The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son,
And this Word He always speaks in eternal silence,
And in silence must It be heard by the soul.

St John of the Cross (Maxims of Love)

John of the Cross sums up his mystical teaching in these words on silence. They would seem to be the culmination of fifteen centuries of mystical tradition, yet, remarkably, they had been anticipated fourteen centuries earlier by Ignatius of Antioch, who could thus be considered one of the earliest Christian mystics.

Silence is an important mystical theme in Ignatius' letters. It is found in every letter except that To the Smyrneans, which deals with the specific problem of Docetism; it is a dominant theme in Ephesians and plays a large part in Romans. I wish to show that the concept of silence, which seems so enigmatic and puzzling really affords us a glimpse of an integrated spirituality. Because Ignatius does not explain his teaching we may infer that his listeners were fairly familiar with it. By close attention to the text and by comparing similar passages we are able to fill out his doctrine and come to a better understanding of it.

The words that Ignatius uses to express the idea of silence are varied; this fact indicates how the concept pervades the thinking of Ignatius and is integral to it. He uses the normal words for silence, such as σιγή, σιγάν, σιωπάν, and ἡσυχία. But is is also expressed in many subtle ways. As we examine these we begin to see how far-reaching this theme is in Ignatius.

My methodology is based on the following assumption. It is reasonable to expect that letters written within a very short period of time, dealing with a few topics that Ignatius considered important for the Church and which seemed so urgent for him to express because of his imminent death, would show a much greater consistency of thought and expression than would be the case for letters written over a long period. The same thoughts occur in most of the epistles, and thoughts which are enigmatic in one may be more fully treated in another.
The key text in the study of silence in Ignatius is from the *Letter to the Magnesians* (8.2)

[Ἅσσοι Χριστοῦ] ὅς ἐστιν αὐτοῦ λόγος ἀπὸ σιγῆς προελθὼν.

There is a similar statement a few lines earlier

[Ἅσσοι Χριστοῦ] τὸν ἄφ’ ἐνδε πατρὸς προελθόντα.

*Mag* 7.2

Some have interpreted the first passage to mean that the divine silence was broken when the Word came forth. This does not take into account the full context of Ignatius' teaching on silence, a fact noted by R A Bower:

More consistent with the rest of Ignatius’ statements concerning σιγή is the interpretation which sees λόγος as an expression of σιγή.³

Bower arrives at this conclusion by considering the consistency of Ignatius' teaching. I suggest that an examination of the use of the word προέρχομαι will provide an even stronger proof. By the fourth century this verb had become the technical term for the processions in the Trinity, but this use had been established earlier. Tatian speaks of the λόγος προελθὼν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς δύναμεως,⁴ where it is obvious that δύναμις is the active principle producing the Logos. Athenagoras in his *Legatio* ⁵ uses the verb προέρχομαι to describe the origin of the earth from the Giant Egg in the Homeric cosmogony, and Irenaeus uses the same verb in giving the Valentinian doctrine of the generation of Jesus.⁶ Ignatius himself gives us the clearest indication as to what he means. If we compare *Mag* 8.2 with *Mag* 7.2 (both quoted above) we notice that the texts are parallel, and so we may reasonably conclude that Silence and the Father are identical, especially when one expression follows immediately on the other. It is not a question of the λόγος emerging where before there was silence (ie nothing). Silence is the active principle which produces the word - it is therefore substantial. For Ignatius, the Father and Silence are the same thing. We have thus a contrast between the agent and what is produced:

father → son.

