

## Silence and Words

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Benedict includes a number of admonitions about speaking among the "Instruments of Good Works" in chapter four of his Rule:

Close your mouth on evil and perverse talk (a malo et pravo). Do not get in the habit of long-winded conversations. Do not engage in empty babbling (verba vana) or joking (verba risui apta). Don't indulge in prolonged (multum) or explosive (excussum) laughter. Listen to holy readings.... (4.51-55).

Benedict devoted chapter 6 to taciturnitas, "restraint in speech," and put the chapter between the two other chapters which he devotes to (other) major virtues, obedience and humility. There Benedict condemns vulgarity (scurrilitates), idle talk (verba otiosa) and talk which leads to laughter (verba risum moventia). Such talk is to be locked up forever. However, in chapter 6, Benedict gives special emphasis to remaining silent even about good things.

Finally, in chapter 7 three of the 12 steps of humility also concern speech and silence. A monk who has reached the ninth degree of humility prohibits his tongue to speak, and refrains from speech until he is asked a question. In much speaking brings sin and disaster. In the tenth degree, a monk is not ready and quick to laugh, and in the eleventh degree when he speaks he does so gently, without laughter, humbly, seriously, with a quiet voice, using a few, thoughtful words.

Benedict makes a number of points in these texts.

- (1) The first is obvious: one should not ever engage in evil talk.
- (2) Nor should one engaged in empty babbling or joking. This is puzzling. Perhaps it is less so if one emphasizes Benedict's word "vana" vain, useless. Some joking is therapeutic and helpful; some of it merely calls attention to oneself, or advances one's agenda, or is an excuse to avoid the effort of intelligent conversation or needed confrontation.
- (3) Benedict's strictures on laughing are also puzzling. He does not say one should not smile or laugh, but he says one should not indulge in "prolonged or explosive" laughter. There is something to Benedict's admonition. Raucous laughter often rings hollow; it often is caused by vulgarity or cruelty. Nevertheless, Kardong says: "It is frivolity that is condemned, and not good humor..... What is forbidden is raucous laughter, not all mirth." In 49.5 Benedict proposes "a toning down of joking" (scurrilitas) during Lent, "so apparently monasteries were not dour places."
- (4) Benedict's admonition to remain silent about good things stems from his emphasis on humble, obedient attentiveness, his desire that monks listen to what others are saying and to the voice of the Lord in the Scriptures or the heart. "It befits the disciple to be silent and to listen."<sup>1</sup>

Benedict's primary emphasis on restraint in speech was different from, but part of a wider concern about silence. There was to be deep silence during meals (38.5). Although silence is to be cultivated at all times, it is especially important at night (42.1) and at times of resting or reading

(48.5). There should be silence in the oratory at all times, so that people can pray without being disturbed (52.2).

Silence (*silentium*) is wider than taciturnity, which means not quiet, but restraint in speaking, or a habit of not speaking unless there is good reason. The point of taciturnity is stillness of mind and heart, so that one will be aware that God is present. A constant bombardment of words and ideas makes mindfulness almost impossible. Like humility and obedience, restraint in talking is a basis of prayer. It is also a characteristic of the prayer Benedict recommends. Like Jesus, Benedict did not like dabbling and babbling, even pious and prayerful babble.<sup>2</sup>

Worse than idle words and indifference to their meaning is the corruption of words to serve falsehood, persuade to sin or ridicule others, especially the dead and the powerless. There is something especially blasphemous about saying things like your kingdom come, forgive us our sins as we forgive, your will be done, when one's heart and deeds contradict the prayer one is saying.

Taciturnitas, disciplined use of words, is a recognition of the sacredness of words. Words are to our faith what the ark of Noah was to the living creatures within it. The words of the psalms, the Bible, the Lord's Prayer, buoy us along when we can no longer float on our own, when we cannot frame words to make sense of the world or of our inner life. These words keep chaos at bay.

If plain and honest words serve the God of truth, beautiful words serve the God of glory, the God of shimmering orioles and Mona Lisa's smile. So, it is not just the preacher and the prophet who are ministers of the word, it is also the makers of words, poets and writers, who reflect the mind of their maker in their beautiful words.