

On Silence in the Rule of St. Benedict

Introduction

Recently I came across two words with regard to silence in the **Rule** of Saint Benedict, *silentium* and *taciturnitas*. Actually there's a chapter devoted to the latter (number six), short but meaningful, especially in the original Latin. That text will be examined first. *Taciturnitas* differs significantly with a few references found in other chapters which will be examined. As for *taciturnitas*, it means maintaining silence by habit or disposition. This noun seems to contain a more personal touch which means some effort or conscious application is involved. You just don't have *taciturnitas* overnight but need to cultivate it over a period of time.

I was delighted that St Benedict used *taciturnitas* for Chapter Six of his **Rule** because it fits in perfectly with a life style or mode of living associated with a monk. On the other hand it's helpful to keep in mind that the English adjective taciturn leans a bit to the negative. That is to say, it suggests someone who not only favors silence but often is rather stern and unapproachable. Unfortunately that definition concurs with the popular perception of what a monk is like which by no means is accurate. As for *silentium*, it's more generic or comprehensive meaning silence, stillness, the lack of noise. In other words, *silentium* is equivalent to its English translation.

In light of this brief Introduction, I will examine these two words accordingly paying special attention where scriptural references are included ¹. The format is as follows. The Latin of the **Rule** is in dark red followed by the English translation in purple. Next we have in green some notations for each sentence. I hope this approach is helpful. It is my desire to keep it in line with the overall theme of this homepage, namely *lectio divina*, the slow perusal of a sacred text which supports prayer or resting in God after having read each sentence. Words will remain in their form or as they are found in the **Rule**. ²

¹I was tempted to look at the original Hebrew or Greek in order to supplement the meaning of these verses but decided against it. That would add too much to the document and unnecessarily burdening the reader.

²For example, *posui* instead of *pono*.

I include several references from the **Rule** with regard to both *silentium* and *taciturnitas*. Both are more or less intended to be supplements to this brief document. I'm full aware of the limitations and incompleteness of the text at hand. Nevertheless, it was a real joy to have gone through the **Rule** and see how both terms are essential to the life of a monk.

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***De Taciturnitate* Chapter Six**

Faciamus quod ait propheta: Dixi: Custodiam vias meas, ut non delinquam in lingua mea.

Let us do what the Prophet says: “I said, 'I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue.’”

Faciamus or let us make suggests a rousing from one's particular condition to do something usually not in accord with our wish or desire. At the same time we must forge ahead. Nevertheless, insertion of the prophet's words is intended to overcome our innate sluggishness. As for the scriptural reference—the prophet being King David—it's Ps 39.1: “I will guard my ways that I may not in with my tongue (I will bridle my mouth so long as the wicked are in my presence ³).”

Custodiam connotes protection, safe-keeping or guard which occurs in the future and pertains to the plurality of ways (*via*) which can involved considerable expenditure of energy. Here *via* has a somewhat negative sense, that our ways are not in accord with God.

The second verb which similarly is in the future is *delinquam* or to fall short of an approved moral standard. Here it pertains to the tongue or more specifically, to speech. Note the preposition “in,” literally, “in my tongue.” This implies the possibility that *delinquam* can take up residence there and directs one's very organ of speech (*lingua*), that is, for the worse.

Posui ori meo custodiam.

I have set a guard to my mouth.

The verb *posui* is in the past tense indicating that the psalmist has shown

³The parentheses represent the rest of the verse which is not in the **Rule**. I insert it to fill out the verse.

resolution. *Pono* has an air of stability and permanence about it, here referring to the psalmist's mouth compared with his tongue in the first sentence. Thus we have two blockages, as it were, signified by (*non*) *delinquam* and *posui*, the first in the future and the second in the past. Thus the psalmist has covered both ends temporally speaking. *Custodiam* signifies protection as well as guardianship.

Obmutui et humiliatus sum et silui a bonis.

“I was mute and was humbled, and kept silence even from good things” [Ps. 39.2-3].

Three verbs in rapid succession are based upon Ps 39.2, the first verse of that psalm quoted in the section above. It runs in full as “I was dumb and silent, I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse”⁴. As for the verbs, they run as follows:

-*Obmutui* also means to become incapable of speech. Here's in the past tense.

-*Humiliatus sum*: having been brought low or humbled.

-*silui*: to be silent, quiet, to be inactive. *Silui* pertains not just to what is evil or useless but even good things, *bonis*.

Hic ostendit propheta, si a bonis eloquiis interdum propter taciturnitatem debet taceri, quanto magis a malis verbis propter poenam peccati debet cessari.

