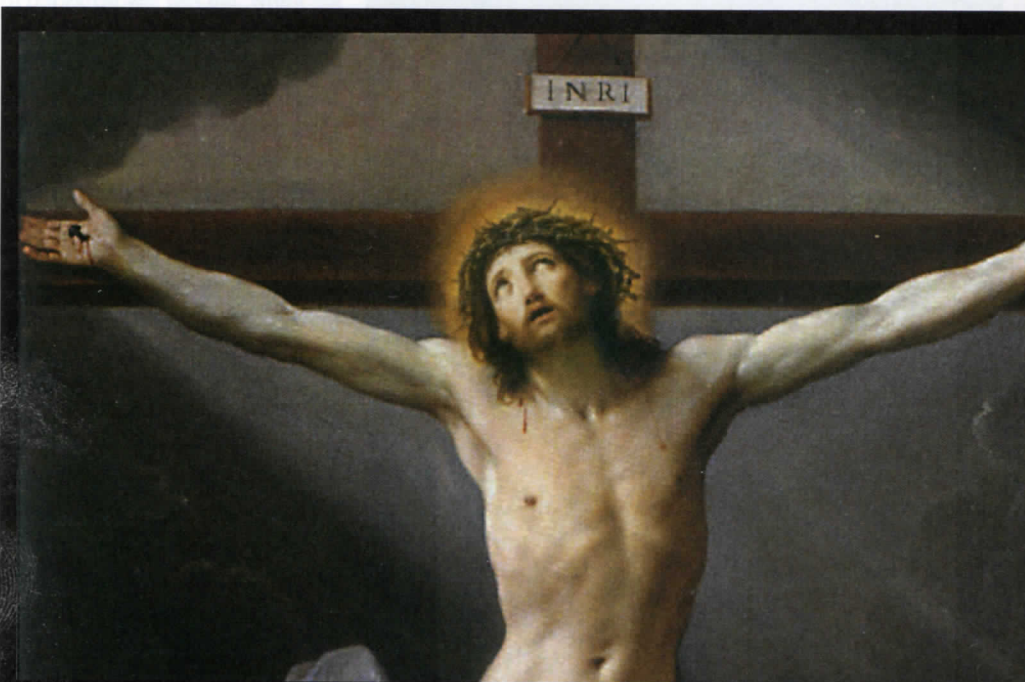


"GOD SPEAKS THROUGH THE SILENCE"

During recent weeks, Benedict XVI has stressed the value of silence several times, saying it is necessary for us to "hear" God. Here, the catechesis the Pope gave at his general audience on March 7. Benedict stresses "the importance of silence in our relationship with God"



The cross of Christ not only portrays the silence of Jesus as His final word to the Father; it also reveals that God speaks through the silence

Left, *Crucifixion* by Guido Reni (1575-1642), Estense Gallery, Modena, Italy.

Opposite, top, *Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary* by anonymous; opposite bottom, *Resurrection* (detail from Averoldi Polyptych) by Tiziano (1488/1490-1576), Sts. Nazaro and Celso Museum, Brescia, Italy

■ By Pope Benedict XVI

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, I made reference to the role that silence assumes in the life of Jesus, especially on Golgotha: "Here we find ourselves before the 'word of the cross' (1 Corinthians 1:18). The word is muted; it becomes mortal silence, for it has 'spoken' exhaustively, holding back nothing of what it had to tell us (n. 12). Faced with this silence of the cross, St. Maximus the Confessor places upon the lips of the Mother of God this touching phrase: 'Wordless is the Word of the Father, who made every creature which speaks; lifeless are the eyes of the one at whose Word and whose nod all living things move'" (*The Life of Mary*, no. 89: *Marian texts of the first millennium*, 2, Rome 1989, p. 253).

The cross of Christ not only portrays the silence of Jesus as his final word to the

Father; it also reveals that God *speaks* through the *silence*: "The silence of God, the experience of the distance of the almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the incarnate Word. Hanging from the wood of the cross, he lamented the suffering caused by that silence: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46) Advancing in obedience to his very last breath, in the obscurity of death, Jesus called upon the Father. He commended himself to him at the moment of passage, through death, to eternal life: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46)" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 21). The experience of Jesus on the cross speaks deeply of the situation of the man who prays and of the culmination of prayer: after having heard and acknowledged God's Word, we must also measure ourselves by

God's silence, which is an important expression of the same divine Word.

The interplay of word and silence that marks the prayer of Jesus during his entire earthly life — especially on the cross — also touches our own lives of prayer, in two ways.

The first concerns our welcoming of God's Word. Interior and exterior silence are necessary in order that this word may be heard. And this is especially difficult in our own day. In fact, ours is not an age which fosters recollection; indeed, at times one has the impression that people have a fear of detaching themselves, even for a moment, from the barrage of words and images that mark and fill our days. For this reason, in the already-mentioned Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, I recalled the necessity of our being educated in the value of silence: "Rediscovering the centrality of God's word in the life of the Church also

means rediscovering a sense of recollection and inner repose. The great patristic tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence" (n. 21).

This principle — that without silence we neither hear nor listen nor receive the word — applies above all to personal prayer, but it also pertains to our liturgies: in order to facilitate an authentic listening, they must also be rich in moments of silence and unspoken receptivity.

St. Augustine's observation forever holds true: *Verbo crescente, verba deficient* — "When the Word of God increases, the words of men fail" (cf. *Sermon* 288; 5: *PL* 38, 1307; *Sermon* 120, 2: *PL* 38, 677). The Gospels often present Jesus — especially at times of crucial decisions — withdrawing alone to a place set apart from the crowds and from his own disciples, in order to pray in the silence and to abide in his filial relationship with God. Silence is capable of excavating an interior space in our inmost depths so that God may abide there, so that his Word may remain in us, so that love for him may be rooted in our minds and in our hearts and animate our lives. The first way, then: to learn silence, [to learn] the openness to listening that opens us to the other, to the Word of God.

However, there is a second important element in the relation of silence with prayer. For in fact there exists not only our silence, which disposes us to listening to God's Word; often in our prayer, we find ourselves before the silence of God; we experience a sense of abandonment; it seems to us that God is not listening and that He does not respond. But this silence of God — as Jesus also experienced — is not a sign of His absence.

The Christian knows well that the Lord is present and that he is listening, even in the darkness of suffering, rejection and solitude. Jesus reassures the disciples and each one of us that God knows well our needs at every moment of life. He teaches the disciples: "In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:7-8): an attentive, silent, open heart is more important than many words.

God knows us intimately, more deeply than we know ourselves, and He loves us:

"Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence"



prayed, saying to the Lord: I love you, not because you can give me heaven or condemn me to hell, but because you are my God. I love You, because You are You....

The prayer of Jesus indicates to us who are often preoccupied by the efficiency of our work and the concrete results we achieve that we need to stop and to experience moments of intimacy with God, "detaching ourselves" from the daily din in order to listen, to go to the "root" that supports and nourishes life. One of the most beautiful moments in the prayer of Jesus is precisely the moment when he — in order to face the disease, distress and limitations of his interlocutors — turns to his Father in prayer, thus teaching those around him where the source of hope and salvation is to be sought....

Jesus reaches the heights of the depth of his prayer to the Father during his Passion and Death, when he pronounces his supreme "yes" to the plan of God and reveals how the human will finds its fulfillment precisely in adhering fully to the divine will, rather than the opposite. In Jesus' prayer, in his cry to the Father on the Cross, "all the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history are summed up..."

"Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them beyond all hope, answers them by raising His Son. Thus is fulfilled and brought to completion the drama of prayer in the economy of creation and salvation." ○

"Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son"

