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## THE SEMIOTIC IDEOLOGIES OF RELIGIOUS SILENCE<sup>1</sup>

Le rosaire n'est pas une invention de la monotonie, mais de la fidélité  
P. Claudel, *La rose et le rosaire* (1913)

### 1. Introduction

Terms such as 'prayer', 'worship', and 'ritual' designate semantic fields that are densely intertwined rather than clearly separable or collapsible into a single unit (Kreinath - Snoek - Stausberg 2007). This complexity becomes even more evident as soon as one shifts across languages and traditions, where analogous terms organize partially overlapping but non-identical constellations of practices. The range of phenomena to which these words refer can be approached from many theoretical perspectives<sup>2</sup>. Yet, from a semiotic point of view, prayer, worship, and ritual are not first of all 'religious objects'; they are intellectual operators that allow us to reflect on a broader and more fundamental issue for semiotics and the human sciences: the way in which meaning emerges, stabilizes, and withdraws. In this perspective, the semiotic study of prayer is less concerned with cataloguing its doctrinal varieties than with analyzing the dialectic between expression and non-expression that structures it: the way in which words, formulae, gestures, and images are framed, suspended, or interrupted by pauses, hesitations, and zones of silence. It is this oscillation between saying and not saying that opens the wider field which we

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the arguments developed in this article were sketched in preliminary form in Leone (2012f). The present contribution, however, offers a thorough reformulation of that earlier framework, re-centering it on a systematic reconsideration of the role of silence in the semiotics of religious meaning.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on prayer is vast; for discussions most directly aligned with the philosophical and semiotic issues examined here, see especially Di Nola and O'Connor (1961), Phillips (1965), Leonard (1981), Brümmer (1984), Appleton (1985), Paloma - Gallup (1991), and Sweeney (2000).

may, in a first approximation, call a 'semiotic anthropology of meaning'.

The ambition to analyze characteristically religious entities such as prayer, worship, and ritual in order to gain insight into meaning-making beyond explicitly religious domains implies two complementary claims. First, features traditionally associated with cultic practice reappear in ostensibly secular forms of human behavior; second, the semiotic analysis of religious practices offers a privileged vantage point from which to reinterpret fundamental traits of our species, its language, and its cultures. In this sense, the study of religion functions as a conceptual laboratory: a space in which thought experiments can be staged to probe the constituents of human semiosis. This does not entail that human nature is intrinsically religious – at least not in the ordinary sense of 'religion' – but rather that religion manifests, with particular clarity, something essential within human nature itself. What emerges, especially when attention shifts toward the interplay of expression and its suspension, is a deeper semiotic structure: a dynamic in which meaning depends as much on what is articulated as on what remains withheld, paused, or silenced.

## **2. The semiotic philosophy of prayer**

This study does not aim to summarize the vast scholarship on prayer but to explore three interconnected questions that illuminate its semiotic structure: the inevitability of prayer, the distribution of agency within it, and the incarnation of language in its practice. These themes will be approached both at a general, theoretical level and through the close examination of a specific devotional device: the rosary. The choice of this object is not incidental. The rosary offers a privileged lens through which to observe how prayer organizes expression and non-expression, how it scaffolds the alternation between voiced articulation and its suspension, and how it materializes the pauses, hesitations, and micro-silences that shape religious semiosis. For the sake of terminological economy, the term 'prayer' will be used here as a shorthand for prayer proper, worship, and ritual – three domains that remain connected yet not reducible to one another. Their semantic contours will become clearer as the analysis unfolds. What matters at this stage is that the semiotic investigation of prayer requires us to think not only about what is said but also, and perhaps more importantly, about what is not said: about the

expressive economy that modulates utterance and its interruption, fullness and withholding. Silence, in this perspective, is not a single phenomenon but a spectrum that stretches from complete muteness to barely audible mumbling, from the intentional pause that structures rhythm to the involuntary faltering that reveals vulnerability. By reading the rosary through this prism, we shall consider how prayer is composed as much of articulation as of its omissions; how its meanings are carried not only by words and formulas, but by the intervals that separate them. This oscillation between sound and suspension will guide the inquiry that follows.

### **2.1. The inevitability of prayer**

What does it mean to speak of the inevitability of prayer? Certainly not that human beings are fated to pray – at least not if ‘prayer’ is understood in its ordinary religious sense. If that were the claim, it would be refuted at once by the many who never address a god. Rather, the point is that the semiotic structure designated by the term prayer contains features essential for understanding the human relation to meaning and language. Even where no religious intention is present, something in human semiosis continually reconstitutes the gesture of prayer – its structure of address, its orientation toward an absent interlocutor, its modulation between articulation and pause. Two authors, approaching from different angles, illuminate this broader semiotic inevitability.

The first is William James, who in *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892) famously remarks:

We hear, in these days of scientific enlightenment, a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given why we should not pray, and others why we should. But in all this, little is said of the reason why we do pray, which is simply that we cannot help praying. It seems probable that, despite all that science may do in the opposite direction, men will continue to pray as long as they live, unless their nature changes in some manner which none of us can foresee. The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that while the deepest part of man’s empirical self is a social self, it can find its adequate Socius only in an ideal world. (James 1984, 172)

James's target is the long-standing effort – Galton's statistical inquiries (Galton 1872), Byrd's clinical trial<sup>3</sup>, and many others – to test the empirical efficacy of prayer. For James, the question is misplaced: people pray not because prayer 'works', but because something in human subjectivity is structured as an appeal beyond itself. Prayer answers not empirical needs but an ideal necessity. Even those who never pray in the religious sense, James suggests, cannot escape the deeper semiotic pattern he calls 'prayer': the construction of an interlocutor adequate to one's inner sociality, a Socius capable of receiving what cannot be said to any finite other. This point already shifts prayer toward a semiotics of expression and its suspension: toward the fact that humans are beings who project meaning into an interlocutive void, who must address – even silently – an ideal addressee.

A second and deeper articulation of this inevitability appears in Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* [*Sygdommen til Døden*] (1849):

But the fatalist has no God – or, what amounts to the same thing, his god is necessity. Inasmuch as for God all things are possible, one may say that this is what God is: he for whom all things are possible. The fatalist's worship is therefore at most an exclamation, and essentially it is obtuseness, blind submission; he is incapable of praying. To pray is to breathe, and possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing.

[...]

