

# The Paradoxical Effect of Silence in Interpersonal Relationships

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As Carmelites we are called to cultivate silence in our prayer life and to withdraw into our cell in order to rest in the Lord and to hear Him speak to us, putting into practice the words of the prophet Samuel, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening".

Our resting in the Lord and our focus on hearing His voice propels us into a higher realm where we abandon our egos, give up control, and enter into the sphere of the divine. We can reap great rewards if this prayer of silence is practiced on a regular basis for we find that the rays of the divine can then permeate our daily lives. Our auditory faculties, being sharpened and brought to the forefront, play a greater role in the manner in which we communicate and react in our interpersonal relationships.

Some of the key words and phrases in Carmelite Spirituality, with regard to living a life of deep prayer and furthering our union with the Lord, are "cell", "solitude", "silence", and "interior life". This language implies that the individual seek out a place of quiet and rest so as to be able to engage in contemplative prayer. How then one may ask does the silence and the sequestering of oneself play a positive role in day to day relationships and situations?

*"What we need most in order to make progress is to be silent before this great God with our appetite and with our tongue, for the language he hears best is silent love."*

*St. John of the Cross*

The relationship between contemplative prayer, especially the last stage of total silence of mind, and the manner in which we react to situations which come up in our daily lives, is apparent to me.

Cultivating silence in our prayer life is akin to cultivating a multifaceted virtue. It is a discipline which serves us well. Take for example an argument. Silence cultivated through prayer can teach us to react calmly without losing our tempers and can cause the "adversary" to be caught off guard by a well controlled response. Emotional outbursts are eliminated and have no place at these times. Our patron, the Prophet Elijah heard the voice of the Lord in the whisper of the wind. By cultivating spiritual silence on a regular basis as we are called to do in our Order, this silence penetrates into all our faculties, having an extremely positive and transformative effect.

Saint Teresa of Avila said, "Look for Christ our Lord in everyone, you will then have respect and reverence for all." How true this is when the perspective of silence is applied to our everyday communication and relationships. The vertical relationship between divine and human enriches our communication on a personal level by enhancing our listening capabilities. It eliminates interruptions as well as sole reliance on our human senses. Our minds and hearts are raised to a higher plane, that of being directed in our thoughts and speech by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore silence, usually equated with isolation, actually brings about an expansion of heart and mind. Contrary to the notion that silence is conducive only to withdrawing into oneself, silence promotes a going out of oneself and includes the "other". Everyone is included in the sphere of conversation. The Carmelite cell is the catalyst which breaks down barriers and fosters openness.

John the Baptist's words, "I must decrease and he must increase", ring true in personal interaction born out of the daily discipline of listening to the Lord. The concentration that is essential to hearing the voice of God is also of central importance in both conversation and relationships. It is only when our mind is cleared of all distractions that we can hear the Lord. Similarly, in order to truly "hear" the person with whom we are engaged in conversation, our mind needs to be free of all wandering thoughts. Silence brings about the shedding of the ego. It enables us to peel off all the extra layers enshrouding our ego and bares the essence of our being that we are made in the image and likeness of God. It bears much fruit when transferred to our reactions and our communication with one another in daily life. It increases empathy, compassion, and kindness because our responses are not governed by our "feelings" but rather by the Lord's standards.

As a result, through the practice of silent prayer, the preoccupation with the self gives way to inclusion of the *other* in our interpersonal relationships. By silencing our minds and our hearts through contemplation, we allow the Lord to enlighten us. This illumination of mind enables us in turn to reflect His light to others through the manner in which we speak and react to others. We thereby exhibit a slice of our authentic nature as children of God and disciples of Christ. Silence becomes the governing force of a truly charitable attitude in our daily relationships.