

**SILENCE, THE ORIGIN OF EVANGELIZATION**  
**A Discourse with Max Picard, Raimon Panikkar,**  
**and Aloysius Pieris**

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**Abstrak:** Max Picard berargumen bahwa keheningan adalah sumber ucapan. Ucapan yang tidak berasal dari keheningan hanyalah suara bising tanpa makna. Ucapan atau kata-kata sejati yang bermakna bersumber dalam keheningan. Raimon Panikkar dan Aloysius Pieris berpendapat bahwa keheningan adalah karakter Allah. Keheningan ilahi diungkapkan melalui Sabda, melalui bahasa Tubuh dan Darah, yakni pribadi Yesus Kristus. Evangelisasi Kristiani sesungguhnya bersifat profetik. Evangelisasi Kristiani tanggap terhadap penderitaan umat manusia, mengikuti dinamika Keheningan dan Sabda Illahi, atau dinamika hidup-kematian-kebangkitan. Evangelisasi Kristiani bukan hanya hal mewartakan Sabda, melainkan juga hal kembali kepada sumbernya yang sejati, yakni Keheningan Allah.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** Keheningan, evangelisasi, “bahasa Tubuh — dan — Darah,” profetis, penderitaan manusia.

**Abstract:** Max Picard argues that silence is the source of the word. The word that does not come from silence equals noise. A true word, or meaningful speech, springs from silence. Raimon Panikkar and Aloysius Pieris contend that silence is a characteristic of God. God’s Silence is spoken through the Word, expressed through the language of Body and Blood, the person of Jesus Christ. Christian evangelization is prophetic. It responds to human suffering, following the dynamism of Silence and Word, of life — death — resurrection. Christian evangelization is not merely about delivering the Word of God, but also about returning to its origin, the Silence of God.

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**Keywords:** Silence, evangelization, Body — and — Blood language, prophetic, human suffering.

## INTRODUCTION

Today it is common to hear an announcement to remind people to turn off their cell phones before a meeting or seminar begins. Even in our churches such a reminder needs to be made before celebrations of the Eucharist or other liturgical events. Still, in many cases, people cannot turn their cell phones off and allow themselves to remain in silence to follow divine worship.

Perhaps Raimon Panikkar is right that people today have been infected by *siegephobia*, the fear of silence.<sup>1</sup> Our surroundings also offer other indications. In *Trans Jakarta* buses, for example, I see people who cannot free themselves from headsets connected to their MP3/MP4 players or *iPods*. Others are very busy with their cell phones, texting or talking to somebody elsewhere. Also, with handy cellular phones, some people enjoy chatting with their friends through *Facebook*, *Yahoo! Messenger*, chat rooms, or just browsing certain websites to get news or information.

Put positively, the marvelous progress of computer-based technology, including the cell phone, has motivated people to communicate with others more than they did before. Seeing this advantage, Christians have developed a new way of communicating the Good News. Cyberspace can be seen as a wide-reaching and timeless medium for evangelization.

Nevertheless, we should be aware of the quality of communication in daily life and in our spiritual lives. Some basic questions should be posed: *Do we communicate with others merely because of our fear of silence? Conversely, can we communicate with others if we stay in silence? Do we need silence in our communication with others, including in delivering the Good News? Does silence give a quality, or certain qualities, to our daily communication and our evangelization?*

To ponder these questions, I offer an exploration in two major parts.

Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p.166.

to Max Picard and his thoughts on *the world of silence*.<sup>2</sup> The second part is more theological. A dialogue with Raimon Panikkar and Aloysius Pieris helps us grasp some thoughts on silence as a divine characteristic and the consequences of this understanding on the evangelical enterprise.

### MAX PICARD: THE WORLD OF SILENCE

Needless to say, silence, on its own, cannot be spoken or explained. What people can do, I believe, is to name their experience of being in silence. These experiences could possibly give rise to an understanding of what silence is, and what silence can or cannot do with our lives.

The Swiss philosopher, Max Picard, has tried to describe *the world of silence*. Unfortunately, he gives us no information about the genesis of his book. Looking at the span of his life (1888-1965) and his Jewish heredity, we can only presume that the two World Wars and the Holocaust are behind his work.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the obscure background of his writing, we capture Picard's clear criticism about his contemporaries' modern lifestyle that was created and supported by the progress of science and technology.