For there to be prayer there must be God, and there must be a self with possibility, or a self and possibility in the pregnant sense; for God is the fact that everything is possible, and the fact that everything is possible is God; and only the person whose being has been so shaken that it has become spirit in understanding that everything is possible is in relation to God. That the will of God is the possible that makes my prayer possible; if the will of God were only the necessary, the human being would be essentially speechless like the brutes. (Kierkegaard 2008, 33)

Two decisive moves emerge here. First, Kierkegaard provides the philosophical ground of James's Socius: the ideal counterpart is not a theological entity but the structure of possibility itself. To pray is

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<sup>3</sup> «Analysis of events after entry into the study showed the prayer group had less congestive heart failure, required less diuretic and antibiotic therapy, had fewer episodes of pneumonia, had fewer cardiac arrests, and were less frequently intubated and ventilated» (Byrd 1988, 829).

to orient oneself toward what exceeds the given, toward the open horizon of transformation. In this sense prayer is not a doctrinal utterance but an existential semiotics of potentiality (Leone 2011; 2012a; 2012d). Second, Kierkegaard reverses the common intuition that language enables prayer. It is prayer – understood as the existential relation to possibility – that enables language (Leone 2011b; 2012b; 2012c; 2012d). We speak because the world could be otherwise; without that horizon, expression would collapse into mute necessity. The human voice is grounded in this opening. Meaning arises in the oscillation between a finite self and an infinite potentiality, between articulation and the silence from which it emerges. From this perspective, prayer is not a religious function but a condition of semiosis: an existential grammar linking possibility, expression, and the pauses that articulate both. What is commonly called ‘hope’ is only the emotive residue of this deeper structure. Prayer, in its expanded semiotic sense, is not merely the utterance of petitions but the primary scene where language, silence, and the desire for sense first interlock. In this broader light, the study of prayer becomes a privileged entry into the semiotics of the unsaid: the whispered, the suspended, the murmured; the shift from voice to breath, from articulated speech to the threshold of silence. It reveals that meaning is not produced only by what we pronounce but also by what we cannot help addressing, even when that address takes the form of pure interiority, near-muteness, or the fragile murmur that precedes language.

## **2.2. The Distribution of Agency**

The second axis of inquiry concerns what we may call the distribution of agency in prayer (Leone 2009a; 2009b). If prayer is interpreted, semiotically and philosophically, as the enactment of an immanent freedom in dialogue with a transcendent potentiality – both construed as semiolinguistic simulacra – then agency is asymmetrically allocated between these poles. Prayer amplifies the initiative of the one who prays while simultaneously attenuating the initiative of the transcendence invoked (Leone 2009c). In the perspective opened by James, Kierkegaard, and the semiotic exegesis of their texts, the fundamental agency of prayer does not lie in any active intervention by the transcendent nor in the passive receptivity of the immanent, but in a reflexive agency of prayer itself: an agency whereby the praying subject discovers its own

immanent freedom through the simulacral representation of an infinite potentiality addressed as if it were a transcendent agent.

This dynamic is not exclusive to modern psychological, philosophical, or semiotic approaches; it is deeply rooted in the conceptualization of prayer within several religious traditions, including Christianity. It can be illustrated through a set of canonical passages in Christian theology and philosophy, which also reveal how semiotics conceives the dialogical distribution of agency.

Among Christian authors, Augustine articulates this tendency with exemplary clarity. In his *Letter to Proba*<sup>4</sup> he writes:

We need words in order to stir our own minds and to consider what we ask for, not to inform the Lord or to bend Him to our wishes. When we say, «Hallowed be Thy name», we rouse ourselves to desire that His name – ever holy in itself – may be held holy also among human beings. [...] When we say, «Thy kingdom come», which will come whether we will it or not, we awaken our desire for that kingdom. (*Letter to Proba*, XI, 21)<sup>5</sup>

Augustine's distribution of agency is unequivocal: the efficacy of prayer does not consist in altering the agency of God. To assume that human words could bend divine will would be, for Augustine, a theological impossibility. Instead, the function of prayer is reflexive: by addressing God, worshippers intensify their own desire, reorient their interiority, and potentiate their own agency. In contemporary semiotic terms: prayer produces a simulacrum of divine agency that, through its very fictionality, potentiates the immanent agency of the subject. Using Greimas's lexicon, prayer in Augustine is fundamentally an *embrayage* – a discourse that grounds its own immanent modalization through the fictional projection of a transcendent addressee.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Letter to Proba* (*Epistula 130*, «De orando Deum») was written by Augustine of Hippo around A.D. 412. Scholars generally date it to 411-412, shortly after the sack of Rome in 410, when Proba and her family had taken refuge in North Africa.

<sup>5</sup> «Nobis verba necessaria sunt ut nobis ipsis mentem excitemus et consideremus quid petamus, non ut Domino indicemus aut eum nostris votis inflectamus. Cum dicimus: 'Sanctificetur nomen tuum', nos ipsos excitamus ad desiderandum ut nomen eius, quod semper sanctum est, etiam in hominibus sanctum habeatur [...] Cum dicimus: 'Adveniat regnum tuum', quod sive velimus sive nolimus venturum est, desiderium nostrum erga illud regnum excitemus».

This logic recurs, with variations, throughout Christian intellectual history. Thomas Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologiae*, writes:

To the first objection, therefore, it must be replied that it is not necessary for us to offer prayers to God in order to make our needs or desires known to Him, but rather so that we ourselves may consider that in these matters we must have recourse to divine help.

[...]

To the fifth objection it must be replied that prayer is not offered to God in order to bend Him, but to awaken within ourselves the confidence to ask. This confidence is chiefly stirred in us by reflecting on His love for us, through which He wills our good – and therefore we say, Our Father – and on His exaltedness, through which He is able – and therefore we say, who art in heaven. (*Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, 83, 2, 1; 9, 5)<sup>6</sup>

Here again, divine agency becomes a mirror whose sole function is to enlarge the worshipper's capacity for volition and trust. The address to God is a structural device for modulating the intentionality of the subject. This distribution of agency is further radicalized in early Protestant thought. John Calvin writes in the *Institutio christianae religionis*:

[God has taught us to pray] not so much for His own good as for ours [...]. It is wholly for our benefit that we continually supplicate Him: first, that our hearts may be fired with a serious and ardent desire to seek, love, and serve Him; second, that no wish or aspiration of which we would be ashamed before Him may enter our minds, as we learn to place all our desires before His face; and finally, that we may receive His benefits with gratitude, reminded through our prayers that they come from His hand. (Calvin 1986, III.20.3)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> «Ad primum ergo dicendum quod non est necessarium nos Deo preces porrigere ut ei nostras indigentias vel desideria manifestemus, sed ut nos ipsi consideremus in his ad divinum auxilium esse recurendum. [...] Ad quintum dicendum quod oratio non porrigitur Deo ut ipsum flectamus, sed ut in nobis ipsis fiduciam excitemus postulandi. Quae quidem praecipue excitatur in nobis considerando eius caritatem ad nos, qua bonum nostrum vult, et ideo dicimus, pater noster; et eius excellentiam, qua potest, et ideo dicimus, qui es in caelis».

