that comes from the total relinquishment of one's life to the Triune God. It is not a Utopian Nirvana-type of peace, but a peace in God in the midst of intense daily struggle. Thus, the Fathers teach us that *hesychia* or inner quietness and tranquility proceed from unceasing prayer. Hesychastic prayer leads to true rest where the soul can dwell with God in utter inner peace despite outer storms.

St. Gregory Palamas (+ 1359) describes hesychastic prayer as follows:

“Let us work with the body and pray with the soul. Let our outer man perform bodily tasks, and let the inner man be entirely dedicated to the service of God. As Jesus, God and man, commanded us, saying, ‘But when you pray, enter into your closet, and when

you have shut your door, pray to your Father which is in secret' (Matthew 6:6). The closet of the soul is the body; our 'doors' are the five bodily senses. The soul enters its closet when the mind does not 'roam' among the things of this world and the affairs of this world, but stays within — in our heart. Our senses become closed and remain closed when we do not let them be attached to external sensory things. In this way, our mind remains free from every worldly attachment; and, by secret mental prayer, unites with God its Father.'

Dr. Gabriele Winckler comments on the deeper meaning of the silence that is part of hesychastic prayer:

*"The hesychastic prayer teaches inner silence as the fundamental and original state of being. Hesychia is perceived as the highest realization of spiritual life, a life where body and mind are brought to absolute inner recollection and peace in order to become aware of the awesome peace and silence of which God is surrounded."*³⁴

Hesychia As Contemplation

Hesychastic prayer is very much like contemplation which may be defined as enjoying the Lord in silence. It is a relaxing love relationship. The mind rests and the heart is full of joy. Contemplation begins where prayer leaves off. In contemplation there are no words, no actions, no thoughts. Our heart is completely open before God. We receive His love and enjoy His presence. Contemplation, enjoying the Lord in silence, is as close to heaven as we can get here on earth. Nay, it is heaven. For, hesychastic prayer, according to Theophan the Recluse, leads us into the very presence of God: "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you."

Noise! Noise! Noise!

We live in a noisy world. The roar of traffic has grown so overwhelming that now cars are being soundproofed. And because

cars are soundproofed, auto horns have to be made louder for motorists to hear them. Now we have portable transistors with earplugs constantly bombarding our eardrums with noise. An AP dispatch from Los Angeles told of a huge sixty-pound dog dropping dead of a heart attack when two smaller dogs barked at him. Noise permeates our lives. And we're paying the price.

As far back as 1927, noise was identified as a slow agent of death. Studies have repeatedly linked noise pollution not only to hearing problems but also to insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure and heart disease.

One of the greatest needs we have is the need for silence. James Truslow Adams the American historian said, "Perhaps it would be a good idea, fantastic as it sounds, to muffle every telephone, halt every motor, and stop all activity some day, to give people a chance to ponder for a few minutes on what it is all about, why they are living and what they really want."

Intervals of Silence

A famous music master often told students that the rests were just as important in music as the notes. New students thought he was exaggerating, but soon learned that without careful attention to the intervals between music phrases, however brief, the music lost half its beauty.

What is true of music is also true of life. For without daily intervals of silence and prayer, however brief, life loses much of its beauty and meaning. Even the heart that beats 70 years, rests during 35 of those years.

When the human mind is agitated, it's like the surface of the sea in a storm. No insight can emerge from the depths. But when the mind is calmed by the great hand of the Lord, then insight comes; then understanding comes; then wisdom comes. It's much like a computer. In using a computer, the operator must clear the machine of the previous problem before undertaking a new one. Otherwise, parts of the old problem carry over into the new situation, and the result is a wrong answer.

Ernesto Cardenal wrote, "Modern man always tries to flee from himself. He can never be silent or alone, because that would mean to be alone with himself, and this is why the places of amusement and the cinemas are always filled with people. And

when they find themselves alone and are at the point where they might encounter God, they turn on the radio or the television set.”

A Foxhole In My Mind

During the last days of World War II, President Truman was asked how he managed to bear up so calmly under the stress and strain of the Presidency. His answer was, “I have a foxhole in my mind.” He explained that just as a soldier retreats into his foxhole for protection and rest, so he periodically retired into his own “mental foxhole” where he allowed nothing to disturb him.

