A SOUL OF SILENCE

SISTER ELIZABETH OF THE TRINITY

By

M. M. AM. du COEUR de JESUS, O.D.C.

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[Mary Amabel du Coeur de Jesus, Mother]

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Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity

INTRODUCTION

At the evening of her short life, and already within sight of the eternal shore, Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity—in deep recollection beneath the divine light—penned in a few inspired words the summary of her life of grace: "In heaven, it seems to me, my mission will be to draw souls into interior recollection, by helping them to go out from themselves in order to adhere to God by a very simple, wholly loving movement; and to maintain them in that great inner silence which allows God to imprint Himself on them and to transform them into Himself."[1] Is not this, as it were, a synthesis of her spiritual life, the secret of her rapid attainment to sanctity? Already she had explained how one can find "heaven on earth," and had revealed in these luminous pages the profound workings of her interior life, and her office of "praise of glory." In response to the wishes of her Prioress she took up this theme in her "Last Retreat" which enables us to penetrate further into that inner sanctuary where her soul already lived as in an anticipated heaven. These little manuscripts, which may be termed the full-flowering or crowning of her efforts towards a life of recollection and union with God, reflect the soul of Sister Elizabeth at the end of her life's journey. The letter in which she speaks prophetically of her posthumous "mission" is of a more definite character. Sister Elizabeth here points out the means which helped her to realize her ideal.

Like a true daughter of Carmel, instinctively she draws her inspiration from the ancient traditions of the Order: viz. "To lead souls to recollection, to

[1] Letter to a Nun of the Carmel of Dijon—October 1906.

help them to go out of themselves, (*detachment*) in order to *adhere to God* by a very simple, wholly loving movement; to keep them in this great inner *silence*, which allows God to imprint Himself on them and to *transform them into Himself.*" This is to put in practise the "todo-nada"* of St. John of the Cross: to detach oneself, to go out from self, to forget self, to live in silence, to make no account of created things. Not however to stop at this state of annihilation, but thereby to take flight more swiftly towards the "*All*" of God—the end and goal of its aspirations—(to adhere to God, and to be transformed in Him).

How did Sr. Elizabeth attain to such a plenitude of the spiritual life in the few short years she spent in religion—a plenitude which ranks her beside the Reformers of Carmel and among the greatest saints? Divine predestination of course, but also her exceptional fidelity to grace and her ever deeper correspondence with the lights she received.

An enlightenment from her director, Father Vallée, on the mystery of the Divine Indwelling, grafted on a personal experience of this superemi-nent grace—God's free gift—and behold Sr. Elizabeth launched in full sail upon the ocean of sanctity: "I have found my heaven on earth, because Heaven is God, and God is in my soul. . . . From the day when I understood that, everything became clear to me, and I would like to whisper this secret to those I love."[2]

But in order to find God in the depths of her soul, there is need of an atmosphere—that of *silence:* to envelop herself in silence, as much as

* "Todo-nada"—the "All-Nothing"—*See* St. John of the Cross, by Fr. Gabriel, O.D.C., page 22 (Mercier Press.)

[2] "Heaven on earth."

exterior circumstances will allow—moreover to plunge herself in that great inner silence which will allow God to imprint Himself in her soul.

Silence will become then for Sr. Elizabeth the indispensable element of union, the basic virtue of her spirituality, a virtue which will become almost natural to her, and which will form—together with recollection and detachment—the ascesis which sustains her even to the summit of the mount of perfection. Since the particular character of each individual soul determines the form of its virtues and the phases of their development, so for Sr. Elizabeth, silence will clothe itself under different aspects, the progression of which we shall study in its relation to her ascensions in the way of love.

I. SILENCE WHICH PREPARES SAINTS

" In silence and deep mystery."

EXTERIOR SILENCE

(a) "*The life of a Carmelite is silence.*"

"It is silence which prepares saints; it is silence which begins, continues and perfects the life of sanctity," wrote another Carmelite Nun who died in the odour of sanctity in 1874.[3]

Like all interior souls, Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity was deeply convinced of the dynamic power of silence. Silence was tne attraction of her artistic temperament with its vibrant sensitivity. As a child, and as a young girl, she sought solitude wherein the soul can fill itself with silence, and contemplate the wonders of Nature which is the reflection of the creative Infinite Beauty.

". . . Amidst those beautiful mountains high up near the Church, it was so beautiful in the silence and calm of the night. Did you not feel that my whole soul was borne away to Him?"[4] she wrote, recalling the past. Again, writing to a friend: ". . . you are so secluded among your beautiful mountains—it seems to me like a iittle Thebaid. How delightful to wander about alone through those vast woods—to leave your books and your work, and dwell with the good God in closest intimacy, heart to heart, gazing upon Him with

[3] Sister Aimée of Jesus—Carmelite of the Avenue de Saxe.
[4] Letter to Canon A. August 1903.

overflowing love! You should enjoy such happiness: it is heavenly."[5]

At Carmel, from the first moment of her entrance, everything delighted Sr. Elizabeth, but especially the silence: "Carmel is a real foretaste of heaven; in silence and in solitude one lives there alone with God Alone."[6]—"The life of a Carmelite is silence."[7]—"I am writing to you from our little cell which is filled with silence—filled above all with the presence of God."[8]

Eight days after her entrance, the young postulant, in response to a question at recreation: "Which point of the Rule do you like best?" answered: "Silence."[9]

A little later: "Oh, thank God on my behalf; my life is so beautiful—a whole life-time to be spent in silence."[10] Referring to the Feast of the Blessed Trinity, which is truly her own, there was for her nothing comparable to it: "In Carmel, all is silence and adoration."[11]*

The love of silence is characteristic of interior souls, of persons of deep spirituality. The more a man becomes super-naturalised, and the more he reflects, the more he seeks silence. The rays of Truth cannot penetrate souls which are not silent and receptive. Silence engenders thoughts: meditation

[5] Letter to Madame S.
[6] Letter to Madame S. October 26th, 1902.
[7] Letter to her Mother. October, 1901.
[8] Letter to her Mother. August, 1901.
[9] "Souvenirs" page 73 (English edition of 1913, Translated by the Benedictines of Stanbrook.)
[10] Letter to Canon B.
[11] Letter to her Sister.