<sup>7</sup> «[...] neque enim id tam sui ipsius, quam nostri potius causa ordinavit. [...] Nostra tamen plurimum interest assidue ipsum implorari, ut serio ardentique

In Greimasian terminology, these positions reveal a systematic interplay between exotactic and endotactic modalization<sup>8</sup>: prayer appears to be exotactic – addressing a transcendent actant – but functions endotactically, reinforcing the subject's own *vouloir-être* and *savoir-être*. By modalizing the deity («Thy will be done» – *fiat voluntas tua*), the worshippers in fact modalize themselves. Agency migrates from the transcendent to the immanent through the mediating fiction of the address.

This drift reaches its philosophical culmination in Immanuel Kant's *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793), where he writes:

The disposition to carry out all our actions as if they were performed in the service of God is the spirit of prayer, which can and should be present within us without interruption. But to clothe this desire in words and formulas [...] can at best be regarded as a means through which that disposition may be repeatedly quickened within us. (Kant 1960, 181)<sup>9</sup>

Two decisive insights are to be emphasized. First, Kant 'completes' the transfer of agency: divine agency becomes purely regulative, while the true seat of agency is the moral disposition of the subject. This prepares the post-Kantian development of prayer without a deity, in which the addressee becomes structurally unnecessary – a pure placeholder that enables the immanent subject to enact its own freedom. This move provides the philosophical grounding for the anthropological inevitability of prayer subsequently claimed, in different fields, by James and Kierkegaard. Second, Kant opens the

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eius semper quaerendi, amandi, colendi desiderio cor nostrum inflammetur, dum assuescimus ad ipsum velut ad sacram anchoram in omni necessitate confugere. Deinde ut nulla cupiditas, nullumque omnino votum animum nostrum subeat, cuius ipsum testem facere pudeat: dum vota nostra omnia coram eius oculis sistere, adeoque totum cor effundere discimus. Tum ut ad beneficia eius vera animi gratitudine atque etiam gratiarum actione excipienda comparemur: quae ab eius manu nobis provenire nostra precatione admonemur».

<sup>8</sup> «[...] On désigne ici comme exotaxiques les modalités susceptibles d'entrer en relations translatives (de relier des énoncés ayant des sujets distincts) et comme endotaxiques les modalités simples (reliant des sujets identiques ou en syncrétisme)» (Greimas - Courtés 1979, 89, *sub voce* 'modalisation').

<sup>9</sup> «Die Gesinnung, alle unsere Handlungen so auszuführen, als ob sie im Dienste Gottes geschehen wären, ist der Geist des Gebets, der ohne Unterlass in uns sein kann und soll. Aber dieses Verlangen mit Worten und Formeln zu bekleiden... kann höchstens als ein Mittel gelten, wodurch jene Gesinnung in uns wiederholt beschleunigt werden kann».



path toward a prescriptive semiotics of prayer's language. Words and formulas possess only instrumental value; what matters is the disposition they accelerate. This makes the linguistic surface of prayer – its uttered phrases, repeated formulas, murmured sequences – secondary yet indispensable. They are techniques for modulating interior agency, and their efficacy lies precisely in their rhythmic alternation of expression and pause. Kant thus implicitly introduces the theme central to our inquiry: the semiotic power of silence, of suspension, of the minimal interval between desire and its verbal vestment.

Across this long tradition – from Augustine to Kant – the gradual reallocation of agency from the transcendent addressee to the immanent subject accomplishes two results. It reinforces the philosophical claim of prayer's inevitability, and it inaugurates a semiotic reflection on the texture of prayer's language: a language whose effectiveness resides not only in articulation but also in the silences that articulate it, in the pauses where agency gathers, intensifies, or hesitates. Prayer emerges not as the speech that moves a god, but as the patterned oscillation between voice and its suspension through which a subject discovers the contours of its own agency.

### **2.3 The Incarnation of Language**

A third axis for a semiotic philosophy of prayer concerns the incarnation of language. Read through the lens of the distribution of agency, Kant's position implies that the linguistic 'body' of prayer – the discursive wrapping of words and formulas – is in principle dispensable. What truly matters is the desire of prayer, its 'spirit', and the capacity of verbal formulas to accelerate the self-reflexive empowerment of the praying subject. Once agency is polarized toward the immanent sender, the language of prayer tends to be spiritualized: in order to exist semiotically, prayer certainly needs to be signified and communicated, or better, self-communicated, through some language, some code, some formula. Yet this language is treated as an accessory, a detachable expressive device. The outer shell appears arbitrary and contingent; the inner movement of desire appears necessary and inescapable.

From within this Augustinian–Protestant–Kantian trajectory, it is easy to see how a conception of prayer arises that calls for a progressive dematerialization of its verbal embodiment. As the transcendent agency of the deity fades, the conative function of the

language of prayer likewise fades: there is, in the end, no real addressee whose agency must be moved to action. The radical *embrayage* of prayer – its folding back upon the immanent agency of the worshipper – exalts, instead, those functions of language centered on the sender: the emotive function, but also the poetic function, that is, the continual re-arrangement of the verbal wrapping of prayer.

Put more simply: if the point of my prayer is not to persuade a deity to act according to my wishes, but to persuade myself that I am acting according to the will of that deity, then what matters in the language of prayer is not obedience to a pre-given divine code, but the elaboration of my own semiotic code, the one that most effectively produces the self-empowerment of my immanent self through dialogue with an imagined transcendent addressee. The language of prayer shifts from collective to individual, from formulaic to poetic; in extreme cases it is wholly spiritualized and interiorized, culminating in silent prayer. What began as fixed liturgical texts pronounced aloud becomes a continuum of vocal attenuation: from fully articulated formulas to whispered fragments, from almost inaudible mumbling to an internal discourse where the lips no longer move and only a patterned silence, broken by minimal sonic cues, marks the act of praying.

