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To Know Him and To Know Yourself (V): How God Speaks To Us

The language of prayer is mysterious. We cannot control it, but little by little by persevering in prayer we find that God changes our heart.

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In the territory of Perea, in present day Jordan, on a hilltop 100 meters above the Dead Sea, stands the impressive fortress of Machaerus.

There Herod Antipas has imprisoned John the Baptist (cf. *Mk* 6:17).^[1] In the cold and damp dungeon hewn from the rock, darkness and silence reign. John is troubled by a recurring thought: time is going by and Jesus has still not revealed Himself as clearly as John had hoped. He has received news of his mighty deeds (cf. *Mt* 11:2), but Jesus doesn't seem to refer to Himself as the Messiah. And when people ask Him directly, He remains silent. Is it possible that John was mistaken? But he saw it all so clearly! He saw the Spirit come down from heaven in the form of a dove and rest on Him (cf. *Jn* 1:32-43). So he sends some of his disciples to ask the Master: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (*Mt* 11:3).

Jesus responds in an unexpected way. Instead of giving a clear answer, He directs their attention to his deeds: "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.” Although a bit enigmatic, his response is sufficiently clear for those who know the prophecies in Sacred Scripture pointing to the coming of the Messiah and his Kingdom. “Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise!” (*Is* 26:19). “The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped” (*Is* 35:5). Our Lord encourages John to trust Him: “And blessed he is who takes no offense at me” (*Mt* 11:6)

In this scene we can see a similarity to a person who finds it hard to discern God’s voice in prayer. When we find ourselves in this situation, Jesus invites us to completely change our perspective, to abandon our eagerness for human certitudes and enter into the mysterious adventure of a God who speaks to us through

his deeds and through Sacred Scripture. In Jesus' final words, "blessed he is who takes no offense at me," we discover a call to persevere with faith in our prayer, also when God sometimes doesn't seem to respond as clearly as we had hoped.

Gestures that can break the "silence"

A person who has begun to pray may often have to face the apparent "silence" of God. "I speak to Him, I tell Him about my concerns. I ask Him about what I should do, but He doesn't answer me. He doesn't tell me anything." This was also Job's complaint: "I cry to thee and thou dost not answer me; I stand, and thou dost not heed me" (*Job 30:20*). It is easy to become disconcerted then: "I have always heard that prayer is a dialogue but God never says anything to me. If God speaks to others... why not to me? What am I

doing wrong?” These doubts of a person who prays can lead at times to a temptation against hope. “If God doesn’t answer me why should I pray?” And if this silence is interpreted as God’s absence, it can even become a temptation against faith: “If God doesn’t speak to me, then He doesn’t exist.”

What can we say in answer to all this? In the first place, to deny God’s existence because of his apparent silence makes no sense. God could choose to be silent for any number of reasons, and this would not affect his existence or non-existence, nor his love for us. Faith in God—and in his goodness—is what is decisive. In any case, this can be a good moment to beseech Him, filled with faith and trust: “O God, do not keep silence; do not hold thy peace or be still, O God!” (*Ps 83:1*)

But neither should we doubt our ability to hear God's voice. The human heart has the necessary "resources," with the help of grace, to hear God speaking to us, no matter how much this capacity has been obscured by original sin and our own personal sins. The first chapter of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is entitled "Man's Capacity for God." Saint John Paul II said in a general audience: "Man, as the tradition of Christian thought maintains, is *capax Dei*: capable of knowing God and of receiving the gift he makes of himself. Indeed, created in the image and likeness of God, he is able to live a personal relationship with Him."[2] It is a personal relationship that takes the form of a dialogue made up of words and actions.[3] And at times, only actions, as happens also in human love.

For example, just as an exchange of looks between two persons can be a

silent dialogue (there are looks that speak clearly), so too our trusting conversation with God can take on this form as well: “looking at God and realizing that He is looking at us. Like the way Jesus looked at John, which decided the course of his disciple’s life forever.”^[4] The Catechism says that “contemplation is a gaze of faith.”^[5] And often a look can be more important and more filled with meaning, with love and light for our lives, than a long string of words. Saint Josemaria, when speaking about the joy that comes from a contemplative life, said that “the soul breaks out once more into song, a new song, because it feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long.”^[6] As “God’s beggars,”^[7] we humbly implore that we too, besides knowing it is true, might “feel” God’s loving look upon us always.

No man ever spoke like this man

Saint Teresa of Calcutta said that “in vocal prayer we speak to God; in mental prayer He speaks to us. It is then that God pours Himself into us.”^[8] This is an attempt to explain what is ineffable. In reality, prayer entails a great mystery. This “mysterious encounter” between God and the person who prays takes place in many different ways. Some of these are hard to classify and cannot be fully understood or explained. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says regarding the mystery of prayer: “We must also face the fact that certain attitudes deriving from the *mentality* of ‘this present world’ can penetrate our lives if we are not vigilant. For example, some would have it that only that is true which can be verified by reason and science; yet prayer is a mystery that overflows both our conscious and unconscious lives.”^[9] Like John the Baptist, we often anxiously seek to ground truth on evidence that is not

always attainable in the supernatural realm.