There is a proportion between this and

silence → word.
Since Ignatius speaks of Jesus as τοῦ πατρὸς ή γνώμη (Eph 3.2), he may have been likening the Logos to the Stoic λόγος προφορικός, a commonplace in Ignatius' time, thereby implying also the silent λόγος ενδιαθετος in the mind of God, and giving a third pair of correlatives

λόγος ενδιαθετος → λόγος προφορικός

Ignatius may have derived this idea of God as Silence from proto-Gnostic thought. If this is so, it must be admitted that there is a world of difference between the Logos proceeding from Silence and the Valentinian doctrine. In the latter σιγή and βυθὸς proceed from the ineffable Father. From them proceed νοῦς and ἀλήθεια from which in turn comes λόγος and ζωή. As Camelot notes, in this theogony λόγος does not proceed from σιγή but from νοῦς. If Ignatius was dependent on this system he radically altered it in line with Johannine theology, and in doing so rejected the gnostic system.

For Ignatius silence expresses what is characteristic of the Father, as logos expresses what is characteristic of the Son. Ignatius returns to this theme in Eph 19.1:

The virginity of Mary and her giving birth as well as the death of the Lord, escaped the notice of the ruler of this world; three mysteries of a cry which were brought about in the stillness (ie silence) of God.

These three events are the external manifestation or sign of what occurred in the stillness of God, for that is what a mystery is. So definitive was the breaking of this silence that it is likened to a cry shattering God's silence. Because of the parallel between this text and Mag 8.2 I suggest that κραυγή has the same function as λόγος and that it is equivocal, meaning not only the Word, but the event by which the Word was made known, ie the Incarnation. Ignatius goes on to describe the manner of his manifestation to the world:

A star shone in heaven above all the stars and its light was ineffable, its newness produced astonishment ... and there was confusion.

Eph 19.2

In this poem Ignatius heightens the mystery and silence by saying even the light of the star which was supposed to manifest the Incarnation was beyond the capacity of words to explain and so caused perplexity. For Ignatius the time before the Incarnation was the time of God's silence. The prophets were disciples of Jesus in the Spirit "for whom they waited as their teacher" (Mag 9.1-2).
And we also love the prophets because they also made their proclamation to prepare for the gospel and hoped in him and waited for him, in whom by believing they were also saved, being in the unity of Jesus Christ.

Phil 5.2

But it was Jesus who was the definitive revelation of God (Eph 3.2).

Given that silence is an important characteristic of the Father, we would expect it to be an important characteristic of the bishop also, since the bishop is a 'type' of the Father. Ignatius taught that there were two hierarchies, the heavenly and the earthly. In the earthly hierarchy the bishop takes the place of God; "Let all respect the deacons of Jesus Christ, as also the bishop, being the type of the Father" (Trall 3.1; cf Mag 6.1; 13.2). When Ignatius says "The more anyone sees that the bishop is silent, the more let him reverence him" (Eph 6.1), he is expressing an important theological concept and not merely giving a defence of a taciturn bishop, as some commentators suggest. This concept of silence becomes important in the bishop's teaching role: "Speak to them after the manner of God" (Pol 1.3).

When Ignatius says that "it is better to be silent and to be, than to talk and not be, it is good to teach if the speaker does what he teaches" (Eph 15.1), he is not saying that silence is better than speech, although I think that as a mystic he believed this to be so, but he is saying that silence is not negative; it is something dynamic and eloquent; it cannot deceive, as speech can. Our actions will always be in conformity with our silence, i.e. with our true selves, not necessarily with our words, so that our silence indicates our true nature, as God's silence indicates his. Ignatius points out how the actions of some Magnesians give the lie to their empty words (Mag 4), and elsewhere he says "the tree is manifest from its fruit" (Eph 14.2; cf Mat 12.33) echoing Jesus' saying "By their fruits you shall know them" (Mat 7.20).