This tendency is radicalized in the post-Kantian psychology of religion. T.R. Miles, in *Religion and the Scientific Outlook* (1959), argues that prayer can be reinterpreted as a performative act of dedication and commitment, provided one accepts that much of its language is parabolic. Miles maintains that «we need not be troubled if acts of dedication and commitment involve the use of parable-language, provided, of course, that this parable-language is recognized for what it is» (Miles 1959, 186). He adds that addresses to God as a person «are not necessarily, therefore, to be excluded, provided we are not just being simple-minded about them», and that expressions such as «Thy will be done» remain justified so long as we are not misled into taking them literally but treat the metaphor of human relationships as an adequate parable.

For our purposes, the crucial word in this passage is precisely ‘simple-minded’. The worshipper must not be naïve. This injunction crowns a long theological and philosophical trajectory that promotes the same intellectual posture toward prayer – in other words, that promotes the intellectualization of prayer (Keane 2007). Augustine was already warning his readers against a too

simplistic practice of prayer, offering a counter-intuitive interpretation of it. Subsequent Christian authors, especially in Protestant contexts, accentuated this trend, which was then reworked and radicalized by Kant and by modern psychological and philosophical anthropologies of religion. The mature outcome of this tradition is a model of prayer that is anthropologically necessary, modally polarized toward the immanent subject, and linguistically spiritualized, with verbal expression reduced to a contingent, inessential support for inner disposition.

Once this developmental line has been sketched in its main steps, the cultural semiotician cannot avoid formulating an apparently naïve – one might say ‘simple-minded’ – question: why should the opposite tendencies, namely the stress on the specific anthropological distinctiveness of prayer, on the polarization of its agency toward a transcendent addressee, and on the dense incarnation of its language, be coded as simple-minded? In what, precisely, does this supposed simplicity consist? From a meta-logical point of view, it is evident that the intellectualizing trajectory carries with it a strong negative value judgement against non-intellectual forms of prayer: against those forms of cult which, although extremely widespread among believers, are perceived as something to be corrected, tamed, or eradicated through progressive catechesis in the ‘true’ meaning of the practice.

The semiotics of culture is not tasked with promoting this or that theological interpretation of prayer (Leone 2012e). Its task is rather to show that religious cultures are traversed by a persistent tension between two polarities. One pole, exemplified by the intellectualizing tendency that begins with Augustine and culminates in post-modern demystifications of cult, emphasizes the anthropological inevitability of prayer, its humanistic core, and the need for a non-formulaic, even spiritualized language for it to be effective. The other pole, exemplified by what is often designated – not without prejudice – as ‘popular religion’, stresses instead the anthropological peculiarity of prayer, its theistic character, and the need for a formulaic and strongly incarnated language if it is to ‘work’.

From the first point of view, we pray essentially in order to potentiate our own immanent agency in the world. The addressee of prayer tends to become a fictive simulacrum, or grows marginal, or even disappears, opening the way to secularized forms of prayer that are barely distinguishable from verbalized hope.

Consequently, the language of prayer must constantly be reinvented: its aim is not to elicit a response from an external addressee by conforming to a fixed code, but to give voice to the intimate identity of the sender through the elaboration of a personal code. Hence the transformation of prayer into poetry, or even into an interior discourse where sound is progressively reduced: whispered improvisations, fragmented phrases, inner monologue, pauses and hesitations where silence itself functions as sign.

From the second point of view, by contrast, we pray in order to persuade the transcendent agency of the deity to act in the world. The addressee of prayer is not a convenient fiction but a real person, whose metaphysical presence eludes attempts at demystification and secularization. Consequently, in the language of prayer nothing is to be invented: its primary objective is not to externalize the subjectivity of the sender through a personal code, but to provoke the response – ideally, the intervention – of the addressee. Here prayer tends to become formula, or even unconscious routine: fixed texts, repeated sequences, standardized gestures, regulated patterns of breathing and intonation. And here too silence is not absent: pauses between formulas, mechanical murmuring barely above audibility, the half-voiced recitation of memorized texts, the low sonic profile of shared communal responses. Incarnation of language does not mean only phonetic fullness; it also means a choreography of sound and non-sound, where omissions, suspensions, and mumbled segments are integral parts of the code.

Given this dialectic, the task of a cultural semiotics of prayer is double. First, it must stress that this tension is not Manichaeic, but a continuum of infinitely sundry intermediate positions. The history of Christian prayer, for example, contains not only radically intellectualized interpretations of this semiotic practice or radically 'simple-minded' popular interpretations; it displays a complex fan of intermediate configurations. Numerous authors – including some already mentioned in this essay, and many others in the Catholic theology of prayer – have repeatedly tried to reconcile an intellectual understanding of prayer with its embodied popular practice, negotiating different balances between spiritualization and incarnation.

Second, cultural semiotics must illuminate the inner dynamics of this dialectic not only by interpreting abstract philosophical or

existential positions, but by analyzing how those positions become embodied and signified through specific semiotic practices. These practices involve the production, circulation, and interpretation of heterogeneous texts: verbal formulas and spontaneous words, but also images, bodily gestures, ritual objects, spatial arrangements, and, crucially, patterned uses of voice and silence – from loud proclamation to whispered repetition, from deliberate pauses to nearly complete muteness. The next step, therefore, is to turn to the historic and anthropological semiotics of a Christian practice of prayer known as the rosary, in which beads, gestures, repetitive formulas, pauses, silences, and mumbling together stage the complex dialectic between expression and non-expression that has implicitly accompanied our entire discussion of prayer.

### **3. The cultural semiotics of the rosary**

#### **3.1. The rosary as a prayer device**

Across different historical and socio-cultural environments, human beings have not only invented words, images, and gestures of prayer, but also devices for praying. One of the most widespread in many religions is what, at least in early modern Christianity and especially in Catholic regions, has come to be called the ‘rosary’. Strictly speaking, the Catholic rosary is only one particular historical and cultural manifestation of a more general prayer device whose basic semiotic features this second part will describe and analyze, connecting them to the semiotic-philosophical reflections on prayer developed above – and, in particular, to the question of how prayer organizes expression and non-expression, sound and silence, verbal articulation and its attenuation into murmur.

