We, as a culture, have fallen deaf to silence. This became apparent to me recently while attending a national conference for lay ecclesial ministers. Amidst the many workshops and activities offered during the week, I engaged in conversation among professional lay ministers regarding the complexities facing contemporary ministers. Throughout the week, various discussions ensued over the struggle to maintain balance between the personal and the professional in the life of the minister.

Professional lay ecclesial ministerial positions, often under budget constraints, are characteristically a consolidation of multiple jobs recreated as a singular position. Ministers desiring to live their vocations authentically while meeting countless needs run the risk of increasing burnout.

Perhaps the most prevalent factor contributing to complications in lay ministry is the dramatic technological advances made over the last twenty years. As a result, ministers find themselves habitually replying to needs at all hours in an attempt to answer requests at the moment of occurrence. We unwittingly quantify “success” in ministry by tabulating the rapidity of responses and the number of outgoing emails.

While social media has transformed our world permanently, the danger of unrestrained electronic engagement has significant consequences for lay ministers. The 24/7 “plugged in” mentality smothers our ability to listen. We are formed in God’s image and likeness; Professor Martin Laird reminds us that we are built for contemplation. But we are no longer schooled in contemplation. The call to silence, to “Be still and know I am God” (Ps 46:10), is asphyxiated. Psalm 139:14, which states, “I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” becomes irrelevant to a generation uncomfortable with silence. With the groundswell of unlimited access, we risk diminishing ourselves to the point of no longer knowing ourselves.

Pragmatically speaking then, how can one integrate a regular practice of silence in a culture that eschews it? The ancient teachers of the earliest monastic movement from the Middle East provide us with tools of wisdom for incorporating silence in attentiveness to the Indwelling.

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Theologian and author William J. Harmless, S.J., believes the message of the early desert Christians is not only timeless but is needed now more than ever. The desert wisdom challenges us to reorder our agenda away from insularity and self-focus. In a highly individualized and myopic culture of First World Christians, this is revolutionary. The silence essential to the desert Christians allows us to confront our true failings in genuine humility and a sincere recognition of God’s indwelling presence, abundant mercy and love for each of us.

To examine the practice of silence and how it can impact contemporary ministry, I turn to two ancient figures from the early Christian movement, Abba Evagrius of Pontus and Amma St. Syncletica, as models of wisdom and praxis. Both rather unknown individuals lived in monastic communities of the fourth and fifth century in the Egyptian desert and possessed tremendous wisdom for us to share.

Evagrius, (345–399) desert monk, theologian, and prolific author, is credited with introducing ideas that laid the foundation for spirituality and theological practice that continues to affect theologians throughout the centuries even to the present day. Why Evagrius for contemporary ministers? His genius is evident in his prolific writings on prayer and stillness with his ability to observe, reflect on and write on the movement of the thought process during prayer. “Evagrius is the consummate psychologist.”¹ His ability to observe and document was far ahead of his time. And his works profoundly impact contemporary thought on contemplative prayer and practice in a practical way.

While he was considered by some to be the Father of Byzantine spirituality, he also greatly impacted western monasticism as his writings influenced John Cassian (380–465) who in turn affected the practices of Benedictine monastic movement in the fifth century. Evagrian thought can be identified through the Cistercian movement in the twelfth century and can be traced through the twenty-first century in the works of theologians such as Rahner and Balthasar of the last several decades.²

Evagrius tells us, “If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian.”³ As an example for the integration of theology and the spiritual life, Evagrius provides us with a model. For lay ministers, prayer and theology are not dichotomous but should be fully integrated.

In his work “On Prayer,” Evagrius defines prayer as something that takes place spiritually between God and humanity.⁴ To this point, Evagrius invites us to deliberate periods of silence and stillness.⁵ He reminds us repeatedly not to get caught up in worries. He addresses the struggle of distractions in silence and provides us with a method for addressing them through the use of a prayer word or phrase taken directly from scripture.⁶ Throughout all of these efforts, Evagrius continuously reminds us all that prayer and contemplation are gifts from God. As lay ministers, this should be an implicit goal of our lives professionally and personally.

Syncletica, one of the few named women from the early Christian monastic tradition in the earliest desert writings, gives great insight to the importance of the contribution of women in the formulation of desert wisdom spirituality and practice. Theologian and Professor of Antiquities Studies, Dr. Kevin Corrigan, writes that the prophetic wis-

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²  Evagrius, The Praktikos, xix.
³  Evagrius, The Praktikos, 65.
⁴  Evagrius, The Praktikos, 56.
dom of Syncletica has been long buried and ignored over the centuries. Syncletica, though considered an “absolute nobody,” gives “real insight into the genuine importance of women as builders of the church tradition.”

Syncletica is critically important for several reasons. Her Vita, or biography, is a simple volume devoid of miracles or of significant personal affiliations with well-known monastic names of her time period. But it is deeply profound. Corrigan states: “...as soon as Syncletica begins to speak...we hear the authentic and original voice of a supremely clever person who knows what she is talking about.” Scholars identify the influence of Evagrian thought in her teachings; however, Syncletica outlines a plan different from Evagrius to thwart the evil one who seeks tirelessly to pervert virtue. All of her teachings point towards the core of her concern: ultimate damage done to the human psyche by the distortions of the evil one if allowed to take root in the unsuspecting soul.

Extraordinarily, she preaches to all vocations, anchorites, cenobites (those in community), and even to those who are married. Perhaps most profound, is her articulation of psychological balance necessary on this arduous journey towards holiness and God's work. Balance of practice is not usually associated with the stringent practices of the desert monks. And yet, Syncletica eschews radical abuses and practices and admonishes the sisters in her community to balance. "How do we discern from the tyrannical and demonical?...by moderation...At all times a lack of moderation is destructive."

Syncletica models stillness and interior reflection and humbly opens herself to personal transformation for the sake of incarnating Jesus Christ in the world. Syncletica tells us that those who practice contemplation live a life of “genuine love...these [contemplatives] are the custodians of pure love.” She is an inspiration for contemporary women with her faithfulness and wisdom on community life and her clear intelligence even while exhorting us to live with balance in our lives.

A daily habit of silence and interior focus while keeping sound balance—the timeless wisdom of Abba Evagrius and Amma Syncletica invites us, contemporary pastoral and lay ecclesial ministers, to re-discover contemplation as the grounding praxis that forms and informs our daily journey.

8 Corrigan, “Syncletica and Macrina.”
9 Corrigan, “Syncletica and Macrina.”
10 Corrigan, “Syncletica and Macrina.”