Here the Prophet shows that if the spirit of silence ought to lead us at times to refrain even from good speech, so much the more ought the punishment for sin make us avoid evil words.

Hic or here which for the prophet (King David, the psalmist) refers to what he had just offered as centered around the context of Ps 39, vss. 1 and 2. The small word *si* or “if” plays a crucial role insofar as it signals that we are free to follow up on what he's about to say or better shows, *ostendit* also as to hold out for inspection.

What's at issue is *taciturnitatem* defined in the Introduction where emphasis is put upon the habit of maintaining silence. In this sentence also is the verb *taceri* is with *debet* which connotes a certain bound or keeping.

⁴Vs. 2 folds into vs. 3 as a continuous sentence as follows: “my heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.”

Quanto magis or so much more contains a kind of threat—perhaps too strong a word but nevertheless true—where punishment is introduced, *poenam* also as satisfaction for injury. Such punishment is associated with sin, *peccati* also as error, mistake or moral failure. It's designed to make us avoid words which are evil, *malus* also as harmful. The verb is *cessari*, to hold back from an action.

*Ergo, quamvis de bonis et sanctis et aedificationum eloquiis, perfectis discipulis propter **taciturnitatis** gravitatem rara loquendi concedatur licentia, quia scriptum est:*

Therefore, since the spirit of silence is so important, permission to speak should rarely be granted even to perfect disciples even though it be for good, holy edifying conversation; for it is written,

Ergo or therefore signals a shift, if you will, of moving from a statement of importance to some details as to how it's to be followed through. *Gravitatem* signifies heaviness or weight and thus importance as it pertains to *taciturnitatis* or the habit of silence. Rarely (*rara*: spaced thinly or at intervals) should permission be granted (*concedatur*: to transfer, pass into a new state or condition) to speak, *licentia* also as opportunity. This applies to those disciples who are *perfectis* also as fully grown or mature. This applies to conversation which is even described as *aedificationum*, literally as the act of building, of constructing.

In multiloquio non effugies peccatum, et alibi:

"In much speaking you will not escape sin" [Prov 10.19],

Multiloquio is best rendered as loquaciousness, much or unending speaking. If one engages in it, there's little or no escape from sin, *effugies* also as to avoid *peccatum* also as error, fault. The verse at hand runs in full as "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent,"

Mors et vita in manibus linguae.

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue" [Prov 18.21].

The verb to be is lacking. Implied is that death and life are fully present in the hands (*manibus*) of the tongue, this noun indicating manipulation.

Nam loqui et docere magistrum condecet, tacere et audire discipulum convenit.

For speaking and teaching belong to the master; the disciple's part is to be silent and to listen.

Magistrum and *discipulum*: the latter subjected to the former. Note the contrast: *loqui* and *docere* vs. *tacere* and *audire* or to speak and to teach vs. to be quiet and to hear.

Et ideo, si qua requirenda sunt a priore, cum omni humilitate et subiectione reverentiae requirantur.

And for that reason if anything has to be asked of the superior, it should be asked with all the humility and submission inspired by reverence.

Ideo or for that reason as well as therefore which follows on the heels of the distinction between master and disciple noted above. *Priore* or superior, fundamentally as the one who's first in the community. *Requirenda* also as to look for, to seek which is in the plural. *Requirantur* is used a second time and is to be qualified by *humilitate* and *subiectione* or humility, the latter literally a putting or placing under. Both are marked by *reverentiae* alternately as awe, respect.

Scurrilitates vero vel verba otiosa et risum moventia aeterna clusura in omnibus locis damnamus et ad talia eloquia aperire os non permittimus.

But as for coarse jests and idle words or words that move to laughter, these we condemn everywhere with a perpetual ban, and for such conversation we do not permit a disciple to open his mouth.

Damnamus or condemn is a strong very also as to damn. It pertains to *scurrilitates*, words which are *otiosa* and words which are marked by movement to *risum*: acting as fool or buffoon, idle words and words relative to ridicule. *Damnamus* is emphasized with *clusura* alternately as a lock or bolt which is *aeterna* or forever.

Benedict uses the first person plural with *permittimus* or (not) to permit when it comes to a disciple having a conversation, *eloquia* also as speech, eloquence.

Taciturnus

Chapter 7

Quartus humilitatis gradus est, si in ipsa oboedientia duris et contrariis rebus vel etiam quibuslibet inrogatis iniuriis, **tacite** conscientia patientiam amplectatur et sustinens non lassescat vel discedat, dicente Scriptura: Qui perseveraverit usque in finem, hic salvus erit.

