

“LISTENING TO GOD IN THE SILENCE OF OUR HEARTS”
Being a talk presented at the Occasion of the National Youth Day
Celebration of the Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria held @ Calabar,
the Catholic Archdiocese of Calabar on 10th August, 2018 by His
Excellency Most Rev. Hilary Dachelem, CMF Catholic Bishop of Bauchi
Diocese

There is an obvious irony in any attempt to talk about silence. Talking about silence is like trying to describe the ineffable or depict the invisible. The task itself is inherently impossible. Silence can only speak for itself: not through words, but through experience. Silence is something that we say we want but struggle to actively do.

As children, when we were in school we were made to sit in silence in class or during preps and siestas. The prefect is asked to scribble down the names of noise makers to keep us quiet and silent in order to minimize the level of noise and disruption in the classroom. In this very act, the act of practicing silence has been negatively associated with the form of discipline or to correct behavior.

Now as adults or young people, we understand that silence is needed more than we could have ever imagined. There’s so much chaos in the world, life’s the responsibilities and constant connectivity with the phone that it often takes an act of self discipline to set aside time to just be still and silent. This is still a discipline task that has to be learned until we acquire it as a routine part of our day and even then it takes us actively choosing to be silent.

It is not easy to undertake in the act of silence especially in our modern society of so many noise, distractions and turbulence. In these few minutes, I will be speaking to you on the topic: **“Listening to God in the Silence of our Hearts.”** The best way to begin, therefore, is not by any definition or analysis, but by a story because silence is an act which is short of any basic definition but can only be felt or experience.

There is a story which is told of an Archbishop and an Abbot. The Archbishop went to the desert wasteland, a spiritual paradise where a great number of monks carried on their spiritual warfare. The Archbishop made his way to the cell of the Abbot. The Abbot was a man well recognized and acclaimed for his humility and wisdom.

The brethren who accompanied the Archbishop said to the Abbot: “say something to the Archbishop, so that he may be edified.” The Abbot replied: “If

he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech.” There is really little more that can or should be said. If people cannot listen to God in silence and be edified in their hearts, how much more will they listen to Him and be convinced even if He speaks to them in words? It may be extremely difficult for them to be edified by His words.

There are many Christians, especially young people in our world today, who are searching for God in the wrong places of life. Some of you are seeking for God in money, some of you are seeking for God in alcohol, drugs, sensual pleasures, while some are seeking for God in noisy and fruitless ventures. More often than not, God still speaks to us in the silence of our hearts.

Silence is the Medium of Divine Revelation

Silence, in the most positive sense, is the environment and atmosphere, the sacred space, the language into which God speaks His word, both to create the world and to save it from death and corruption. The best way to experience God is to listen to Him through the silence of our hearts because God reveals Himself in silence.

The scriptures testify that in the beginning there was absolute silence when God revealed Himself in creation. Through his word, God spoke into this silence, to create the heavens and the earth. God declares through prophet Isaiah: “My Word that goes forth from my mouth will not return to me empty; it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Is. 55:11). To affirm that God creates *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), is to say that He speaks out of silence, to bring all things into existence by the power of His creative Word.

Silence, therefore, is the medium of Divine Revelation. In a terrifying epiphany (the revelation of God) recounted in the first Book of Kings, God appeared on the mountain to the Prophet Elijah not in the chaos or tyranny of life but in a still shrill voice. As the Lord passed by, there came a mighty wind, so strong that it split the mountain and shattered the rocks in pieces.

The narrative tells us: “The Lord was not in the wind.” After the wind there came earthquake, then a fire; but the Lord was neither in them. Then, the passage concludes, “after the fire a still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). The New Revised Standard Version renders this more forcefully: “after the fire the sound

of sheer silence.” Through “the sound of sheer silence” – God reveals both His presence and His purpose.

In the Gospel of Luke the people of God are themselves reduced to awe-filled silence as they witness Christ’s ability to silence his adversaries. Jesus in the presence of His disciples displays the authority to still the waters and silence the thundering of the waves as a great storm threatens to swamp their boat. He rebukes the wind and the sea: “Peace! Be still!” and “the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Lk 20:26; Mk. 4:39).