Using the radio as an example, and also as an object of his criticism, Picard observes that his contemporaries have forgotten about silence as a virtue. They have drawn themselves into the noise of words, have spoken without knowing the meaning of their own speech, and thus, have been unconscious of their world, and worse, of their own innermost being.<sup>4</sup> We can use this observation to look critically at the contemporary phenomena of cell phones and the internet. Picard's thoughts can be basically regarded as a call for people to be mindful of the danger of being, in certain ways, so attached to science and technology, particularly internet-based technol-

2 This is the title of Max Picard's famous book (Washington: Reguery Gateway, 1988).

3 Max Picard was born into a Jewish family in 1888, and converted to Roman Catholicism in 1939. Becoming critical of his colleagues' mechanical approach toward medicine and patients, the promising diagnostician gave up his career in the University Hospital in Heidelberg, Germany. He moved to Switzerland, studied philosophy, and started his new vocation as a writer. He died on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1965. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,822068,00.html>. Accessed on September 20, 2010.

4 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp. 198-210.

ogy.<sup>5</sup> The following paragraphs contain some of Picard's ideas on which it is valuable to reflect.

First, according to Picard, silence itself is autonomous, holistic, pure, purposeless, and thus, unexploitable. Silence cannot be used or exploited for profit.<sup>6</sup> Even more, silence has the power to resist any purposeful exploitation. Following from this is the power of healing, i.e. the power to reunite creation with the Creator, to bring the elements of creation into wholeness again.<sup>7</sup>

Second, silence is the original source of speech. Only speech that arises from silence embraces truth and goodness. Delivering and returning are the two elements in the creative dynamism of silence and speech. This dynamism is also pictured by Picard as the dynamism of pre-creation-creation-recreation and of life-death-resurrection.<sup>8</sup> Speech and language that does not originate from silence, Picard says, are "the noise of words."<sup>9</sup> They are meaningless.

Third, silence is the source of human speech, as well as the center of human qualities. This correlates with the first point. Human qualities are not defined by "development." Development embeds itself in our world of profit and exploitation. Human qualities are delivered by the spirit through the creative dynamism of creation and recreation.<sup>10</sup> Picard gives no clear description about what human qualities he refers to. However, in his writing we can find indications that those qualities are autonomy and wholeness.

Apart from these three points, Max Picard also has some notes that represent his theological ideas about silence. The incarnation of the Logos and the victory of Christ are the two central events in the dynamic

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5 We must also be aware that Picard's criticism of science and technology could lead people to the radical stance of avoiding the progress and development of science and technology in order to become fully human.

6 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp. 17-19.

7 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp. 19-22.

8 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp. 36, 41, 48.

9 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp. 168, 172 ff.

10 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp. 70-71.

movement of silence and human speech. Both the Logos and Christ fill human speech, language and words with truth and goodness. Also, both correspond to the return of human beings to their original beginning, that is, to God.<sup>11</sup>

While Picard regards God, the Divine, as the origin of silence, he does not explicitly identify God as silence or silence as God. However, Picard's description of silence evokes the transcendent and immanent aspects of God.

Silence is not visible, and yet its existence is clearly apparent. It extends to the farthest distances, yet is so close to us that we can feel it as concretely as we feel our own bodies. It is intangible, yet we can feel it as directly as we feel materials and fabrics. It cannot be defined in words, yet it is quite definite and unmistakable. In no other phenomenon are distance and nearness, range and immediacy, the all-embracing and the particular, so united as they are in silence.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps we can consider this note as a signal of Picard's recognition that silence symbolizes God. If we believe that a symbol is representative of what is symbolized, then, we arrive at the concept that silence represents God's-Self or, simply said, that God is Silence.

#### **PANIKKAR AND PIERIS: SILENCE AS A DIVINE CHARACTERISTIC**

For us Christians, the idea of God as Silence is a challenge as we inherit a faith that is said to be rooted in the Word of God.<sup>13</sup> But two Asian theologians, Aloysius Pieris and Raimon Panikkar, have reflected on this theme. They have immersed themselves in, and learned from, one of the greatest ancient religious traditions of Asia, namely Buddhism. The Divine as Silence is a focal theme of Buddhist spirituality. The next paragraphs look at the theological notions of Panikkar and Pieris.

#### **SILENCE IN WORD**

Since the Word of God is an essential of the Christian faith, we should firstly focus on the issue of silence and word. On this point, there is a sig-

<sup>11</sup> Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp. 33-35, 49-52.

