

January 1, 2017 Mary The Listening Virgin Homily: Brothers and sisters, once a year I make my annual spiritual retreat at a Cistercian Monastery in Western Massachusetts. For several days I pray with a community of men known as Trappist monks whose life is dedicated to prayer and sacrifice. The monastery is a house of prayer and contemplation. All visitors are expected to maintain a respectful silence while residing in the holy enclosure. Unnecessary chatter is strictly forbidden. As contemplatives, the monks have a long experience of listening to and contemplating the Word of God. Any noise disrupts their intimacy with the Lord. The pilgrim on retreat is privileged to enter into the monk's rhythm of daily prayer. For me personally, one of the most unforgettable moments in the daily life of the monks is when they gather in the beautiful chapel for compline, the last public prayer of the day for a consecrated religious. The chapel is dimly lit, in virtual darkness. Following the final blessing, a large stained glass window in the sanctuary is illuminated. The window depicts the Blessed Mother and her Divine child seated on her lap. The monks then chant the ancient hymn to Mary, the "*Salve Regina*" ("*Hail, Holy Queen*"). In the Cistercian Order, the blessed Mother is revered as a woman of prayer, a true contemplative. As one writer eloquently puts it, she is "a woman clothed in silence". Clearly, the Trappist is enrolled in the Marian school of prayer.

In St. Luke's account of the birth of Christ, Mary is inexplicably silent. She utters not a single word. She simply listens. "All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds." (Lk.2:18) Her dialogue with God is unspoken, but real nonetheless. In the second chapter of Luke's gospel he says twice that the Virgin Mary "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." (Lk.2:19, 51) According to Fr. Raymond Brown, the author of the classic work, "The Birth of the Messiah", the biblical verse cited above may have been influenced by the Wisdom tradition of the Old Testament. For example, in the book of Proverbs, the wise man teaches his son and urges him, "Hold in your heart my words". (3:1) Later, in Luke's gospel, Jesus praises the one "who hears the Word of God and keeps it". (Lk.11:28)

Our modern culture seems allergic to silence. Contemplation is regarded as boring, unexciting... a useless enterprise! It is as if we fear the consequences of being alone. (as if that were ever possible for a person of deep faith). "The sound of silence" makes many of us anxious, afraid. Our churches, one time sacred places of silence and mystery, are now overwhelmed by an excess of noise and chatter. But if we make it impossible to hear the voice of God, then we will eventually fall victim to an existential loneliness that can lead to despair and a sense of hopelessness. We need to be impregnated with the Word of God! We must allow the word of God to bear fruit in each one of us.

God has a mother, a woman of deep faith with the capacity of listening to the Word of God and dutifully fulfilling all that is expected of her. On this first day of the year, the Church celebrates Mary as the one who gave birth to the one who is God. "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb." Let us pray that the Eternal Word may be born in each one of us.

Amen!