



The Silence of Women Overflows with Life

*Reflection on the message of Benedict XVI
for the 46th World Communications Day*

“I was born in silence, / I was conceived in silence, / I was a fugitive of silence. / And now, / if I am nailed to a cross, / what is nailed are the wings of a butterfly / finally free.” These words of Alda Merini (from the book *A Mystic of Love*) capture the powerful way in which Jesus communicated. Not by chance, Benedict XVI in his message for the 46th World

Communications Day points to silence as a means of evangelization not only on a par with the spoken word but that even takes precedence over it.

Impoverished, empty, confusing, cold: according to the Pope, this is what communication is when it excludes silence and restricts itself to words alone. Instead, word and silence are indispensable partners because they are the “two aspects of communication which need to be kept in balance, to alternate and to be integrated with one another if authentic dialogue and deep closeness between people are to be achieved.” Among other things, the message of Benedict XVI reveals yet again his genuine and unique closeness to women (I am almost tempted to add “surprising” but the Pope has by now accustomed us to his “surprises”): a closeness with regard to point of view, sensitivity, almost of identification. Because from time immemorial (or at least from Mary onward) genuine silence—the kind that speaks and communicates, that has nothing to do with mutism, with not having anything to say—has always been a vibrant and fecund presence in the life of women. It is enough to think about the relationship between a mother and her child before and immediately after its birth: a mute dialogue that is a vital “sap” for not only the life that is just beginning but also for the one that is already formed. The first steps of the former are nourished by silence, while the other makes new discoveries as a result of it.

As the Pope reminds us, silence is an essential prerequisite for communication and in fact carries out a twofold role: it allows us to get to know ourselves first of all and then our interlocutor. It is a sphere in which the human being is able to truly manifest his/her freedom by attempting to give value and meaning to the message entrusted to him/her.

Silence is therefore life-giving because we see on a daily basis that genuine silence frequently has a much greater binding force than words. But silence can also be dangerous if it is wrongly interpreted or poorly used: that silence which is so laden with meaning but at the same time evaporates so rapidly; which is so rich and yet runs the risk of crumbling to dust; which is so capable offering guidance but at the same time often tends to be overpowering.

Meditating or ruminating on the message of Benedict XVI, I am reminded of a passage of Etty Hillesum’s diary that is in silent yet deafening harmony with the words of the Pope. She says: “I want to write words that are organically inserted into an immense silence. I don’t want them to cover and disperse this silence but rather accentuate it.” This is the ex-plosive message of Joseph and Etty—two physically petite but spiritually gigantic individuals.

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