* Again elsewhere, Sr. Elizabeth associates immediately the idea of silence with her ultimate goal—adoration. A precious indication of the use she made of silence.

develops them, silence terminates thought: when the heart cannot express itself it keeps silence.

> "The heart can offer the Infinite
> Amid the profound depths of silence."
> (Sully Prudhomme.)

The true quality of a soul is known by its attitude towards silence, by its capacity for silence.* May not the decadence of this present age be ascribed to a lack of silence? In modern life all is hurry and noise, productive of empty or superficial characters. And for souls who seek God, the thirst for silence is so much the more intensified.

Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity was one of these latter. In the midst of the world she loved to isolate herself. Having entered Carmel, she was fortunate enough to have for the formation of her interior life, one whose soul was enamoured of silence and recollection—her Mother Prioress—who knew well how to impart to Sr. Elizabeth the secrets of a life of intimacy with the Divine Guests of her soul—"the beautiful Sun which would henceforth illumine her life," in silence and adoration. The young Carmelite immersed herself with delight in silence—"this dear silence"—which helped her to remain ever "on the watch" at the threshold of heaven. She set out to establish this silence in all her faculties.

* She is speaking in general of spiritual or nobler souls. For one may be silent merely by temperament, or due to surroundings conducive to a life of silence. Some people are more so than others—country people more than city-dwellers. One may be silent also through lack of culture: uneducated people have only a very limited horizon—"of the earth, earthy"—as subject matter for conversation. Outside this, their thought seems to cease, and develops into unintelligent dumbness. Evidently there is no question here of such souls.

Silence in action. The sister who lived in the cell next to Sr. Elizabeth's, a victim of severe headaches, dreaded the slightest noise. For five years, Elizabeth so controlled her every movement, that this sister never heard a sound.[12] What recollection would be expected from one who was so completely mistress of herself? She was asked to teach a postulant how to sweep. Merely to watch Sr. Elizabeth calm, silent, was a lesson in itself.[13]

Silence of the eyes. From the first Community act to the last, no one ever saw her raise her eyes needlessly. On the contrary, it would have seemed for her an effort to look up.[14]

(b) "*One must be silent.*"[15]

Silence of the tongue. Undoubtedly this is enjoined by the Rule of Carmel, but it may be practised in a greater or less degree. The tongue is a small instrument—so active, so restless. With wisdom and foresight the Carmelite Rule devotes a long chapter to silence: "He that useth idle words shall hurt his own soul. . . . On the day of judgment you will have to render an account of every idle word you have spoken. . . . In silence and hope shall your strength be.[16] Did not St. John of the Cross, experienced director of contemplative souls, write to the Carmelite Nuns at Veas: "What is lacking is not writing or speaking, for of this there is generally too much, but *silence* and *work*.[17]

[12] "Souvenirs," page 72.
[13] "Souvenirs," page 105.
[14] "Souvenirs," page 69.
[15] "Souvenirs," page 111.
[16] Primitive Rule of the Order of Carmel. . . . On Silence.
[17] St. John of the Cross. Letter to the Carmelites of Veas, Nov. 22nd, 1557. (Complete Works of St. John of the Cross, ed. by Allison Peers. Vol. III, page 271.)

Silence is the indispensable condition for a life of deep spirituality. "A soul which is easily inclined to talk and converse, is but very little inclined toward God; for when it is inclined toward God, it is at once, as it were, forcibly drawn within itself that it may be silent and shun all conversation."[18]

"If two words will suffice," adds an ancient rule of Carmel, "we owe Our Lord the obligation of not using three."[19]

Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity knew how to put this counsel into practice with such faithfulness, but without constraint however, that the "Souvenirs" relate that when she accepted a silence-challenge with another sister, her few failures were always provoked by the excess of her charity.[20]

To keep silence was for her the way par excellence that leads to God. Whenever there was question of a Novena or mode of preparation for a Feast, on being asked what she would do—"I am going to remain silent," she would say, "in order to give Him full liberty to flow into me."[21] "We must keep our gaze ever fixed upon Him, we must keep silence, it is so simple."[22] This was the invariable reply, mischievously provoked by the young Sisters, who would say: "Silence—isn't that so? You will be silent, won't you?" and Sr. Elizabeth would smile quietly.[23]

[18] Ibid.

[19] From an ancient Book of Customs. Chapter on Silence.

[20] "Souvenirs," page 106. Sr. Elizabeth understood that silence may not be always the most perfect thing, and that there are circumstances and times when speaking is necessitated by the duties of our state or apostolate, or by fraternal charity.

[21] "Souvenirs," page 111.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

Her letters show the same attitude. On the eve of an Ordination, in order to communicate her thoughts to a Priest who was closely united to her by spiritual bonds, she wrote: "Now that we are approaching the great mystery which is being prepared for you, I can do nothing but remain silent, and adore the exceeding Love of Our God." And before the diaconate she had written: "With you I sing the hymn of thanksgiving, and then I shall become silent in order to adore the mystery which is overshadowing your whole being." Elsewhere she writes: "The speech of the Word is the infusion of the Gift. Is it not true that He speaks to our souls in silence. I find this dear silence a blessing." . . . "A Carmelite is a soul hungering for silence, in order to be ever listening, penetrating ever more deeply into the Divinity."

II. SILENCE WHICH FORMS SAINTS.

". . . to maintain them in that great interior silence."

INTERIOR SILENCE

(a) "*One must keep silence.*"

To keep silence, in oneself, in one's spirit, in one's heart, in one's soul. There is the essential practice of silence—the relentless ascesis of Sr. Elizabeth. We find the same theme even in her last retreats, the principle which, more than all else, had established her mystical ascent on solid foundations.

Every soul, almost from the outset, places by an unconscious psychological reflex, an accent on the virtue or form of ascesis which best befits its spiritual temperament. Now, Sr. Elizabeth had a profoundly contemplative soul; her constant tendency was to seek God within her own soul, to live there by faith, in a union of conformity with Christ, as it were in an anticipated heaven. In order to arrive at this ideal, it was necessary for her to void herself perseveringly of all created things, to banish the least useless thought, to maintain her soul in that emptiness which is required in order that it may become receptive of the Divinity Who is reflected in it; in a word, "to make silence" always and everywhere. One by one, all her powers had to pass through the crucible of silence: to pass and re-pass through it. On reading Sr. Elizabeth's life attentively, one is amazed to find that she had to work so hard to master her sensibility, to bend her will incessantly towards the perfection for which she longed, so that, as she expresses it so well, "everything may be done according to His Will and

inspiration, and not according to the impulse of nature."