Marcus Aurelius said once, “Men seek out retreats for themselves, cottages in the country, lonely seashores and mountains. Thou, too, art disposed to hanker after such things; and yet this is quite unnecessary, for it is in thy power, whenever Thou wilt, to retire into thyself. No place is quieter . . .”

It is indeed a thrill for astronauts to journey into outer space. But the greatest adventure we can make is not to the world without. It is to shut the door and enter the world within, where God waits to speak to us.

The great psychologist, William James, said once that being alone with God in prayer is much like the experience of a person who, being jostled in a crowd, climbs on a nearby doorstep, looks over the heads of the people, sees what the crowd as a whole is doing, and is then able to descend again into the jam and push; this time, not in the direction the crowd is traveling but *in the right direction*. Like a person in a telephone booth with the door open, we are bombarded daily by the many conflicting voices of the crowd. What we need is to close the door on the crowd daily and listen to the voice of God Who is trying so hard to speak to us.

Great Discoveries Made In Silence

It is in silence that some of the world’s greatest discoveries have been made. Archimedes discovered the law of specific gravity while relaxing in silence in his bath. Galileo discovered the principle of the pendulum while praying silently in the cathedral of Pisa. When the scientist of today would wrest some secret of nature’s mystery, he does not set up his apparatus in the midst of a noisy and crowded street, but in some quiet and remote laboratory,

where he waits for nature to speak. It is so when man waits for God to speak. He must close the door on the world.

Out of the such silences have come the great prophets — Moses from the desert, Amos from the hillside, Paul from Arabia, John the Baptist from the wilderness, Anthony from the desert, and Jesus from the seclusion of Nazareth and from His forty days and nights in the wilderness.

The Mother of Prayer

Elijah found that the Lord was not in the whirlwind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the still small voice. It was in silence that God spoke to him. Isaiah learned that “in quietness and confidence” lay the sources of his strength. The saints and mystics of every age unite in testifying that silence is an indispensable condition of spiritual knowledge, that without it we cannot call our souls our own, that “a man does not see himself in running water but in still water,” that spiritual realities do not shriek or shout but that God is waiting in the depths of our being to talk to us if we will only “wash our souls with silence.” “Silence,” writes St. John of the Ladder, “is the mother of prayer . . . a continuous ascension to heaven.”

Jesus Practiced Solitude

Jesus practiced quietness in spite of all His activities. St. Mark, for example, tells how Jesus spent a typical day in Capernaum. Entering the town He taught in the synagogue. Then He restored health to a man with an unclean spirit. After that He went to Simon’s house where He healed Peter’s mother-in-law. In the evening He ministered to the sick of the city. Where did He get the strength for all this activity? St. Mark provides the answer. The next morning, he writes, “a great while before day, He (Jesus) rose and went out to a lonely place, and there He prayed.” Jesus went out often to lonely places to pray. For Him they were places of power, places of strength and peace. Before His crucifixion, He poured out His soul in prayer in the lonely corner of a garden. He emerged from Gethsemane with a feeling of strength and peace. The night before He chose His own disciples He went out on the mountainside and “passed the whole night offering prayer to God.”

If Jesus found it necessary to guard carefully the time for quiet and reflection, if He had to be alone to keep His soul steady, how much more do we? It is not only the health of body and soul and the state of our nerves that depend on it; something much deeper is at stake. Until we know God and are sure of Him, we have no fixed point in life, no wall, amid the pressure of things, against which to put our back. We cannot know God if we are always in motion, caught up in and held prisoners by the rush and pace of life. It is when we go into our closet and shut the door that God has an opportunity to become real to us.

God Makes Silences For Us

Perhaps this is the reason God makes silences in every life; the silence of sleep, the silence of sickness, the silence of sorrow, and then the last great silence of death. One of the hardest things in the world is to get little children to keep still. They are in a state of perpetual activity, restless, eager, questioning, alert. And just as mother says to her child, "Be still," and hushes it to sleep that it may rest, so God does sooner or later with all of us. What a quiet, still place the sick-room is! What a time for self-examination! What silence there is in a house where a loved one has died! How the voices are hushed, and every footstep soft. Had we the choosing of our own affairs we would never have chosen such an hour as that; and yet how often it is rich in blessing. All the activities of our years may not have taught us quite so much as we learned in the silences of sickness, sorrow and death. So God comes, in his irresistible way, which never ceases to be a way of love, and says, "Be still, and know that I am God."