<sup>12</sup> Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> See Jn 1:1.

nificant difference between the perspectives of the two Asian theologians and Picard. Max Picard argues that silence can be present without words, but words cannot exist without silence. Moreover, for Picard, word is seen on a level above silence, for word articulates truth, which silence itself cannot express.<sup>14</sup>

Raimon Panikkar is in agreement with Picard about silence as the source of a true word.<sup>15</sup> Panikkar defines silence as “the matrix of every authentic word.”<sup>16</sup> However, he takes a very different viewpoint when addressing the existential correlation of silence and word. Unlike Picard, Panikkar contends that silence and word have *intra-dependent* or *inter-penetrated* existences.<sup>17</sup> They are “mutually inclusive [...]; they need one another and they cannot be without each other.”<sup>18</sup> There is no quality or ability that makes one more than the other. Aloysius Pieris, in turn, names this relationship as “the inner-harmony between word and silence.”<sup>19</sup>

It is true that when word appears, silence does not exist. But, Panikkar argues, the word appears bringing with itself all of the expressions of silence. “Any authentic silence is pregnant with words which will be born at the right time. Any authentic word is full of silence which gives to the word its life.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Pieris notes that “silence is the word unspoken and the word is silence heard, their ‘relationship’ is not one of temporal priority but of dialectical mutuality.”<sup>21</sup>

#### SILENCE, A CHARACTERISTIC OF GOD

Furthermore, Panikkar contends that both silence and word are the characteristics of God. Silence represents the mystical quality of God. God

14 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, p. 28.

15 Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony: Essays on Contemplation and Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 41.

16 Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 20; also see his book *Invisible Harmony*, p. 41.

17 Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony*, p. 51.

18 Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony*, p. 50.

19 Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 41.

20 Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony*, pp. 42, 51.

21 Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, p. 41.

is mystery.<sup>22</sup> The Word becomes the second divine characteristic not because it is less than silence, but because it proceeds from Silence. As Silence expresses God, so does the Word. Here Panikkar brings out the Trinitarian concept. The Son (Christ, the Logos) "is the Father's breach of silence."<sup>23</sup> The Son expresses the Father. "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well." (Jn 14:7)

While the Spirit is missing from Panikkar's Trinitarian picture, It is identified clearly by Aloysius Pieris. In the inner-harmonic relationship of Silence and Word, the Spirit is "the eternal energy, which makes every word, springs from silence and leads to silence."<sup>24</sup> The dynamisms of delivering and returning, of pre-creation, creation, and re-creation, of life, death, and resurrection are rehearsed here.

#### THE SILENCE OF LIFE

We look further at the silence of God in the next section on human suffering. But first we should see a preliminary consequence of our understanding of God as Silence. To believe in and build an intimate relationship with God, we must enter silence itself. This is a great test for most of us who have been parts of this noisy world, and so infected by the fear of silence. Fear of silence is a result of the human intellect demanding an explanation of everything in words.<sup>25</sup> For those who follow this order, silence is merely an absence of word.

22 Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God, the Answer of the Buddha* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 165.

23 Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, p. 169. Panikkar does not mention the Holy Spirit in this Trinitarian image. In his conclusion of *Invisible Harmony*, he mentions "the Spirit" as the One who works with human instinct to realize an invisible harmony.

24 Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, p. 41. In his article "Inculturation in Asia: A Theological Reflection on an experience," in *Jahrbuch für kontextuelle Theologien. Missionswissenschaftliches Institut* (Aachen: Missio e.V., 1994), S. 60, Pieris recognizes the Spirit as "the Unspoken Speaker" who speaks to "the paschal body of Christ." The speaking of the Spirit, or as Pieris calls it, pneumatological speech, is "the illuminating word of Revelation" which assures salvation and leads to transformation. This pneumatological speech is addressed to Christian and non-Christians alike as Pieris believes that the paschal body of Christ is the people of the whole world (pp. 187-188).

This intellectual demand also impacts the religious sphere. The emergence of diverse schools of theology in Christianity, for instance, is a phenomenon that signals the human intellectual demand to explain the reality, or the presence, of the Divine. One potential danger is that the conclusion “silence is merely an absence of word” becomes the end of the search for intellectual satisfaction about Divine reality. The Silence of God could be (rationally) interpreted as merely the absence of God.

Therefore, Panikkar argues, it is imperative to see the Silence of God as an indication “first of all that any pretense to a total intellection must be abandoned.”<sup>26</sup> If we believe that God’s Word, the Logos, has been present in creation, that the Logos has been incarnated and dwelled among us (Jn 1:14), we should realize that “in a certain sense, we are precisely the disappearance of God.”<sup>27</sup> The inter-penetration or inner-harmonic relationship of silence and word helps us understand that if God is absent, so are human beings and the whole of creation.