We often imagine, in our simplicity, that the Saints were always borne along by grace and had little need to struggle. Let us then, for our encouragement, study the succession of sacrifices, of profound despoliations, which the ascesis of silence demanded of Sr. Elizabeth. For her it was question of nothing less than "to make unity in her whole being by interior silence, gathering together all the powers of her soul so that they might apply themselves entirely to the exercise of loving."[24]

In order to "collect" her powers (according to her forceful mode of expression) they must be purified, detached, emptied; for a "soul which listens to self, which is pre-occupied with its sensibilities, which indulges in useless thoughts and desires, scatters its forces. It is not completely under God's sway. Its lyre is not in tune, so that when the Divine Master touches it He cannot draw forth divine harmonies: it is too human and discordant."[25]

Therefore an increasing vigilance is necessary, so that, little by little, every discordant note may be banished from this silent concert. In Carmel, where everything is strictly regulated within the Kingdom of the spirit, of the heart and of the soul, God exacts a profound purification of the higher faculties so that they may arrive at that state of receptivity which invites His Presence.

The great Mystical Doctor of Carmel, St. John of the Cross, in order to summarise this determined and persevering toil of a soul climbing the rugged ascent of Carmel, has invented a forceful expression,

[24] Retreat, 2nd Day.
[25] Ibid.

not hitherto used by theologians: "nakedness of spirit." What is this "nakedness of spirit"? Nothing less than the "great interior silence" of Sr. Elizabeth. The spirit must void itself of all that would form an obstacle to the free working of grace within it, to the divine action. It must place itself in a state of despoliation, of utter nakedness. "All the sensible operations of the powers must be stilled and silence must be imposed on them, in order to leave a clear field for the action of the Sovereign Master."[26] "One must be stripped of everything, both in the natural and supernatural order."[27] "Nothing, nothing, nothing—in order to arrive at the All of God."[28]

Solitude easily falls back upon itself—develops "personality," introspection, egoism. Many a soul thinks itself capable of solitude—yes, but in an entirely human way, because it merely shuts itself up in its own little world of memories, living the past over again, or building castles in the air. Sr. Elizabeth understood this illusion, and knew what an obstacle *self* is to interior silence. She ceaselessly crucified self by imposing on it that form of mortification which best corresponded with her ascesis of silence—*complete forgetfulness*.

(b) "*Help me to forget myself completely.*"[29]

Self-forgetfulness holds an important place in the field of abnegation for Sr. Elizabeth as for St. Thérèse. "Hearken oh daughter, and incline thine

[26] St. John of the Cross: "Ascent of Mount Carmel. Book III. Chapter I.

[27] Retreat, 6th Day.

[28] St. John of the Cross: "Ascent of Mount Carmel." Frontispiece.

[29] Prayer: "O my God; Trinity Whom I adore."

ear, and forget thy people and thy father's house. . . ." This remark is an invitation to silence. Hearken, incline thine ear; but in order to listen (this is important) we must forget our father's house, that is to say, all that pertains to the natural life. To forget our people is more difficult, for this "people" is that world which is, so to speak, part of ourselves. It includes our feelings, memories and impressions and so forth. In a word, it is *self*. We must forget it, give it up.[30]

For a Carmelite—as indeed for every contemplative—this falling back on self is a constant danger, though nevertheless necessary in order to acquire self-knowledge; and all methods of spirituality recommend this practice at certain times in the day. But the art consists in limiting these introspections to what is strictly necessary, and in knowing how to carry them out with a certain liberty of spirit. It is not a question of neglecting self-knowledge, but of avoiding these returns upon self—to live in one's cell not face-to-face with oneself but face-to-face with God. It is in this sense that Sr. Elizabeth understands "self-forgetfulness." "I think that the secret of peace and happiness lies in forgetfulness, disregard of oneself, of that which does not exist—to rise above our physical and moral ills. God would have you go out from yourself, to put aside all anxiety, in order to retire into that solitude which He has chosen for Himself in the depths of your heart. It may seem to you difficult perhaps to forget yourself; don't think of yourself at all; if only you knew how simple it is!"[31] And she explains how this can be done: "Think of God Who dwells within you:

[30] Retreat, 10th Day.
[31] Letter to a friend.

little by little the soul becomes accustomed to live in His dear Companionship . . . she then breathes as it were a divine atmosphere, her body alone remains upon earth, her soul already dwells beyond the veil in Him Who is unchangeable."[32]

"It seems to me that the Saints are people who are continually forgetful of themselves, who lose themselves in Him Whom they love, without falling back on self, without stopping at creatures, so that they can say with St. Paul: "It is no longer I that live, it is Jesus Christ Who lives in me."[33]

"To love means to forget oneself
To lose oneself in the Beloved."[34]
"One who truly loves, no longer lives in self,
But feels the need of ceaseless self-oblivion."[35]

Ten days before her death, Sr. Elizabeth still counsels this forgetfulness as it were in a last testament: "Everything passes away," she murmurs in a voice scarcely audible to the Community grouped around her bed of suffering . . . "love alone remains —we should do everything for love, we should forget ourselves unceasingly. The Good God so loves a soul which is self-regardless."[36]

There is no doubt about this fact: for Sr. Elizabeth self-forgetfulness is interior silence, "to lose oneself, to go out from self" in order to live in God, with God. "Be rooted in Him, and thus be uprooted from self, or acting as though you were—that is to say, denying self every time it makes itself felt."[37] It is moreover to make of her life a

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] "The Laws of Love"—Poem by Sr. Elizabeth.
[35] "Heaven within the soul"—Poem by Sr. Elizabeth.
[36] "Souvenirs," page 212.
[37] Letter to a friend.

