The Gift of Silence in a Catholic School

Marguerite Hamilton

In-Service for Religious Education Coordinators

"We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls." – Mother Teresa

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Good morning everyone it is lovely to be with you today.

Thérèse asked me to speak on the “gift of silence” and at the initial meeting with herself and Finbar we talked about schools in general and the new challenges you as Heads of Department are meeting. I’m part of a retired principals’ group and although we are retired, we keep in touch with education by serving on Boards of Governors, reading and commenting on briefing papers and we are members of diocesan education groups. What you are experiencing - good and bad - is the experience of Heads of Department throughout the Diocese.

In general, we are experiencing an escalation of tension in schools. It may be between students, teachers and parents. Everything is heightened/everybody wants the answer/ solution yesterday and as a leader they may expect you to come up with it.

I’m sure it has been said to you, it was certainly said to me, “I’ll leave it with you” … which really means I’m not going to do anything about this …. It’s your problem now.

I’m sure you’ve heard the expression “I’ve fired off an email” …if it is from teacher to teacher, you may well be brought in to whatever conflict they can’t resolve. It’s sometimes difficult in the day to day grind to remember that we have one of the best jobs in the world…for we can lead as Heads of Department in schools that will change children’s lives for the better, allowing them to experience love, safety and security, opening up opportunities, empowering them so that the cycle of poverty, trauma in their lives can be broken, giving them real choices and exposing them to Christian values that will help and guide them and hopefully lead them into authentic service that will make life better for everyone.

A funny image also came into my head when I was thinking about today - apparently years ago in primary schools after lunch the teacher would encourage the children to put their heads down on the desk and go to sleep. I wonder how long the silence lasted? I’m sure it deescalated tensions but I’m not sure we could try that one today.

While it is becoming increasingly rare, it remains deeply powerful and that is silence. In our busy world of emails, notifications, scrolling, demands that never seem to stop, silence can be seen as a luxury, but in our tradition as Catholics it is not so much a luxury but a necessity - for silence is where God speaks.

Our Catholic schools are centred around the teachings of Jesus and we try to live by His values of love, respect, forgiveness, His teachings and His example.

The example that shows him going off to the mountains to pray in silence, listening to what the Father had to reveal to Him about his vocation. He went to the mountain to pray before he chose the 12 disciples and in the Garden of Gethsemane before he faced his passion and death. If he needed silence in his life how much more do we?

Throughout scripture silence is where God is found. When the prophet Elijah was seeking the Lord, he did not come in the earthquake or in the thunder but in the still, small voice - the gentle whisper.

Our leadership roles in Catholic schools mean that we may be constantly making decisions, managing crises, resolving conflicts, framing the vision...without silent reflection, we will be reacting sometimes without the clarity that is necessary to bring the best option forward.

Did you ever say to yourself I could have handled that better? Perhaps with a little more reflection before the decision or the interaction would have brought a better resolution.

I think we have to practise this idea of “space for silence” - before meetings, decisions - and see settling into silence, asking God’s guidance as the way we do things.

Silence helps us to listen more attentively to God, ourselves, and others. It helps us to hear what is really being said, not just the words spoken but the feelings and emotions too. When we have the true picture, all the information then we can make right decisions.

Silence is counter cultural in schools which are filled with chatter and noise. Sometimes we can fear silence...it can be awkward. Think of when you ask a question in class and nobody makes eye contact, children and adults shift uncomfortably in their seats and then somebody might speak just to fill the gap!

And yet if we as leaders believed in the power of silence and practised it for a few moments throughout our day we would be more at peace and I think emotionally healthier for it. As Heads of Department we are one of the greatest resources our schools have therefore we need to care for ourselves too.

I know you're thinking where would I get 5 minutes to pray silently during the day... the simple answer is you won't unless you make the time, make the commitment, practise it. Sit in silence for 5 minutes, no agenda, no noise, just you and God. Breathe in His presence, breathe out you tension...this small habit could transform your day. You will be leading Religious Education from a place of peace and in the right spirit.

As Catholic educators we are spiritual leaders and spiritual leadership requires prayer which begins in silence where we can encounter the divine. We do this on our own behalf but also for our staff and students.

In my experience children love meditation, they love silence. Some of you have brought groups to us at the Iosas Centre for retreats...meditation is always highly rated by the children. It gives them a chance to breathe, to pray, to use their imagination, to encounter Jesus.

Creating a culture of stillness in school at different points in the day, in different spaces may be challenging but we would be doing a great service to staff and students - morning prayer offered with reverence, quiet moments after scripture is read, moments when we take time to breathe between one task and another. Thérèse gave me this lovely devotion of Pope Francis - Our Lady of Silence. The icon depicts her with her finger to her lips. A powerful image!

The novena outlines the 12 virtues of silence...SILENCE/LISTENING/HUMILITY/ JOY/ATTENTIVENESS/WAITING/BALANCE/DOCILITY/STABILITY/PURITY/TRUST/ MERCY.

The first one asks for the gift of inner silence so that I may listen to the voice of God within me. This helps us to understand what is going on within us.... did you ever wonder why did I react in that way? This silence and the next step listening to God and ourselves helps us to understand ourselves better. In silence before God we come in humility before the one who created us and who in the beautiful words of scripture tells us that "he is waiting to be gracious to us"; tells us "You are my work of art". Words that we would never say about ourselves but words that build us up, give us courage in the face of the challenges of leadership and give us a sense of rootedness and belief in our true identity as children of God, the same identity of every person with whom we come in contact.

The novena then talks about Joy explaining that it comes in knowing who I really am as a child of God and knowing that I am not alone, knowing God has a plan in my life and in the life of my school. This can help us in times when leadership is a lonely road.

Silence invites us to wait…to wait for God's answer to the situation I am bringing before him…waiting before we have that challenging conversation with someone/not jumping to every demand until we have gathered our thoughts.

This waiting can bring balance into our lives, the novena states the balance is between silence and words, rest and play, prayer and service. This brings a stability into our lives where we can trust God to help us in times of discouragement and allow us to see joy and fulfilment in what we are doing.

I recommend this little book to you …. perhaps this will be your moment of reflection during the day.

In my own life silent prayer brings me into a place of encounter, encountering the God who loves and accepts me with all my gifts and all my shortcomings.

I pray this will be the same for you.

Thank you.

"Be still, and know that I am God"