However, as the world did not recognize the Incarnated Logos (Jn 1:10), so we cannot comprehend this until we are in total unity with the Logos, and thus, one with the Silence of God. We move toward this union with God as Silence at the same time as we enter “the silence of life.” It is, “the art of making silent the activities of life [...] in order to reach the pure experience of life.”<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, Panikkar highlights that “the entry into silence is not a flight from the world.”<sup>29</sup> The silence of life is the way “to be in harmony with ourselves and with the universe,”<sup>30</sup> with all of our reality, including the activities of our life. This is the way to grasp our being (including our will, feelings, heart, reason, intelligence, etc.) and our whole (non-fragmented) being. Only within our whole being can we experience God the

25 Max Picard says that modern people have become accustomed to *verbal noise*, so silence looks terrifying. But it seems that he regards products of the human intellect, namely science and technology, as the cause of this fear of silence; not the intellect per se. Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp.172 ff.

26 Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, p. 168.

27 Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, p. 168.

28 Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God*, p. 24.

29 Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God*, p. 24. Cf. Max Picard’s thought gives the



Silence.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, two questions still remain. *How can we understand God the Silent in the face of human suffering? How can we explain that the entry into silence is not a flight from our broken world?*

#### DIVINE SILENCE AND HUMAN SUFFERING

I recall how one day a friend came to me and said, "I do not believe in God any longer. You may see that my ID card states my religion: Roman Catholic, but for me, God does not exist."<sup>32</sup> For the rest of our meeting, I just listened to the story behind such an utterance. It was a story of a person who had experienced anguish throughout his life. His faith in God gradually faded as he began to feel that God did not notice his suffering, and did not intervene in his life. He concluded that it was he himself alone who overcame all his sufferings, and his efforts alone that made every achievement obtained in his life.

Reflecting upon my friend's experience, I saw how God as Silence in the face of human suffering can be interpreted as "the God who does nothing" and therefore, "God does not exist." The latter follows from the former. One can grasp this through one's experience of human suffering, whether the sufferings are ours or others'.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, in many other stories, the experience of human suffering can help us to recognize the God who truly exists and acts powerfully and creatively. I believe that the processes of interpreting our experiences and recognizing God as Silence are our choices to make.

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impression of a radical departure from progress and development in the world; see p. 17 in this essay.

30 Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God*, p. 42.

31 See Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God*, p. 14.

32 In Indonesia we have to put our religious affiliation on our ID cards. Only five religions are officially recognized: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Tribal religious practices are not recognized as religions. Officially, because of this one item on their IDs, many indigenous people who keep their religious traditions cannot get legal papers such as marriage documents. Many children in this group, therefore, are categorized as "a child born outside a legal marital relationship."

33 Additionally, I think the world of profit and exploitation, sustained by the progress of science and technology, has changed our life-view as well as our way of being. We

Here we encounter Aloysius Pieris and his call to recognize the “Unspoken Speaker” in “the vast suffering peoples.”<sup>34</sup> Pieris’ idea brings a definite virtue to Raimon Panikkar’s thoughts on the silence of life. Entering silence as “the *locus* of God”<sup>35</sup> we are immersed in the reality of human suffering in our world. Hence, through this immersion, our humanity becomes whole once again. Pieris suggests that we return to Jesus in order to understand this notion.

According to Pieris, immersion into the reality of human suffering is shown by Jesus at two key moments in his life: his baptism in the Jordan and his crucifixion on Calvary.<sup>36</sup> The baptism in the Jordan is Jesus’ enunciation of his principle: “losing oneself in order to find oneself.”<sup>37</sup> In Buddhism, suffering is regarded as the fruit of human desire-to-be. The elimination of suffering coexists with the elimination of this human desire.<sup>38</sup> Or, in Jesus’ formula: the losing of life delivers life (Lk 9:24-25). Is not this the meaning of an authentic and holistic being?