Praise of glory, by rising above her own wretchedness, practising the "knowing-nothing" of St. John of the Cross; in order to hymn the divine Goodness, to be an instrument vibrating under the Divine Touch. "Nescivi: I know nothing, I desire to know nothing, but Him."[38] Without deviating from her line of thought, the end constantly pursued; she adds "When I shall have become completely identified with this Divine Exemplar, dwelling wholly in Him and He in me, I shall fulfill my eternal vocation. . . . I shall become the unceasing Praise of His glory."[39]

"The path is traced for us. We have only to deny ourselves in order to traverse it as God intends we should. To deny self, to die to self, to lose sight of self, this is the death that God demands, and of which He says: "Oh soul, my adopted daughter, look on Me, and you will lose sight of self; flow wholly into Me; come, die in Me, so that I may live in you!"[40]

Therefore, for a soul which has understood its high destiny here below, for a contemplative soul that desires to live in God, that dwells recollected beneath the light of Truth, what does it matter whether it feels or not, whether it is plunged in darkness or in light, enjoys or does not enjoy! It feels a kind of shame at differentiating between these things, and despising itself utterly for such want of love, it turns at once to its Master for deliverance."[41] It exalts Him on the highest summit of the heart, that is to say "above the sweetness and consolations which flow from Him, having resolved

[38] Last Retreat—1st Day.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Retreat—9th Day.
[41] Letter to a friend. August 11th, 1906.

to pass by all else in order to be united with Him Whom it loves.[42] And this is the work wrought by the sword of self-forgetfulness in the realm of our sensitive nature and in the imagination. There is the condition: "we must be *dead;* otherwise . . . we do not live habitually in the Divinity, because our feelings, our self-seeking and the rest draw us forth from Him." [43]

Now let us study the working of the self-forgetfulness in the *memory:** "My Master asks me to live in an eternal present, with no past, no future, but wholly in the unity of my being in an *eternal present.*" [44] Profound psychology!

The silence of the memory and of the imagination is most important, so that the soul can live fully in the present moment, without continually recalling a past which may be either bitter or pleasant, or dreaming of a chimerical future. The past exercises a hold over the most secret fibres of our being, and the memory has innumerable ways of reacting to the least reminiscence: perfume, sound, landscape, idea—the sum total of these can suddenly awaken, in a most vivid manner, a whole phase of our life, whence come reflex emotion, thought, association of ideas which people the solitude and often weaken the will by diverting it from the duty of the present moment. With the help of the imagination there is soon a perfect "sarabande" of natural sentiments, entirely earthly, encircling one: melancholy, sadness, regrets or

[42] Retreat—4th Day.
[43] Retreat—6th Day.
[44] Retreat—10th day.

* Let us notice how Sr. Elizabeth was nourished on the writings of St. John of the Cross: c.f. "Ascent of Mount Carmel" Book III, Chapter I & II.

desires, memories of all sorts chase and overtake one another without pause or rest. The immediate past encumbers the imagination and memory still more and in a way which is more dangerous to the soul, and often sinful. Susceptibility, jealousy, thoughts of pride, want of charity, rash judgments, inward criticising, are awakened by some incident, word or action of our neighbour. And so Sr. Elizabeth writes: "I must guard against being withdrawn from this holy interior silence by keeping myself always in the same state, the same *isolation,* the same *retirement,* the same *detachment.*" (Let us note the gradation in the ascesis of self-forgetfulness.) "If my desires, my fears, my joys or my sorrows, if all the impulses coming from these four passions are not completely subjected to God, I shall not be solitary: there will be turmoil within me. Therefore calm, the slumber of the powers, the unity of the whole being are needed."[45]

Then "whatever turmoil there may be outside or whatever tempests within" . . . (Sr. Elizabeth knew both) . . . "however its honour may be assailed (silence under humiliations) . . . however it may be accused (silence under contradiction)—nothing can draw it forth from its silence."[46]

We see then how Sr. Elizabeth, by means of self-forgetfulness knew how to immolate nature—whose least stirrings she wished to silence, in order to become established and unified in a triumphant stillness. The more silence reigns, the more easily will the soul catch the whisperings of God. When the *understanding* no longer discourses, there will be *simplicity:* when the *will* no longer follows its own dictate there will be absolute *abandonment* to the

[45] Ibid.
[46] Retreat, 2nd Day.

Will of the Father; when the *imagination* is silent, there will be *self-forgetfulness*.

Then all the powers will be "enclosed" in God, "the soul will be fit to sing without interruption the new canticle, for it will not have to be continually tuning the strings of its instrument, all a little off key."[47] "Henceforth the Divine Master is free to flow into her, to give Himself according to her capacity of receiving."[48]

(c) THE PRAYER OF SILENCE.

> "*I am silent, I listen to Him . . . and I love Him.*"[48a]

Thus impregnated with the spirit of silence, it is natural to expect that Sr. Elizabeth would bring to her prayer this intimate habitual disposition of her soul. Our prayer, more than any other manifestation of our spiritual activity, is the true reflexion of our interior dispositions. Sr. Elizabeth found the natural expression of her state of soul in the prayer of simple regard, and the prayer of recollection, which very soon developed for her into a state of habitual contemplation, including passing experiences of the grace of union. A born Carmelite, she practised from the outset prayer "by day and night," by an assiduous remembrance of the Presence of God—a remembrance which is a simple, loving act of faith, maintained by silence and in silence. "He dwells in me and I in Him. I have only to love and let myself be loved by Him

[47] Ibid.
[48] Letter to Madame A., 1903, and Last Retreat, 2nd day.
[48a] "Souvenirs"—(French edition of 1919.)

always, *in silence*." [49] My Master is there with me, and we live night and day in a sweet intimacy, heart to heart."

With Sr. Elizabeth there is no question of discursive meditation. That would have meant introducing noise, encumbrance, distraction of spirit, rather than recollection. By a spontaneous movement, she established her prayer in contemplative silence. "In the stillness of prayer. . . . I am silent and I adore." [50] "I am silent, I listen to Him, I love Him."

Wishing to teach a friend how to pray, she wrote: "You must build, like me, a little silent cell within your soul. You must consider that the good God dwells there, and you must enter within from time to time. . . . It seems to me that this is a repose, a relaxation. We come quite simply to Him Whom we love, and our heart goes out to Him." [51] Here is an even more expressive remark of Sr. Elizabeth on this entirely contemplative form of prayer: "I raise my eyes and look at God; then I lower them upon you, thus exposing you to the rays of His Love. I say nothing to Him in words, but He understands me very well, and prefers my silence." [52]

To be silent, to listen to God, had become for Sr. Elizabeth a real need of her soul. Her letters and poems express this in eloquent terms. Had she not almost created the noun "listener," which responded so perfectly to the life she ambitioned for herself, face-to-face with God.

