

# Silence and Contemplation with Children



We talk about the importance of silence as a necessary means of listening to and responding to God. With this purpose in mind, there is a lesson, discovered quite by accident, by Dr. Montessori called the Lesson in Silence. This is the greatest help to the child in becoming aware of and mastering his or her own actions.

It is important to establish that this is not a silence imposed on the children by a teacher trying to restore order to a noisy room. We could say that such silence is “an empty silence” for it is of little value to anyone but the teacher. The silence we want to establish is the one Maria Montessori describes as rising from stillness, which has substance and brings to the child an interior order.

The Gift of Silence is a special activity proposed to the children as a means of helping them to become conscious of the individual effort that it takes to achieve such a group result. It invites conscious control of every movement, which is not accomplished by an external command. Rather, it is an exercise which demands developmental maturation, a willingness to cooperate, true inhibition of impulsive behavior, a trustworthiness and high level of the desire to belong to a group. This "ultimate" lesson in the control of movement requires much of the child. The preparations for the Gift of Silence are spread over a long period of time and is achieved through the continued practice.

It is done in the following way:

- ❖ The catechist invites the children to find a comfortable position and calls to their attention her own stillness. She challenges a child to try and imitate her.
- ❖ As the children become more able to achieve their own silence, she whispers a few brief suggestions to help them become aware of their own bodies. “Is even our breathing quiet?”
- ❖ When all are relatively silent, the catechist invites an awareness of sounds around them. (birds, traffic, water dripping, etc.) The suggestion might be given to close their eyes and listen for a particular sound that is deliberately made (ringing a bell, snapping fingers)
- ❖ As the silence is more complete, a psalm verse might be repeated or a song might be very quietly sung.
- ❖ The exercise may be concluded by the catechist going just outside the sight of the children and whispering each child’s name to come to her. The child who is called gets up and moves as silently as possible to where the catechist is, while the others wait with amazing patience and great anticipation for their names to be called.

The self-control that the children manage to exhibit is a wonder to behold and gives them great joy. Montessori wrote in *The Discovery of the Child*:

“It was then that I learned that within the mind of the child dwells its own reward and its own spiritual pleasures. After such exercises it seems to me that their love was greater: they certainly became more obedient, sweeter and gentler.”

She goes on to say, “It is in silence and when movements are so ordered that the inner sensitivity that is called ‘religious sense’ or ‘spiritual sense’ can be developed.”

Such experiences with silence puts the child in touch with him or herself, first of all through awareness of one’s body and the simple attention to one’s own breathing. Doing the silence exercises also helps the child feel connected to the others in the group through the common effort of achieving the silence. Furthermore, it sensitizes the child to the surrounding environment and fosters a state of inner peace and thus, a greater capacity for listening to God.

Silence needs to become a habit of being, for prayer, understood as dialogue, requires silence. Without it, there is no prayer.

The Gift of Silence will help the group, with willful self-discipline, remain quiet for a period of time and help to develop a sense of peace and spiritual awareness of God.

Possible Scripture verses:

- ❖ The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth be silent before Him. (Hab 2:20)
- ❖ Be still before the Lord. (Ps 37:7)
- ❖ Be still and know that I am God. (Ps 46:10)
- ❖ Be still before the Lord, all mankind. (Zec 2:13)
- ❖ The voice of the Lord was not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire; but in a gentle whisper. (1 Ki 19:11 - 12)
- ❖ The Good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (Jn. 14:3)