

Silence of the Mind and Word of Prayer

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Abstract: The silence of the mind is the heart's dialogue with God. A peaceful mind resides in a peaceful heart, communicating with God through "unspeakable words," as the Apostle Paul affirms. This paper explores the connection among actions, words, and silence as depicted in Saint Gregory the Theologian's Twelfth Homily, aiming to understand what he describes as 'the silence of the mind,' a result of spiritual insight and an expression of contemplative prayer.

Keywords: Mind; Word; Spirit; Saint Gregory the Theologian; contemplative prayer; heart; deeds; words and silence

Introduction

Prayers take many forms and stages. The Holy Fathers describe prayer as "the plowing of the soul." When we understand the relationship between the mind and heart from Philocaly's perspective, it becomes clear why contemplative prayer is central to spiritual life. The Holy Fathers teach that prayer is the breath of the soul, rooted in faith and strengthened by hope. It is the most accessible way to receive God's love. As it is said, "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (*Matthew 4:4*), indicating that prayer is spiritual nourishment. Prayer also helps believers discern God's will. In discovering His will, we see that without the forgiveness of our debts to God and others—meaning repentance—no one can truly fulfill God's plan. Therefore, we ask God to reveal His will through His

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commandments. Without practicing His commandments, prayer becomes empty talk.

From the outset, it's crucial to remember that prayer is a spiritual gift. The apostles likely asked Christ to teach them how to pray. By explaining the shift from the old law—'an eye for an eye'—to the new—'love your enemy,' Christ showed that mercy, forgiveness, and fasting are vital to the spiritual life, which is rooted in prayer. The Lord's Prayer encapsulates the entire Christian spiritual journey: "Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?', for the pagans seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things; but seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (*Matthew* 6:31–34). Essentially, the Lord's Prayer teaches us to resist temptation by doing the Father's will. It explains why, after Jesus' forty days of fasting and temptation, His disciples were given the Lord's Prayer to combat human weaknesses—highlighting vulnerability: greed, which separates man from God through fleshly pleasures; self-sufficiency, which does so through personal will; and disobedience, through pride of mind. Clearly, mercy that overcomes greed, forgiveness that removes selfishness, and fasting that prevents disobedience make the Lord's Prayer central to the spiritual life.

The journey toward the Kingdom of God begins with mortifying the body, which, in turn, fosters the soul's enlightenment and the perfection of the mind on both ontological and existential levels. This mortification involves consuming what God commands. Just as the body needs wheat bread, the soul requires spiritual nourishment—the Word of God. Importantly, this spiritual sustenance must be requested: "Give us this day our daily bread!" Hence, the prayer emphasizes "our daily bread." The Lord's Prayer invites believers to embrace a new life in which following God's will unlocks the Kingdom of Heaven. However, the journey to salvation is often long and difficult. After the Ascension, the apostles fully understood that the Lord's Prayer embodies Christ's description as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." They also recognized that asking in His name is essential for entering the Kingdom of Heaven, as He

declared: “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (*John* 15:7).

Abba Evagrius and Contemplative Prayer

To better understand the connection between the silence of the mind and the word of prayer, we have chosen to start with a statement by Saint Gregory the Theologian that fully explains what he calls “philosophizing through silence.” A man educated in “external” philosophy who, as is well known, clarified the relationship between Greek philosophy and “true philosophy,” Christianity, especially through his well-known theological discourses, will guide us in understanding when we should speak and, more importantly, when we should remain silent in God’s presence. An Athonite commentary on Abba Evagrius’s insights on prayer will serve as a kind of “prologue” to my interpretation. I have chosen a text by Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, who provides a highly instructive interpretation of several sections on prayer from Abba Evagrius’s work.² While recognizing that he was somewhat influenced by Greek philosophy and that he was ordained archdeacon by Saint Gregory the Theologian, I will emphasize aspects of the spiritual life that clarify the foundation of contemplative prayer. Since the Divine Liturgy is the place where “prayer is man’s personal struggle with God,”³ we understand that the believer, to attain His Kingdom, will ask in faith for help to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Christ. The cross primarily signifies not pursuing one’s own will but God’s, then accepting and enduring the consequences in a Christian way.

Prayer was regarded by Abba Evagrius as one of the four virtues, alongside love, humility, and discernment. While in the context of Greek philosophical life, virtues were attained through one’s own effort, in the context of the Christian life, nothing can be attained without God’s grace. Furthermore, we are told that without the virtue of discernment, all other virtues are worthless. But knowing that “the spiritual life is, of course, something simple,

² Emilianos of Simonopetra, *On Prayer, Commentary on Abba Evagrius*, trans. Agapie Corbu (Arad: St. Nectarios Publishing House, 2018).

