

Giving silence a seat at the virtual table

It's one aspect of Christian life that can translate well to digital space.

by [Stephanie Perdew](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

Published on February 20, 2026

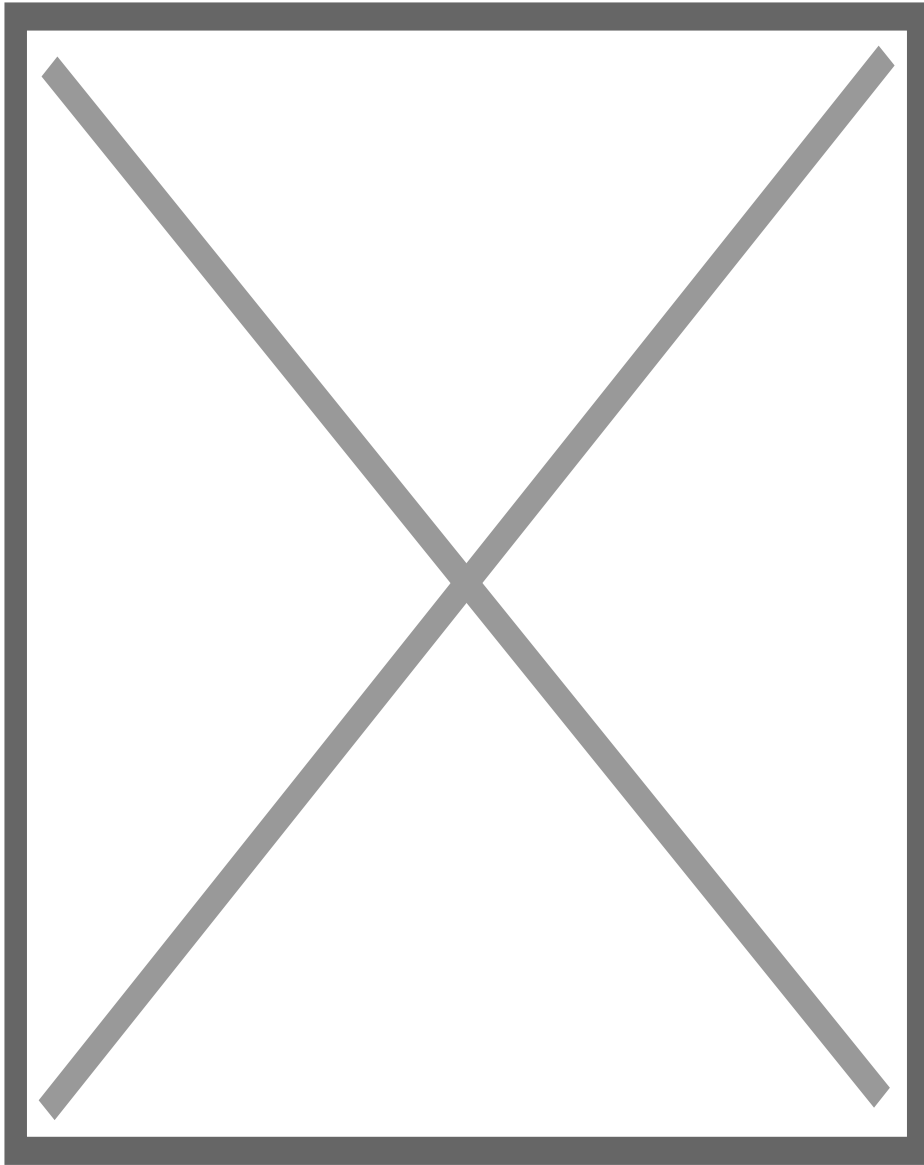


Illustration by Grace J. Kim

“Silence spoken here.” I first read this phrase in reference to the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Trappist monastery in Kentucky. Silence has been spoken there for more than 175 years. It has been spoken in the Christian tradition for millennia more.