Silence facilitates our meeting with God for God speaks out of the depths of His own silence. It is true that we can find God everywhere, even in the midst of a crowd but the Lord Jesus who knows so thoroughly the laws of human psychology, recommends that we seek God in silence and solitude: When you pray, go into your room, and shut the door, pray to your Father in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you” (Matt. 6:6).

Why is it important for us to listen to God in Silence?

We feel more the presence of God more in our Situations of life when we listen to Him in the Silence of our Hearts: With the constant tug of everything pulling at us, it is important that we dedicate time to sit in silence to hear our Heavenly Father. This is because He cares about the things going on within us and He wants nothing more than for us to cast it all on Him and allow Him to speak life into our situations.

In the Gospel of Mathew God says: “Come to me all ye who labor and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-29).

We become more in Fellowship with God when we listen to Him in the Silence of our Hearts: God doesn’t want to compete with the distractions of the world but desires to see us make time to be in fellowship with Him, not just on Sundays during our Masses and other prayers of the Church but in those quiet, still moments throughout the week. It is through those quiet moments that the words of the Lord can leap into our hearts and give us peace that truly surpasses our understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Silence has a profound Spiritual Value: The Psalmist admonishes that “Be angry but do not sin, commune with your own hearts on your bed, and be silent”

(Psalm 4:4). Genuine compunction arises out of silence and solitude of one's own bed. St. Augustine declares that, the heart opens to the outpouring of divine love through the Holy Spirit and the Prophet Zephaniah said: "Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand" (Zephaniah 1:7).

Silence possesses an eschatological quality insofar as it prepares both heart and mind to receive God in His final coming. The day of the Lord is a day of judgment, symbolized by thunder and fury. But it is also a day of vindication, blessing and the bestowal of everlasting peace. These are qualities both given and received in silence.

How do we quiet our minds to listen to God in the Silence of our Hearts when everything around us today is pulling for our attention?

Practice the act of quietness and Silence: Practice, they say, makes perfect. Silence is a virtue. It is going inward within the heart of the human person and listening to God as He speaks to you in the silence. It may take time to practice and learn how to quiet our minds, but that does not mean that it is impossible.

It may seem silly at first, but trust that the process of it all will be greater once it becomes part of a daily routine. Practicing being quiet also gives us the opportunity to carefully consider the things that usually consume our time like television, social media, cell phone etc. What are you willing to give up spending time with your Savior?

Prayer and personal reflection on the Psalms and the Scriptures: A big milestone in prayer is reached when we discover a need to listen more rather than to talk in prayer. A crucial stage in the process of learning to pray is to begin to listen. The essential condition for contemplative prayer is the ability to listen, and an appreciation of silence. There is a story of a priest and an old man.

The old man would sit still in the church for hours on end. One day a priest asked him if God ever said anything to Him in his prayer. The old man said: "God does not talk. He just listens." "Well, then, what do you spend all this time talking about?" The old man said: "I don't talk either. I just listen." Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can share with each other even with God in prayer.

Think how bad you feel when you are not being listened to, or when you feel you don't have the voice to say what you want to say. Listening in prayer is about personal recognition of the presence of God in our lives. This is where we

discover the creativity of prayer – where God is at work in our hearts, more deeply than in our consciousness. Nothing could be more powerful than this silent word.

Colossians 4:2 says that we are to devote ourselves to pray with an alert mind and thankful heart. Our Father wants us to come to Him with expectancy ready to learn and hear from Him. The Lord may not tell us everything in the moment but He'll make us alert of the signs along the way. Regardless of what it can be, it is important to remain alert to whatever He wants to show us.

Many of us want the feeling of hearing from God on daily basis. We want to feel God's presence. We want to know that He is with us and He is there to help us with our difficult decisions and challenges of life. We just don't have to pray and go about our day but we have to truly give Him (God) the opportunity to speak and talk to us. We have to approach prayer as truly a two-way communication.

When we sit down with our friends, we talk to them but also give them an opportunity to talk as well. It is the same when we talk with our God in prayer. But sometimes the temptation for us is that we often feel like heaping all our problems to God without letting Him speak to us in response. We want to talk to Him and He listens to us and solves our problems without letting Him speak to us too. But in real sense, God wants an opportunity to be given a chance to talk to us too.