The second moment is the crucifixion on Calvary. The Calvary event shows Jesus’ authoritative renunciation of wealth and power. For Pieris, the crucifixion is not merely a consequence of Jesus’ (political) action, as many Christians presume. It is also a “calculated strategy against mammon.”<sup>39</sup> This resonates with the Buddhist teaching noted by Raimon Panikkar: “The road to salvation is not that of speculation, but that of the concrete praxis of the elimination of suffering.”<sup>40</sup>

The Calvary event also provides the scene for the Silence of God in the face of human suffering despite Jesus calling out “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.*” (Mt 27:36; Mk 15:34) The comment made by people who heard this call represents human acceptance attitudes to see what God will do in such more of instant product. By this change, we human beings treat ourselves more as productive beings instead of creative beings.

34 Aloysius Pieris, “Inculturation in Asia...,” SS. 60-61.

35 Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, p. 171.

36 Pieris considers the crucifixion as the second baptism of Jesus. See Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Quenzon City: Claretian Publications, 1988), pp. 45-50.

37 Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, p. 48.

38 Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, p. 20.

39 Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, pp. 48-49.

situation. Their statement: "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." (Mt 27:49) reminds me of my friend's conviction: I am alone; God did not look at my suffering; God did not save me.

This failure to see God's presence and action responding to human suffering contrasts with Pieris' thought on the Calvary event. For Pieris, the picture of Calvary shows us that the Silence of God has been incarnated by Jesus in word, and spoken through "the flesh-and-blood language," that is the person and the life of Jesus himself.<sup>41</sup> This language "is an expression that epitomizes the created, fallen, and redeemable nature of everything that seems to 'sustain' us (like the brittle bread that breaks between our fingers) and 'cheer' us (like the intoxicating wine that time can turn into bitter vinegar)."<sup>42</sup>

Probably, our response to this language of Jesus is similar to the response of the disciples: "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (Jn 6:60). But I assume that the apparent hardness to us of Jesus' flesh-and-blood language is coherent with our rigidity in being able to recognize it as our own language. Parallel to this, our fear of silence is consistent with our ignorance that silence is within our very being, and that silence ontologically connects us to God.

#### SILENCE AND DIVINE REVELATION

My previous statement can be said more simply: if we realize that silence and flesh-and-blood language belong to us (the essence of our being), we will not be fearful of silence, and we will be able to understand Jesus' language. If we have no fear of silence, who can employ silence to intimidate us? I am in agreement with Max Picard that silence itself is unexploitable; thus it cannot be used to exploit us human beings for any reason or purpose. However, I cannot deny the reality of the misuse of silence as a tool of oppression and an escape from responsibility and risk. I concur with Raimon Panikkar's disposition, and regard these repressive and escapist silences as

40 Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, p. 20.

41 See Aloysius Pieris, *God's Reign*, pp. 27-28.

42 Aloysius Pieris, *God's Reign*, p. 28.

“non-authentic silence.”<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, this non-authentic silence is often embodied in flesh-and-blood language, too. Gang rape, massacres, genocide, and many other forms of violence are examples of the usage of this language among us. As our silence has been mistreated, so has our language of flesh-and-blood. Our silence becomes oppression; our flesh-and-blood language turns into violence. This situation signals it is time to return to the divine silence and the language of God’s revelation.

#### SILENCE AND THE LANGUAGE OF REVELATION

The Silence of God must be incarnated in our language so that we can recognize God as “the one living and true God.”<sup>44</sup> As affirmed by Pieris, God uses flesh-and-blood language to “allow us to understand, experience, and announce God’s reign which begins here on earth.”<sup>45</sup> Jesus was not only speaking flesh-and-blood language, but he himself is God’s flesh-and-blood language. Through the person of Jesus and in his entire life, including his struggle to bring people into new life (his death and resurrection) God personally relates to us human beings, dwells among us, and shares with us the divine nature.<sup>46</sup>

We human beings are also God’s flesh-and-blood language. At the beginning we were delivered from the Silence of God, and became flesh (and blood) by the Word of God (Gn 1:26-27). Expressing flesh-and-blood language, we convey our authentic and holistic being as God’s creation. Regrettably, as we have realized, our language of flesh-and-blood has been exploited and betrayed by us, and consequently, our being has been fragmented.

~~From this view point, the Calvary event brings us into the dynamism~~  
 43 Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony*, p. 51. The Jewish theologian André Neher identifies “the silence of conspiracy” and “the silence of sympathy,” which he considers “rise out of the heart of evil.” André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), p. 32.

44 Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, article 3. Hereafter: DV, followed by the number of the article.