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

complete, not fragmented,”⁴ we will understand that the four virtues are inseparable “by grace.” Indeed, like all other Christian virtues, spiritual discernment is received as a gift from God, not earned through one’s own effort. The primacy of the virtue of discernment in the order of spiritual practice is thus presupposed by the primacy in the contemplative order of the virtue of prayer, which is achieved only through humble reflection and the love of God.

“Prayer is the conversation (*ὁμιλία*) of the mind with God,” says Abba Evagrius.⁵ When we view the work from God’s grace perspective and consider its initial effect on humans, we observe a pattern: it involves a process of “going forth and returning, stretching out and uniting, a unifying turning and inclining of the mind toward God,”⁶ as something that occurs in practice. The mind “speaks” and converses through words, thoughts, and reasoning, but in true prayer, “speaking with God” is straightforward and unmediated; it’s an ontological, not psychological, “state” where ‘the conversation (*ὁμιλία*) of the mind means the mind remaining within itself, not spilling outwards through reasoning, so that the whole mind may be raptured, may cleave to God.’⁷ Prayer is a spiritual experience of encountering God through or in the silence of the mind, rooted in faith rather than reasoning. First and foremost, to pray, we need faith: “And whatever you ask for in prayer, believing (emphasis added), you will receive” (*Matthew* 21:22). Additionally, we know that true prayer is impossible if our hearts are filled with passion or if we are impure. We also understand that only the fulfillment of God’s commandments can cleanse us of passions; therefore, practical work cannot be separated from contemplation—each complements the other with different emphases.

When Archimandrite Emilianos Simonopetritos reminds us that “we must desire God, and not our own wills, so that we may pray,”⁸ it clarifies why, in the Lord’s Prayer, we find only the beginning of the journey toward the Kingdom of God—an indispensable starting

⁴ Emilianos of Simonopetra, *On Prayer*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

point for salvation (what believers call a “good beginning”). Seeing prayer as one of the believer’s most challenging spiritual works—the work without which the believer cannot renounce themselves, that is, the worldly spirit—we understand why the Savior says: “But when you pray, go into your inner room, and having shut the door, pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (*Matthew* 6:6). The “inner room” is the heart, and the “door” is the mind; thus, the “reward” from the Lord confirms the renewal of the heart and mind through the grace of the Holy Spirit, for we are told: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, for He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (*Romans* 8:26–27). Therefore, understanding Christ’s own teaching on prayer, we also see why the words “Thy will be done!” embody the essence of true prayer. Essentially, the “heart” of prayer is harmonizing the human will with the will of God, as Saint Gregory the Theologian describes regarding the work of the Holy Spirit within us in his Twelfth Discourse.

Contemplative Prayer as Foundation of Spiritual Life

Unraveling the spiritual meaning of the phrase “I will philosophize through silence” can help us understand the source of contemplative prayer. But before reflecting on the spiritual words of Saint Gregory the Theologian, let us first recall the words of Christ the Savior. “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes, so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (*John* 15:1–5)

This statement, “Without Me you can do nothing,” forms the foundation of spiritual life. It’s crucial to remember that the

Savior also says, “You are already clean through the word that I have spoken to you,” and “Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.” The Worker, the Father who prunes the branches through the Word, and the Son of the Father and the Son of Man—these words illustrate the essence of spiritual living: obedient purification through the Word of God. Saint Paul reminds us that “no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (*1 Cor.* 12:3). Through the Word, God’s divinity is revealed to us. This shows that the Son of Man embodies the whole Truth—meaning the Truth, the Son of God, and the Son of Man are one, the visible image of the invisible Father. By stating, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (*John* 5:17), Jesus affirms His divinity and indicates that human cooperation with God is essential for spiritual fruitfulness. The Father’s work is united with that of the Word and the Holy Spirit, for God is One in Three Persons. Recognizing the distinction between the created and the uncreated, between essence and person, essence and uncreated work, it is important to note that uncreated work belongs to divine essence. Since the Father is one with the Son in essence, God’s speech can only be heard “in Christ,” but solely through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Essentially, every spiritual work of a believer is a joint effort with God, but only “in Christ” and through the Holy Spirit’s grace, without which we cannot recognize Christ as God. All spiritual work is achieved “in Christ,” the “vine,” into which believers are “grafted”, the branches that bear fruit according to their ability, through the Holy Spirit’s gifts. Prayer, for instance, is a prime example. “There are varieties of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of works, but it is the same God who works all in all” (*1 Cor.* 12:4–6). The many gifts (and uncreated works) serve to unite believers with God, through the variety of charisms received in the same Spirit, who “works all things in all.” The “prayer of prayers,” a simple, unified prayer, becomes a work in which all charisms unify as “one mind,” through the Holy Spirit’s grace, which is, in essence, “the mind of Christ.”

