

TO KNOW HIM AND TO KNOW YOURSELF (VI): A Richer Language

God speaks to us, constantly. He speaks with words and also with deeds. His language is much richer than ours. It is capable of unlocking secret resources in our heart by making use of the people and events around us. God speaks to us in Scripture, in the Liturgy, through the Church's Magisterium... Since He always looks upon us with love, He seeks a dialogue with us in each event, and always calls us to be holy. Hence, in order to hear this mysterious divine language, we try to always begin our prayer with a sincere act of faith.

From within...

God speaks to us by acting on our soul's faculties, which He can move from within: on our intellect, through inspirations; on our sentiments, through the emotions; on our will, through the resolutions we make. Thus, as Saint Josemaria taught us, when ending our prayer we can say: "I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations that you have given to me in this time of prayer."

But a doubt could arise here: "How can I be sure that it is really He who is speaking to me? How can I know that these resolutions, affections and inspirations aren't merely my own desires and feelings?" It is not easy to answer this question. Prayer is an art that we learn with the passage of time and with the help of spiritual direction. But we can be sure that anything that leads us to love Him and our fellow men and women more, to fulfil his will, also when this entails sacrifice and generosity, comes from Him. Many people who pray frequently can say: "In my prayer I think about the same things that I think about throughout the day, but with this difference: I always end by saying in my heart, 'not my will but yours be done,' which doesn't happen to me at other moments."

God often speaks directly to our heart, whose language He knows better than anyone. He does so through the deep desires that He himself sows there. Therefore listening to God often means looking into our own heart and having the courage to place before Him our longings, with the intention of trying to discern what leads us to fulfil his will and what doesn't. What do I really desire? Why? Where do these impulses come from? Where do they lead me? Am I deceiving myself, pretending they are not really there and refusing to face them? Pope Francis advises us that someone who seeks to lead a life of prayer naturally asks these questions: "If we are not to go astray, we need to ask: Do I know myself, beyond my superficial feelings? Do I know what brings joy or sorrow to my heart?"¹

¹ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Christus vivit*, 25 March 2019, no. 285.

Besides speaking to our heart and intellect, God also does so through our *internal senses*. He speaks to our imagination, by stirring up a scene or image; and also to our memory, through a remembrance or some words that can be a reply to our prayer or a sign of his wishes. This is what happened, for example, to Saint Josemaria on 8 September 1931. He was trying to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament in the church of the Foundation for the Sick, but he had trouble controlling his imagination. “I noticed that, without meaning to, I was repeating some Latin words which I had never paid any attention to and had no reason to recall. Even now, to remember them, I have to read them off the sheet of paper I always carry in my pocket for writing down whatever God wants. (Right there in the sanctuary, I jotted down that phrase instinctively on that sheet of paper, out of habit, without attaching any importance to it.) The words of Scripture that I ‘found’ on my lips were: *Et fui tecum in omnibus ubicumque ambulasti, firmans regnum tuum in aeternum* [‘And I have been with you everywhere, wherever you went; your throne shall be established forever’ (2 Sam 7:9,16)]. Repeating them slowly, I applied my mind to their meaning. And later, yesterday evening and again today, when I read them again (for—I repeat—as if God was taking pains to prove to me that they were his, I can’t recall them from one moment to the next), I well understood that Christ Jesus was telling me, for our consolation, ‘The Work of God will be with Him everywhere, affirming the reign of Jesus Christ forever.’”²

To speak to us God can also make use of the notes we jot down on a retreat or in a means of formation, especially when we reread them in our prayer and try to decipher their full meaning. There perhaps we will discover a guiding light or pattern that reveals what God wants to say to us.

An unceasing murmur

It is true that God may choose to speak clearly and in a supernatural way, but this is not usually the case. Ordinarily God speaks softly, and therefore we sometimes fail to appreciate the small gifts—resolutions, affections, inspirations—that He offers us in our simple prayer. What happened to the Syrian commander Naaman can also happen to us. When the prophet Elisha advised him to bathe seven times in the river in order to be cured of his leprosy, Naaman complained: *I thought that he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper* (2 Kgs 5:11). Naaman went to the God of Israel to be cured, but he was expecting something spectacular that would attract everyone’s attention. Luckily, his servants urged him to reconsider: *if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?* (2 Kgs 5:11). He did as the prophet had asked, something so seemingly ordinary, and thus he came into contact with the saving power of God. In our prayer, we need to appreciate these small lights regarding “what we already know,” the motions of the Holy Spirit about “what we

² Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes*, no. 273; in Andrés Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, pp. 291-292.

always have before us,” the quiet affections and “easy” resolutions, and not overlook them because they are so ordinary, since all this can also be God’s way of speaking.

