

THE PRAYER OF SILENCE



WE BEGIN WITH the easiest and yet the hardest of all prayers—the prayer of silence. Easiest because the brain is not taxed to think of words to speak to God. Hardest because most of us are so unused to silence, to waiting, to being still and feeling our souls become still.

Some of us have an absolute aversion to silence. We live in a world of sounds and noises—bleeping gadgets, ringing cell phones, chattering radios and televisions. If we are left alone for half an hour, we turn on a noise for companionship. We idolize quiet, rustic settings, but when we go there we take our cell phones and iPads with us.

Yet, from the beginning of time, and in all religions, God has been associated with eternal silence. Mystery is hushed. Holiness is awesome, still, unspeakable.

The greatest temples have always been those that embodied this stillness, not those that provided excellent acoustical qualities for the transmission of voices. By allowing us to leave the world of sound, they seem to usher us into the presence of the One who has been called “the wholly Other.”

Perhaps the best way to begin praying, then, both when we are first learning to pray and long afterwards, is by coming before

God in quietness—by drawing near and waiting in silence, with no anxious straining after words or thoughts.

In the beginning, the silence may make us nervous.

Nothing seems to be happening.

No matter. Wait.

Prayer is not “useful” in the sense that certain other things are. We do not arrive at its benefits directly.

We are not dealing, after all, with a banker, an insurance agent, or a pharmacist.

We are waiting before the Creator of the World, the Most High God, the Transcendent One, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Source of All Holiness.

God is so holy, in fact, that the ancient Jews would never speak the divine name. Only once a year did the high priest of Israel dare to enter the Holy of Holies and utter it. And even then, it is said, the people tied a rope around his ankle so they could draw him out if he should be struck dead while doing so.

Viewed in this light, what do we have to say to God? What *can* we say?

Instead, reverently enter the divine presence and kneel or sit without speaking.

Concentrate only on what you are doing—waiting in the presence.

Listen to the silence.

Will the presence speak?

Perhaps.

And if it doesn't?

Listen to the silence.

Without speaking, the presence surrounds you.

Your earthly ambitions are recognized as tawdry, your fears

as groundless, your resentments as self-paralyzing, your hurrying as pointless.

Love, peace, joy, gratitude, the fruit of the spirit. These are the things that matter.

Bless the name of the Holy One.

This is what the silence comes to.

Move to other forms of prayer. Or, if you feel that the praying is over, return to your work.

But something is different. You don't feel so harried. Your very being is lighter, more spiritual. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Holiness, cradles your own.

Perhaps your heart will beat too fiercely when you try this prayer of silence, and you will wish to stop.

Try breathing deeply, and concentrating on that.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Wait before God.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Wait before God.

Feel the rhythm of it.

Many holy persons in our own tradition, as well as those from the Eastern religions, have employed this technique.

Next, let us consider a slight variation of silent prayer.