

# Silence: The Path to Peace

## From Bishop Serratelli

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In 2011, the World Health Organization issued a report on the adverse effects of environmental noise on health. We are constantly surrounded by noise. Airplanes overhead. Buses, cars and trucks on our highways. The roar of subways in our cities. Police and fire sirens. We are bombarded on every side by a cacophony of noise. And, then there are those sounds that we inflict on ourselves: iPods plugged into the ears, radios blasting music in our cars, televisions broadcasting controversy and conflict in our homes. Noise pollution is a modern plague that affects the health of each of us. Both children and adults suffer from chronic noise.



For decades, psychologists have been telling us that continual noise impairs a child's health. It hinders mental development. Those children whose homes or schools are near airports or busy trains stations develop their cognitive skills at a much slower pace than those children in a more serene environment.

Adults also suffer from a barrage of sounds. Those immersed in constant loud noises are at risk for high blood pressure, heart attacks, sleepless nights and hearing loss. Researchers claim that noise pollution triggers the release of the stress hormone cortisol from the cortex of the adrenal glands into the blood. This adversely affects a person's general health. Already in the 19th century, the famous British nurse Florence Nightingale remarked, "Unnecessary noise is the most cruel abuse of care which can be inflicted on either the sick or the well."

Our culture places us in a hotbed of noise, conflicting opinions, and the constant din of information. We are fired on from every side with the demand to listen and pay attention. And, in the end, we are stretched and our ability to concentrate for longer periods of time and think things through is diminished, if not destroyed.

Whereas research shows that noise raises our stress level and makes us tense, research also demonstrates silence puts us at ease, reduces stress and promotes general well-being. Herman Melville once wrote, "All profound things...are preceded and attended by silence." When we disengage our brain from external sensory stimuli and place ourselves in silence, we can actually pay attention to our own thoughts and ideas, our feelings and emotions. With such quiet reflection, we can go beyond the surface of the events of our lives and discover meaning and experience peace.

In the desert, Moses, fleeing in exile for having murdered an Egyptian, came upon the burning bush. Only when he stopped and stood in wonder before it did God speak to him. It was in that reflective silence, he encountered God (Ex 3:3).

The prophet Elijah, fleeing from King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, came to the same mountain where Moses had encountered God. He took shelter in a cave. There was a strong and violent wind splitting the mountain into pieces, but God was not in the wind. There was a thunderous earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Rather, in the gentle, soft, barely audible whisper, God was present. In the sound of silence, when Elijah's soul was calm and his mind attentive, he heard God reveal to him what God wanted him to do (1 Kgs 19:11-12).

Jesus made silence a priority in his life. After the Father anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit in his baptism, Jesus did not rush to begin his public ministry. Rather, he went into the solitude of the Judean desert to pray (Mk 1:12). Throughout his short public ministry, he would not be hurried into action. Prior to every major decision, Jesus set aside time to be silent in prayer before the Father.

Before choosing the twelve apostles, he spent the entire night in prayer on the side of a mountain (Lk 6:12). After the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, when the crowds clamored to crown Christ king, he went up on a mountain to pray by himself (Mt 14:23; Jn 6:15). In the last hours of his life, after the Last Supper, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray alone in silence (Mk 14:32).

Jesus has set the example for all of us. If he, in his humanity untainted by sin, needed moments of silence to think, reflect and, most importantly to pray, how much more do we! Silence does not come easily to us. We need to discipline ourselves, learn to place a pause in our busy, noise-filled lives and make meaning of our lives. This is at the heart of what it means to be truly human and the way to be filled with the presence of God.

In the words of Herman Melville, "silence is the invisible laying on of the Divine Pontiff's hands upon the world." Silence releases us from the tyranny of noise. It is not a negative. It is a positive. It is not emptiness and nothingness. It is the openness and receptivity before God. As Christopher Jamison so beautifully says, "Silence is a gateway to the soul, and the soul is the gateway to God." It is the path to peace.