[49] "Souvenirs," page 116. (French edition of 1919.) (cf. Letter to Canon A., 1903.)

[50] "Souvenirs," page 112. (French edition of 1919).

[51] Letter to a friend—1904.

[52] Letter to a friend—September 11th, 1906. ("Souvenirs," page 190. English translation of 1913.)

"Oh that I might become Thy "Listener,"
Ever at peace, in faith."[53]
"May I spend my life, oh Word Eternal,
In listening to Thee."[54]

She writes of Mary Magdalene, whose attitude of contemplative silence at the Feet of the Divine Master, attracted her:

"Wrapt in silence she is listening
To the Word Who to her speaks;
And to savour more His Presence
Her whole being silence seeks."[55]

To know how to be silent in prayer, to be silent before God, to listen to Him, to remain always His "listener"—that is the great silence of prayer. Alas! how many souls remain inveterate babblers, even in solitude, even in prayer. They talk so much that they have no time to listen to God. Why? Because they do not yet know how to find God in any other way, because they are not sufficiently empty and voided of created things, because their powers are not detached, but act after too human a manner. The more supernaturalised they become, the more will they understand the simple experience of Sr. Elizabeth, and learn to expose their needs and requests quite simply before the loving Gaze of God—without noise of words. God sees them, knows them, knows what is best for

[53] Christmas 1904—Poem.
[54] Ibid.
[55] The Laws of Love. Poem.

* It is important here not to generalise, and to distinguish carefully the different phases of the spiritual life, and the ways by which the Holy Ghost leads souls. Except in a few cases, beginners should practise discursive meditation until such time as God sees fit to lead them into contemplation. St. John of the Cross and all spiritual writers insist on this point.

them; understands their silence and prefers it, because it is a silence of faith and love—a silence of abandonment, of confidence in Him—the adoration of His good Pleasure, the praise of His glory. Thus, the need of using words, felt by inexperienced or too expansive souls, becomes under the contemplative light of silent prayer, a need of remaining silent, a passion for listening. "Have you not experienced a "*longing to listen to Him?*" wrote Sr. Elizabeth to a young seminarist; "sometimes it is so strong—this need of being silent—that one would like to do nothing but remain at His Feet, like Magdalene . . . hanging on His Words and penetrating more and more the mystery of love which He comes to reveal to us."[56]

In her celebrated offering to the Blessed Trinity, "Oh my God, Trinity Whom I adore," etc. Sr. Elizabeth takes up the same idea and expresses it in an even more striking way: "Oh Eternal Word, Utterance of my God, I would wish to spend my life listening to You. I long to become quite docile, so that I may learn all from You." [57]

It is then not sufficient merely to be silent and to listen, one must become "docile," that is to say pliant and simple-hearted, having one's will disposed to receive the light. How deeply had this young Carmelite plumbed the depths of the ascesis of silence, in order to draw forth conclusions as rigorous as they are practical! So few souls are really "docile"—even (and perhaps especially) among so-called pious people. Hardly have they set foot on

[56] Letter to Abbe Ch. "Souvenirs," page 112.

[57] cf. the commentary on Elizabeth's prayer to the Blessed Trinity, under the form of meditations, in the Booklet: "To the Light, to Love, to Life," by M.M. Am. du Coeur de Jesus. (Carmel of Rochefort.) Translated into English by a Discalced Carmelite. Mercier Press.

the way of perfection than they think themselves very advanced, more ready to give advice than to receive it. And even among religious, how many "Masters in Israel" there are—ever ready to deliver spiritual discourses in season and out of season, thinking they have knowledge and experience of everything. Few souls, alas! are truly docile and pliant, because few are utterly detached, humble, and really interior. The great inner silence is undoubtedly the quality which is most lacking among so-called contemplative souls, and this explains why there are so few real contemplatives.

Saint John of the Cross, having analysed in psychological fashion, the obstacles which are opposed to the reign of the Holy Spirit in the souls of contemplatives, insists on the practice of silence, which is so necessary to a soul desirous of attaining to union with God. ". . . when a person once understands what has been said to him for his profit, he needs neither to hear nor to say more, but rather to practise what has been said to him silently and carefully, in humility and charity and self-contempt."[58] "That which we most need in order to make progress, is to be silent before the great God, with the desire and with the tongue, for the language that He best hears is the silent language of love."[59]

When the soul has become accustomed to remain silent and to listen to God, Our Lord usually leads it into this prayer of silence wherein it is sustained by His infused grace, provided it is faithful and generous. "God speaks to our heart when our heart speaks to Him."[60]

[58] St. John of the Cross. Letter to the Carmelites of Veas (Complete Works, Vol. III. Letter VI., page 271.)
[59] St. John of the Cross. Maxims. Vol. III., page 255.
[60] St. Teresa. "Way of Perfection."

Sr. Elizabeth had sweet experience of this: "I keep silent, I listen to Him; it is so good to listen;" and she adds "I love Him." Truly the "Divine Shepherd" caused her very quickly to hear the sweet music of His pipes, music which has such power over the senses and faculties, and disposes them to hear His divine Words."[61] She had discovered by experience that "at such times it is good to be silent," and she practised this assiduously. "I leave you in order to enter into profound silence with my Beloved." [61a]

The prayer of recollection, which, in her case became ever more intense, led her rapidly to the great silence of the transforming union, into the "Divinum Silentium" spoken of by the Psalmist. "What He teaches me, without words, in the depths of my soul, is ineffable," said Sr. Elizabeth. "He enlightens me on all matters; He responds to all my needs." [62]

[61] St. Teresa. "Interior Castle," IVth Mansion.
[61a] Letter to Canon A.
[62] "Souvenirs," page 109.

III. SILENCE WHICH PERFECTS SAINTS.

"Silence is Thy Praise."

(a) THE SILENCE OF GOD.

"In the hour of trial, remain in peace . . . and in silence, beneath the Hand which fashions you."

What is God's usual response to the longings of His chosen ones, as recompense for their detachment, and in order to enlighten their yet darkened souls, and to render them fit to take part in the great concert of the elect? Silence. This perhaps is the most crucifying suffering of Love. The heart has sacrificed all, and can rest in nothing: this is the silence which purifies *Charity*.

The spirit has cast aside everything, and agonises amidst the darkness: Silence which purifies *Faith*.