The essential structure of the Christian rosary – and of analogous devices in other traditions – consists in a series of homogeneous elements arranged in regular succession. In its most characteristic form these are beads threaded on a string, but other variants exist: an elementary form likely antecedent to later and more complex devices was a simple pile of roughly regular stones; prayer sticks marked by notches or other incisions have likewise been assimilated to the same family of objects. In all these cases, the device is a series of discrete, tactilely iterable units. Eithne Wilkins, in *The Rose-Garden Game: The Symbolic Background to the European Prayer-Beads* (1969), succinctly characterizes its operation: a rosary is a string of notches or beads which must be

touched or slid along, one by one, so that a given prayer, invocation, or magical-religious formula can be repeated the prescribed number of times without having to keep count verbally, because «it is the fingers on the notches that do it» (Wilkins 1969, 25). The device thus externalizes counting in the register of touch, allowing the register of voice to loosen, blur, and sometimes even fall silent without interrupting the progression of the ritual.

Despite the extraordinary variety of forms, materials, bead counts, and techniques and purposes of use (a variety generated by the labyrinthine history of prayer-beads in many religions), a common semiotic principle underlies their functioning: rosaries establish a parallel between the material structure of the device (an ordered chain of homologous units) and the symbolic structure of the prayer. This parallel is at once syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. Manipulating the rosary, the worshipper constantly keeps in mind the particular syntax of phrases, mental images, and sometimes gestures and postures required for 'correct' prayer. Each unit on the chain semantically marks a specific stage in the overall structure of the cult, pragmatically inciting its performance. The rosary thus develops historically and functions semiotically as a portable mnemotechnic for executing complex ritual sequences, individually or collectively<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, because the beads carry the count, the voice can slip from fully articulated recitation into chant, from chant into murmuring, from murmuring into barely audible breath. The device guarantees that the ritual continues even when expression becomes indistinct or is partially replaced by patterned silence and the mere rhythm of moving fingers.

### 3.2 The semiotic ideology of rosaries

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<sup>10</sup> See, in this regard, Mitchell (2009, 152): «We possess, in fact, an early sixteenth-century printed book called the *Chiropsalterium* (literally, 'hand psalter'), which instructed readers in how to use their hands as a mnemonic device for praying and meditating on the biblical psalms – the text of which had previously been committed to memory»; compare Wills (2005, 11): «The fingers' transit along the beads – if one strips the practice of its fetishistic associations – can help put one in a prayerful frame of mind. [...] A kind of tactile memory is evoked in their use, helping to recall earlier moments of prayer. The British author Eamon Duffy [...] notes that the clicking of rosary beads brings back childhood memories of his grandmother praying through sleepless nights, with her 'muttered preamble – This one is for Tom, for Molly, for Lily – as she launched on yet another decade'».

Rosaries, however, are much more than portable mnemonic aids. They are both the product and the embodiment of a specific semiotic ideology of prayer (Leone 2010a), broadly opposed to the intellectualizing and spiritualizing ideology evoked in the first part. Three principles are crucial: repetition, quantification, and sensuality. Interconnected yet analytically distinguishable, these principles characterize the rosary as a 'text of culture' in Lotman's sense – a text that both embodies and is pervaded by a specific cultural logic (Lotman 1990).

First, the rosary presupposes an ideology of prayer as repetition. Only if cultic discourse is conceived as made of formulas to be repeated indefinitely, with little or no variation, can the device function as a ritual machine<sup>11</sup>. In the Catholic rosary, for example, the material sequence of beads stands for a sequence of *Hail Marys* repeated many times without alteration. Creativity or verbal improvisation do not belong to the logic of the practice; the rosary's semiotic principle is precisely to transform cult into a mechanical procedure, a quasi-automatic practice in which the agency of the worshipper is strongly reduced<sup>12</sup>. Seen from the outside, articulation converges toward chant; seen from within, articulation tends toward de-articulation: the formula becomes so familiar that it is no longer fully 'said' but let slip, half-sung, half-mumbled, sometimes simply intended in silence while the fingers continue to move.

Second, rosaries rest not only on the possibility of repetition, but on the possibility of enumerating repetitions. They are thus at once mnemonic devices and counting machines. Like an abacus, the rosary makes it possible to accumulate a given number of prayers and to keep track of this accumulation. Rosaries do not merely

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<sup>11</sup> See, in this regard, Howard Patton (1927, 135-136): «In solving the secret of the rosary, we must take into consideration the strong impulse towards iteration in language, and especially in the language of prayer».

<sup>12</sup> See again Mitchell (2009, 215): «[...] The rosary's role as a medium of presence results not from its originality but from its repetitiveness and widespread replication. Replication is, in fact, a 'critical aspect of Catholic culture'. It is the principal means by which religious practices that might otherwise remain local and ethnic are globalized and come to embrace 'the universality of the supernatural', providing practitioners with a way 'to participate in a worldwide community that [does] not recognize the limits of time and space'; see also McDannell (1995) (and, on 'material Christianity' - Orsi 1996); Wilkins (1969, 32), defines the rosary as a «sort of prayer-wheel with a centripetal action»; and Wilkins 1969, 78, further observes: «It is this inevitability, this organic drone, that releases the mind into detachment».

structure the sequence of expressions; they produce an accounting of cultic acts<sup>13</sup>, a ledger of uttered or half-uttered formulas, including those that have sunk below the threshold of clear audibility and survive only as a rhythm of lips and breath.

Third, the rosary is structurally sensual. Beyond being a cognitive aid and a counting mechanism, it is a material object that can be continuously handled and felt, generating a resonance between the rhythm of the worshipper's body and the rhythm of the prayer<sup>14</sup>. This sensuality is not limited to touch; it extends to sound – the faint clicking of beads, the rustle against clothing – and to its suspension: moments in which the hand lingers on a bead while the voice falls silent, or in which the chain slides through the fingers even though the mouth no longer pronounces the corresponding formula. The device thereby inscribes prayer in a regime where the body and its micro-rhythms – including micro-rhythms of silence – become part of the semiotic fabric of the cult.

Repetition, quantification, sensuality: these three traits are the mirror-image of the philosophical and theological tendencies described earlier. It is hardly surprising that rosaries and analogous practices have often been criticized or condemned by proponents of intellectualizing demystifications of prayer. The mechanical repetition of phrases, gestures, and postures encouraged by the rosary; its capacity to 'count' prayers and, thus, to assign quantitative value to cult; and, above all, its sensuality – its close link to the body and to tactile pleasure – all seemed to contradict an interpretation of prayer that prized poetic creativity against formula, qualitative intensity against counting, and spiritualization against any 'fetishistic' attachment to objects. In the intellectualizing model, the verbal expression of prayer is a dispensable arena in which immanent agency is shaped and heightened. In the rosary model, by contrast, verbal expression appears to dissolve into monotony and mumbling, and the device becomes the dense, sometimes opaque interface where human agency is muted, making room for a submissive invocation of

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<sup>13</sup> See Howard Patton (1927, 135-136): «In solving the secret of the rosary, we must take into consideration the strong impulse towards iteration in language, and especially in the language of prayer».