Ignatius contrasts speech and reality; he does not merely want to be called a christian, but to be found to be one (Rom 3.2). It is good to teach, if one does what one says (Eph 15.1). This is what Jesus did. His words were in conformity with his Father's will, and his actions in conformity with his words. This is why what he did, even in silence, was worthy of the Father (Eph 15.1). It is for this reason that the silence of the bishop of Philadelphia is so eloquent; he is attuned to the commandments as a harp to its strings (Phil 1.2). Those who are so attuned, who possess the word of Jesus, can also hear his silence (Eph 15.2) and so be perfect, that they might be known (for what they really are, γινώσκηταί) through their silence (Eph 15.2).
What is true of the bishop and the community is seen by analogy to be true of the Father also. Although Jesus, the Logos, is the definitive revelation of the Father (Jn 10.30; 14.9-11; 6.46), Scripture tells us that we can and should know something of the Father through his works (Rom 1.19-23; Wis 13.1-9). Yet this knowledge is essentially limited. We can know something of the Father from the prophets, but we cannot know him as he is in himself without the revealing Logos, and so the silence of God is finally a statement of Negative Theology. It does, however, lead us to a unique type of knowledge, the knowledge of the mystic.

Ignatius ardently desired to attain to God. Silence played an important part in this, for it is in the obedience of Jesus that the Logos most fully reveals the Father, that the divine silence is best heard. This is what we would expect: it is natural that the words of Jesus, the Logos, would reveal the Father, but given Ignatius' insistence on the importance of what we do, Ignatius would also be looking to the deeds of Christ to manifest his Father, and nothing that Jesus did was more important, in the opinion of Ignatius, than his obedient acceptance of his passion and death. "The divine silence is 'heard' (paradoxically) in the 'action' of the λόγος, ie in the obedience of Christ's Passion. ... The Christian's σιγή would be his identification with the work of Christ (who is the λόγος from σιγή) by way of 'faith and love' and martyrdom". The Ignatian way of attaining to God, or of attaining to Jesus Christ, was by way of martyrdom. He expresses this in the letter to the Romans: "Allow me to be an imitator of the sufferings of my God" (Rom 6.3), and "I shall never have a better opportunity to attain to God" (Rom 2.1). It is in the Passion of Jesus that Ignatius is best able to hear the silence of Jesus. In this context it is worth noting that in the Matthean tradition of the Passion, which was that of Antioch, the most striking attitude of Jesus during his Passion was that of silence. Ignatius would no doubt have been aware of this. He begged the Romans to be silent,

For I do not wish you to please human beings, but to please God ... for I shall never have such an opportunity to attain to God, and you, if you remain silent, cannot have a better deed ascribed to you; for if you remain silent in my regard, I shall be a word of God, but if you love my flesh, I shall again be a (mere) voice. 

Rom 2.1

In this passage there is a twofold application of the axiom, "it is better to be silent and to be, than to speak and not be". We can fill it out in this way:

1° If the Romans remain silent, they will be credited with a better deed, and this deed will be in conformity with the will of God. So by silence they will do God's will.

2° If the Romans keep silent it is implied that Ignatius will do so too, and then he will be a logos doing the Father's will, instead of a mere voice. Ignatius, the
bishop, wanted to be the earthly counterpart of the heavenly Jesus and so, by his passion, to be a word, not merely a voice. In seeking his passion, he had some misgivings;

For I desire to suffer, but I do not know if I am worthy, ... therefore I need meekness (πραότης) by which the leader of this world is deposed. _Trall_ 4.2

This shows a further aspect of silence which I wish to discuss. For Ignatius it was identified with the virtues of meekness and patience.

Ignatius uses several related words to indicate patience and forbearance, eg πραότης, ἐπιείκεια, μακροθυμία.

Χριστός υμαῖν μετὰ ἀλλήλων ἐν πραότητι, καὶ τὰ μυθήματα ὑμῶν.

In our patience and forbearance we are to imitate God:

Permit them to learn at least from your deeds to become disciples. Towards their anger may you be gentle, towards their boasting, humble ... not being eager to imitate them in return. Let us be found their brothers in forbearance, ἐπιείκεια, let us be eager to be imitators of the Lord ...

