

Afterword to *The Power of Silence*

by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

Ever since I first read the Letters of Saint Ignatius of Antioch in the 1950s, one passage from his Letter to the Ephesians has particularly affected me: "It is better to keep silence and be [a Christian] than to talk and not to be. Teaching is an excellent thing, provided the speaker practices what he teaches. Now, there is one Teacher who spoke and it came to pass. And even what He did silently is worthy of the Father. He who has truly made the words of Jesus his own is able also to hear His silence, so that he may be perfect: so that he may act through his speech and be known through his silence" (15, 1f.). What does that mean: to hear Jesus's silence and to know him through his silence? We know from the Gospels that Jesus frequently spent nights alone "on the mountain" in prayer, in conversation with his Father. We know that his speech, his word, comes from silence and could mature only there. So it stands to reason that his word can be correctly understood only if we, too, enter into his silence, if we learn to hear it from his silence.

Certainly, in order to interpret Jesus's words, historical knowledge is necessary, which teaches us to understand the time and the language at that time. But that alone is not enough if we are really to comprehend the Lord's message in depth. Anyone today who reads the ever-thicker commentaries on the Gospels remains disappointed in the end. He learns a lot that is useful about those days and a lot of hypotheses that ultimately contribute nothing at all to an understanding of the text. In the end you feel that in all the excess of words, something essential is lacking: entrance into Jesus's silence, from which his word is born. If we cannot enter into this silence, we will always hear the word only on its surface and thus not really understand it.

As I was reading the new book by Robert Cardinal Sarah, all these thoughts went through my soul again. Sarah teaches us silence—being silent with Jesus, true inner stillness, and in just this way he helps us to grasp the word of the Lord anew. Of course he speaks hardly at all about himself, but now and then he does give us a glimpse into his interior life. In answer to Nicolas Diat's question, "At times in your life have you thought that words were becoming too cumbersome, too heavy, too noisy?," he answers: "In my prayer and in my interior life, I have always felt

the need for a deeper, more complete silence. ... The days of solitude, silence, and absolute fasting have been a great support. They have been an unprecedented grace, a slow purification, and a personal encounter with ... God. ... Days of solitude, silence, and fasting, nourished by the Word of God alone, allow man to base his life on what is essential." These lines make visible the source from which the cardinal lives, which gives his word its inner depth. From this vantage point, he can then see the dangers that continually threaten the spiritual life, of priests and bishops also, and thus endanger the Church herself, too, in which it is not uncommon for the Word to be replaced by a verbosity that dilutes the greatness of the Word. I would like to quote just one sentence that can become an examination of conscience for every bishop: "It can happen that a good, pious priest, once he is raised to the episcopal dignity, quickly falls into mediocrity and a concern for worldly success. Overwhelmed by the weight of the duties that are incumbent on him, worried about his power, his authority, and the material needs of his office, he gradually runs out of steam."

Cardinal Sarah is a spiritual teacher, who speaks out of the depths of silence with the Lord, out of his interior union with him, and thus really has something to say to each one of us.

We should be grateful to Pope Francis for appointing such a spiritual teacher as head of the congregation that is responsible for the celebration of the liturgy in the Church. With the liturgy, too, as with the interpretation of Sacred Scripture, it is true that specialized knowledge is necessary. But it is also true of the liturgy that specialization ultimately can talk right past the essential thing unless it is grounded in a deep, interior union with the praying Church, which over and over again learns anew from the Lord himself what adoration is. With Cardinal Sarah, a master of silence and of interior prayer, the liturgy is in good hands.

Vatican City State, Octave of Easter 2017

Benedict XVI, Pope Emeritus