The soul is stripped, and sees only its wretchedness and poverty and faults; silence which anchors *Hope*.

Silence everywhere — torturing silence — the crushing silence of the Dark Night.

The soul, eager for a word of comfort, wants to question, to listen, to hear—and the only response is the silence echoing from the depths of the abyss wherein God plunges it. The divine work goes on however, by means of this very silence. Little by little, the human will becomes fixed in the Will of God; the soul learns to love in the purity of faith, and to realise the depths of its own wretchedness. "The Saints themselves passed through these crucifying states," (they, above all, we might add), "but they did not rest there; they constantly rose above these trials. When they felt themselves

affected by them, they were not surprised, for they knew "that we are but dust."[63] Sr. Elizabeth had well understood the liberating grace of these sufferings, for she adds: "It seems to me that the Good God asks of you unlimited abandon and trust at those sorrowful times when you feel this terrible void. At such times, believe that He is preparing for His indwelling in your soul fresh capacities which must be to a certain extent, infinite like Himself. . . . Look upon each suffering as a proof of love coming direct from the Good God, in order to unite you to Him. . . . Do not be discouraged by the thought of your miseries; in times of greatest suffering, think that the Divine Sculptor is using the chisel to beautify His work, and remain at peace beneath the Hand which shapes you." [63a]

Having passed through this supreme trial, the young Carmelite insists strongly upon the importance of *faith*, which is its support and guiding-light—"possession in obscurity"—according to the expression of St. John of the Cross. "If I were to rest there (i.e. in the suffering itself) I should feel nothing but my cowardice; but that is to regard things from a human standpoint; so at once, I open the eye of my soul under the light of faith, and this faith tells me that it is Love Who is destroying me, Who is slowly consuming me; and my joy is immense. I yield myself to Him as His prey."[64]

It is worth remarking that, in spite of the profusion of light which inundated her towards the close of her life, Sr. Elizabeth had always to fix her

[63] Letter to a friend—(cf. Psalm c II. v. 14.)

[63a] Letter to Madame A., November 24th, 1905. ("Souvenirs," page 83.)

[64] Letter to a friend—September 11th, 1906.

abode in *faith.* "It is in pure faith that I am going forth," she will say—"I prefer it so, for thus I shall be more like my Divine Master, and more established *in the truth.*"[65] Thanks to this unshakable faith, it matters little to her whether God hides Himself in silence, whether He sends her joy or suffering—she believes in His Love. "The more she is tried, the more her faith increases, because she passes over all obstacles, so to speak, in order to repose in the Bosom of Infinite Love."[66]

The silence of God, accepted, "received," with an equally perfect supernatural understanding, establishes the soul in a blessed serenity. "It is very obscure, very painful, but I think it is just as simple to suffer as to enjoy,"[67] concludes Sr. Elizabeth. "And when the soul, plunged in this silence, has reaped the fruit of it, when she has made a complete break with self, when she is free . . . the King greatly desires her beauty. . . . The Creator, seeing the silence which reigns in His creature deeply recollected in her interior solitude . . . leads her into that immense and infinite solitude, into that 'large place' of which the Psalmist sings, which is His very Self: 'I will enter into the powers of the Lord' Ps. LXX. 16."[68]

(b) SILENCE IN SUFFERING.

> "*Beneath the Divine Touch, oh remain in silence, so that the image of the Saviour may be imprinted on your soul.*"

To be silent, to maintain both interior and exterior silence when God makes Himself almost

[65] "Souvenirs," page 213.
[66] Retreat 7th Day.
[67] "Souvenirs," page 116.
[68] Retreat—11th Day.

imperceptible, and when the body enjoys just sufficient health for the observance of the Rule one has embraced, is already an achievement which cannot be maintained with the same degree of perfection. Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity was to soar beyond this state, and to wing her flight like an eagle to those heights where reigns the silence of the perfect: silence in suffering, silence in God. It is in the crucible of suffering that souls are tempered and reveal their true metal. Suffering at its highest point is the revealer of our secret "sub-soil," as also of our moral fibre. The less a man is master of himself, the more noise he makes about his suffering. It is dramatic, where there is habitual lack of simplicity, and the desire to attract attention; vociferous, with cries and sobs, in the case of primitive peoples, as also with the majority of children, who allow themselves to be mastered by it: bitter or violent for passionate souls: taciturn for those who are shut up in themselves: quiet and serenely peaceful for nobler souls: heroic, finally, for the Saints—after the example of the Blessed Virgin at the foot of the Cross . . . "Stabat Mater."

Suffering was to become, for Sr. Elizabeth, conformity to Christ. Her soul, established in unity, knew how to give forth beneath the blows of the chisel of the Divine Sculptor, the "ring of eternity" —echo of her interior canticle. Silence and self-forgetfulness had matured in her a wonderful fruit of detachment: "There is a Being Whose Name is Love . . . Who helps me to suffer, Who teaches me to pass beyond the pain in order to repose in Him. . . . This transforms everything."[69] "To pass beyond the pain—not to suffer in suffering —to suffer *outside oneself*"—such ideals were

[69] Letter to her Mother—October 1906.

to form for Sr. Elizabeth the new effort, as she called it, to transplant into the closed-garden of suffering her ascesis of silence. Too often, in our sufferings, we want to complain or to give vent to our feelings in one way or another, in order to draw to ourselves sympathy and consolation. Sr. Elizabeth however, far from seeking these little alleviations for nature, wanted to disengage herself from them. Asked how she spent the painful nights of her last months on earth, she replied simply: "As a sick person does," and immediately she would enquire after the other invalids. "If I stopped at my suffering," she said, "it would seem very painful—yes—but I quickly rise above it in order to plunge into *His* Sufferings —into the abyss of His pain." And what was the secret of this heroism? Forgetfulness of self. To forget self more and more, to be silent in suffering, not to rest in it, but to unite it at once to the suffering of Christ, to plunge it into this abyss of pain, and to dwell in the divine "palace of beatitude and suffering."

