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To Know Him and To Know Yourself (IV): Learning How to Listen

Blessed Guadalupe wrote about her life of prayer: "Go deeper in that silence to arrive where God alone is: where not even the angels can enter without our permission." A new article in the series on prayer.

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The Lord chose Moses for a crucial mission: to guide his people in a new

stage of salvation history. With his cooperation, Israel was freed from slavery in Egypt and led towards the Promised Land. Through his mediation, the Jewish people received the tablets of the Law and guidelines for their worship of God. How did Moses reach this point? How did he attain this close harmony with God that, over time, would make his life so fruitful for so many people: for the entire Jewish people and for all of us who would come afterwards?

Although Moses was chosen by God right from birth, as his providential escape from Pharaoh's persecution shows, it is striking that he encountered the Lord only after many years. In his youth he seemed quite an ordinary person, although with a great concern for his fellow Jews (cf. *Ex* 2:15). Perhaps what best explains his transformation was his readiness to listen to God.[1] We too,

to attain what we are called to be, need to be transformed through our ability to listen. Certainly, it isn't easy to reach the closeness with God that the book of Exodus describes for us: *the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (Ex 33:11)*. This process usually takes years—our entire life—and often we need *to begin again to learn* how to pray, as though we were just starting out in our dialogue with God.

“Moses, Moses!”

Discovering our need for prayer means realizing that He “first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19), and likewise that He first spoke to us. *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them... (Gen 1:27-28).* [2] God, who takes the initiative in creating us out of love and choosing us for a specific mission, also takes

the first step in our life of prayer. In our dialogue with God, it is He who pronounces the first word.

This “first word” can already be found in the desire for God that He himself has sown in our heart and that is awakened by many different experiences. The Lord’s first apparition to Moses took place in Horeb, also called “the mountain of God.” There *the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, “I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt”* (Ex 3:2-3). More than just curious about this amazing event, Moses senses that something transcendental, superior to himself, is taking place.

In our lives too we can be amazed by events that open up to us a deeper dimension of reality. This is often a

deeply personal discover of something we may have failed to appreciate. We sense God's presence in becoming aware of one of his gifts, or in seeing how setbacks and hardships have helped us mature and prepared us for confronting challenging circumstances or tasks. This could also be a discovery we make in the world around us: in our family, in our friends, or in the beauty of nature... In one way or another we discover the need to pray, to give thanks, to ask for help... and we turn to God. This is the first step.

When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I" (Ex 3:4). The dialogue begins when we look at God, realizing that He is already looking at us. And our words, if needed, arise after we first listen to Him. If we try on our own, we will never be able to pray. Rather we

need to turn our eyes to our Lord and recall his consoling promise: *I am with you always, to the close of the age* (Mt 28:20).

Hence a trusting faith in God is essential for any sincere prayer. Often the best way to begin to pray is to ask our Lord to teach us. This is what the apostles did and it is the path that Saint Josemaria encouraged us to follow: “If you think you’re not quite ready to pray, go to Jesus as his disciples did and say to Him, ‘Lord, teach us how to pray’ (Lk 11:1). You will discover how the Holy Spirit ‘comes to the aid of our weakness; when we do not know what prayer to offer, to pray as we ought, the Spirit himself intercedes for us, with groans beyond all utterance’ (Rom 8:26), which are impossible to describe, for no words are adequate to express their depth.”[3]

“Put off your shoes from your feet”

At the end of several days of a spiritual retreat, Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri wrote to Saint Josemaria: “I’ve told you in other letters about how I draw close to God in my heart, about my prayer. When I make a bit of an effort, our Lord makes it easy for me and I simply surrender myself entirely.”[4] The initiative to pray, and prayer itself, are a gift from God. But we can also ask ourselves: what is our role here? Dialogue with our Lord is a grace, and hence it is not merely passive, since to receive it we need to want to receive it.

Besides being eager to receive this grace, what more can we do to attain a life of intense prayer? A good starting point can be to realize who we are addressing, and to respond with an attitude of reverence and adoration. In the dialogue on Mount Horeb, God said to Moses: “*Do not come near; put off your shoes from*

your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God (Ex 3:5-6).

Taking off his shoes and covering his face was the reply of the people of Israel’s greatest prophet in his first encounter with the Lord. By doing so he gave expression to his deep awareness of being before the transcendent God. We can do likewise when we draw close to Jesus in the Tabernacle in an attitude of adoration. As Benedict XVI said in a prayer vigil with young people before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament: “Here in the Sacred Host he is present before us and in our midst. As at that time, so now he is mysteriously veiled in a sacred silence; as at that time, it is here that the true face of God is revealed. For

us he became a grain of wheat that falls on the ground and dies and bears fruit until the end of the world (cf. *Jn* 12:24). He is present now as he was then in Bethlehem. He invites us to that inner pilgrimage which is called adoration. Let us set off on this pilgrimage of the spirit and let us ask him to be our guide.”[5]

We express adoration in our prayer in various ways. Before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, for example, we kneel down, as a sign of our littleness before God. And when circumstances make it impossible for us to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, we can do something equivalent such as fostering the awareness that God is truly in our soul and “kneeling down” interiorly, reciting calmly each word of the opening prayer or of another prayer that reminds us that we are in his presence.

“The cloud covered it”

When Moses received the tablets of the Law, his dialogue with God took place amid great manifestations of God's glory, but also great intimacy. *The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. And Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights (Ex 24:16-18).*

The cloud manifests the glory of God and prefigures the presence of the Holy Spirit. But it also establishes an atmosphere of intimacy in the dialogue between the prophet and his Creator. Hence we learn that in order to pray we need to acquire some virtues that make intimacy with God easier: love for silence,

both exterior and interior; constancy; and the ability to listen carefully, which enables us to hear his voice.