It must be understood that silent prayer cannot stand alone. It is intimately related with public worship. As one of the saints said, "*There can be no closet prayer without common prayer.*" It is common prayer that gives us the inspiration and enthusiasm to practice closet prayer.

Silence: The Mother of Knowledge

Fr. Thomas Hopko said once, "In order to pray you've got to be quiet. In order to get to know your children, you've got to be

quiet. In order to get to know your spouse, you've got to be quiet. In order to get to know yourself, you've got to be quiet. In order to get to know God, you've got to be quiet.'

How few of us there are who can be still enough to hear God speak. For before we can hear Him, we must learn to go into the closet and shut the door.

Henri Nouwen writes, "We have to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions and dwell in the gentle, healing presence of our Lord. Without such a desert, we will lose our own soul while preaching the gospel to others."³⁵

Describing the stillness he found on the Holy Mountain, one visitor wrote:

This stillness, this silence, is everywhere, pervades all, is the very essence of the Holy Mountain. The distant sound of a motorboat serves only to punctuate the intensity of the quietness; a lizard's sudden rustling among dry leaves, a frog plopping into a fountain, are loud and startling sounds, but merely emphasize the immense stillness. Often as one walks over the great stretches of wild country which form much of this sacred ground, following paths where every stone breathes prayers, it is impossible to hear a sound of any kind. Even in the monastery churches, where the silence is, as it were, made more profound by the darkness, by the beauty and by the sacred quality of the place, it seems that the reading and chanting of priests and monks in the endless rhythm of their daily and nightly ritual is no more than a thin fringe of a limitless ocean of silence.

But this stillness, this silence, is far more than a mere absence of sound. It has a positive quality, a quality of fullness, of plenitude, of the eternal Peace which is there reflected in the Veil of the Mother of God, enshrouding and protecting her Holy Mountain, offering inner silence, peace of heart, to those who dwell there and to those who come with openness of heart to seek this blessing.³⁶

The Church Fathers on Silence

“The highest form of prayer is to stand silently in awe before God” (St. Isaac the Syrian).

When Arsenius prayed, “Lord, lead me into the way of salvation,” he heard a voice saying, “Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for those are the sources of sinlessness.”

“May the name of Jesus be united with your breath; then you will understand the value of solitude” (St. John Climacus).

“Love silence diligently for in it your soul will find life” (St. Isaac the Syrian).

“Speech is the organ of this present world. Silence is the mystery of the world to come” (St. Isaac the Syrian).

When the Fathers felt in themselves the beginning of the Fruits of the Spirit, they found their refuge in total solitude.

“I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent” (Abbott Arsenius).

The desert fathers tell of the time Archbishop Theophilus went to the desert to visit Abba Pambo. But Abba Pambo did not speak to him. When the brethren finally said to Pambo, “Father, say something to the archbishop so that he may be edified,” he replied, “If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech.”

A brother once came to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word of advice. The old man said to him, “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”

Diadochus of Photice said,

“When the sea is calm, the eyes of the fisherman can penetrate to the point where he can distinguish different movements in the depth of the water, so that hardly any of the creatures who move through the pathways of the sea escape him, but when the sea is agitated by the wind, she hides in her dark restlessness what she shows in the smile of a clear day.”

“If a man cannot be alone, he doesn’t know who he is,” said Thomas Merton.

“Be Still and Know . . .”

“Be still and know that I am God,” says the Lord. Be still! Stop your rushing about, all tensed up, acting as if everything

depends on you, acting as if you are God. Stop! "Be still and know that I am God." In stillness as we practice God's presence, we discover who God is and who we are. The noises and disturbances of the world serve to hide our faults and our true selves from us. The desert fathers were disciples of Jesus in honest search for their true selves in Christ.

"Silence. All human unhappiness comes from not knowing how to stay quietly in a room," said Pascal.