45 Aloysius Pieris, *God’s Reign*, p. 28.

46 DV 2-3; cf. Aloysius Pieris, *God’s Reign*, pp. 27-28.

of silence (life-death-resurrection). Our flesh-and-blood language, and – indissolubly – our being, is returned to the Silence of God to be united once again with our original beginning that is God's-Self. Christ is the firstborn and the fullness of this unification (see Col 1:15-23). Moreover, Christ is the firstborn and the fullness of God's language that ensures salvation and leads to transformation.<sup>47</sup> The return to the Silence and Word of God is a Christic venture.

#### OBEDIENCE, THE PROPHETIC SILENCE

Nevertheless, God's language is never intended to be a monologue.<sup>48</sup> The language is dialogical, for God addresses us human beings so that we can know God.<sup>49</sup> This knowing is not just a matter of our mind, but of our whole being.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, again, we must enter the ultimate characteristic of God that is Silence. Only in the Silence of God can the process of unification of our whole being take place. This process has one indispensable requirement, i.e. obedience, which is also our response to God's language.

From Jesus himself we learn about obedience and its features or phases.<sup>51</sup> The English term 'obedience' comes from the Latin *ob-audire*, to listen to.<sup>52</sup> So, the first phase is to listen only to God, the Silence and Word of God. As Pieris and Panikkar suggest, to listen to God we must be in silence without departing from the real world. In the midst of life activities and calamities, we are challenged to discern: to distinguish authentic silence from non-authentic silence, the Word from noise, and so on.<sup>53</sup> We move from this phase to the second stage, that is, our commitment in response to God. This commitment is founded on openness to work with God's Spirit, to listen to the Unspoken Speaker, so that we can concretize our commitment into the last stage of obedience which is taking an action.

<sup>47</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Inculturation in Asia...", S. 60.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony*, p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> See DV 2, 3, 6; cf. Aloysius Pieris, *God's Reign*, p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. DV 5.

<sup>51</sup> Vatican Council II speaks about obedience in DV 5; this article is elucidated by Joseph Ratzinger in "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Origin and Background," in *Commentary of the Documents of Vatican II*, Volume III, edited by Herbert Vorgrimler, *at al.* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967-1969), p. 179.

There are two important notes about action that is representative of obedience. First, the phases mentioned above immerse us not in a linear process but in a spiral concentric one. In the center is the Silence and Word of God, in which our action began and was oriented. Also, it is the center to which we return, so our language and work are continuously renewed. The Spirit, who keeps the harmony of Silence and Word, will help us in this lively “delivering and returning” dynamism.

Secondly, as obedience only to God led Jesus to the cross, so does our obedience. The cross, says Pieris, represents the *kenosis* of Jesus for the sake of reconciliation between God and human beings, and with all of creation. The cross “provides [...] a link between the divine and the human, so that one can always touch God in humanity, and touch humanity in God.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, our action is not simply an activity. It is an action for the sake of human salvation and transformation. It embodies the very message of divine revelation.<sup>55</sup>

At the end of this theological journey, I maintain that obedience is a primary expression of our silence where we encounter God the Silence face to face with human suffering. Obedience becomes our “prophetic silence” that turns us, ordinary human beings, into the partners of God in this broken world.<sup>56</sup> Obedience plunges us into the process of recognizing God the Silence and God’s action in silence. This immersion happens within our obedient action responding to the suffering of our world. Aloysius Pieris uses the phrase “Christian agapeic gnosis” to affirm that the knowledge of God is grasped primarily through our praxis of love.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, the questions we posed earlier about how we can understand God as Silence in the face of human suffering, and how to make clear that entry into silence is not a flight from our broken world, are no longer valid. These questions must be replaced with more appropriate ones: *How do we*

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52 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, English Translation (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc. and Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), p. 144.

53 Cf. Aloysius Pieris, *God’s Poor*, p.16.

54 Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology*, p. 9.

55 See DV 2-4.

*perform our obedience to God or exercise our prophetic silence in this broken world? How do we work as God's partner in dealing with the world-wide catastrophe that is particularly occasioned by oppressive silence?* These inquiries open a further conversation about Christian evangelization.

## TOWARD A NEW EVANGELIZATION IN ASIA

This reflection on silence (and in silence), that we have explored, draws us into the heart of the mission enterprise in Asia. I believe that the questions we posed above lie at the core of the theme *Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia* (2006 Asian Mission Congress, Chiang Mai, Thailand) and in the search for a new mission narrative approach by the Indonesian Church (General Assembly of the Indonesian Catholic Church, November 2010). Here I propose three essential steps that we must take toward a new evangelization in Asia, and in particular in Indonesia.