Once again, before examining the words of Saint Gregory the Theologian, let us remember what Saint John the Theologian

said about the time before Jesus' crucifixion. He told his followers, "Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, and believe in Me" (*John* 14:1). These words, "Believe in God; believe also in Me," explain the answers to the questions asked by Thomas and Philip: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (*John* 14:7). Jesus Christ, the Word, is the only mediator between humans and God. That's why, after His Ascension, He promises the disciples that He will ask the Father to send them "another Comforter...the Spirit of Truth" (*John* 14:16–17).

The Savior highlights a crucial point: "These things I have spoken to you while I am with you; but the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have told you" (*John* 14:25–26). The Holy Spirit, called the Spirit of Truth, is "the other Comforter" sent by the Father in Christ's name, who will teach by recalling all He has spoken. Apostle Paul rebuked the "foolish Galatians" (*Gal.* 3:1), asking, "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (*Gal.* 3:3–4). He further reminds them that "the whole law is summed up in one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (...) If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not be lovers of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another" (*Gal.* 5:15; 25–26). Therefore, true prayer cannot occur without Christ's help through the grace of the Holy Spirit, "the Other Comforter."

Prayer and Mental Silence

Offering yourself completely so the Spirit can guide and control your words, actions, and thoughts as needed. Gregory the Theologian views himself as a finely tuned instrument of God, shaped by the Spirit. Yesterday, the Spirit's work was silence, and he reflected through quietude. Today, if the Spirit touches his mind, his speech will reflect philosophical thought. He neither speaks excessively nor remains too silent but instead allows his inner state—guided by the Mind, Word, and Spirit, the one God—to

determine when to speak or remain silent.⁹ To clarify the connection between prayer and mental silence, we'll also reference the "Preface" of the *Mystagogy* by St. Maximus the Confessor. Acknowledging that he could not fully express everything revealed by the elder, whom he describes as a "philosopher and teacher of all doctrine," Saint Maximus admits that only God's grace allowed him to discuss these teachings.¹⁰

"Moreover, I believe that you, possessing the right judgment, would not think that I can understand or speak beyond what divine grace bestows, aligned with the capacity of the one given. Although He Who grants and teaches is the Most High, God will guide us in our words and thoughts—the sole Reason behind all who think and are considered, the only Word for those who speak and are spoken to, and the only Life for those who live and receive life¹¹. Only divine "grace from above" gives words the power to transmit the meanings of the mysterious Christian teachings into the soul. Saint Maximus also began his "Preface" by recognizing that he genuinely understood what Scripture reveals, affirming that "the wise man becomes wiser, using every opportunity, and the righteous increase his knowledge" (Proverbs 9:9),¹² if he has received grace from above. Thus, human words can serve only as mediators of spiritual truths through divine grace. It is essential to highlight that, as St. Gregory the Theologian states, only with "the grace from above" and under God's guidance can we truly speak of the mysteries.

We now see that "philosophizing through silence" and "philosophizing through words" serve as the "door" to spiritual experience, which "closes" and "opens" only "at the will of the Mind, the Word, and the Spirit, the Godhead of one essence." When the mind is touched by "that master artist, the Spirit," one can philosophize through words; otherwise, philosophy is expressed through silence. The "touching" of the mind by the Holy Spirit represents man's freedom to follow God's will by practicing spiritual

⁹ Gregory the Theologian, "Homily XXII," in *Homilies* (Bucharest: Editura de Suflet, 2013), 73.

¹⁰ Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogy* (Bucharest: Orthodox Biblical and Missionary Institute Press, 2017), 105.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹² Gregory the Theologian, "Homily XXII," 103.

teachings. Consequently, the faithful's mind becomes a "door" that opens or closes by free will, belonging to someone "neither too talkative" nor "too silent," and understanding that when it's time to speak, he must not guard his mouth like the uneducated. When God works silently, man must also act quietly, avoiding speech but engaging in silent prayer and contemplation of God. If Gregory the Theologian states, "I am not (...) so silent and uneducated," it affirms the importance of doing God's will daily through faith. If "philosophizing through speech" is reason purified by following commandments, then "philosophizing through silence" is contemplative prayer, as the mind always seeks God, whose knowledge is infinite. Let's recall the quote: Does He communicate with my mind today? My words will be heard, and I will express my thoughts through speech. I am neither so talkative that I feel compelled to speak when He works silently nor so silent and unlearned that I would remain silent during the Word. Instead, I open and close my door according to the will of the Mind, the Word, and the Spirit—the one and same Godhead.

Conclusion

"Philosophizing through silence" describes the mind contemplating the Word with the Holy Spirit's grace. The believer remains silent when contemplating God's Omnipresence. Thus, silence and speech aligned with God's will define the limits of spiritual philosophizing. Saint Gregory the Theologian reflects, "Yesterday, His work in me was silence, and I philosophized through silence." This form of contemplative prayer aligns with Saint Paul's account: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago, whether in the body, I do not know; whether out of the body, I do not know; God knows, this man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know this man, whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows, that he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (2 Cor. 12:2–5).

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