_Eph_ 10.1-2

This is an important passage because it unites themes that are basic to Ignatius' spirituality; forbearance, and the imitation of Christ, especially in his passion. For Ignatius these deeds imply silence. We can deduce this from καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἔργων ὑμῶν μαθητευθῆναι, for we have already seen the link between silence and action. We are justified then in saying that in these deeds of gentleness and humility an imitation of the Lord's silence is implied. This is made more specific in _Phil_ 1.1-2:

I am amazed at his forbearance (ἐπιείκεια) who when silent can do more than those who speak vain things. He is attuned to the commandments as a harp to its strings. Therefore my soul blesses his mind turned towards God, recognising that it is virtuous and perfect, recognising too what is unmovable and without anger in him, in all the forbearance (ἐπιείκεια) of the living God.

Moreover in _Trall_ 4.2 quoted above, the meekness that Ignatius prays for to make him worthy to suffer is contrasted with boasting, in which speech is implied. In the same letter Ignatius says of the bishop,

I have received the example of your love and I have it with me in your bishop whose very demeanour is a great lesson, and his meekness is his power.

_Trall_ 3.2

Here again it is by deeds that the people are being taught and this silent witness in meekness is powerful.
We are now in a better position to understand what Ignatius means when he says: "The more anyone sees the bishop is silent, the more let me reverence him" (*Eph* 6.1). We have already seen in the case of the bishop of Philadelphia how effective his silence was. Ignatius here elevates this silence to a general principle; the teaching of the bishop is most effective when he is silent. Because of the doctrine of the two hierarchies we may say that the bishop's silence will be a type of the Father's silence, and the bishop's forbearance will be a type of the Father's. When Ignatius told the Ephesians (15.1-2) to teach the pagans by their example, by deeds of forbearance imitating the Lord, he was speaking primarily to the people, but his remarks apply *a fortiori* to the bishop. This is the burden of his advice to Polycarp (6.2) quoted above.

By the bishop's silence then Ignatius means his patience and forbearance. This has primacy over his speaking out because people see what he really is from his actions. It is not a passive thing but dynamic because it discloses his being. It has primacy because it is the basis of the authenticity of his speech; it does not exclude speech. In fact at times the bishop has the duty to speak out (*Pol* 5.1). There is no doubt how highly Ignatius respects this meekness and patience of the bishop, even when he does not explicitly link it to silence (*Trall* 3.2).

"It is better to be silent and to be, than to speak and not be", seems to have been the guiding principle of Ignatius in all his exhortations. He especially approved of this characteristic in the bishop. For him the best way to spread the gospel was by silent meekness and forbearance (*Pol* 6.2). The model for good actions is always the Father (Silence) or Jesus, his Logos. When Ignatius wrote to Polycarp, "Speak to them after the manner of God", he used a term that was vague and that has been interpreted by Schoedel and others in terms of godly unity. This unduly narrows the meaning of what is a vague and therefore thought-provoking statement. I suggest from what we have seen that it is a far richer term, and includes overtones of God's forbearance and patience, and these in God also imply silence, which is his nature.

NOTES

1. And only by implication in the *Epistle to the Trallians*, which deals with the related theme of meekness (*Trall* 3.2; 4.2).
2. σιγή *Mag* 8.2: σιγάν (of the bishop) *Eph* 4.1, (of the Christians) *Eph* 15.1-2: σωσάν *Eph* 3.2; 15.1; *Rom* 2.1: ήσυχία *Eph* 15.2 (of Jesus), 19.1 (of
God). Ignatius uses different words for silence even in the same passage, perhaps to avoid repetition.


7. H Chadwick, "The Silence of Bishops in Ignatius", *Harvard Theological Review*, 43 (1950), 169-72. Since the publication of this article new information has come to light on Gnosticism with the publication of the Nag Hammadi documents.


9. It is interesting to note, though I should not like to press the point too far, that κραυγή is also used in *Luke* 1.42 for Elizabeth's cry of welcome when she recognised the mother of the Saviour, and also in *Mt* 25.6 to indicate the coming of the bridegroom. Since the word is used in a similar context here, the word may have been associated in the early Church with the coming of the Messiah.

10. This pre-Incarnational silence of God was also a theme of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. See R Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, Hanstein, Bonn 1986, 2, 36-37, 63.