## RENEWING OUR WORD AND LANGUAGE

Living in a country with European colonialism in its historical background and with religious plurality as its contemporary reality, I have trouble comprehending why "telling the story of Jesus" has been placed as the heading of our script for evangelization. My concern is that by having the heading "telling the story of Jesus," our mission language could

56 André Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, p. 21. In this book, Neher refers to the silent prophecy of Ezekiel which has the theme of exile and redemption of the word. Neher believes that the role of the prophet instigates silence, "draws God into his own silence" (p. 22). Neher contends that only when "it is sustained by silence" initiated by the prophet/human beings, does one find that "the revelation of God is true" (p.126). Neher articulates Panikkar's idea of the silence of life differently.

57 See the whole discourse of this phrase in Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, pp. 114-116. Pieris' concept of Christian agapeic gnosis is developed from his criticism of the concepts of contemplation-action and faith-justice. Pieris argues, both concepts maintain the dichotomy of the sacred and the secular; both are departures from Jesus' language. See Pieris' description of these two in *God's Reign*, pp. 5-24. We can compare Pieris' note with Gustavo Gutiérrez's notion of contemplation-action. Gutiérrez contends that "contemplation and practice [or action] feed each other; the two together make up the moment of silence before God." However, Gutiérrez's further explanation gives the impression, that for him, silence is a pause before speech. Also, it seems that in his understanding, silence is simply identical with prayer. At this point, Gutiérrez's disposition is different from what we have discussed about silence. James Nickoloff, ed., *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 52.

seem to be a monologue. This monologue is carried out by us Christians to non-Christians. Even more, it could be taken to be a repressive, colonial expression. We Christians insist that other people listen to the story of Jesus because we think, we know, it holds the goodness required for their salvation. Does not this “we-they,” one-way communication revive our memory of colonialism and Christian mission work in the past? Is it not about “our saying” and “their receiving?”

Further, the process of the Congress itself was described as a joyful and colorful tapestry. It was a moment when the contemporary disciples of Jesus shared with each other their stories of their evangelical efforts.<sup>58</sup> I wonder, while we Christians listen to each other about our mission enterprises, *how open are we to listen to what other people, who are non-Christian, say about Jesus and about our mission works?*

Aloysius Pieris is one who strongly articulates the importance of such an attitude of listening and thus learning a new language for delivering the message of divine revelation in Asia. The experience of a Buddhist scholar who once saw the performance of Christ’ paschal narrative is one component that prompted Pieris’ fervor for a new attitude and language. A Buddhist scholar had heard about Christ, and discovered the Buddhist language in Christ and vice versa. But he failed to recognize Christ in this performance.<sup>59</sup>

From this experience of a Buddhist friend, we learn that most people in Asia probably have heard about Christ. Unfortunately, they cannot recognize Christ in the language and the life of Christians themselves. We still keep in our memory Mahatma Gandhi’s admission: “I rebel against orthodox Christianity, as I am convinced that it has distorted the message of Jesus.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore, to ensure that Christ has been accepted in, and has affected, the life of the people in Asia, we must first not tell them the story we have, but listen to their story of Christ.<sup>61</sup> This approach is maintained by Joseph Ratzinger regarding an attitude of listening and of proclamation as the

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58 See The Message of the First Asian Mission Congress, *Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia*, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 18-22 October 2006. <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr007/mission.html>. Accessed on October 9, 2010.



double roles of the Church.<sup>62</sup> Also, this – once again – resonates with the dynamic movement of silence and word.

#### INITIATING PROPHETIC LANGUAGE AND THE RIGHT EVANGELIZATION

Our attitude of listening for the sake of God's revelation today will be mostly challenged by people who are rendered mute in our community and in society in Asia.<sup>63</sup> We should recognize them among the poor, but within a much broader and complex milieu than simply within the economic sphere. The only way to listen is by immersing ourselves in their oppressed silence. Hence, we enter what we called earlier "prophetic silence".<sup>64</sup> In this silence, we listen – with the help of the Spirit – to God, who speaks through the oppressed people of Asia (and of the entire world), for commitment and liberating-transformative action. As Gerhard Lohfink says: "Clearly this change in the world must begin in human beings, but not at all by their seeking through heroic effort to make themselves the locus of the new, altered world; rather it begins when they listen to God, open themselves to God, and allow God to act."<sup>65</sup>

What Pieris calls "the right type of evangelization" should be considered an imperative implication of our prophetic silence.