Replying to a question about prayer, Cardinal Ratzinger said that God doesn’t usually speak to us loudly: “He doesn’t speak to us, as I was saying, in a loud voice. Yet he does speak again and again. To be sure, it is also important for the receiver, so to speak, to be tuned to the broadcaster. And our average way of living and thinking causes too much interference that keeps the sound from coming through. Moreover, we are so alienated from his voice that we simply do not recognize it immediately as his. But I would say that everyone who is in some sense attentive can experience and sense for himself that now *He* is speaking to me. And it is a chance for me to get to know him. Precisely in catastrophic situations he can suddenly break in, if I am awake and if someone helps me decipher the message. Of course, he does not speak loudly, but he speaks through signs and through events in our life, through our fellowmen. A little bit of vigilance is certainly called for as well, and it is also necessary that we not get wholly caught up in what is superficial.”³ This capacity for vigilance is closely tied to interior recollection (at times also exterior), which is something we need to grow in. To grasp God’s voice we need to set aside some minutes from the daily hustle and bustle and concentrate on spending time alone with Him. We need silence.

Certainly, God speaks to us in a thousand different ways. But it can happen that we become so accustomed to his gifts that we don’t realize this and we fail to recognize Him, as we see in the reaction of Jesus’ fellow townsmen: *Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brethren James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this? (Mt 13:55-56).* We need to ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and ears, to purify our heart and illumine our conscience in order to recognize his unceasing “murmur” within us.

God has already spoken to us

When Jesus responds to the disciples of John the Baptist by listing the signs that apply to Himself—*the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them (Mt 11:5)*—He is announcing the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies in Sacred Scripture about the Messiah. For God has spoken to us and speaks to each one of us, in a special way, through Sacred Scripture: “For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them.”⁴ Therefore “prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue may be opened up between God and man; for ‘we speak to Him when we pray, and we

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, Ignatius Press 1997.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, no. 21. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2700.

hear Him when we read the divine words' (Saint Ambrose, off. 1, 88)."⁵ The words of the Bible are not only inspired by God; they also give us inspirations *about* God.

We hear God's voice in a special way in the Gospels, which pass on to us the words and deeds of Our Lord Jesus Christ. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews said: *In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Heb 1:1-2)*. Saint Augustine said that the Gospel is "Christ's mouth. He is seated in Heaven, but continues speaking on earth."⁶ Hence our prayer is nourished above all by the Gospel: reading, meditating, rereading and engraving it on our memory, going back over his words again and again. There God speaks to our heart.

Following the Church's tradition, Saint Josemaria frequently recommended that we listen to God's voice by meditating on the Gospels: "My advice is that, in your prayer, you actually take part in the different scenes of the Gospel, as one more among the people present. First of all, imagine the scene or mystery you have chosen to help you recollect your thoughts and meditate. Next apply your mind, concentrating on the particular aspect of the Master's life you are considering—his merciful Heart, his humility, his purity, the way he fulfils his Father's Will. Then tell him what happens to you in these matters, how things are with you, what is going on in your soul. Be attentive, because He may want to point something out to you, and you will experience suggestions deep in your soul, realizing certain things and feeling his gentle reprimands."⁷ Our effort in prayer is expressed in specific actions: *imagining* the scene, *taking part* in it, *considering* a specific aspect of the Master's life, *telling* Him what is happening to us... And God may choose to reply by *pointing out* something to us, *suggesting* something deep in our soul, *making us realize* something. Thus a dialogue is opened up with Him.

Saint Josemaria encouraged us to contemplate and imitate Christ in this way: "Take up the Gospel every day. Become one of the people there, in that divine story, and react accordingly. Contemplate Christ's miracles, hear the voices of the multitude around Him, exchange words of friendship with the first Twelve. Look our Lord in the eyes and fall in love with Him, so that you become another Christ."⁸ Contemplate, hear, exchange words of friendship, look... These actions require employing our faculties and senses, our imagination and intellect. Each of us is present there, in each page of the Gospel. Each scene, each action of Jesus provides meaning and light for my life. His words are addressed to me and uphold my life.

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⁵ Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, no. 25. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2653.

⁶ Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 85, 1.

⁷ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 253.

⁸ Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a meditation, 12 October 1947; in *While He Spoke to Us on the Way*, pp. 25-26.