It was Paul Tillich who said, "Language has created the word *loneliness* to express the pain of being alone, and the word *solitude* to express the glory of being alone with God."

The Place of Our Salvation

Henri Nouwen explains what happens in solitude, "Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversation, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman occurs. . . . In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone call to make, no meetings to attend . . . just me — naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived broken — nothing. . . . The wisdom of the desert is that the confrontation with our frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Solitude is not simply a means to an end. Solitude is its own end. It is the place where Christ remodels us in His own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of the world. Solitude is the place of our salvation."³⁷

As Mother Euphrasia, mother superior of the monastic community of Deolu of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, wrote: "*Hesychia* is the supreme mark of the ascetic life and of our victory over our passions. For St. John Climacus *hesychia* is the sum of the virtues, paradise restored, heaven in our hearts. It is a different way of speaking of the gifts of the Spirit mentioned by the apostle Paul (Gal. 5:22). The hesychast possesses these gifts and exhales them in all directions like the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14), as a flower gives off its scent or the sun sheds abroad its kindly light."

The Purpose of Solitude

The purpose of solitude according to the desert fathers is to descend with the mind into the heart and stand in the presence of God. It was not just a time of silence, of not speaking, but of listening to God Who dwells in the inner temple of the soul and standing in His presence.

Fr. John Meyendorff has written,

*“Since the incarnation, our bodies have become ‘temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us’ (1 Cor. 6:19); it is there, within our own bodies, that we must seek the Spirit, within our bodies sanctified by the sacraments and grafted by the eucharist into the Body of Christ. God is now to be found within, He is no longer exterior to us. Therefore, we find the light of Mt. Tabor within ourselves.”*³⁸

The purpose of solitude is to celebrate the liturgy in the inner chapel of the heart which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. For in reality there are three liturgies: the liturgy celebrated in the chapel of the heart for which solitude is so necessary. The corporate liturgy celebrated in church. And the liturgy after the liturgy, the *diakonia* or service rendered to Christ in the world. “I was hungry and you fed me.”

Archbishop Anthony Bloom said, “It is not the desert that makes a desert father . . . the desert is everywhere.” It is portable. It is within. It is solitude that creates an inner desert, an inner monastery, as it were, where we stand in His presence and where God is constantly listened to, remembered and praised.

Don't Lose Him In Your Heart

Let me share with you a folk tale from India:

“A neighbor found Nasruddin on his knees searching for something. ‘What are you searching for, Mullah?’ ‘My key. I’ve lost it.’ Both men got on their knees to search for the lost key. After a while the neighbor says, ‘Where did you lose it?’ ‘At home.’ ‘Good Lord! Then why are you searching for it here?’ ‘Because there is more light here.’”

Of what use is it to search for God in holy places if you have lost Him in your heart?

Now, let us see how we can find Him in the heart so as to stand constantly in His presence.

How To Shut the Door On the World

The early church fathers speak of their private prayer life as *krypti ergasia* (secret work) or *noera meleti*. This is what they called their constant inner awareness and conversation with God. God was in the inner temple of the soul and man was in constant communion with Him. Part of this "secret work" was the recitation over and over again to oneself, either quietly or more loudly, of certain prayers such as the Jesus Prayer or Scripture verses or entire Psalms.

St. John Climacus mentions this inner prayer activity when he writes, "Not even in the refectory did they (the monks) stop *noera ergasia*, but according to certain customs, these blessed men reminded one another of interior prayer by secret signs and gestures. And they did that not only in the refectory, but at every encounter and gathering."³⁹

To silence the mind is an extremely difficult task. It is hard to keep the mind from thinking, thinking, thinking, forever producing thoughts in a never-ending stream. The Church Fathers have taught us the way to control the mind. It is by using one thought to rid ourselves of all other thoughts that crowd into the mind. That one thought is the Jesus Prayer. By fastening the mind on the name of Jesus we are enabled to keep the mind open to the voice of God, keeping at bay all other voices that seek to intrude.

A Time Set Apart

In order to have quiet time with God we need to set apart a time and a place to be alone with God. It could be in the early morning or late night or in the middle of the night. As Fr. Maloney writes, ". . . the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob waits for us in the desert of our silent selves to reveal Himself to us in His own time and in His own words."