The way God chooses to speak to our soul transcends our understanding, and we can never completely comprehend it. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, far too lofty for me to reach” (*Ps* 139:6). Our alphabet is not God’s alphabet, our language is not his language, our words are not his words. When God speaks He has no need for vocal cords, and He is heard not by our ears but by a more hidden and mysterious place in our being. At times we call that our heart; at times, our conscience.^[10] God speaks to us from the reality of his Being and to the reality that we are. A star is related to other stars not through words, but through the force of gravity. God does not need to speak to us with words, although He can also do so. He speaks with his works and with the secret action of the Holy

Spirit in our soul, moving our heart, stirring our emotions and giving light to our intellect in order to draw us gently to Himself. It could happen that at first we may not even be aware of it. But with the passing of time He will help us to recognize his action in us. Perhaps He will have helped us to be more patient or more understanding, or to work better, or to give greater importance to friendship... In short, our love for God will grow ever stronger.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that for a person who prays the “transformation of the praying heart is the first response to our petition.”^[11] It is a transformation that is normally slow and gradual, and even at times imperceptible, but that nevertheless is completely certain and that we must learn to recognize and be grateful for. This is what Saint Josemaria did on August 7, 1931: “Today this diocese

celebrates the feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ. When making my Mass intentions, I noted the interior change that God has made in me during these years of residence in the ex-Court ... and that the change has come about in spite of myself—without my cooperation, I might say. I think I then renewed my resolve to dedicate my entire life to the fulfillment of God's will.”^[12] This “interior change” recognized in prayer is one of the ways God speaks to us... and what a marvelous way! Then we come to understand what the Temple officers said to the chief priests about Jesus: “No man ever spoke like this man” (*Jn* 7:46). God speaks as no one else can speak: by changing our heart.

God's word is “living and active” (cf. *Heb* 4:12). It changes us, and his action in our soul transcends our understanding. As Yahweh said

through the prophet Isaiah: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (*Is* 55:9-11). This mysterious effectiveness is a call for us to grow in humility, which “is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that ‘we do not know how to pray as we ought,’ are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer.”^[13] We are ready to open ourselves trustingly to God’s action.

God’s sublime freedom

God speaks when He wants to. We cannot put limits on the Holy Spirit. It is not in our hands to direct his action in our souls. Saint Josemaria once said that Christ, present in the tabernacle, “is a Lord who speak when He wants to, when one might least expect it, and He says specific things. Then He is silent, because He wants the response of our faith and our loyalty.”^[14] For we “enter into prayer” not through the door of our senses—seeing, hearing, feeling—but “by the narrow gate of faith,”^[15] shown in the care and perseverance we put into our times of prayer. And even though we may not immediately realize it, our prayer always bear fruit.

This often happened to the Founder of Opus Dei. For example, on October 16, 1931, he tells us: “I wanted to pray, after Mass, in the quiet of my church. I didn’t succeed. On Atocha Street I bought a newspaper (*ABC*) and got

on the streetcar. Up to this moment, when I'm writing this, I have not been able to read more than one paragraph of the paper. I felt flowing through me a prayer of copious and ardent affections. That's how I was on the streetcar and all the way home.”[16] Saint Josemaria tried without success to pray in a quiet spot. And yet, a few minutes later, amid the hustle and bustle of a streetcar filled with people, as he began to read the newspaper he was caught up by God's grace and experienced “the most sublime prayer” in his life, according to his own account.

Many other saints have given witness to God's freedom in speaking to the soul when and where He wants to. Saint Teresa of Avila, for example, recounts in her *Life*: “I would laugh at myself and find it pleasant to realize how low a soul can sink when God is not forever working within it.

In such a state, the soul sees clearly that it is not without God: this is not like the severe trials which I have said I sometimes experience. The soul collects wood and does all it can by itself, but finds no way of kindling the fire of the love of God. It is only by His great mercy that the smoke can be seen, which shows that the fire is not altogether dead. Then the Lord comes back and kindles it, for the soul is driving itself crazy with blowing on the fire and rearranging the wood, yet all its efforts only put out the fire more and more. I believe the best thing is for the soul to be completely resigned to the fact that of itself it can do nothing ...and learn by experience how little it can do of itself.”[17]

But, in fact, God has spoken to us many times. Or better said, He never stops speaking to us at every moment. In a way, to learn to pray is to learn to recognize God’s “voice” in

his works, just as Jesus helped John the Baptist to do. The Holy Spirit never stops acting in our souls. As Saint Paul reminded the Corinthians: “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). This should fill us with peace. But whoever loses sight of this truth could easily become discouraged. “Some people seek God by prayer but are quickly discouraged because they do not know that prayer comes also from the Holy Spirit and not from themselves alone.”^[18] In order to never become discouraged in prayer, we need to have great trust in the Holy Spirit and in his multiform and mysterious ways of acting in our soul: “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how” (Mk 4:26).

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[1] Cf. Flavius Joseph, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18, 5, 2.

[2] Saint John Paul II, *General Audience*, 26 July 1998.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2567.

[4] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken from a meditation, 9 January 1959; in *While He Spoke To Us On The Way*, p 87.

[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2715.

[6] Saint Josemaria, Homily “Towards Holiness,” in *Friends of God*, no. 307.

[7] Cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 56, 6, 9.

[8] Saint Teresa of Calcutta, *No Greater Love*, New World Library, p. 5.

[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2727.

[10] “His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths (GS 16),” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1776.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2739.

[12] Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes*, no. 217; in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, Scepter Publishers, 2001, pp. 287-288.

[13] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2559.

[14] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a family get together, 18 June 1972 (*Cronica*, 2000, p. 243).

[15] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2656.

[16] Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes*, no. 334; in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, Scepter Publishers, 2001, p. 294.

[17] *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, trans. by E. Allison Peers, Image Book, Ch. XXXVII, pp. 216-217.

[18] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2726.

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