Opinion
Spirituality



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May 22, 2019

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I could hear the news broadcast outside my door this morning as I sat down to talk to you about the Rule of Benedict's ninth step of humility. For the first time in my life, I not only understood the depth and beauty of it but I could also hear the social effects of ignoring it as one side harangued the other and neither side listened as well as talked.

The ninth step of humility is one of those levels of personal spiritual development that we once taught to children. Now we understand that it's adults who need to concentrate on them most. Without this kind of spiritual development in adults, children will never again have a model of human decency to depend on. Worse, they may not even realize the value of spiritual reflection in a country that purports to be a democracy.

The ninth step of humility in the sixth-century Rule of Benedict reads that "we control our tongues and remain silent, not speaking unless asked a question, for scripture warns, 'In a flood of words you will not avoid sinning' (Proverbs 10:19), and 'A talkative person goes about aimlessly on earth' (Psalm 140:12)."

Now that's what you call "straight talk." There are no caveats here as in "keep silent unless you're angry at someone" or "unless you can get the microphone and keep it from everyone else." No, just this: Silence is the better part of communication.

Silence brings three aspects to speech that not only sharpen it, but also enrich it, give it depth, create bonds instead of barriers.

First, silence teaches us to go down inside ourselves. Unless we learn to hear beyond the babble of ambitions, advertisements, old angers and the petty irritations we carry around within us, we will never find the peace that comes with consciousness of the eternal presence of God within us.

Second, silence provides us with the harrowing ground of the soul. It breaks up the clods of our lives, it roots up the weeds, it levels the rocky ground in which we've grown. It clears the field, removes the impediments, smooths our path so we can think things through and go on through life more secure, more aware that we hold the beauty of life within ourselves.

Most of all, it is in silence that we hear our own cries of fear and pain and resistance that only in silence can really be addressed. In silence, we come to know ourselves. Then, we are ready to disengage ourselves from the thickets that block the way beyond ourselves to where light is and growth is and God is.

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Silence has two dimensions, both of them intensely godly. No one talks about it much, but silence is not simply a spiritual discipline. Silence has as much to do with what it means to be a life-giving part of the human community as it does with what it means be piously reflective.

Each of these dimensions of silence — internal and social — determine how we go through life and whether or not we are able to do it well.

It's in silence that we hear the sounds of our better angels calling us to rise above our lesser selves. It's in silence that we arm-wrestle our puny selves to the ground of truth.

Silence can, of course, become our private game of escapism. We can begin to substitute feeling holy for being holy. We can withdraw from the real world and call withdrawal "a spiritual life." We can use silence to avoid the world, its problems, the persons in our lives and our responsibility to them.

No, the ninth step of humility is clear: Silence is not for its own sake.

It is only the calmed and calming kind of silence that knows how to listen to others, rather than freeze them out in silent anger or ignore them in the interests of our own self-protection and personal aggrandizement. Silence can become such a holy way of being unholy and looking good while we do it.

The attention we give to others by showing interest in their interests or fears or preoccupations is the beginning of human community. It requires us to actually attend to another rather than simply use the encounter as an excuse to talk about ourselves alone. Attention to the other is the holiest of human acts.

The truth is that silence teaches us about ourselves and teaches us about the need of others for our attention, our help, our genuine regard for them.

Or to be more direct, silence is meant to expose us to ourselves and make us available to others at the same time.

As the Rule of Benedict reads, "In a flood of words, you will not avoid sinning." Too often, so-called conversations or discussions become arguments or empty repetitions of personal opinions. Then they deteriorate into pure folly. No one really gets heard and nothing is resolved.

When what I say will only escalate someone else's anger or when what they say is only meant to goad mine, holy silence saves the day and the soul of the relationship.

When what is being said is said with malice, no matter how "true" on one level, truth has not failed us; we have failed truth. When nothing is changing in the attitude or openness of either party, it's time for self-reflection. What is it in me that has brought this encounter to this point?

It's when we refuse to reflect on our own behaviors and motives and responses that our speech begins to give us away. Then, the language gets divisive and accusatory, loud and irascible. Then we bully and force, demean and deride. Then, as it says in the Gospel, "Thy speech betrayeth thee" (Matthew 26:73).

Then, everyone knows exactly who we are inside ourselves: petty, mean, destructive, unholy. And most of all, empty. A shell without a spine. A body and no heart.

From where I stand, the ninth step of humility may be the very core of what's needed if this country's place in the community of nations, its quality of government, the propriety of its next generation and the character of its leadership is to be saved.

Maybe this Fourth of July we should send a copy of the Rule of Benedict, or at least an embossed copy of Chapter 7 on humility, to every member of Congress and the entire administration. A good dose of reflection and a heavy layer of holy speech —minus demeaning nicknames, groundless slander and fictional braggadocio — might save the character of this country yet.

Just a thought ...

[Joan Chittister is a Benedictine sister of Erie, Pennsylvania.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Joan Chittister's column, From Where I Stand, is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 1-14, 2019** print issue under the headline: St. Benedict counsels a little less talk, a little more thought.