

TO KNOW HIM AND TO KNOW YOURSELF (VII): A Good Connection

One sometimes hears stories about the “red phone” that connected the leaders of two superpowers many thousands of miles apart. The idea of being able to speak immediately with someone so far away was quite surprising back then, with cell phones still hard to imagine. Saint Josemaria referred to this in 1972 when he said that we have “a direct line with God Our Lord, a much more direct one ... He is so good that He is always available for us, and never makes us wait.”¹

Our faith assures us that God is always at the other end of the line. And yet, how often we have encountered difficulties in trying to hear his voice or stick to our planned times of prayer! Some people express their frustration by saying they “can’t connect with God.” This painful experience can even lead to abandoning the attempt to pray. We too, despite great effort over years trying to pray, can feel that we don’t know how to speak with God. Although we are convinced we have a direct line with Him, we find it hard to escape our interior monologue and reach the intimate connection we long for.

Pope Francis encourages us “to stay connected to Jesus, to ‘remain online’ with him ... Just as you try not to lose your connection to the internet, make sure that you stay connected to the Lord. That means not cutting off dialogue, listening to him, sharing your life with him.”² What can we do to make our prayer truly a dialogue between two persons? With the passing of the years, how can we continue growing in intimacy with God?

Watching from the shore

After the Resurrection, the disciples go to Galilee, as our Lord had instructed the holy women to tell them: *There they will see me* (Mt 28:10). Dawn is breaking. Peter and John, accompanied by five others, are rowing towards land after an unsuccessful night of fishing. Jesus is watching them from the shore (cf. Jn 21:4). Similarly, when we begin to pray we place ourselves in Jesus’ presence, with the assurance that He is waiting for us. He is watching us from the shore and wants to listen to us. It can help us in our prayer to imagine our Lord looking at us. And we too want to look at Him: “That I may see you; this is the heart of prayer!”³ Our dialogue with God starts when two people who love one another look at each other. “Looking at God and allowing yourself to be looked upon by God: this is prayer.”⁴

¹ Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 8 November 1972.

² Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Christus vivit*, no. 158.

³ Benedict XVI, General Audience, 4 May 2011.

⁴ Francis, General Audience, 13 February 2019.

But we also want to listen to his words, to sense how much He loves us and know what He wants from us. The disciples hadn't caught any fish, but Jesus speaks to them. He gives them instructions so they won't return empty-handed: *Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some (Jn 21:6)*. Good conversations often begin by establishing harmony right from the first words. Likewise the first minutes of prayer are important because they set the tone for the rest of our prayer. Striving to begin the conversation well will help us to keep our dialogue alive.

Up to then, the faith of those in the boat was weak. When they see their nets fill with fish, when they realize that their brief dialogue with Jesus produces more fruit than an entire night of effort on their part, John says to Peter: *It is the Lord! (Jn 21:7)*. This certitude is already the beginning of prayer: the Lord is here, alongside us, whether we are in front of the Tabernacle or in some other place.

As the Holy Spirit permits

The disciples come ashore with their nets filled with fish. There they find a charcoal fire with an unexpected breakfast of bread and fish waiting for them. Sitting down around the fire, they begin eating in silence. No one *dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord (Jn 21:12)*. The thread of the conversation is left in Jesus' hands. Certainly, the key to prayer is letting God act, rather than our own efforts. When someone asked John Paul II about how he prayed, he answered: "You would have to ask the Holy Spirit! The Pope prays *as the Holy Spirit permits him to pray.*"⁵ In prayer, it is the Person we are speaking to who takes the initiative.

After placing ourselves in God's presence we need to try to "shut out the noise" and foster interior silence, which requires effort on our part. Then it will be easier to hear the voice of Jesus, who asks us, *Children, have you any fish? (Jn 21:5)*, and who tells us lovingly, *Follow me (Jn 21:19)*. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out the need to struggle to "disconnect in order to connect," in order to be able to speak with God in the solitude of our heart.⁶ The saints have often repeated this advice: "Leave aside, for a little while, your occupations; hide yourself, for a time, from your disturbing thoughts. Cast aside, now, your burdensome cares, and put away your toilsome business ... Enter the inner chamber of your mind; shut out all thoughts save that of God, and such as can aid you in seeking him; close your door and seek him. Speak now, my whole heart! Speak now to God, saying, *I seek your face; your face, Lord, will I seek (Ps 27:8)*. And come you now, O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how it may seek you, where and how it may find you."⁷

This is not always easy to do, since our daily tasks and concerns have a strong hold on our memory and imagination and can fill our interior world. There are no magic formulas to make

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Alfred A. Knopf 2005, p. 19.

⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2725-2729.

⁷ Saint Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 1.

these vanish, and distractions are usually inevitable. Saint Josemaria advised us to make them part of our conversation with our Lord, “by asking Him for what caused this distraction, for those persons, and letting our Lord act, who always draws what He wants from each flower.”⁸ Our effort to avoid distractions can also be assisted by seeking out a good time and place for our prayer; although we can pray anywhere, not every circumstance is well suited for establishing a dialogue with God or for showing Him our sincere desire to pray.

The introductory prayer: connecting

To make it easier to “connect” with God, Saint Josemaria recommended an introductory prayer that he often used.⁹ These words help us to begin our prayer with an act of faith and a humble heart: “I firmly believe that you are here;” “I adore you with profound reverence.” We are telling Jesus, “I’ve come to spend time with you. I want to speak with you and you to speak with me. I ardently desire that this encounter may help me to unite myself more fully to your will.” By saying “I firmly believe,” we are expressing a reality but also a desire; we are asking our Lord to increase our faith, since we know that “faith is what gives wings to prayer.”¹⁰

This act of faith leads us directly to adoration, by which we acknowledge God’s greatness and abandon ourselves in his hands. And it leads us to acknowledge our faults and ask Him for pardon and grace, since “humility is the foundation of prayer.”¹¹ We realize our littleness compared to his greatness, how lacking we are in strength. Prayer is a gratuitous gift that we need to beg for. As Saint Josemaria said: “Prayer is the humility of the person who acknowledges his profound wretchedness and the greatness of God. He addresses and adores God as one who expects everything from Him and nothing from himself.”¹²

To believe, adore, ask for pardon, beg for help: four movements of our heart that open up for us a “good connection.” We may find it helpful to calmly repeat this introductory prayer, savoring each word. Perhaps it would be good to repeat it several times until our attention is centered on our Lord. We may also want to compose our own personal introductory prayer and use it when our heart is dry or distracted. If we find ourselves distracted or our mind empty, slowly repeating a vocal prayer (the Our Father or another prayer that moves our heart) can often focus our attention and calm our thoughts: once, twice, even three times, saying it slowly, dwelling on the words or changing one of them.

⁸ Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 21 February 1971.

⁹ “My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here; that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I beg your pardon for my sins, and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.”

¹⁰ Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, no 28.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2559.

¹² Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 259.

Enkindling the fire: dialogue

This initial connection leads into the core of our prayer: “a heart-to-heart dialogue with God, in which the whole soul takes part: intellect, imagination, memory and will.”¹³ Let us return to that early morning scene of the disciples, still amazed at the miraculous catch of fish. Jesus builds a fire to cook breakfast for them. We can imagine Him seeking the right sticks to get the fire going. Similarly, if we view the prayer as a small fire that we want to see grow, we first need to find the right material to “enkindle” it.

The material that enkindles the fire of our prayer is usually the tasks we have in hand and our own personal circumstances. Our joys, sorrows and worries are the best summary of what we hold in our heart. With simple words, the thread of our conversation is closely tied to the events in our daily life, as we can imagine was the case in that Eastertide breakfast. Not infrequently, we will need to start by saying: “Lord, I don’t know how to pray!”¹⁴ But the prayer of a Christian is not limited to opening our own intimate life to God, since we feed the fire in a special way with Christ’s own life. Our conversation with God is also about Him, about his life on earth, his longings for the redemption. Moreover, since we realize we are responsible for all our brothers and sisters, “a Christian does not leave the world outside the door of his room, but carries people and situations, problems, many things in his heart; I bring them all to prayer.”¹⁵

With this starting point, each person will seek the way of praying that works best. There are no fixed rules. But having a set method can help us to know what to do until we sense that God is taking the initiative. Thus, for example, some people will find it helpful to have a fixed plan of prayer throughout the week. At times, writing down the words of our prayer offers many advantages to prevent distractions. Our prayer will take one path during times of intense work and another when things are more peaceful. It will also find inspiration in the liturgical time being observed in the Church. Many paths are open to us: immersing ourselves in contemplating our Lord’s Holy Humanity in the Gospels or meditating on a topic with the help of a good book, realizing that reading can assist our examination of conscience. Some days we will find petition, praise or adoration easier. Calmly praying short aspirations is a good path to follow when our heart is agitated; at other times, we will keep quiet, sensing that Christ or Mary is looking at us lovingly. In the end, whatever path the Holy Spirit guides us along, everything will lead to “getting to know Him and to know yourself.”¹⁶

¹³ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 119.