<sup>14</sup> See Winston-Allen (1997, 111): «[Rosary beads] lend the devotion an added aesthetic dimension and a certain concreteness, even as simple as the tactile comfort of something to grasp onto in times of trouble and especially in the final hours».



transcendence – an invocation that can, at the limit, continue even when the voice has ceased and only the tactile progression along the beads persists<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.3. The intellectualization of the rosary.

The remainder of the essay reconstructs some historical and anthropological data to support this reading of the semiotic ideology of the rosary and of the many attempts – especially within Catholicism – to intellectualize it, to transform it from a device of submission into an instrument for affirming immanent agency. In other words, it shows how the rosary has been repeatedly modified because it is embedded in the broader dialectic of prayer ideologies outlined earlier, including differing valuations of silence, murmur, and full expression.

A few concise historical indications<sup>16</sup>. The first attested prayer device based on a string of beads appears in India, associated with the cult of Śiva, whose iconography almost systematically includes a rosary (sometimes composed of human skulls); his female counterpart Śakti, in her form as Kālī, is likewise often shown with a bead-string. The device was then taken up by Jainism and Buddhism; Tibetans and Chinese learned its use through contact with India, and the Japanese through contact with China. Today, various forms of rosary are used across these religious cultures. Through contact with India, Persians and Arabs also adopted similar devices. The poet Abū Nuwās (d. early ninth century) offers the first ironic mention in the Islamic world, describing himself as always wearing rosaries on his arm and carrying the Qurʾān on his chest in place of gold chains (Goldziher 1890, 295). Here already,

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<sup>15</sup> See Wilkins (1969, 87): «The meaning of the word ‘contemplation’ lights up in its history. *Contemplatio* in classical Latin means attentive considering, a surveying, and it relates back to a verb that is obviously ancient (*contemplor*, a deponent) which originally belonged to the language of augury – that is, to the art of divination practiced by a college of priests who particularly observed the flight of birds within a *templum*, a space marked out for the purpose. The *templum*, which is also a circuit, is therefore not only what we now mean by a temple, but any enclosure created for a numinous purpose; the root is in fact the same as in the Greek *temenos*. To contemplate, then, is to mark out a space, a circle, and fix one’s attention on what is within it, uniting as far as possible with the numinous forces thus concentrated».

<sup>16</sup> The bibliography on the history of the rosary is extensive; for an overview, see Howard Patton (1927) and Miller (2001). On the ‘rosary’ in Islam, see Zwemer (1930); on the Japanese *juzu*, a Buddhist prayer device analogous to the Christian rosary, see Hanayama (1962); see also Kun-dga’-rin-chen (1986).

prayer-beads oscillate between a devotional instrument and a quasi-ornamental object, a silent marker of piety whose visibility can substitute for explicit verbal confession.

The development of rosaries in the Judeo-Christian world is less clear. Traditional legends lack historical support: neither the claim that Saint Dominic invented the rosary after a Marian vision in order to convert the Albigenses, nor the counter-legend that it was borrowed from Arabs during the First Crusade. Available evidence suggests a more complex five-stage history.

The most primitive Christian form is mentioned in the *Life of Paul of Thebes* (c. 234-347), where the hermit is said to shift pebbles to keep count of his daily ration of three hundred Paternosters. Later, stringing the stones together made the system portable; knotted cords and notched sticks were probably among the earliest cultic mnemotechnics. Whether these arose within Christian monasticism or were imported from other religious environments remains uncertain, but they clearly met a cross-cultural anthropological need: to count repeated prayers without variation and to materialize the count. Wilkins suggests that the main purpose of this technique was to generate a continuous rhythm of gestures and utterances capable of producing a state of mental dulling resistant to desert temptations – a ‘stabilization’ of the psyche through the coupling of intense mental effort with rhythmic bodily movement<sup>17</sup>. To this we can now add: the device also allows vocalization to thin out into chant and then into quasi-silence without breaking the counting; the fingers ‘remember’ even when the tongue no longer distinctly articulates.

A second decisive step occurs in Irish monasticism, which adopted the rosary from Eastern desert monasticism but gave it a standard structure of 150 beads divided into three sections. The first number parallels the 150 biblical psalms; the tripartition is likely linked to Trinitarian theology. Contemporary Christian rosaries still preserve this structure in the form of fifteen decades of *Hail Marys* arranged in three groups of fifty.

Originally an ascetic device for mental concentration among Eastern hermits, and then a biblical mnemotechnic among Irish monks, around the year 1000 the rosary was diffused from Irish monasteries to continental houses in a vulgarized form for illiterate

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<sup>17</sup> «For an anchorite engaged in intense and systematic psychic effort, it was necessary to maintain stability by combining the mental exercise with some rhythmic physical movement» (Wilkins 1969, 33-34).

laity. Those who could not memorize the psalms now used the beads to mark the repetition of a single prayer, the *Paternoster*, 150 times. Hence 'paternoster' remains the name for the rosary in many languages. Here the device mediates between a learned, textual, and chanted recitation and a popular practice in which the same formula is recited or half-murmured by those who cannot access the written word; the beads provide continuity where the script is absent, and the rhythm of fingers and lips replaces the rhythm of the psalter.

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In the fourth phase, the rosary 'changes genre'. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Christian authors composed 'psalters' of 150 praises to the Virgin<sup>18</sup>. Gradually, the *Hail Mary* displaced the *Paternoster* in rosary practice. From the 13<sup>th</sup> century on, the semiotic practice of the rosary became 'professionalized': guilds of rosary makers sprang up across Europe, leaving traces in toponyms such as Paternoster Row and Ave Maria Lane in London, via dei

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<sup>18</sup> See Winston-Allen (1997, 136): «Already at this earliest stage the tension between ritualism and meaningful spirituality – the divide between literacy and illiteracy – was felt. Although the psalms themselves formed a beautiful and meaningful liturgy for chanting, the 150 Aves of the 'illiterate man's psalter' tended toward monotony».

Coronari in Rome, or the former Paternoster-Gässchen in Vienna (Wilkins 1969). The name 'rosary' increasingly fused the cultic device with Marian symbolism: the garden of roses, the votive garland. The object thus acquired a dense iconic and affective charge – something to be looked at, worn, and smelled, not only handled – and thereby a new range of largely silent semiotic functions.

