

# MINDFULNESS OF WORDS

## MARIANIST HABITS OF HOLINESS

### Silence of Words

One of the founders of the Marianist Family, Blessed Fr. Chaminade, offers us a way to grow in personal holiness and community life. He identified 18 virtues that address common obstacles to our mission – bringing Christ to the world. He called this practice, *The System of Virtues*.



The first virtue is Silence of Words. As Chaminade said, “Mary loved silence, spoke little and rarely, and never spoke unnecessary words.” Today, we often call this *Mindfulness of Speech*.

## MINDFULNESS OF SPEECH

- Pause for a moment of stillness. Loving God, be with me in this time of silent waiting.
- As I review the conversations I’ve had today, are there any words that I regret? that were unnecessary? that hurt someone?
- One time that I lifted the spirit of another by my words was...
- Anticipating today’s conversations, when ought I restrain myself from speaking too much? When ought I speak up courageously? Spirit of God, give me the wisdom to know the difference.
- Jesus, you are the Word, may you speak through me today.

Conclude: Mary, I join with you in bringing Christ into the world today.

## BACKGROUND

Every religious tradition recommends silence. Poets and philosophers have done the same. Herman Melville claimed, "Silence is the general consecration of the universe. Silence is the invisible laying on of the Divine Pontiff's hands upon the world. Silence is the Voice of God." Contemporary CEOs also have caught on to the power of silence. Regularly, Business Week and the Wall Street Journal run articles about the need to find quiet space alone in order to return refreshed and inspired to the bustle of the corporation. Christian icons for this virtue of silence are Mary quietly at prayer at the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38) or standing boldly silent beneath the cross (Jn 19:26-27) and Jesus off by himself in deserted places (Lk 5:16).

Silence - no radio, no TV, nothing but the sounds of nature- creates room within us to hear God's Word in a world in which words go around ceaselessly. It gives us space to get in touch with ourselves, to put aside distractions, to become quiet enough to hear the deepest voice within us speak. It has restorative powers, enabling us to regain balance and perspective in our lives, families, communities, and work. In its stillness we can stand back from what blares or squeaks the most in order to see all the aspects of our lives, even those that clamor for the most attention, in their proper place - at best, even to the point of seeing them within God's perspective. Thus, silence empowers us to bear and nurture Christ in this world, for those who do this best are those who hear God's Word and appreciate life from the sweep of God's vision.

Because noise seems to be the contemporary norm, we need to devise strategies to section off some silence in our lives. Some of us may mark out several moments for silence at the beginning or the end of the day. Others might only be able to capture silence in the shower or while driving to or from work (without the radio or CD playing). The strategy is not important. What matters is to discover ways to find silence, than to cherish it.

But silence of words is not only about the absence of noise. Ultimately, its practice is to enable us to speak as God spoke the divine Word in Jesus. Father Chaminade, therefore, invites us to weigh the words we use. Once again, this attention to language is something various religious traditions recommend. For example, Buddha counseled his followers to practice right speech as a step on the Eightfold path to enlightenment. Part of this religious interest in words stems from the conviction that the language we use is a clue into the kind of people we are. Language, then can be a means through which we can examine ourselves and by which we can effect some change in our lives. Spiritual counselors advise that through choosing how we speak, we can help shape ourselves into the kind of people we want to become, because we become who we are partly through what we do.

Spiritual mentors also know that language is fragile, so well portrayed in the myth of Babel (Gnl 1:1-9). What is meant to bring us together pulls us apart. We experience failure to communicate. Although meaning comes into focus through language, we sometimes find ourselves unable to say what we mean. Or we find there is nothing to our words — all we have are words and more words, but no action. Very often, then, only careful consideration enables our words to achieve their purpose.

One way to live this virtue is to look to Mary, the woman who conceived the Word within her own flesh, and to meditate on her words and her silence. At the Annunciation she says, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). At the Visitation she testifies, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk 1:46) and "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Lk 1:51 -53). In Cana, at the wedding feast, she notifies her son that "They have no wine" (Jn2:3), and she says to the workers who would assist Jesus, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). These words are spoken in response to and in praise of God, words on behalf of others. But at Calvary (Jn 19:26-27) and in the upper room, she is silent (Acts 1:14). In the face of the mystery, there was nothing to be said.

Mary, then, is a woman who knows when to speak and when to be silent. As we look at her, we might ask, "Do we speak on behalf of others and in order to respond and offer praise?" Or are our words too often an attempt to draw attention to ourselves or to justify something we have done? Is our silence motivated by fear of what others will say or do to us? Do we keep quiet because we don't want to get involved? Or, mindful of the maxim "Speak only when it is an improvement on silence," do we remain quiet, believing, like Mary, that at this moment there are not words equal to the situation?

Virtues for Mission (Lackner)

### **EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE**

Do I listen so to address others as other?

Do I hold back significant conversation?

Do my conversations call others to a deeper quality of life?

Do I use my words/silence to be of help to others?

What keeps me from conversing with people that are different from me?

How/When do I witness, "Be still and know that I am God?"

How can I be more effective in my speech?

Do I speak in a way that builds community?

Does my gift of language en flesh the Word?