¹⁴ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 244.

¹⁵ Francis, General Audience, 13 February 2019.

¹⁶ Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 91.

Wind and wet leaves

Besides good “kindling material,” we also need an awareness of the obstacles we may encounter for keeping the fire burning: the strong “wind” of our imagination that tries to put out the weak initial flame, and the “wet leaves” of the small miseries that we want to burn out.

Certainly, our imagination has an important role to play in our dialogue with God. We especially need to rely on it when contemplating our Lord’s life. But as Saint Teresa of Avila said, it is also the “mad women in the attic” and can try to build up a fantasy world in our mind. Letting our imagination run free often leads to dispersion in our interior world. Hence we need to resist the strong wind that could put out the fire, and encourage the gentle breezes that enkindle it. One detail stands out in the encounter of the Risen Lord with his disciples on the shore of the sea of Galilee. Only the one who has been present on Calvary, Saint John, recognizes our Lord. His contact with the Cross has purified his sight, making it more perceptive and quicker to grasp the truth. Suffering smooths out the path of prayer; interior mortification helps the imagination to enkindle the fire more fully, and prevents it from becoming a suffocating wind.

Finally, we need to confront the “wet leaves” of our wretchedness. Inside we harbor an entire “sub-world” of bad memories, small grudges, vulnerable points, envies, comparisons with others, sensuality and the desire to stand out, which center our attention on ourselves. Our prayer should lead us precisely in the opposite direction: to forget about our own ego and center ourselves on Him. We need to “ventilate” these affective failings in our prayer, exposing this damp world to the light, to the sun of God’s purifying warmth, and tell Him: “Look at this, and this; what a disaster. I place it here before you, so that you may purify it.” And we will ask Him to help us learn how to forgive, to forget, to rejoice in other people’s good; to see the positive side of things, to reject temptations and be grateful for humiliations. Then the sun will evaporate the dampness that could hinder our conversation with God.

A desire that continues

Connection, dialogue, calm. The final moments in our prayer are an opportunity to “store up” what we have been given, so that we will remember it. This led Saint Josemaria to consider the “resolutions, affections and inspirations” his prayer had led to.¹⁷ The natural result of our dialogue with God is the desire to improve, to fulfil his Will. This desire, Saint Augustine said, is already a good prayer: “as long as you continue desiring, you will continue praying.”¹⁸ These good intentions will often give rise to resolutions that are specific and practical. In any case, our time of prayer should help us to live in God’s presence the rest of that day. Affections may have been

¹⁷ Saint Josemaria recommended this closing prayer: “I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations that you have given to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel intercede for me.”

¹⁸ Cf. Saint Augustine, *Enarrat. in Ps.* 37, 14.

present with greater or lesser strength; they aren't always important, but if our emotions are never involved in our prayer we should ask ourselves where we habitually place our heart. Naturally, these emotions don't always have to be felt, since affections can also arise through the tranquil desires of our will, as when we "want to want to."

Inspirations are lights from God that it is good to note down, since they can help us greatly in our future times of prayer. Over time, they can become good "kindling material" that awakens our heart when it is arid, when we find ourselves dull or apathetic. Although when these inspirations first strike our heart we may think we will never forget them, in fact time can often dull our memory. Hence it is good to jot them down when they are still vivid and can be captured in writing with special force and clarity. "Engrave on your memory those words which struck you while praying, and repeat them slowly many times throughout the day."¹⁹

We should never forget the help our allies in heaven offer us. When we feel weak we should have recourse to those who are closest to God. We can do so both when we begin and end our time of prayer, and whenever we sense that the flame is dying down. We will be assured of the special presence of our Mother, her spouse Joseph and our guardian angel, who will bring us "holy inspirations."²⁰

¹⁹ Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 103.

²⁰ Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 567.