This silence is said to aid us in listening for God's guidance, to give space for the Holy Spirit to speak. Christians seek silence because Jesus sought silence in the wilderness after his baptism and at other intervals during his ministry. Silence cultivates the inner spaciousness needed to approach our siblings in Christ, and all people, with expansive grace and generous patience. As science now confirms, silence and deep breath can calm the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn instincts of our central nervous systems.

For ages, monasteries have cultivated silence and modeled it for others. Their inhabitants have provided hospitable space for pilgrims to come sit and pray with them in silence. Christian teachers have handed down these traditions. Parker Palmer has called others to the habits of silence embraced in the Quaker tradition. He describes patterns of communal conversation, discernment, and accountability in which we "treat silence as a member of the group," to quote from his touchstones for establishing what he calls Circles of Trust.

In years of ministry, I have tried to give silence a seat at the table. But this is hard in our Christian era. Silence is often an unwelcome member of the group in congregational life. Churches are filled with talking because our world is filled with talking and texting and content and whatever passes for conversation. Protestant liturgies privilege wordiness over silence; church meetings rarely leave space to listen for the Spirit; fellowship gatherings are lively spaces of chatter. For many, silence feels awkward. We don't trust it. We rush to fill it. Instead of listening, we think about what to say next.

As I've practiced ministry in the past few years I've been surprised to find that online space can be a conducive site for cultivating Christian silence. Years ago, I would have found virtual silence hard to imagine. Now I experience it several times a month. Silence, it turns out, is one of those aspects of Christian life that can translate well in online space.

Some Christian communities have been experimenting with translating ministry into virtual practice since before 2020. Others came to this work that spring in a pandemic panic. I've served in settings where much is lost in translation: embodied community, residential life, classroom interaction. I resisted online ministry and teaching as long as I could. I worry about the effect of screen time on our brains, social-emotional capacities, and civic fabric. But this technology is not going away. So the question, as Kate Ott has suggested, is how to inventory what we value and love and then ask how virtual life serves or detracts from it.

When I first realized that silence can be spoken well in virtual space, I was in a spiritual direction training program created by a group of Dominican sisters. For years the program took place at their retreat center on the shores of Lake Michigan. The pandemic forced them to take their program online. The timing in my life was right for this opportunity, even if I had doubts about the modality. Our leaders had gained facility with guiding spiritual formation online. They were technologically prepared, with a designated host for the meetings who was focused on solving tech problems, creating breakout rooms, screen-sharing materials, and monitoring the chat. They were also spiritually prepared—at ease guiding conversation, sharing content, and praying in an online environment. This undoubtedly came from years of experience guiding the program in a retreat center before they tried adapting it to the virtual context.

As we introduced ourselves to one another via Zoom that first weekend, we were instructed to take a "prayerful pause between speakers." We did so easily. The online platform was not a distraction; it was a help. The time it took to unmute, speak slowly and clearly into the microphone, finish speaking, and mute again slowed the pace of conversation. Those silent breaths and moments between sharing felt normal and natural. There was no way conversation could be rushed. Interruption was almost impossible in online conversation. So the slower pace and the silent spaces facilitated the creation of the contemplative, online community.

After two years in that program I learned that not only was it possible to form sacred community in online space, but the limits of our teleconferencing platform in fact served the possibility. Since then I've seen how silence

translates in online space, both in ministries I've led and in others I've chosen to join. Whether in a group spiritual direction circle, an online class, a clergy community of practice, or even a board meeting, the steps of muting, speaking, muting again, pausing, and hearing from another offer the possibility that silence becomes a valued member of the group. Decision-making slows down. People take time to think, even gazing at one another with patient compassion.

Time will tell what we can do well in online ministry, whether in the parish, theological education, or spiritual formation. And we have yet to learn whether practicing online silence makes us better at holding silence in person, at pacing our conversation differently. But I'm convinced that we can cultivate contemplative community in online space, and that we can say silence is spoken here, and well.