Approach God through adoration of the Blessed Sacrament: Adoration according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before His Creator (CCC. 2628). For us Catholics we are blessed and fortunate to find God in the real presence of the Blessed Sacrament. This is a most sublime gift and opportunity which is not shared by other Churches and religions.

As Catholics, we believe that Christ is truly and substantially present in the Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament is given the same adoration and devotion that is accorded to Christ. Eucharistic adoration or adoration to the Blessed Sacrament is adoring and honoring the Eucharistic Presence of Christ. Jesus waits for us in the Blessed Sacrament. By worshipping the Eucharistic Jesus, we become what God wants us to be.

Immolating the lives of the Saints and other Models of Contemplative Life:

Jesus Christ and His Blessed Mother are perfect models and examples of contemplative life and prayer in silence. Jesus not only taught His disciples how to pray in silence but he went ahead several times of His Ministry to pray in silence. Fulton Sheen was a 21st Century Bishop who faithfully and daily fulfilled the Holy hour sixty years of his busy life. Other saints who lived contemplative life include St. Teresa of Avila, St. Francis de Sales, those who live monastic lives etc.

According to Confucius, “Silence is the true friend that never betrays.” A German Proverb says: “Silence is a fence around wisdom.” For a Japanese Proverb: “The silent man is the best to listen to.” “Silence is as deep as eternity; speech, shallow as time”, Thomas Carlyle affirms. While an Arab Proverb echoes that “Silence is medication for sorrow.” According a Latin Proverb: “To silence another, first be silent yourself.”

Obstacles that hinder young people from listening to the voice of God in Silence in our Society today

There are certain obstacles or hindrances which can affect young people today to not listen the voice of God as He speaks to you in your hearts. These factors block the penetration of the silent voice of God to enter deep into your heart. You must be careful and take not of these obstacles if really you want to hear God as he speaks his words into your heart.

The Obstacle for the quest for the mundane and the Pleasures of Life: The quest for the material things of the world and the pleasures of life above other meaning things can derail us from hearing God. When we seek the pleasures of life at the detriment of the Divine, when we are looking our only for number one, when we look for the fashions of life, these can affect our visions and our hearing of the voice of God in our hearts.

The Dangers of the Social Media as a hindrance to listening to the voice of God in Silence: In modern life, social media is developing fast. It is used by many people all over the world. But it is especially very popular among the young people. The Social Media can be a great tool for communication, but it also has many harmful effects especially among the young people.

There are many young people today who cannot control themselves and are addicted to the social media. I recently asked a teenage girl if she ever took time

to sit still and reflect on her life and God. “Not really”, she smiled nervously, “I think I would find that threatening. I am always on face book or wattssp to keep me company whenever I feel bored.”

There are many young people that even in Church when God wants to speak to them they are using cell phones to surf Facebook, Instagram or chat with friends on Messenger. They always check their cell phones every five minutes to see what is going on on social media. If the young people use social media in Church, how can they listen to God and understand what He is saying to them?

The Dangers of Religious Sensationalism as a hindrance to listening to God in Silence: It is unfortunate that religious sensationalism exist in some of our Christian Churches today. Sensationalism in religious circle is the use of melodrama, over-the-top theatrical methods in a religious service or overblown, incredible claims in religious service. Sensationalism is not too concerned with the truth.

A religious sensationalist can be either one who manipulates others through such methods or a wide-eyed participant mesmerized by the thrill of it. Sadly enough, many young people today are led by religious sensationalism and spiritual trance rather than genuine and true worship of God. In this case young people are not led to listen to the voice of God as he speaks to them in their hearts.

The African Culture as a hindrance to listening to God in Silence: Many scholars have come to acknowledge the fact that Africans are mostly a social communitarian and emotional people rather than a reflective people. For example in the typical African traditional set up, if one undertakes the act of reflection in silence and meditation, he or she can chiefly be termed as a loner or a harbinger of spirits like witches and wizards.

Spiritual Emptiness and the Lack of Internal Security or Satisfaction: The lack of internal security and satisfaction otherwise known as emptiness creates a spiritual vacuum and thus produces external noise or distractions in individuals affecting us to listen to God in silence. This is encapsulated in the saying that “the empty gong makes the loudest noise.” This is very prevalent in the lives of young people.