Few souls have extolled suffering as has Sr. Elizabeth, visibly under the influence of the gift of Fortitude, which imparted to her a peace and serenity and invincible patience. We could cite innumerable instances of this. Let us select a few at random. "I have nothing to fear from my weakness —it only strengthens my confidence, for the 'Strong One' (Isaias IX. 6) is within me, and His Omnipotence works wonders which exceed all our hopes."[70] "I feel that my will is developed and strengthened by means of suffering."[71] The "Souvenirs" show how Sr. Elizabeth knew not only

[70] Ibid.
[71] "Souvenirs," page 187.

how to recommend but to practise silence in suffering. She did not give in till she was absolutely at the end, and had never let the Mother Prioress know of her extreme exhaustion—"I feared lest I should be giving in to nature by complaining," she would say later; "prayer was the best remedy for my ills. I spent the Great Silence in real agony which I united to that of my Divine Master . . . it was an hour of pure suffering." Later on, when, overcome by her illness, she was hardly able to drag herself along to the little tribune near the infirmary, she would never fail to continue in silence this office of praise and immolation, which conformed her, little by little, to the image of her Christ. "Oh, pray that my resemblance to the Divine Model may become daily more perfect, this is my dream, this is what gives strength to my soul in suffering," she will write—"True union does not consist in consolations, but in detachment and suffering."[72] Brave and serene, even in the most acute crises, Sr. Elizabeth proved to what a degree silence and prayer governed her soul—causing her to live no longer in herself, but in Christ, in God—free from those preoccupations too often found in sick people.

Her retreats too, and her last letters, are they not the echo of a soul which has passed completely into silent adoration of the crucifying operations of Love? "Believe always in His Love; if you have something to suffer, it is because you are more loved. Love Him and sing always 'Deo gratias.' Whether a great suffering or a quite little sacrifice is offered you, think immediately that this is 'your hour'—the hour when you are going to prove your love for Him Who has loved you unto folly. If you

[72] "Souvenirs," page 188.

only knew how necessary suffering is in order that God's work may be done in our soul!" "I am experiencing joys hitherto unknown—the joy of suffering. Before I die it is my dream to be transformed into Jesus Crucified."[73] "In order that the resemblance to our Divine Model may be more perfect, our union more intimate, here is the secret: forget self, leave self behind, make no account of self; look at the Divine Master—at no one else but Him; accept with equal gratitude joy or suffering as gifts coming directly from His Love; this fixes the soul on the heights of perfect tranquility."[74] It is on these heights, in this tranquility, that silence and self-forgetfulness have established for ever the little "Praise of Glory"—whence she can enlighten souls and sing her office of eternity.

(c) SILENCE IN GOD.

> "*Silence is Thy praise . . . yes, it is the most beautiful praise, for it alone will sing for all eternity, in the bosom of the tranquil Trinity.*"
>
> (*Retreat—8th Day.*)

Let us now behold this "soul which has entered that vast solitude wherein God will make Himself heard. The Word of God is living and effectual, and more piercing than any two-edged sword: and reaching unto the division of the soul and the spirit, of the joints also and the marrow. (Heb. IV. 12). It is, then, this Word itself which will finish the work of stripping the soul, its characteristic and peculiar property being to effect and create what it makes known, provided the soul

[73] "Souvenirs," page 189.
[74] Letter to her Mother and Sister.

yields its consent, by remaining passive and silent."[75] "The Divinity dwells in eternal and profound solitude; He cares for the needs of His creatures without in any way leaving it, for He never goes out from Himself, and this solitude is nothing but His Divinity.[76] In this Divine Solitude is the plenitude, the perfection of silence. All the work of creation and ordering springs from this silence and is accomplished in silence. The Spirit of God unites Himself to and shares in this silence, through His participation in Infinite Love. Everything in this Love being inexpressible, silence alone is the atmosphere which befits it; and the more our union with God is purified and intensified, the greater the silence it creates.

While yet subject to habits of imperfection, the soul experiences first a need of singing its love, and pours itself forth in praise; then, little by little, as it penetrates further into the divine intimacy, it feels the truth of the Psalmist's exclamation: "Silence is Thy praise." (Ps. LXV. 2.) Arrived at last at the summit of the Mount of Perfection—"the mountain on which God is well-pleased to dwell," (Ps. LXVII) the soul is established in the "Divinum Silentium." In the divine silence, the soul "seems to hear a harmony of sublimest music. . . . It is a tranquil and quiet intelligence, without sound of voices. . . . Her Beloved is this silent music, because this harmony of spiritual music is known and experienced in Him."[77] "The Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity dwell within the soul which loves Them *in truth*. . . . And when the soul realises what

[75] Retreat—11th Day.
[76] Retreat—10th Day.
[77] St. John of the Cross—"Spiritual Canticle" (Complete Works Vol. II. stanza XIII.)

riches it possesses, all the natural or supernatural joys which might come to it from creatures, or even from God, only induce it to enter within itself to enjoy the substantial good which it possesses, which is nothing else but God Himself."[78] "A soul which meditates upon these thoughts . . . lives in an anticipated heaven, above all that possess, above itself . . . it despises self, loses sight of self, (continual self-oblivion) and finds its beatitude in Him Whom it adores, whatever its sufferings, or grief for it has gone out from self, and *passed into Another*,"[78a] (the term of self-oblivion.) "It flows entirely into Him Whom it loves;" "Love causes the lover to go out of himself, transporting him by an ineffable ecstasy into the bosom of the Beloved."[79] And there, in God, Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity silent and recollected, begins "in the heaven of her soul, this occupation of the blessed in the state of glory. . . . Henceforth she is resplendent with 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God' (II Cor. IV. 6) because she allows the Divinity to reflect Himself in her. . . . Whatever happens, and even during the most commonplace employments she sings the 'Canticum Novum' . . . which thrills God to His very depths."[80] The Divine Spouse, finding her soul void and silent, chooses it for His nuptial chamber. He enters it impetuously, "rejoicing as a giant to run his course" . . . and brings about that blessed transformation described by St. John of the Cross, when he wrote: "Each of them seems to be the other and they are both but one"—a Praise of Glory to the Father.

[78] Retreat—11th Day.
[78a] Retreat—8th Day.
[79] Letter to Madame A., 1904.
[80] Retreat—3rd Day.

