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## *Silence and Solitude*

**BY MATT SCHWAB, INTERN-IN-SERVICE**

*Then the LORD said: Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD; the LORD will pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains crushing 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 he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. —Kings 19:11*

From the moment my phone jars me awake with the sound of Kanye West proclaiming, “Good Morning” to the thoughts that cloud my consciousness as I drift off to sleep, my life is filled with noise. In an age where constant communication and accessibility are expectations, this presence of noise, both internal and external, seems to leak into all aspects of our lives. It can even interfere with our relationship with God, causing us to run into the same problem Elijah faced. An argument I’ve heard from several atheist poses the question: “why does the God of present day seem so inactive and silent compared to the God depicted in the Bible?”

It’s a question I think all of us have wondered at one time or another; however, when we ask this question, we make the same incorrect expectation Elijah did: we expect a loud, easily accessible God. We expect a God that can overpower the headphones we wear as we walk to and from class. We expect a God that can woo us away from our textbooks or extracurricular activities. We expect a God that can wow us more than \$2 burritos at Chipotle (which is objectively the greatest thing since sliced bread). In other words, we want a God that does all the work. However, if we truly wish to connect with our Creator then we have to take a bit of ownership; we must work a little bit harder to hear God’s word, which, as Elijah discovered, finds us as a “light, silent sound.”

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## Turning Down the Volume

Silence and solitude are key tools for exploring your interior life, your inner spiritual life through which your connection to God can become very powerful and personal. Being able to “hear God’s word” is a simplification of what truly accessing your interior life can do for you. It will certainly make you feel more connected to God, but it will also make you feel more in tune with yourself, your family and friends, and the world. You’ll notice things you have previously ignored. You’ll be able to truly appreciate the beauty in the world, and aspects of Mass might touch you in new ways. Exploring your interior life is not about establishing a deeper relationship with God. Rather, it is about turning down the noise, the interference, from the world around you and becoming more aware of the already deep and intimate connection you have with God.

A recent example from my own life of the importance of silence and solitude occurred shortly after moving into the CSC. Spending most of my time there makes it very easy to think about my spiritual life, partially because almost every



conversation I have deals with God in some way. For the first part of the internship though, I actually felt pretty distant from God. This was concerning to me because logic would dictate that if you live in a church, spirituality should come easier. God should feel closer, not absent in your life. Eventually, I realized what was wrong: living at the CSC, being so involved with programming at the CSC meant that if I was awake, I was interacting with people. My interior life, my opportunity for silence and solitude had all but disappeared. What has really allowed me to feel God's presence in my life again is making a concerted effort to make time for silence and solitude amidst this busy, extroverted internship. The way I finally accomplished this is taking time when I am locking up the CSC at night to explore my interior life. As I walk the halls, I find myself uncontrollably thinking about what an incredible place this is and how active God has been in my life. Sometimes, I'll slip into the Chapel and sit in the dark for awhile, the shadows and silence heightening the sacredness of the space. I end up going to bed just feeling more whole and at peace with the world.

## Silence and Solitude in Jesus' Life

This practice of quieting oneself in order to be more aware of God’s presence is something even Jesus did, which at first might be a bit surprising. If anyone would be able to hear God’s voice over the noise of everyday life, you would expect it to be the Son of God. However, throughout the Bible, especially at His most trying times, we see Jesus setting off on His own to contemplate God’s will in silence. These moments are also points in Jesus’ life where He experiences the most spiritual and personal growth. After His baptism, Jesus spends 40 days in the desert alone where He is tempted by the devil. He resists these temptations and grows from this experience precisely because He was alone.

And time after time in the Gospels, we see Jesus going off by Himself to pray when the pressures and stress of His ministry became too great.

***“However, the report went around concerning Him all the more; and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities. So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.” Luke 5:15-16***

Even in His darkest hour, when Jesus must come to terms with His impending death, He tells His disciples to leave Him and keep watch in the garden.

***“Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, “Sit here while I go and pray over there.” -Matthew 26:36***

At a time when most of us would turn to others seeking comfort, Jesus prefers solitude. He does this because on His most trying night, Jesus turns to God for the comfort and understanding He will need to face what is to come. His whole life is a testimony to the idea that silence and solitude allow us to become closer to God, to hear God’s voice and feel God’s love. And if the Son of God found this practice helpful, perhaps we should all try to incorporate it more into our own lives. But how do we do that?



### How do I practice silence and solitude?

There are many different ways to utilize silence and solitude. For me, sometimes it takes the form of sitting in the chapel at night. Other times, it is something more active like going for a run by myself. The key is to find a method that allows you to contemplate your life and your faith without getting distracted by the noise that surrounds you. Quiet meditation in nature or yoga are both great options. There are many also many different prayer exercises designed to assist in silent contemplation. These include the Daily Examen and centering prayer (guidelines are listed below). Retreats are also a great opportunity to practice silence and solitude. The CSC puts on several major retreats every year including Immersion and Awakening, both excellent opportunities to connect more deeply with yourself, God, and the world around you.

### Centering Prayer

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.



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