A successful businessman once shared his secret for preventing tensions. He had a short period of silence every day at 10 o'clock and at 3 o'clock. This did not take the usual form of prayer for he did not think about his problems but dwelt upon God's power and peace. He placed himself deliberately in God's presence

and he thought of the spiritual strength of Christ flowing into him. He reported that those few minutes a day spent in God's presence resulted in complete renewal of energy and clarity of mind. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee," said the Prophet Isaiah (26:3).

One woman has learned to rise early each morning and spend one hour silently in the presence of God. It wasn't easy, she says. It took time and persistence to get it started. But she now feels "the warm presence of love. I know no other way to describe it. . . . Through every crisis, I have found a quietness of soul in that hour with God. It gives me time to put things in perspective, to find God in every circumstance. Once I find Him, there seems to be no problem that cannot be resolved. Because of it, my life is better. Starting my day with an hour of prayer has filled the empty space within me — to overflowing."

Other "Little Solitudes"

There are other "little solitudes" that fill our day. We can take advantage of those early morning hours in bed before the family awakens. Or the solitude of the early morning cup of coffee before leaving for work. Or the solitude of bumper to bumper traffic during the freeway rush hour. Or the solitude of waking up in the middle of the night and talking to the Shepherd instead of counting sheep. Or the solitude of a minute's silence at 6 a.m. to thank Him for the physical light of the sun and for the spiritual light of the other sun, the Son of God. At 9 a.m. to pause quietly and remember that this was the hour of Pentecost and to pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. At noon to remember Jesus nailed to the cross and to thank Him for His love. At 3 p.m. to pause and remember His death on the cross at this hour and to pray the penitent thief's prayer, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom." And at 6 p.m. when the coming darkness reminds us of the darkness of sin and death, to remember Jesus Who came into the world as Light to destroy the oppressive darkness of sin and death.

A Silence Zone

There is no doubt that we live in a noisy world among crowds of hurrying, pushing mortals. The pressure is harder. The pace is

quicker. The noise is louder. We owe it to ourselves to set up a *silence zone* somewhere in every day. When the Bible talks of one day in seven being set aside for worship, it emphasizes the need for a break in the noise. We need this break in the noise, this silent zone, every day. We need to go into our room, shut the door, and pray to our Father in secret. We need it physically; we need it mentally; we need it spiritually. Dr. Paul Tournier, the eminent Swiss psychiatrist, writes, "One day, almost a year ago, I realized I was doing myself harm because I had begun to read the newspaper before my morning meditation, the time when God was asking me to listen to Him before listening to the world. Correcting that was simple, but it was enough to brighten again the climate of my life."

*Dear God
 Help me to be still and know
 That You are there.
 I was making so much noise
 That I couldn't hear You.*

—J. B. Turber

The Fruit of Hesychasm

St. Symeon said of Moses, "Moses went up to the mountain as a mere man; he came down carrying God with him." St. Anthony went into the desert a mere man. He came out of it carrying God. So did the other saints. So can we if we daily descend with the mind into the heart, there to stand in God's presence. This is the fruit of hesychasm, of our solitude: to carry God into the world.

The climate of your life, too, can be brightened if you will take time to be alone with Jesus, to go into your room, shut the door against the noise of the crowd, and listen to the still, small voice of God. It speaks of forgiveness and new life. It speaks of the never-failing love of God. It speaks of security in the storms of this life and of blessed fellowship with God eternally. It speaks of peace and pardon, of courage and strength, of life and hope through Christ Jesus, our Savior. We need to pause and be silent from time to time, quietly to unwrap God's gift of life in Christ Jesus.

The whole purpose of the spiritual life is to descend with the mind into the heart through inner prayer and silence and to discover there the Kingdom of God (the grace of baptism and the Holy Spirit). The heart is the Lord's reception room. Meet Him there. "The Kingdom of God is within you," said Jesus.

Fr. Basil Pennington sums up the purpose of hesychasm:

*"By deep prayer, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can hope to so establish this deep inner quiet that even in the midst of everyday activities, this lively sensitivity will remain and all activities will be guided by the call of grace and the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is really the fruit of hesychasm."*⁴⁰