Finally, between 1410 and 1439, the Carthusian Dominic of Prussia composed a psalter of fifty meditations on the lives of Jesus and Mary, which became the most widespread 'libretto' for rosary performance. Similar psalters and devotional booklets multiplied; collective recitations of the rosary emerged, so that by 1571 the victory of Christian forces over the Turks at Lepanto was partly attributed to the efficacy of this new form of cult. Here, the rosary becomes embedded in complex soundscapes: communal choral recitation alternating with stretches where only a few voices lead and others follow in murmurs; moments of pause where beads pass from hand to hand while the church is filled with a low-level background of coughs, footsteps, and the faint clicking of wood or glass.

The standard Catholic structure was stabilized at this time and has remained essentially unchanged: a circular string of roughly 169 beads (often 170 or 171 to accommodate additional *Paternosters*), with 150 beads for *Hail Marys* grouped into decades, separated by 14 beads for the *Paternoster* and the *Gloria*, and arranged into three sets dedicated to the joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries, codified under Pius V. This rapid overview is meant to situate a fundamental cultural process: once detached from its original monastic contexts and adapted to largely illiterate lay publics, the rosary's semiotic traits of repetition, quantification, and sensuality became ever more accentuated, provoking unease and criticism within Christianity itself.

With regard to sensuality, from the late Middle Ages onwards, Christian authorities frequently noted and attempted to regulate the material exuberance of the rosary. It was often transformed into a fetish or amulet: turned into precious jewelry, perfumed, associated with bodily adornment, used in unorthodox ways. Dominican chapters in the 13<sup>th</sup> century forbade lay brothers to wear oversized or luxurious rosaries; later, an Augustinian canon in Osnabrück condemned the fashion for coral rosaries worn around the neck (Wilkins 1969, 49). A Viennese priest, still in 1706,

deplored the habit of attaching silver skulls filled with balm to rosaries: an especially sensual memento mori (*ibidem*, 60). In all these cases, the device becomes a sensory focus whose meaning can be displayed without any accompanying speech: a visible and tangible condensation of piety, often more eloquent in its silent presence than many words.

As for repetition, proponents of the intellectualizing ideology of prayer could scarcely do otherwise than condemn the rosary's semiotic principle, especially in popular forms. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, John Cosin, bishop of Durham, objected to «divine service in an unknown tongue, to the saying of a certain number of Hail Marys in chant upon a rosary, to the sprinkling of themselves and corpses with holy water [...]» (Winston-Allen 1997, 73), where the formulaic and quasi-musical character of the practice seemed to reduce prayer to uncomprehended sounds, half-meaningful or even purely mechanical. From a semiotic perspective sensitive to silence, one might say that Cosin's objection is directed not only against what is said but against what is no longer fully said: that zone of semi-articulation in which prayer oscillates between sound and a kind of patterned muteness.

Quantification attracted even harsher criticism, especially from Luther, whose annotated copy of Marcus von Weida's rosary manual is filled with indignant marginalia. Luther famously asks «where the devil so many and such various lies come from», and, in commenting on the story of a youth converted by the rosary, remarks that «through a foolish work he thus deserved salvation» (Winston-Allen 1997, 130)<sup>19</sup>. More abstractly, he resists the idea – implicit in the rosary – that modal agency can be radically shifted toward the capacity of the worshipper to move the deity through accumulated formulas, instead of conceiving prayer as trustful surrender to predestined grace<sup>20</sup>. On the semiotic plane, he attacks the monetarization of prayer, whereby counted recitations become quasi-commodities in the economy of indulgences. Yet precisely here, too, the rosary structures a continuum in which fully voiced prayer, whispered repetition, and silent counting all enter equally into the same 'ledger' of cultic acts.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Kawerau (1917) and Thomas (1971, 42).

<sup>20</sup> «To the degree that all language can be regarded as a medium of negotiation and exchange, the medieval rosary constitutes an interesting example of how words functioned as spiritual capital» (Winston-Allen 1997, 133).

A cultural semiotics of prayer must therefore show how macro-semiotic ideologies – or ‘forms of life’ – clash and negotiate with micro-semiotic configurations like the rosary, generating ongoing changes in its structure and use. Lotman’s model of the semiosphere producing and modifying cultural texts should not be applied too rigidly (Leone 2010b). Moments of tension – such as Luther’s vehement rejections or Protestant polemics against rosary practices<sup>21</sup> – are often accompanied by moments of reconciliation: attempts to formulate an Anglican rosary<sup>22</sup>, or to propose new theological interpretations of the practice in contemporary Catholicism<sup>23</sup>. Nathan D. Mitchell, in *The Mystery of the Rosary: Marian Devotion and the Reinvention of Catholicism*, shows how 19<sup>th</sup>-century American theologians pursued precise ritual aims. Archbishop John Hughes of New York sought, on the one hand, to

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<sup>21</sup> Likewise for mystical thinkers of various traditions: see Thomas Merton’s *Contemplative Prayer*, where he writes: «The contemplative [...] accepts the love of God in faith, in defiance of all apparent evidence. This is the necessary condition for the mystical experience of the reality of God’s presence and of his love for us. Only when we are able ‘to let go’ of everything within us – every desire to see, to know, to taste, and to experience the presence of God – do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionize our entire inner life» (Merton 1969, 111). These tensions are by no means exclusive to Christianity. See Howard Patton (1927, 94-95): «It is, however, one of the many signs of an intellectual and spiritual awakening among Moslem [sic] people, especially those of the Near East, that the superstitious and mechanical use of the *tesbih* is being challenged in high quarters. A Turkish weekly recently contained an article about prayer, in which it boldly took to task the Angora [sic] government for issuing an order for school children to repeat a certain Arabic prayer four thousand four hundred times. The comment of the editor, as given below in translation, shows an appreciation of the true nature of prayer: «[...] Besides, this prayer is ordered to be repeated four thousand and forty-four times mechanically. The desire and emotion of the soul have nothing to do with it. If the aim of the prayer is to secure divine help, it is a sin against the righteousness of God to seek divine mercy in such a way. God verily says, «Pray to me and I will answer». That is true; but He does not say, «Repeat words which you do not understand and I will give you whatever you like»».