[The right type of evangelization] is the exchange between the Church evangelized by the poor (a church that educates itself to become once again the vicar of Christ or the voice of the Spirit, by becoming the Church of the poor) and the poor evangelized by the Church (the poor recognizing their covenant partner in Jesus.)<sup>66</sup>

59 Aloysius Pieris, "Inculturation in Asia..." SS. 63-65.

60 Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Gandhi on Christianity* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 25.

61 In particular I address this to the Indonesian Catholic Church General Assembly which held its Assembly on 1-5 November 2010, because "to know to what extent Christ has been recognized and has affected the life of people" is the first purpose of the Assembly as stated in the final draft of its Terms of Reference.

62 Joseph Ratzinger, "Preface," in *Commentary of the Documents of Vatican II*. Volume III. p. 167. See also DV 1.

63 As the Asian Bishops believe, God communicates the Word also through their stories; the 9th Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) 2009, Final Document, B.6. Hereafter, FABC IX, and the number of the article. [http://www.fabc.org/plenary%20assembly/FABC%20IX%20PA%20Final %20Document.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/plenary%20assembly/FABC%20IX%20PA%20Final%20Document.pdf). Accessed on October 23, 2010.

It is clear that for Pieris, Christian evangelization is meant first of all to educate Christians themselves about the true meaning of becoming Christian. The very challenge of being Christian is to recognize Christ, as Pieris says, in the life-stories of the suffering people in Asia and all over the world. *How do we evangelize them? How do we Christians help them to recognize us as their partners in the work of the salvation and transformation of this world?*

These questions are beyond the search for method and media for evangelization. Often, we focus on method and media, which we use to attract other people's attention to listen to us. This attempt could turn evangelization into the deliverance of noise that is our own political agenda, rather than the proclamation of the authentic Word of God. It leads us to fragmentation within our own being as a Christian community. For these reasons, we should regard the questions above as a call to draw ourselves back into the depth of our Christian identity.

#### REVIVING OUR IDENTITY

Identity is constructed by the stories that we narrate to others so they may understand who we are and who we are not.<sup>67</sup> The stories we narrate come from, or are part of, our memory. In other words, identity is constituted by memory.<sup>68</sup> Our Christian identity is rooted in the sacred memory of God. It is the memory of God whose Silence is embodied in Jesus Christ. It is the memory of God who dwells in human history to listen to human stories of suffering; God who promises and fulfills the salvation of human beings and of all creation, and the transformation of their suffering stories into stories of joy and liberation.

This sacred memory of God is transmitted from generation to generation from one place to many places. Through this transmission, Christian identity has been established.<sup>69</sup> However, the process of transmission is not

64 We can compare this with Pieris' phrases: enforced poverty and voluntarily poverty. See Philip Gibbs, "Aloysius Pieris' Understanding of Divine Revelation," in *The Word in the Third World: Divine Revelation in the Theology of Jean-Marc Éla, Aloysius Pieris, and Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1996), p. 168.

65 Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 27.

66 Pieris, "Inculturation in Asia..." S. 61.

simply about remembering what God did and how the faithful responded to God somewhere in the past. For God is still listening to human stories of injustice, impoverishment, and dehumanization. God the Silence invites us to listen to these stories, to recognize the Word of Jesus Christ, and to communicate the Word to others through obedient action.<sup>70</sup> This action is our authentic narrative, which tells people that we are God's and their partner in the work of human salvation and transformation. This is our new evangelization.

## CONCLUSION

The biggest challenge for us today is to remain in silence, as we are surrounded by noise. This impacts the Christian evangelical enterprise that somehow intends to compete with the surrounding noise.

To renew Christian evangelization, we must return to, and be transformed by, the Divine Silence which, according to Max Picard, Raimon Panikkar, and Aloysius Pieris, is God's-Self.

The return to silence demands a deep immersion in the Silence and Word of God, from which Christian proclamation springs. This effort includes the renewal of our way of seeing and hearing, and of acting or behaving.

Working together with God the Silence, we Christians are invited to see our reality with spiritual eyes, beyond what we are eager to see through our physical eyes and "mind eyes." We are also invited to hear the unheard or unspoken voices, i.e. the voices of the suffering people around us, and the voice of the Holy Spirit.

A deep immersion into the Silence and Word of God will enable us to renew our evangelical language that it may be more prophetic in this broken world.

<sup>67</sup> See Catherine Köhler Reissman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (California: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> See William James Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> See FABC IX, C.2; DV 7-10.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. FABC IX, C.2.

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