

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Genesis 3:9-15.20 / Luke 1: 26-38)
08.12.2021

Last week, in the midst of an extremely busy schedule in France, God's providence arranged things to bring me back to what is essential in the midst of much busyness: simply being silently present to the Lord; *taking* a moment in which to be aware of God's *being* and the ways in which He is forever silently present to us. Let me explain...

Last Thursday our little team of canonical visitators (the Abbot General, Dom Andrea and myself) had to meet with someone who lived at a distance from the monastery we were visiting. We agreed to meet with this person at a halfway distance between where he was and we were. Halfway was the well-known French town of Lourdes. As night fell, at the end of our meeting, we (the visitators) made our way to the Grotto of Massabielle for a short moment of quiet prayer. However pressed we were for time – for we had further meetings that night – it was unthinkable to be in Lourdes and not halt there for a little while. When we entered the area around the Grotto, what struck me (and the two others with me) was the quality of silence reigning in that sacred space. When we left the Grotto we remarked to each other how it seemed to us as if we could *hear the sound of the dense silence* that permeated that place of meeting between Mary and Bernadette Soubirous.

As I said earlier, praying before the *Rock of Lourdes*, I found myself brought back to something essential, something that really matters in the Christian life: our simply being quietly present to the Lord, aware of the fact that He is always with us, ever simply quietly present to us.

How important it is for all of us – even (indeed especially) as we busy ourselves in the Lord's work – to take time just *to be...* just to be quietly present to God, aware that He is ever and always there with and for us – quietly present to us. As I say that, the following words of Sacred Scripture come to mind: *Be still and know that I am God*. It strikes me that it is so important for us to open our hearts to the Lord's grace which is made available to us freely each and every time we turn to Him in expectant hope... and, in His presence, just to be still and know that God is God.

I am sure that Mary experienced this truth in the house of Nazareth when the Angel of the Lord appeared to her. It seems to me that Bernadette also experienced this truth when she responded so simply to the Lady's invitation to do her the favour of coming to the Grotto – that privileged place of meeting indicated to her. Massabielle was *a place apart*. It was *a place of meeting* with the Lord's graciousness; a place *'away from the madding crowd'*. The Grotto of the Apparition was situated in a quasi-desert area, on the outskirts of the town.

You will recall how when *The Lady* appeared to Bernadette at the Grotto of Lourdes, she revealed her identity to the poor girl whom she had bidden to return to meet with her several times with these words: *I am the Immaculate Conception*. You may also recall how Bernadette didn't really know what *The Lady* meant by the words she used to convey her identity. The phrase employed was actually beyond Bernadette's comprehension. Only later did she come to grasp their meaning and fully understand who *The Lady* was.

Bernadette's understanding of the Immaculate Conception was not that of the dogmatic theologians or Church Pastors who had declared the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Bernadette's discovery of the meaning of Mary's Immaculate Conception has to be situated at another level of understanding: that of a heartfelt encounter with the mystery of God's grace at work in the lowly handmaid of Nazareth, whom the Lord had chosen to be the mother of His incarnate Son.

The words *Immaculate Conception* were not those of Bernadette's habitual vocabulary. Even though she didn't fully grasp their meaning, she nonetheless fully savoured their sense –

something verified by the deep peace she felt in her heart as she memorised them so as to be able to relay the message she had received to the Church authorities (the Parish Priest and Bishop) to whom she was sent by *The Lady*.

I wonder if we understand any better than Bernadette did the title *The Lady* (Mary) gave to herself.

I'm inclined to think that the mystery of God's grace at work in Mary's favour in her Immaculate Conception is as much a mystery for us – something as far beyond our understanding – as it was for the ignorant adolescent Bernadette.

I dare to say that at the end of the day perhaps the only reaction we can have to the declaration of Mary's Immaculate Conception is that which the revelation made to her inspired in Bernadette: a response of prayerful trust and of humble silence. As much as any of us can do before the declaration of Mary's Immaculate Conception is to quietly savour in the depths of our hearts the wonder of God's grace at work in His lowly handmaid, Mary.

There is a saying that makes the claim *silence is golden*. That saying points to just how precious silence is in all our lives. This is true in every domain of our existence, but especially at the level of what is called the spiritual life. The Bible makes the point over and over again that silence is golden. It is a truly precious gift, for, all so often, it is in the silence that God makes His presence felt and His voice heard.

