

6. Speak Lord, your servant is listening

Do you remember what you were telling me one day about Phillip? "He is a very obliging boy, always ready to do my errands. Sometimes he is so eager that he rushes off before even knowing what he is supposed to buy." As I was reading your last letter, I thought, "You are unmistakably his mother!"

When the time for your daily mental prayer arrives, you go about it without delay. Like Phillip, you charge ahead. You think of God, you speak to God, and you try to make your love for him surge up, before you have even asked him what he is expecting, what he is hoping from you.

Now, I have no intention of addressing lofty thoughts on mental prayer to you. I want simply to give you some very modest advice, indeed advice as important as it is modest: never begin your mental prayer without first coming to a halt, taking a few moments to make silence within you, and asking what you should be doing during this quarter hour of prayer.

I come back to your Phillip. This obliging boy is also well-bred. I have noticed that when he is in the presence of what we call "grown-ups," he is silent. He lets them talk—even if he is itching to talk himself. Why, then, in the presence of the infinitely greater Being who is God, do you not do what you have taught your son to do? Why do you not give God the initiative in the conversation?

Please understand my advice. I am not suggesting that you ask yourself what you are going to say to God. On the contrary, you should ask him what he has to say to you, what answer he is expecting from you, and what attitude of soul on your part will be pleasing to him.

I know that you will retort, "Don't take me for some great mystic. I never hear God talk to me!" And for good reason. In order to hear, one should perhaps begin by listening! "But there have been times when I didn't do all the talking, and even then I never perceived his voice." Is

it so certain that you wanted to hear him, that you were listening with undivided attention?

Besides, I do not promise that God's voice will be perceptible to your senses, although that could happen. When St. Paul was fearful and depressed, and as though lost in the great cosmopolitan city of Corinth, he heard Christ's voice consoling him with tenderness: "*Do not be afraid. Go on speaking and do not be silenced, for I am with you*" (Acts 18:9-10). But that is not the Lord's usual way of acting, even with St. Paul.

If you get into the habit of beginning your mental prayer with a moment of attentive, questioning silence, you will soon discover in what sense we can say that God speaks to us. Sometimes a thought will gently rise from this silence, a thought that has the savor of a prayer. Welcome it, and offer it a favorable climate in which to ripen. Call to mind the admirable verses of Paul Valéry, which we are not forbidden to apply to mental prayer:

Patience, patience,
Patience in the blue!
Every atom of silence
Is the chance for a ripe fruit!

At other times, thoughts will not appear as spontaneously. You will have to link your reflection to the silence, and search out what your mental prayer must be in order to answer the Lord's expectations.

For example, you will gaze in spirit at the perfections of this God in whose presence you are standing, and then maybe you will sense an imperious need to adore, to give thanks or to humble yourself.

Or else you will remember that the Spirit of Christ in the depths of your soul cries out, "Father! Father!", and your mental prayer will become a cleaving, in total faith, of your whole being to the love of the Son for his Father.

Or again, an event in the family or in the world will loom up to inspire your mental prayer, and you will intercede for those who need help, the way Abraham did by the oaks of Mamre, as he pleaded for the cities threatened with fire from the sky (cf. Gn 18:1 ff.).

It may seem to you that God did not really intervene in all of this, that you alone sought and chose the subject of your prayer. Truly, if you did not rush thoughtlessly into mental prayer, if you humbly asked the Lord to help you, it is permissible to think that he sustained your effort at reflection from within even if you were unaware of it, and brought you to an understanding of his thoughts and desires. When we communicate our thoughts and desires to another, aren't we talking to him?

In any event, always remain humble. Do not imitate those who naively imagine that every idea that comes to them indubitably is the thought of God himself.

From what I am writing you, remember above all that the first words of our prayer—whether we are beginners or are experienced in the life of mental prayer—must always be those of the young Samuel. “*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*” (I S 3:9).

Father Bourgoing, who wrote back in the 17th century, dealt with the subject I have just been discussing with you. To support his thesis, he proposed an irresistible (!) argument: “If nature has given us two ears and only one tongue, it is to show that when we converse with men we must listen at least twice as much as we talk. How much more we should do this in our relations with God!”