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A time for silence

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“Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:11). Lent begins this year on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 14, and on the first Sunday of Lent we will hear once again the Gospel of our Lord’s 40 day fast in the desert. Jesus certainly abstained from food during this time of retreat, but perhaps more importantly he also spent time in silence.

The desert is a uniquely quiet place, and throughout history the faithful have gone into the desert to seek God in order to hear his voice more clearly. With the start of Lent, Christ invites us to enter with him into his desert retreat, to spend some time in the quiet of the desert, so that we too might know God more deeply in our lives.

Silence is in short supply in our hyperactive culture, and with all the noise around us it is easy to drown out the quiet voice of God in our hearts. Politicians and commentators constantly rage at the crises of the day and at each other. Entertainment and the media clamor for our attention and distract us from far more important things, like God, family, and friendship. All of this sound and fury can make us angry, anxious, and exhausted. It undermines the tranquility of our minds and can even cut into our spirit of charity towards each other.

But this season of Lent is a time for deeper communion with God, and therefore it should be a time for some silence too. Only in silence can we really hear God speaking to our hearts, and only in silence can we experience intimacy with him.

A good place to begin would be with our own daily schedule. Our lives can be very full and demanding with the ordinary responsibilities of family life, work, and community. But every one of us would do well to make room for a few moments of quiet at the beginning of each day, a time to invite God in, to place before him the people, duties and challenges that we will face, and to ask his guidance and blessing on our activities. In a similar way, a few moments of quiet recollection at night, gratitude for blessings, and contrition for sins, will help us to end the day in communion with God, and prepare us for the day to come.

“Be still and know that I am God.” Lent is also an opportune time to hear the Word of God through the Sacred Scriptures. Quiet reading of the Gospels or any other books of the Bible, maybe a page or two a day, will always enrich our prayer lives as we come to know God more intimately. A few minutes of silent, meditative scripture reading is within reach of even the busiest person, and will bring a little peace to our sometimes hectic days.

Silence is also very important in our celebration of the Eucharist. Arriving a few minutes early for Mass can help us to collect our thoughts and enter more fully into the sacred action that unfolds before and within us. It can also give us time to place before the Lord our specific prayer intentions. Likewise, after we have received Holy Communion, and even after Mass is over, a few moments for a quiet prayer of thanksgiving can help us to abide more fully in the grace of the sacrament that God wishes to give us.

Fasting is a normal aspect of Lenten observance, and we usually think of fasting in terms of food and drink. But perhaps our observance of Lent this year might take a different turn. In an age when we have become so attached to our phones, tablets, computers, and other devices, it might be a good time to detach and fast from the “noise” that these create in our lives. This Lent might be a time to set them aside or turn them off, even if only for a little while each day. The world will keep on turning and our lives will keep rolling too, but we might do well to quiet the noise and give ourselves a chance for some peace and recollection. And most importantly, we would also have a better chance at hearing the voice of our Lord, who speaks to us most personally in the quiet of our souls.

Turning down the noise of technology can also be an opportunity for more meaningful interaction within our own families and among our friends. With the television and radio filling our homes with noise, and with the distractions of social media, it is easy to ignore those whom God has placed in our

lives. But with a little intentional silence, we might be more able to converse and listen to one another, and learn more about what is happening in the lives of our loved ones.

Of course, this invitation to silence is not a ticket to ignore others, nor to disregard those who need our attention. As Christians, we do not shut ourselves off from the world in which we live. We should be informed and engaged in this world, bringing our faith to bear on the important issues of our times. We have responsibilities of charity, and our Lord would never ask us to turn away from a brother or sister in need. But, we can be much more attuned to the voices of those around us if we are first attuned to the voice of God.

In his book *The Power of Silence*, Cardinal Robert Sarah wrote: “Christ lived for thirty years in silence. Then, during his public life, he withdrew to the desert to listen and speak with his Father. The world vitally needs those who go off into the desert. Because God speaks in silence.”

As we begin the forty-day retreat of Lent, let us pray for the grace of silence and for stillness of heart, so that we might experience the grace and mystery of God and welcome him more readily into our lives.