In the famous story recounted for us in chapter 19 of the First Book of Kings it is brought home to us that sometimes silence can be the hardest thing to hear and, at the same time, quite paradoxically, the most clamorous proclamation of God's presence. You may recall the story. In any case, let me refresh your memory. We read: *The Lord said: Go and stand on the mountain before the Lord; for there, I, the Lord, will pass by*. The text goes on to tell us: *There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing the rocks before the Lord – but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake – but the Lord was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire – but the Lord was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound. When Elijah heard this (the light silent sound), he hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave, for He realised that in the light silent sound the Lord was present; He passed by!*

To quote a saint much admired by John-Paul II and acclaimed by devotees of the way of Divine Mercy, the Polish saint, St Faustina: *In order to hear the voice of God, one has to have silence in one's soul and to keep silence; not a gloomy silence, but an interior silence; that is to say, recollection in God...* In her *Spiritual Diary* St Faustina goes on to note: *God does not give Himself to a chattering soul which, like the drone of a beehive, buzzes around but gathers no honey*. For this reason the importance of seeking to develop a deeper interior life must be advocated. We must seek out moments of gentle peace and silence wherein the Lord dwells.

I see Advent as a favourable time for us to seek to develop quiet within our hearts. So much clamour and noise surrounds us during these days of *Jingle Bells*. In the place of *Jingle Bells* we need to attune to what we have been referred to as *The Seven Bells of Advent*: the great *O Antiphons* which hail the One who comes to be with His people.

During all these Advent days – but especially on this feast day of Mary, the Mother of Jesus... Mary who mediated at all times, *treasuring everything concerning Jesus in her heart* – let us seek to be quiet and to listen. Let us strive to hear the voice of the Lord who speaks to us – precisely in the silence; in the quiet of our hearts – that's to say at the deepest level of our being.

God speaks in silence. Someone captured this thought well in the following affirmation which I once came across and noted on a prayer card: *Silence is God's language, though secret, yet living and powerful.*

Let me add that it is not only the Lord who speaks in the silence. In the silence we too can speak... we can speak to God and to each other. Rightly, someone once declared: *Silence is so powerful a language that it reaches the throne of the Living God.*

Many of us will know from our experience of human relationships how silence shared with someone we love can be the deepest exchange open to us as we communicate at the level of *heart to heart* with that loved one. Silence shared can convey what words would never manage to communicate.

The word of God – the word from God – I hear addressed to all of us this year as we celebrate Mary's Immaculate Conception is a call to live in listening silence. It is a call to listen to the Lord speaking to us in so many quiet, gentle, discreet and humble ways. It befalls us to listen... to listen and to hear the Lord's word. For that to happen we need to be attentive, truly attuned to God's grace at work deep down within us. We also need to be awake and attentive to what God has to say to us in every person we encounter.

The Book of Jeremiah's Lamentations contains a little verse which I feel led to share with you this morning as I draw this meditation to a close. I think of that little verse which reads: *It is good to wait with silence for the salvation of God.*

I believe that is how Mary waited for the coming of our God in the flesh: in silence! St Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort asserts: *Silence ever reigned in Mary's heart and soul.* He writes of *Mary's deep humility, which made her prefer seclusion, maintain silence, submit to every eventuality and put herself in the last place.*

I am not 'big into' Marian apparitions – certainly not those in which Mary is said to speak as if delivering a telegraphic message to the world each and every day! But since I mentioned Lourdes, this morning, let me refer to two other Marian apparitions when it comes to the one whom we could call *Our Lady of Silence*.

The first I refer to is that which is said to have taken place at Knock – here in Ireland. At Knock Mary appeared as one who did not open her mouth. Not a word was spoken, and yet the poor and suffering people of the day drew such great comfort from what they perceived to be Mary's gentle presence to them. The crowd who stood looking at the gable wall of Knock parish church saw what Mary had for mission to draw to their attention: the Lamb of God; the One who offered Himself for the whole of humanity; the One who carried their suffering upon Himself. The second apparition I refer to is that which Alphonse Ratisbonne experienced. This sceptical unbeliever, who came from Jewish background, was suddenly and dramatically converted by *the Silent Virgin*, as he called Mary, *Daughter of Israel... Our Lady of Sion*. He later testified: *She did not speak, but I understood everything.* What an eloquent testimony to the power and wonder of silence and its capacity to convey a message. Mary did not speak, but Alphonse Ratisbonne understood everything!

For St John-Paul to remind us: *In a noisy world filled with messages of all kinds, Mary's witness enables us to appreciate a spiritually rich silence and fosters a contemplative spirit.*

May Mary, *The Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Silence* (a gift which is both poor and rich at the same time) help us live these days in quiet hope of and eager expectation for the dawning of this world's salvation in the coming of our God.

A Gregorian chant used at Christmas time captures well the importance of our waiting upon the Lord in silence when it has us sing: *Dum medium silentium... When a profound silence enveloped all things and night was in the middle of its course, Your all-powerful Word, O Lord, bounded from heaven's royal throne.*

It is good for us to wait in silence – as Mary did – to welcome the Word sent forth from heaven.

Amen!