

Homily based on the readings from August 9, 2026 (1 Kings 19.9a, 11-13a; Romans 9.1-5; Matthew 14.22-33)

As some of you may be aware, every member of the clergy – deacon, priest, or bishop – is typically expected to participate in some sort of spiritual retreat every year. This is not just a chance for them to get away from the office – but an opportunity for prayer and reflection, free from the weight of their daily responsibilities. Several years ago, shortly after I began studying for the diaconate, I made arrangements to attend my very first retreat. After some research, I decided to visit Saint Joseph's Abbey – a Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. Months in advance, I rearranged my work schedule and set aside an entire week for the experience. As a Catholic convert and a potential deacon, I was exceptionally eager to encounter monastic life for the first time. The retreat was scheduled to begin on Monday, March 16 – 2020. As you can probably guess, I was not – in fact – able to go on retreat that week, or for many weeks to come.

There was, however, one minor consolation. On the afternoon of March 15, I actually received a telephone call from one of the Trappist brothers – explaining that the retreat had been cancelled and apologizing for their inability to host me. In a very small way, the call itself was a remarkable experience. As you may know, the Trappists – more formally known as the Cistercians of the Strict Observance – are famous for the fact that they almost never speak aloud. Having a conversation with a Trappist – let alone having one of them call you personally – is an *exceptionally* rare occurrence.

This whole situation – and the existence of such communities in the first place – raises an important question: what is the value of *silence*? Why would anyone willingly refrain from speaking with other human beings – often for years, if not for an entire lifetime? Words, of course, are wonderful things. Jesus himself, at the beginning of the Gospel of John, is referred to as the *Word made flesh*. Although we often take it for granted, the ability for individuals to communicate – the divine gift of *language* – is utterly *astounding*. In fact, one of the most memorable

*punishments* God inflicted on his wayward children was at the Tower of Babel, when he “confused the speech of all the world,” making entire nations incomprehensible to each other.

There is an essential distinction, though, that we must never overlook: *language* is not the same thing as *noise*. As Robert Cardinal Sarah, the former Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, once put it: “The *word* is not just a *sound*; it is a *person* and a *presence*.” In other words, *language* is authentic communication between *people*; *noise* is just acoustical disruption. Language can certainly involve sound, but it also can be written or signed – or, best of all, prayed. To borrow an expression from Saint John Henry Newman, language is *heart speaking to heart*. Silence is not, in fact, the *rejection* of language, but the conscious decision to make it *meaningful*. This fact is especially relevant when we are communicating with God himself. To quote Thomas Keating, a Trappist priest who lived for many years at the Abbey in Spencer: “Silence is God’s first language; everything else is a poor translation.”

While God sometimes appears as a booming voice or a blazing fire, it is through *silence* that he most profoundly reveals himself. That is essentially the point of today's first reading. The Prophet Elijah, standing atop Mount Horeb, beheld a strong and heavy wind, crashing rocks, an earthquake, and flame – yet God was not present in any of these cacophonous events. Instead, the Lord manifested himself as “a tiny whispering sound,” or – in some translations – “a still small voice.” Likewise, today's Gospel culminates with Jesus calming the wind and the waves. Silence, in fact, is his gift to his disciples. He is not just quieting the weather, but granting them peace within their hearts.

It is no secret that the world we live in today is exceptionally noisy. Quite often, that noise results from perfectly wholesome activities – athletic competitions, picnics, parades, concerts, books, movies, television programs – which are not *intended* to distract us from more important priorities, but which nonetheless wind up having that *effect*. On the other hand, there are definitely forces at work within our world

that actively seek to disrupt our communication with the divine – noises that are designed to drown out any sort of spiritual reflection. As Christians, we need to guard vigilantly against these exterior voices, but also against the internal disturbances we create ourselves. Blaise Pascal, a noted French mathematician and philosopher, once remarked that “[a]ll of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

Depending on our state of life – our age, our family situation, our employment – not all of us can afford to spend a week or a month or a lifetime in a Trappist monastery. Nevertheless, all of us are all called – in whatever ways we can – to discover God within the silence of our hearts. He is undoubtedly present there, if only we are willing to listen. We simply need the courage, the discipline, and the determination to turn down the noise.