

The Twelve Degrees of Silence



Marie-Aimée de Jésus OCD

Edited by Lucinda M. Vardey

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Marie-Aimée de Jésus OCD

Edited with Introductions and Reflections
by Lucinda M. Vardey

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Preface

Silence has always woven its wisdom around a solitary hermit's cave and through the cells and loggias of cloisters. Hidden delicately under the rough cloth of religious habits, this wordless prayer has revealed the graces of divine love, purity of heart, strength of soul, clarity of mind and a freedom that can be expressed only by joy. Yet, all these gifts of silence are not beyond reach for those still living in the world. Today, more than ever, there is a thirst for finding peace amid the busyness of daily life, and a longing to discover a way of prayer that can become a contemplative practice in which to grow inwardly and mature spiritually. Our cloister can be our home, our silent corner, a haven to sit—like Martha's sister, Mary—at Jesus' feet, to listen intently to what he desires to speak to our hearts.

The practice of listening in prayer requires discipline and direction. To truly hear the Lord's voice, we need to prepare. Preparation helps us recognise the hindrances, the roadblocks we place in the way—the inner voices of contradiction, the 'to do's, the worries, how we allow others' ways to affect our own. We need simply to understand ourselves as we are and be complete in that understanding, mindless of exterior influences. We need to be intimate with the truth of ourselves that lies behind the door to our hearts where Jesus stands knocking to enter.²

This little book contains the wisdom of a 19th-century French Carmelite nun, Sister Marie-Aimée de Jésus, who

was drawn to listen deeply to the sounds of silence and allow them to direct her on her way to giving all to God. Desiring only 'perfection', she strove towards the riches and light of God that purified her into a state of enduring surrender and, eventually, divine union. She thereby reached the eternal shore, a place where her soul lived more fully than her physical being, and from there she abandoned herself into the abundant torrent of God's grace and love.

The call to relinquish what keeps us apart from God is common to all, as is Jesus' promise of abiding love and truth. Marie-Aimée de Jésus' twelve degrees of silence offer the means through which we can transform what Edith Stein (Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) explained was our sensory selves while keeping 'in step with the rise of the spiritual human being'.³ By following what Marie-Aimée de Jésus prescribed, we can evolve through the shedding of what can be false, superfluous and unnecessary, while developing and growing in the fruits of virtue and divine intimacy. Silence directs us away from only *doing for* God, and towards *being with* God. Silence pulls us along, slowly and surely, to its ultimate aim: the peace and selfless joy of abiding solely *in* God.⁴

The more interior is the soul, the more secure, substantial and delightful; because the more interior it is, the purer it is. And the greater the purity, the more abundantly, frequently, and generously God communicates himself.

SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS⁵

The Twelve Degrees of Silence by Marie-Aimée de Jésus

Additional reflections by Lucinda M. Vardey

The interior life

1. Silence in words
2. Silence in actions
3. Silence with one's imagination
4. Silence with one's memories
5. Silence with others
6. Silence with one's heart
7. Silence to self-interest
8. Silence of the mind
9. Silence to judgements
10. Silence to the will
11. Silence towards oneself
12. Silence with God

The interior life

There is no other word that singularly summarises the distinct quality of interior life than silence. To embrace silence is to prepare for holiness. Silence is the company on the path.

God, who is eternal, speaks only one Word.

It would be desirable to speak in correspondence with God.

All our words, directly or indirectly, should express Jesus.

How beautiful is the language of silence!

1

Silence in words

The first indispensable step towards divine union requires a practice of speaking less to the created and much to the Creator.

It is within this school of solitude and silence that the rudimentary principles are revealed. In the spirit of the Gospel and the Rule [the Carmelite Rule of Life] which the soul has embraced, the soul learns and deepens in virtue

and respect. Respect is given to the consecrated holy places, extended towards others, and most of all to the Word that rests in the bosom of the Father, the Word made flesh.

Not listening to the world and its news allows space to be silent with God, to listen only to God's voice and the voices of the holiest of souls. It is to be as silent as Mary, who was able to hear the voice of the angel.

1: GUIDED REFLECTION

**Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord;
keep watch over the door of my lips.**

PSALM 141:3

- Do you really need to speak?
- Do communicating and speaking serve an existing and developing relationship?
- Does every word you share express your heart?
- Is it possible to listen more?
- Are the environments for sharing safe and suitable for abject honesty and truth?
- Is all your conversation founded on mutual respect?
- Do you find opportunities to express yourself silently?
(For example, through contemplative and listening prayer, time in nature and with creation, adoration, being quietly present with the troubled, sick and dying)

And what is there on this earth for this soul who, touched by faith, sees through its shadows a superior world on the threshold of eternity?