<sup>22</sup> See Howard Patton (1927, 155-156), on the ‘Protestant rosary’ devised by Dr. James A. Beebe, former dean of the School of Theology at Boston University: «In making his rosary, the Protestant will draw upon all the literature of worship. The more poetic and devotional parts of the Bible take precedence over all other material – for example, Psalms 1, 8, 19 [...]».

<sup>23</sup> On modern attempts to ‘masculinize’ the rosary and to ‘rescue’ it from associations with kitsch and empty repetition, see Binkley (2000) and Westerfelhaus (2007).

show that Catholics were reliable citizens in a religiously plural society; on the other, to stress Catholic distinctiveness in matters of devotion. The rosary served both purposes: it was a portable, flexible, vernacular devotion rooted in essentially biblical episodes and capable of being adapted to the rhythms of working families, yet its strong Marian emphasis marked it as unmistakably Catholic (Mitchell 2009, 208). One could add: it also offered a recognizable soundscape (the familiar murmur of Hail Marys, the shared pauses at each mystery) and a recognizable silhouette (the beads in the hand, at the belt, around the neck), making Catholic identity legible even when no word was publicly spoken.

Seen in this light, the rosary is not merely an object that structures repetitive expression, but a *dispositif* that organizes a whole economy of expression and non-expression<sup>24</sup>: it calibrates the alternation of voice and silence, articulation and mumbling, mental prayer and tactile counting. As such, it is a privileged case for observing how religious cultures script the presence and absence of expression, how they make silence itself – absolute or filled with breath, gesture, and barely audible sound – into a decisive component of the semiotics of prayer.

#### 4. Conclusion

A semiotics of prayer must ultimately demonstrate how macro-ideological models of devotion – those that privilege interiority, self-modalization, and linguistic spiritualization, and those that emphasize embodied practice, hetero-referential agency, and formulaic repetition – become materially legible in the concrete *dispositifs* of worship. The historical arc traced here, from psychological and philosophical theories of prayer to the cultural semiotics of the rosary, highlights an essential point: prayer is not only a form of expression; it is also a form of controlled non-expression. Silence, hesitation, murmuring, and pause are not absences of meaning but patterned semiotic resources whose organization varies dramatically across religious traditions.

The tradition that most radically interiorizes prayer – transforming silence into its primary medium – is the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. The Quaker meeting for worship, emerging in the mid-seventeenth century under the influence of George Fox and the early Friends, offers one of the most technically

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<sup>24</sup> Compare Oliva (2019) on the «absolute performativeness of language» in the utterance of *Amen*.

elaborated liturgical regimes of silence in the history of Christianity. Its structure is now well documented by historians of religion, anthropologists, and scholars of practical theology.

Quaker silence is not a passive void. It is a disciplined, temporally extended expectant waiting (often termed ‘expectant worship’), in which congregants gather without predetermined liturgy, without officiants, and without formulas. The theological premise is that the ‘Inner Light’ or ‘Seed’ – a divine presence immanent within each person – may ‘move’ any participant to speak. This speech, called ‘vocal ministry’, is not a free improvisation but a rigorously self-regulated act: Friends must discern whether an interior impulse originates from divine motion or from personal inclination. Hence the classical Quaker maxim: Do not speak unless you cannot remain silent.

Historically, meetings last approximately an hour; in many gatherings, the entire duration may pass without a single spoken intervention. Yet this silence is not uniform. Scholars have identified its micro-temporal articulation (Steinbock 2012):

1. the settling silence at the beginning, where bodies adjust and breathing synchronizes;
2. the deep silence where attention becomes corporally dense and auditory thresholds shift;
3. the pregnant silence immediately before or after a vocal ministry, where sound is absent but expectation and evaluation are acoustically palpable;
4. the closing silence, which reabsorbs any spoken contribution back into collective quiet.

Semiotically, this regime reconfigures the distribution of agency: initiative shifts almost entirely to the sender, whose interior discernment is the locus of prayer’s possibility, while the transcendent addressee is conceptualized not as an external agent but as an immanent motion within the subject. Linguistic incarnation is reduced to its minimum: occasional, unstructured utterances, often fragmentary, delivered without ritual framing. Vocality becomes exceptional; silence becomes normative.

In the Catholic traditions, the response to this model is neither a simple repudiation of silence nor an embrace of pure interiority. Instead, it is the ritual capture of silence. Catholic devotional culture does not aim to abolish non-expression but to organize it, subordinating silence to a liturgy of fullness: sound, image, gesture,



ornament, and repetition. In this horizon, the rosary emerges not merely as a device for structuring prayer but as a technology for structuring silence. The beads do not only segment formulas; they segment pauses. They produce a rhythmic alternation between voiced and unvoiced states: a murmured Ave Maria, a half-second of breath as the fingers transition to the next bead, an elongated interval when the worshipper hesitates, the micro-silences of collective recitation when voices fall out of sync and then resynchronize.

Where Quaker silence is unmediated, Catholic silence is mediated – timed, choreographed, and embedded within a material *dispositif*. The rosary does not seek the abolition of speech but its measured intermittence. Each bead is a minimal regulator of alternation: between utterance and its suspension, between presence and non-presence of voice, between the expressivity of the subject and the submission to a prescribed sequence. In this sense, the rosary is both a technique of memory and a technique of silence management. It externalizes the interior spiritualization of language theorized from Augustine to the post-Kantian tradition but simultaneously reinscribes prayer within a bodily economy of touch, breath, and cyclic quiet.

A cultural semiotics of prayer, then, must account not only for what religious traditions say but for how they strategically withdraw from saying. Silence is never a neutral background; it is a mode of signification whose distribution determines agency. Quaker worship shows how silence can function as prayer itself, concentrating agency in an interior divine motion that only occasionally surfaces as language. The rosary shows how silence can be ritualized, collectivized, and embodied, becoming a structural interval within a repetitive verbal economy. Together, these cases reveal that the anthropology of prayer cannot be reduced to the analysis of formulas, utterances, or doctrines. It must also analyze how cultures produce, regulate, and value the absence of expression.

The tension between spiritualized silence and ritualized silence – between the Quaker meeting and the Catholic rosary – exemplifies a broader semiotic dialectic that extends far beyond the religious field. The alternation of voice and non-voice, of expression and suspension, structures political assemblies, therapeutic practices, judicial proceedings, digital interfaces, and countless secular rituals. Understanding this alternation is essential to

understanding how human cultures negotiate agency, presence, and meaning. A semiotics attentive to silence, therefore, not only renews the study of prayer but provides conceptual instruments for analyzing the many zones of contemporary life in which the most significant messages are, at times, those that are not spoken.

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