At times we find it hard to value silence, and if in our prayer we fail to hear anything, we may try to fill in the time with words, with reading, or even with images and audios.

Although we do so with a good intention, we may find it hard then to listen to God. Perhaps we need a “conversion to silence,” which is more than merely keeping quiet.

Saint Josemaria wrote down a reflection in the summer of 1932 that was later published in *The Way*, which gives graphic expression to how our dialogue with God will always have to take this path: “Silence is the door-keeper of the interior life.”[6]

External noise and unruly passions disperse our attention, while silence restores unity to our heart and leads

us to reflect on the direction of our life. Activism and loquacity in our prayer don't draw us closer to God, nor do they allow us to act with true depth. When we are agitated we don't have time to recollect our heart, to think, to live deeply, while silence, both interior and exterior, leads us to an encounter with God, to be amazed by Him. Hence prayer requires a silence that is not merely negative and empty, but that is *filled with God* and leads us to discover his presence. As Blessed Guadalupe wrote: "Go deeper in that silence to arrive where God alone is: where not even the angels can enter without our permission. To adore God, to praise Him and tell Him affectionate things." [7] This is the silence that enables us to listen to God.

It is a question, then, of centering our attention—our intellect, will and affections—on God, in order to let ourselves be challenged by Him.

Hence we can ask ourselves, as Pope Francis suggests: “Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord’s presence, when you calmly spend time with Him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart? Unless you let Him warm you more and more with his love and tenderness, you will not catch fire. How will you then be able to set the hearts of others on fire by your words and witness?”[8]

Along with silence, equally important is constancy, since to pray requires determination. It requires time and effort, as happened to Moses, who spent six days covered by the cloud, and only on the seventh day received the Lord’s word. First of all, an *exterior* constancy to be faithful to a more or less set time for prayer and a specific duration. As Saint Josemaria always advised: “Your time of prayer should be for a fixed duration and at a fixed time. Otherwise we would be

putting our own convenience first, which would be a lack of mortification. And prayer without mortification is not at all effective.”[9] If our motive is love, this constancy will be the doorway to a friendship with God expressed in conversation, since He never imposes himself. He only speaks to us if we want Him to. Constancy on our part is a way to show and foster our ardent desire to receive his words of affection.

Besides exterior constancy, we also need an *interior* constancy, as part of learning how to listen. We need to focus our intellect and fight against dispersion, spur our will to make acts of love, and nourish our affections, which at times are sparse. This effort can be tiring, especially if we have to do so frequently because of many distractions. Moreover, the determination to listen shouldn't be confused with an excessive rigorism

or method of concentration, since our prayer should flow freely. Above all, it flows where God allows it to—*the wind blows where it wills (Jn 3:8)*—but also in accord with our specific situation. A large part of our prayer can sometimes be simply thinking about the persons we love and asking God for them, which can already be a dialogue of love.

Some specific advice that can assist our determination to learn how to listen: fleeing any “multitasking” in order to stay focused and be present during the dialogue, not worrying about other concerns; fostering the disposition of someone who wants to learn, humbly acknowledging our nothingness and God’s perfection, perhaps by making use of aspirations or brief prayers; asking our Lord specific questions, and leaving space for Him to respond when He wants, or simply telling Him that we are ready to do whatever He asks of us;

reflecting on his Love and letting our thoughts go wherever we are led, while fighting against distractions; learning to keep our mind open in order to let ourselves be surprised by Him and to dream God's dreams, without trying to overly "control" our prayer. Thus we open our heart to both God's mystery and his "logic," and we can accept peacefully the fact that we aren't sure where He is leading us.

"Show me thy glory"

When beginning a time of prayer, we have the reasonable expectation that God will speak to us—as in fact often happens. Nevertheless, we may find it frustrating when we finish and we haven't heard anything, or very little. But no matter what happens, we need to be certain that *prayer is always fruitful*. On Mount Sinai, *Moses said, "I pray thee, show me thy glory."* And he said, *"I will make all*

*my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live." And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen" (Ex 33:18-23). If Moses had felt frustrated at not seeing God's face, as he had hoped to do, he might have given up trying or lost his motivation for future encounters. But Moses let himself be led by God and thus became the one *whom the Lord knew face to face* (Deut 34:10).*

The key to prayer is not in achieving tangible results, nor much less in

keeping occupied for a set period of time. What we are seeking through our dialogue with God is not to see immediate results, but rather to reach a state, to put it in some way, where prayer is identified ever more fully with our own life: with our thoughts, affections, hopes and dreams... We want to be with God, to stay in his presence all day. In short, the principal fruit of prayer is *living in God*. Then prayer is seen as a *communication of life*: life received and life lived, life welcomed and life given. It doesn't matter if we don't have warm feelings or amazing lights. In a much more simple way, the theme of our prayer, as Saint Josemaria said,[10] will be the theme of our life, and vice-versa. For our entire life will become authentic prayer, opening out "into a broad, smooth-flowing stream."[11]

[1] Benedict XVI said in his catechesis on prayer: “As we read the Old Testament we note one figure who stands out from among the others: Moses, precisely as a man of prayer.” General Audience, 1 June 2011.

[2] The same happens in the second account of man’s creation: cf. *Gen* 2:16.

[3] *Friends of God*, no. 244.

[4] Letter, 12 December 1949, in *Letters to a Saint*, ch. 2.

[5] Benedict XVI, *Address*, 20 August 2005.

[6] *The Way*, 281.

[7] Mercedes Eguibar Galarza, *Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri*. Ares, Milan, 2019, p. 79.

[8] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 151.

[9] *Furrow*, no. 446.

[10] Cf. *Christ is Passing By*, no. 174.

[11] *Friends of God*, no. 306.

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