The Art of Silence in Waiting

Melissa Tovar-Guerrero

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ABSTRACT:
This piece reflects on what can happen when we decide not to worry and elect to learn the art of remaining silent. Like any art, it requires time to learn how to skillfully apply it in our lives. This paper was written as a homily for the Synoptic Gospels class at the Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary.

The Art of Silence in Waiting
by Melissa Tovar-Guerrero

Matthew 6:25-26; 28-29

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? […] And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
In 1965, Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez began writing a story while living in Mexico City with his wife Mercedes and his two young children. The four of them lived in a small apartment on the top floor of a building. One day, the owner of the apartment called them to collect the months of rent they owed. Mercedes answered and listened patiently to the pertinent complaint. Then, Mercedes asked the lady to wait a moment, raised her voice and asked Gabriel, “How much time do you need to finish the novel?” Gabriel replied, “Six months,” and continued typing on his old typewriter. Mercedes told the woman, “In six months we are going to pay you all the months we owe you, please, can you give us six months to wait?” The lady accepted.1 Gabriel was writing One Hundred Years of Solitude, the novel that portrays the mythical town of Macondo and the Buendía family. Gabriel and Mercedes went to send

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1 Gabriel and Mercedes told this story many times in different interviews, until it became a popular story that is constantly told in Colombia.
the manuscript. They had little money so they could only send half of the book to Buenos Aires, Argentina. By then Mercedes had sold most of the appliances they had in the small apartment; they only had a blender left. She and Gabriel went to sell it and, with the money they were given, they returned to the post office to send the other half of the manuscript. Afterwards, for many months there was only silence. They were waiting for the publisher’s response. As a family they had given everything to support Gabriel’s literary career, but they had debt, two small children to raise, and rent to pay. All they could do was wait for publishers to understand the richness of the magical realism that Gabriel had created in his book. Although Mercedes may have worried, she believed in her husband’s talent and supported him. Gabriel was distressed. The well-being of his family was on the line, yet he trusted in the work he had done and that his daily efforts would yield good results. Instead of worrying, the couple waited silently for an answer. So, what happens when we decide not to worry and agree to learn the art of remaining silent? Like any art, it requires time to learn how to skillfully apply it in our lives.

In Matthew 6:25-26; 28-29, Jesus says to us that we do not need to worry about basic matters of survival. Life goes beyond food and body. Jesus makes a metaphor with the birds of the air and the lilies of the field so that we learn from them. Søren Kierkegaard stated, “Therefore, in accordance with the instructions of the gospel, let us in earnest regard the lily and the bird as teachers.” Nature can be our teacher in the art of waiting and in the art of silence. Nothing flows so accurately with the times of life as nature does. To live, it is often enough to just exist. The idea of moving, of worrying, of filling our bodies with noise and anxiety is a thought of the world, it is not a principle of God. In this passage of the gospel Jesus does not compare us with something that is above our understanding. On the contrary, he uses the simplicity of a metaphor to teach us that we can also live like birds and lilies, that we can exist without being distressed.

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If we decide not to worry, what is left? Allowing ourselves to step back from our worries leaves a space that can change everything. Kierkegaard explained, “You shall in the deepest sense make yourself nothing, become nothing before God, learn to keep silent. In this silence is the beginning, which is first to seek God’s kingdom.”3 If the anguish disappears, there is room for us to be nothing. The world tries to persuade us with the idea that we must be many things in order to be seen and valued. Accepting that we can be nothing seems like a revolution. Being nothing is a revolution of humility. With nothingness comes silence. Kierkegaard continued, “Beginning is this art of becoming silent, for there is no art in keeping silent as nature is.”4 Quieting the worries that the world brings us gives us the opportunity to learn to remain silent in front of God. We can learn the art of silence by observing and emulating nature. With the art of silence we also learn to fear God, which is the beginning of wisdom.5 Silence teaches us to listen, which is why Kierkegaard stated, “He became silent. Indeed, he became what is, if possible, even more the opposite of talking than silence: he became a listener.”6 Birds and lilies listen to nature and wait for it to guide them. By not becoming anxious we remain silent and learn to listen. Some neuroscience studies have shown that the human brain cannot be worried and grateful at the same time, so if you are wondering what we can do while we remain silent and learn to listen, we can thank God for the blessings we have. The art of silence can also teach us to be focused on the issues that really deserve our attention, on the daily tasks that we can control and that give us a feeling of certainty in the future. If, while we remain silent, we concentrate on giving thanks, there is no room for worries.

Gabriel and Mercedes waited in silence to receive a response, until on June 5, 1967, the Argentine editor Sudamericana published the first edition of One Hundred Years of Solitude. They paid the woman all the months they owed on the rent for her apartment. Then, everything changed quickly: the Hispanic literary world was fascinated with the

3 Kierkegaard, The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air, 17.
4 Kierkegaard, The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air, 17.
5 Proverbs 1:7.
story of Macondo, magical realism became fashionable and, in 1982, Gabriel García Márquez received the Nobel Prize of Literature. The time that passed from when he wrote the novel until the literary world recognized his talent for telling fiction was the distance that Gabriel and Mercedes traveled to learn everything that silence can tell us while we wait for a change in our destiny. The art of silence in waiting also teaches us to prepare ourselves to receive the answers we have been waiting on for so long.
Bibliography