My God, my God, only you are kind! Leave some moments of silence for my love.

MARIE-AIMÉE DE JÉSUS, À L'ÉCOLE DE L'AMOUR



2

Silence in actions

Silence in the workplace and slowness in our movements. Silence in walking, softness in looking, gentleness in speaking, blocking out all noise. Being silent to everything exterior is a preparation for the soul to pass into God.

From these first efforts, the soul deserves to hear the voice of the Lord. How well these first steps are rewarded! God calls the soul to the desert, which is why the soul avoids every distraction in this second stage. She steps away from noise, runs away alone to the One who is alone.

There she will taste the first taste of divine union and savour the jealousy of her God. This is the silence of contemplation.

2: GUIDED REFLECTION

Be still, and know that I am God!

PSALM 46:10

- Where can gentleness find expression in your every day?
- What is required for you to be more gentle with yourself?
- Are there incidents of hurry and hardness in your life that need transforming?
- How comfortable—or uncomfortable—is silence for you?
- What distractions keep you from being silent? Are these distractions exterior or interior or both?
- Can you put aside 2.4 hours a day (one-tenth of your day) to be alone with God?
- What changes do you need to make to put aside this time?
- Are your activities propelled by self-desire or prayerful obedience?
- Can your thoughts and activities merge into contemplative gestures?

O my Lord, what shelter have you prepared for a soul so feeble as mine, so that, independent of this incumbent body, she might elevate herself to her Creator and her All?

MARIE-AIMÉE DE JÉSUS, À L'ÉCOLE DE L'AMOUR



Silence with one's imagination

The first faculty of imagination—imagining things, imagining God—comes knocking at the closed door of the garden (Song of Songs 5:1–2), bringing with it emotions, vague impressions, fears and sadness. In solitude, the soul stays in silence.

But it is in this secluded place that the soul proves her love of the Beloved.

The soul will then present to the All-Powerful the beauties of the sky, the delights of her Lord, the scenes of Calvary, the perfections of her God.

From remaining in this silence, she becomes the silent servant of divine love.

3. GUIDED REFLECTION

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.

PSALM 42:5

- How vivid is your imagination?
- How much time in a day do you spend unaware of the present?
- How much acceptance for *what is* can live in your heart?
- Can you release yearnings to understand or work out?
- Do you fill emptiness—interior or exterior—with material satisfactions (such as entertainment or socialising)?
- Do you like being alone? If not, why?
- Is living more simply and quietly an option for you?
- Describe your own garden of Eden.
- How much of this garden is expressed in you?

The closer you come to God, the more you want to get near him. The more you unite with him, the more you desire to be united with him. The more you take part in God, if I can express myself in such a manner, the more you are unquenched.

MARIE-AIMÉE DE JÉSUS, *SUR L'UNION DIVINE ET LA TRANSFORMATION DE L'ÂME EN DIEU*

4

Silence with one's memories

We need to forget the past.

In order to do so, we need to saturate our minds with memories of all the good things God has done for us and the mercy God has extended.

Through silence, we recognise the abundance of God and live in a state of gratitude.

4: GUIDED REFLECTION

**I will bless the Lord at all times:
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.**

PSALM 34:1

- How much of the past affects your present?
- What hurts, disappointments and regrets do you carry in your heart? (List them.)
- Make a list of the prominent gifts you have received as evidence of God's generosity.
- Write a prayer of penance and a prayer of thanksgiving from these lists.
- Consider ways in which you can find closure for past hurts, disappointments and regrets.
- Consider what is required to embrace 'a gratitude attitude', especially in prayer.

The stresses and strains of contemporary life leave so many of us thirsting for peace and clarity of mind and heart. While we may sense that constant distraction hinders spiritual growth, we find it hard to cultivate attitudes of peace and stillness. We may long to experience closer communion with God, yet feel overwhelmed by the many demands on our attention.

This book invites us to nurture a spirituality of silence through the words and wisdom of the 19th-century Carmelite and mystic, Sister Marie-Aimée de Jésus. Through a combination of her measured insights and exercises for personal application by author and spiritual teacher Lucinda M. Vardey, the reader is invited on a twelve-movement journey into a silent and intimate union with God. An introduction and biography of Marie-Aimée de Jésus explores her influence on other well-known Carmelites such as the saint and martyr Edith Stein.



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