Into this ocean of love Sr. Elizabeth plunges and loses herself; it is her "vision" on this earth while she awaits the face-to-face vision in the light of glory. "He dwells in me—and I in Him. I have only to love Him and let myself be loved—at all times and under all circumstances: to wake in love, to act in love, to sleep in love, my soul in His Soul, my heart in His Heart."[81] "Mark everything with the seal of love. It alone endures."[82] "God creates abysses in my soul which He alone can fill; and to this end He leads me into profound silence where I would like to remain for ever."[83]

> "In the deep calm of Thy Eternal Life
> Deign to engulf me, so that, whilst on earth
> Whate'er befall—I dwell, in joy or strife,
> As one in Heaven, in Thy Love and Peace."

Our Lord responded to the prayers of His "Praise of Glory." Immersed in silence, in God, she could truly dwell "as one in Heaven," while awaiting in peace and recollection the great meeting—the "Veni" of her Christ: "The Beloved is here! He is coming with all His gifts: the abyss of His love clothes you as with a garment: silence! silence! silence!"[84]

(d) THE APOSTOLATE OF SILENCE.

"*A 'Praise of Glory' is a soul of silence.*"

"Within the heaven of our soul, let us be a 'praise of glory' of the Blessed Trinity, a 'praise of love' of our Immaculate Mother." This was the

[81] Letter to Canon A., 1903.
[82] Letter to Madame de B., 1906.
[83] Letter to Canon A.
[84] "Souvenirs," page 201.

dream, the unceasing desire of Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity, the radiant ideal towards which she wanted to lead those she loved. In the heaven of glory she continues her mission, and exercises her hidden apostolate in favour of a vast number of priestly and interior souls. An apostolate of silence—by means of recollection and union.

"A Praise of Glory is a soul which dwells in God." Like a true contemplative, Sr. Elizabeth rises to the source of all apostolate, and there—in silence—occupies herself in prayer and immolation, "partaking unceasingly in the prayer of Our Lord, remaining like a little vessel beside the fountain, so that she may be able to give life to others by letting His inexhaustible streams of charity overflow on them."

She associates and compares the apostolate of a Carmelite with that of a Priest: "both can show forth God and give Him to souls if they are always close to the Divine Source,"[85] in silence and adoration. "I should like to be all silence and adoration, in order to penetrate ever more deeply into Him, and to become so filled with Him so as to be able to give Him—by prayer—to those poor souls who do not know the gift of God."[86] "While you are carrying Him to souls," she wrote to a Priest, "I shall remain in silence and adoration at the Master's Feet, begging Him to make your words bear fruit in these souls."[87] "There must be silence in order to adore."

But the Divine Source par excellence, is the Holy Mass, the redemptive sacrifice wherein Christ

[85] "Souvenirs," page 112.
[86] "Souvenirs," page 107 (French edition, 1919.)
[87] Letter to Abbe B.

immolates Himself in a mysterious manner. Sr. Elizabeth longed to be "conformed to His Passion and Death" in order to become in her turn co-redemptrix. The most beautiful passages from St. Paul flow readily from her pen, and she speaks out of the abundance of her heart: "I desire to know Him and the fellowship of His Sufferings, being made conformable to His Death. . . ." (Phil. III. 8). The nearer she approached the end of her life, the more did Christ become her Adorable Exemplar. Having followed Him in the silence of her hidden life, the Carmelite—now arrived at the supreme hour of suffering and consummation—gathers light and strength from the austere silence of the Passion and Calvary. She knows that "true union does not consist in consolations, but in detachment and suffering." "Then serenely peaceful, she goes to meet all sacrifices with her Master, rejoicing at *having been known* by the Father, since He crucifies her with His Son. Detached, freed from self and all things, she will follow her Master to the mountain, to unite with His soul 'in the prayer of God.' " [88]

The silence of Jesus helps Sr. Elizabeth in her way of immolation. The silence of Mary leads her contemplative soul to the adoration of God dwelling within her. "In what silence, what recollection, what adoration, must the Blessed Virgin have buried herself in the depths of her soul, to enclose that God Whose Mother she was. . . ." "I have no need to make any effort to enter into the mystery of the Divine Indwelling in Mary. . . . I seem to behold there the habitual movement of my soul." For Sr. Elizabeth, Our Lady was above all the silent and recollected

[88] Retreat—14th Day.

Virgin, the model of interior souls, "of those whom God has called to live within themselves, in the depths of the unfathomable abyss." The Carmelite, by her vocation, being one of these solitary souls, living for God alone, in love and contemplation, the Blessed Virgin appears to her shining with those virtues which characterise her own mode of life; viz.:

(i) *Purity:* "She is a creature so pure, so transparent, that she seems to be the light itself;"

(ii) *Humility:* "She was always so forgetful of herself, free from all self-interest . . . so little in her own eyes, so recollected in the Presence of God;"

(iii) *Silence:* "I picture her as she passes (over the hill-country of Judea) calm and majestic, absorbed in communion with the Word of God within her . . . reproducing, as it were, on earth, the life of the Blessed Trinity." [89]

In order to hymn her "Mother of Grace," Janua Caeli, the wall and defence of the interior fortress of holy recollection, the little "Praise of Glory"—soul of silence—tuned for the last time the chords of her lyre, which, beneath the mysterious touch of the Holy Spirit, gave forth divine harmonies. And what a magnificent hymn of depth and sublimity arose one starry night from those walls "full of silence" of the poor infirmary, where "Laudem Gloriae" was spending all her substance for the glory of her Heavenly Mother.

[89] Retreat—15th Day, and "Heaven on Earth"—9th Day.

"After Jesus Christ, and of course at a distance which necessarily exists between the finite and the infinite, there is a created being, who was also the great Praise of Glory of the Blessed Trinity, she corresponded fully to the divine vocation of which St. Paul speaks; she was always pure, immaculate, unspotted, in the Sight of the Thrice-Holy God. Her life was so simple, so hidden in God, that there is but little to say of it; 'Virgo Fidelis,' the Faithful Virgin, the soul of silence, 'who kept all these words in her heart' (Luke II. 51)."[90]

She pondered over them unceasingly—she, the "Adorer of the gift of God;" it was within her *heart* that the sword transpierced her, for with her everything took place within her soul."[91]

——There, in recollection and the silent ecstasy of contemplation, Mary adored the Word; and the soul of Jesus and that of His Mother blended in the ocean of an inexpressible silence. . . . "The secret she kept and pondered in her heart is unspeakable: no tongue can tell it, no pen express it."[92]

[90] "Heaven on Earth"—12th Day.
[91] Retreat—15th Day.
[92] Retreat—1st Day.