The fourth degree of humility is that he hold fast to patience with a silent mind when in this obedience he meets with difficulties and contradictions and even any kind of injustice, enduring all without growing weary or running away. For the Scripture says, "The one who perseveres to the end, is the one who shall be saved" (Matt. 10:22).

Chapter 7

Nonus humilitatis gradus est, si linguam ad loquendum prohibeat monachus et **taciturnitatem** habens, usque ad interrogationem non loquatur, monstrante Scriptura quia in multiloquio non effugitur peccatum, et quia vir linguosus non dirigitur super terram.

The ninth degree of humility is that a monk restrain his tongue and keep silence, not speaking until he is questioned. For the Scripture shows that "in much speaking there is no escape from sin" (Prov. 10:19) and that "the talkative man is not stable on the earth" (Ps. 139[140]:12[11]).

Chapter 42

Quod si inventus fuerit quisquam praevaricare hanc **taciturnitatis** regulam, gravi vindictae subiaceat, excepto si necessitas hospitum supervenerit aut forte abbas alicui aliquid iusserit. Quod tamen et ipsud cum summa gravitate et moderatione honestissima fiat.

And if anyone should be found evading this rule of silence, let him undergo severe punishment. An exception shall be made if the need of speaking to guests should arise or if the Abbot should give someone an order. But even this should be done with the utmost gravity and the most becoming restraint.

Silentium

Chapter 38

Et summum fiat **silentium**, ut nullus musitatio vel vox nisi solius legentis ibi audiatur. Quæ vero necessaria sunt comedentibus et bibentibus sic sibi vicissim ministrent fratres, ut nullus indigeat petere aliquid

And let absolute silence be kept at table, so that no whispering may be heard nor any voice except the reader's. As to the things they need while they eat and drink, let the brothers pass them to one another so that no one need ask for anything.

Chapter 42

Omni tempore **silentium** debent studere monachi, maxime tamen nocturnis horis...Quod si inventus fuerit quisquam prævaricare hanc **taciturnitatis** regulam, gravi vindictæ subiaceat, excepto si necessitas hospitum supervenerit aut forte abbas alicui aliquid iusserit. Quod tamen et ipsud cum summa gravitate et moderatione honestissima fiat.

Monastics ought to be zealous for silence at all times, but especially during the hours of the night...And if anyone should be found evading this rule of silence, let her undergo severe punishment. An exception shall be made if the need of speaking to guests should arise or if the Abbess should give someone an order. But even this should be done with the utmost gravity and the most becoming restraint.

Chapter 48

Otiositas inimica est animæ, et ideo certis temporibus occupari debent fratres in labore manuum, certis iterum horis in lectione divina. Ideoque hac dispositione credimus utraque tempore ordinari: id est: ut a Pascha usque kalendas octobres a mane exeuntes a prima usque hora pene quarta laborent quod necessarium fuerit. Ab hora autem quarta usque hora qua Sextam agent, lectioni vacent. Post Sextam autem surgentes a mensa pausent in lecta sua cum omni **silentio**, aut forte qui voluerit legere sibi sic legat, ut alium non inquietet.

Idleness is the enemy of the soul; and therefore the brethren ought to be employed in manual labor at certain times, at others, in devout reading. Hence,

we believe that the time for each will be properly ordered by the following arrangement; namely, that from Easter till the calends of October, they go out in the morning from the first till about the fourth hour, to do the necessary work, but that from the fourth till about the sixth hour they devote to reading. After the sixth hour, however, when they have risen from table, let them rest in their beds in complete silence; or if, perhaps, anyone desireth to read for himself, let him so read that he doth not disturb others.

Chapter 52

Oratorium hoc sit quod dicitur, nec ibi quicquam aliud geratur aut condatur. Expleto opere Dei, omnes cum summo **silentio** exeant, et habeatur reverentia Deo, ut frater qui forte sibi peculiariter vult orare, non inpediatur alterius inprobitate. Sed et si aliter vult sibi forte secretius orare, simpliciter intret et oret, non in clamosa voce, sed in lacrimis et intentione cordis. Ergo qui simile opus non facit, non permittatur explicito opere Dei remorari in oratorio, sicut dictum est, ne alius impedimentum patiatur.

Let the oratory be what it is called, and let nothing else be done or stored there. When the Work of God is finished, let all go out with the deepest silence, and let reverence be shown to God; that a brother who perhaps desires to pray especially by himself is not prevented by another's misconduct. But if perhaps another desires to pray alone in private, let him enter with simplicity and pray, not with a loud voice but with tears and fervor of heart. Therefore, let him who does not say his prayers in this way, not be permitted to stay in the oratory after the Work of God is finished as we said, that another may not be disturbed.

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